

Keith Bennett Memorial Service

Reflections of one involved in the search Professor John Hunter

I was 14 when Keith Bennett went missing. I remember the moment I was told well. I know exactly what I was doing – kicking a tennis ball against a wall in our back yard. 25 years later, and then trained as an archaeologist, I found myself advising police forces on techniques and methods for finding the graves of missing persons, something I have been doing ever since. And for the last two decades much of my professional and personal time has been spent looking for, and recovering, the missing, Keith being one of many – be they individual children and adults, or victims of genocide in the mass graves of Srebrenica.

But Keith has been a larger focus than any of these. I have no idea how many weeks I have spent on those moors over the last two decades trying out ideas and techniques, pitting my wits against a landscape; and you would be surprised how many offers of help continue to arrive by letter, email or phone. And you would be surprised too how many other like-minded folk - individuals and groups - are also out there, some superbly informed and with real skills to offer. Is it not remarkable that 40-odd years on, there is still active commitment? Someone once asked me ‘Do you think you will ever find Keith?’ The answer to that was simple. If I honestly felt that Keith couldn’t be found, what would be the point of carrying on?

Greater Manchester Police’s recent review was a reflection of public interest. I cannot think of any other case in the UK where resources have been deployed to such an extent so long after the event. On the negative side, it failed to find Keith; but on the positive side it succeeded in eliminating certain locations and it leaves others to be explored in the future. There is no black magic box that will find Keith, but there are always avenues of approach. This is still a new discipline: discoveries, technical developments and methodologies are advancing. There are no gurus to consult; and what works in theory often fails in practice on the unforgiving landscape of the moors. I’m reminded of a quote by Elroy Flecker: ‘We are pilgrims, Master. We shall always go a little further’. Indeed this is what we have to do.

I have learnt many things in looking for the missing: I have learnt the importance of working with the police; I have learnt that no case is ever truly closed, the police door is always a little ajar; I have learnt the importance of using the skills and techniques of others; I have learnt the importance of maintaining hope, but above all I have learnt the importance of closure, in repatriating the lost ones: the importance of returning the bodies of husbands to their wives, and sons to their mothers, and the difference that makes.