

MYSTERY: PODCAST EXPLORES UNSOLVED CASE WHERE CHIEF



GHOST: New Crime World podcast

THERE is just one case that still haunts retired garda detective Eddie Naughton – the disappearance of Sandra Collins from a small Mayo fishing village more than quarter of a century ago.

And in a new *Crime World* podcast series, *Ghost*, the former guard reveals that unless Sandra's body is found, he will think about her 'probably every day until I die.'

'You keep thinking about what more you could have done,' he explains. 'And just looking at her family and what they've gone through. At this stage I know it's just her body they want.'

'And they will not give up; they want Sandra's body found and buried in along with her parents and her brother... I would love to see some closure, and I still believe that closure is in the Killala area. There's no shadow of a doubt about it.'

Sandra Collins, a 28-year-old originally from Fotish in north Mayo, went missing from Killala on the night of 4th December 2000. Apart from a pink sleeveless fleece, which mysteriously turned up on the local pier five days after she was last seen, there has been no sign of her since.

PROMOTED

Ghost: The Disappearance of Sandra Collins explores the long and torturous investigation into her unsolved case. As well as in-depth interviews with her family, producers met with local residents and councillors, who remember the day she went missing and subsequent searches.

The podcast team also interviewed Eddie Naughton, who spent the last 16 years of his four-decade long career trying to find out what happened to Sandra and where her body might now lie. Investigators believe she was murdered and buried somewhere in the surrounding area of this remote corner of north Mayo.

Naughton, who was promoted into Ballina's detective unit in 1993, told how there is only one other local case he worked on that was of a similar tragic nature to Sandra's – the murder of 20-year-old Gillian Thornton in 1997.

Gillian met 21-year-old Dean William Richardson at a disco in Ballina and towards the end of the night the pair were seen leaving together.

When initially questioned by gardai, Richardson claimed he and Gillian had just kissed down a laneway about 40 yards from the disco, before heading off in separate directions.

EX-GARDA HAUNTED BY MISSING SANDRA

I'll think about her 'probably every day until I die' unless body is found, says retired detective

EXCLUSIVE

JENNY FRIEL

However, when he was arrested a few days later, Richardson tearfully confessed that he had strangled Gillian with his bare hands.

He told the guards they'd had consensual sex – something Gillian's family have always disputed – but afterwards she said something that incensed him.

'I went crazy, I lost the head,' he said. But that was as much as he claimed to remember.

In 1999 he was sentenced to life in prison.

Gillian's shocking murder was naturally still fresh in people's

minds when Sandra Collins went missing in December 2000 – another family devastated by the loss of a young woman.

For Eddie Naughton it would become one of the most defining cases of his career.

PREGNANT

One of the first pieces of information the guards gathered about Sandra was that she'd learned just three days before she went missing that she was pregnant. They were also informed that her ex-boyfriend still lived in the village. Eddie Naughton ex-

plained how they went straight to Patrick McDonnell's flat on Church Street to check if he'd seen her.

McDonnell told them he hadn't, that they'd split up months earlier and he had no idea where she was. He also allowed them in to search his home, even though they didn't have a warrant.

After being repeatedly questioned by the gardai about his relationship with Sandra, they were satisfied he had nothing to do with her disappearance, and he was dropped as a suspect from their investigations. He would later emigrate to the United States.

Instead, another man was brought to their attention – Martin Earley, a 36-year-old married plasterer who lived in the townland



SUSPECT WAS ACQUITTED DUE TO INSUFFICIENT EVIDENCE

NO TRACE: Sandra Collins has been missing since December 2000



CLUES: Killala Coast Guard search Killala harbour in 2000

'I would love some closure, I still believe that is in the Killala area. There's no shadow of a doubt about it'



HOME: The house where Sandra Collins lived with her aunt before she disappeared

■ 28-year-old Mayo woman disappeared from fishing village on December night over quarter of century ago



APPEAL: Sandra's brother and sister, Patrick Collins and Bridie Conway are commencing another poster campaign seeking any information on their sister's disappearance

of Carrowmore-Lacken, about a ten-minute drive north of Killala.

A trial would later hear evidence from retired Garda John Kennedy that on the 7 December, three days after Sandra disappeared, Martin Earley called into Killala garda station at around 8.10pm.

Garda Kennedy claimed that Earley said he'd heard his name had come up during enquiries about Sandra. And he told him that he'd first met her in a local pub just two weeks earlier.

Garda Kennedy further claimed in court that Earley made a statement to him a few weeks later, on 20 December, where he said he was actually first introduced to Sandra in September 2000.

Over the following years his statements would change, at one point he admitted to having sex with

Sandra on at least two occasions.

