

# The chilling tale of the lady of the lake and the long hunt for her killer

**O**n a warm August day in 1997, three amateur divers broke the surface of Coniston Water, pulling behind them a canvas package trussed up with ropes, writes *Jeremy Craddock*.

The package was heavy but they managed to drag it on to the shore of the lake. With a knife, one of the divers cut through the outer canvas cover and an inner layer of bin liners. Pieces of lead fell out.

The men recoiled. Inside was a body.

Shortly afterwards, detectives were standing on the edge of the lake. The crime scene was illuminated by high-powered lamps. They peered down at the grim remains of a young woman.

The body was that of Carol Park, a 30-year-old mother-of-three from Barrow-in-Furness. She had gone missing 21 years earlier in 1976. The case attracted media attention around the world.

I was a reporter for the local newspaper at the time. As part of the team that reported on the case, I was thrown into the biggest crime story of my career, trying to make sense of the unfolding events.

The case was the strangest English murder mystery of the late 20th century, spanning five decades before justice was finally served. Headline writers, inevitably, labelled the case the Lady in the Lake.

Cumbria Police's chief suspect was Carol Park's husband Gordon, who was aged 53 in 1997, a retired teacher and married to his third wife. The only problem was, Park was on holiday in France.

Detectives wasted no time in securing a warrant to search Park's home in Barrow, gaining entry through an upstairs window. Soon after, officers were seen removing computer equipment from the house and rope samples from the garage.

Meanwhile, Park's children had been informed the body was their mother's. Two decades of hoping she would return safely were cruelly dashed in an instant.

Carol's son telephoned his father, Gordon, in France, to break the news. "Oh dear," was Gordon Park's reaction to news that his first wife's body



Coniston Water in the Lake District seems tranquil enough but it held a gruesome secret for over 21 years. Picture: Steve Wilson

had been found at the bottom of a lake.

The police's suspicion intensified after Park took four days to return to Barrow. Detectives made their arrest the following morning.

Park had been interviewed by police in 1976 when Carol first disappeared. She had frequently walked out of the marital home and at that time detectives could not be certain she was dead. Without a body, they were powerless.

By the time officers sat down to interview Park in 1997, they had thoroughly done their homework.

They knew Park had a motive. Gordon and Carol had been unhappily married, both had been unfaithful but had stayed together only for the sake of the children. Park was known to be controlling and coercive.

He also had the wherewithal. He was a keen sailor with a boat on Coniston Water and was a mountaineer proficient in tying knots.

Detectives found Park cold and sarcastic under questioning. He did not present as someone innocent of killing his wife.

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Within hours, Park was charged with murder. What might have seemed an open-and-shut case would prove to be one of the most complex and challenging in British legal history.

To the frustration of detectives, the Crown Prosecution Service felt the evidence was not sufficient to go to trial.

In January 1998, the murder charge was dropped. Park wasted no time in trying to restore his reputation. The Mail on Sunday paid him £50,000 for an interview published 10 days later in which he taunted the police.

"I want her murderer caught. After all I've been through, the police owe it to me," Park said.

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Gordon Park showed no emotion. As the 1990s melted into the new millennium, Cumbria Police never gave up hope of

securing a conviction.

Detectives kept their ongoing investigation covert. The last thing they wanted was to spook Gordon Park.

In January 2004, detectives knocked on Park's Barrow front door and rearrested him for the murder. Within hours he was charged for the second time.

Park's trial began at Manchester Crown Court in the winter of 2004 and lasted 10 weeks.

There was no single smoking-gun piece of evidence to incriminate Park. Instead the prosecution case was built on a solid foundation of overwhelming circumstantial evidence.

There was Park's boat on Coniston Water, which he sold the same month Carol went missing. There were the ropes binding the package holding the body: they were tied with uncommon knots. Park possessed the know-how. New evidence included statements from inmates to whom Park had allegedly confessed during his time on remand at Preston Prison in Lancashire in 1997.

Park's legal team said none of this proved beyond

reasonable doubt he was the man who murdered Carol.

Park slumped in the dock when the jury reached a guilty verdict in January 2005. He was given a life sentence, with no hope of being considered for release for 15 years.

From his prison cell, he protested his innocence. His family and friends launched a campaign to overturn the conviction.

Park found prison life difficult. In January 2010, on the morning of his 66th birthday, prison officers found him dead in his cell. He had taken his own life.

His family fought on to clear his name posthumously. But in May 2020, the Court of Appeal judges published their decision. It read: "We have no doubt as to the safety of the conviction. Therefore, the appeal is dismissed."

Across the years I never forgot the Carol Park case. I had been there at the beginning and so I felt I needed to write the final chapter.

■ *The Lady in the Lake: A Reporter's Memoir of a Murder* by Jeremy Craddock (Mirror Books, £9.99) was published this week.



Carol Park, whose murdered body was found tied up in canvas in Coniston Water



Carol Park, the so-called 'Lady of the Lake', whose body was found at the bottom of Coniston Water in the Lake District - 21 years after she vanished from her home



Undated photograph of 'Lady of the Lake' murder victim Carol Park's former husband, Gordon, 53, who was arrested at his home in Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria, yesterday (Sunday) just hours after returning from a holiday in France