However, for the next decade there was little progression in the case, not until a new garda superintendent appointed to Ballina, Peter O'Boyle, upgraded the investigation to a murder inquiry.

DOUBT

A few months later, in March 2011, Martin Earley was arrested and detained under Section 4 of the Criminal Justice Act, he was questioned and released twice, before finally being arrested and charged on 28 December 2012.

His murder trial began in May 2014 and lasted almost five weeks before the judge ordered the jury to acquit him because in his view there was insufficient evidence to prove beyond reasonable doubt that the crime of murder had been

committed.

Eddie Naughton retired from the guards in February 2017. He insists he still has hope that Sandra's body will be found and returned to her family.

'People are at a different place in their life,' he explained. 'Those that might be loyal at that particular time, they may be in a different situation now. And then you'd be thinking as years go on, will somebody go to their grave, or bring that information they have (to the gardai).'

'I'm still hopeful that something will come out of this,' he said. 'I have to be.'

Ghost: The Disappearance of Sandra Collins, a brand-new Crime World podcast will be launched on Tuesday, 19 May along with an accompanying YouTube documentary.

‘The saddest thing is that Sandra isn’t in a proper grave’

Over 25 years since the ‘quiet and polite’ 28-year-old disappeared in Co Mayo, the Collins family say they’ve given up on justice and just want a funeral, writes **Jenny Friel**

About four years ago, Sandra Collins’s siblings travelled from north Mayo to their uncle and aunt’s home just outside Liverpool.

Their uncle, Ivan Howard, had recently died and as his closest relatives, the Collins were tasked with clearing out the house where he’d lived with their aunt Bridie for 53 years.

It took three days for siblings Bridie, Patrick, Davey and Mary to sort through all the documents, letters, photographs and mementos.

In among the bundles of paper, they found a cassette tape and on the sticker someone had written ‘Kids Fotish September 1984’.

Fotish is the townland, just outside Crossmolina, where Sandra and her family were raised.

They found a small stereo and loaded the tape. Standing together in the sitting room, they listened to the recording of three children chattering and taking turns to sing a song or read a poem.

There was one section that stood out. A young girl’s voice, confidently announcing the name of her party piece, *The Grey Horse* by James Reeves. Lasting just over a minute, it was a beautifully assured performance.



● Sandra Collins outside the family home in Fotish in 1984

“Does she know how much she was loved?”

At the very end, she took a breath before signing off with: “This poem was by Sandra Collins.”

It had been more than two decades since the Collins family had heard their eldest sister’s voice.

The disappearance of Sandra on a bitterly cold winter’s night, more than a quarter of a century ago, remains one of Ireland’s most tragic and frustrating unsolved missing person cases.

The 28-year-old went missing from Killala, a small fishing village on Mayo’s north coast, on December 4, 2000. She was last seen by staff in the local takeaway shortly after 11pm, where she bought a large bag of chips. They described her as being her usual quiet and polite self. The next day, Sandra’s

aunt raised the alarm, sparking a massive man-hunt, both on land and sea. But apart from a fleece jacket that mysteriously turned up five days after she disappeared, no sign of her has ever been found since.

Since finding the tape, the family have listened to it over and over again.

“To hear her again after all these years. It’s hard, but you can’t resist it,” says Patrick Collins. “And as difficult as it is for myself, Davey and Mary, I think Bridie finds it the toughest. Bridie was there with Sandra that day, recording the tape with herself and our brother James, who’s also now gone.

“They gave it to Bridie and Ivan as a bit of a keepsake, something to tide them over until they visited home again. They held on to it, and to all the letters we wrote to them. We found a fair few from Sandra, telling them all her little bits of news.

“She was very young, only about 12 years old, but you can get a real sense of her. She’s telling them about her pet animals, and her best friend at school. We’re lucky to have them.”

A new nine-part podcast series from *crimeworld.com* charts and explores the investigation into what happened to Sandra, and where she might now lie.

Ghost: The Disappearance of Sandra Collins, set to be released on Tuesday, also delves into her family life in this remote part of Ireland’s western seaboard, building up a full picture of the home where she was raised and examining how, as a young teenager, she ended up taking care of a cantankerous, disabled aunt in Killala.

Long before she went missing, her family had endured multiple tragedies and hardships, including the death of her beloved brother James in a horrific workplace accident during the summer of 2000.

And the year before that, she had made the intensely difficult decision to give up her baby daughter for adoption.

In the months after Sandra disappeared, rumours swirled around the small community where she’d lived for 12 years. Some believed she’d possibly been depressed and taken her own life, jumping into the sea, and her body had then washed away from shore.

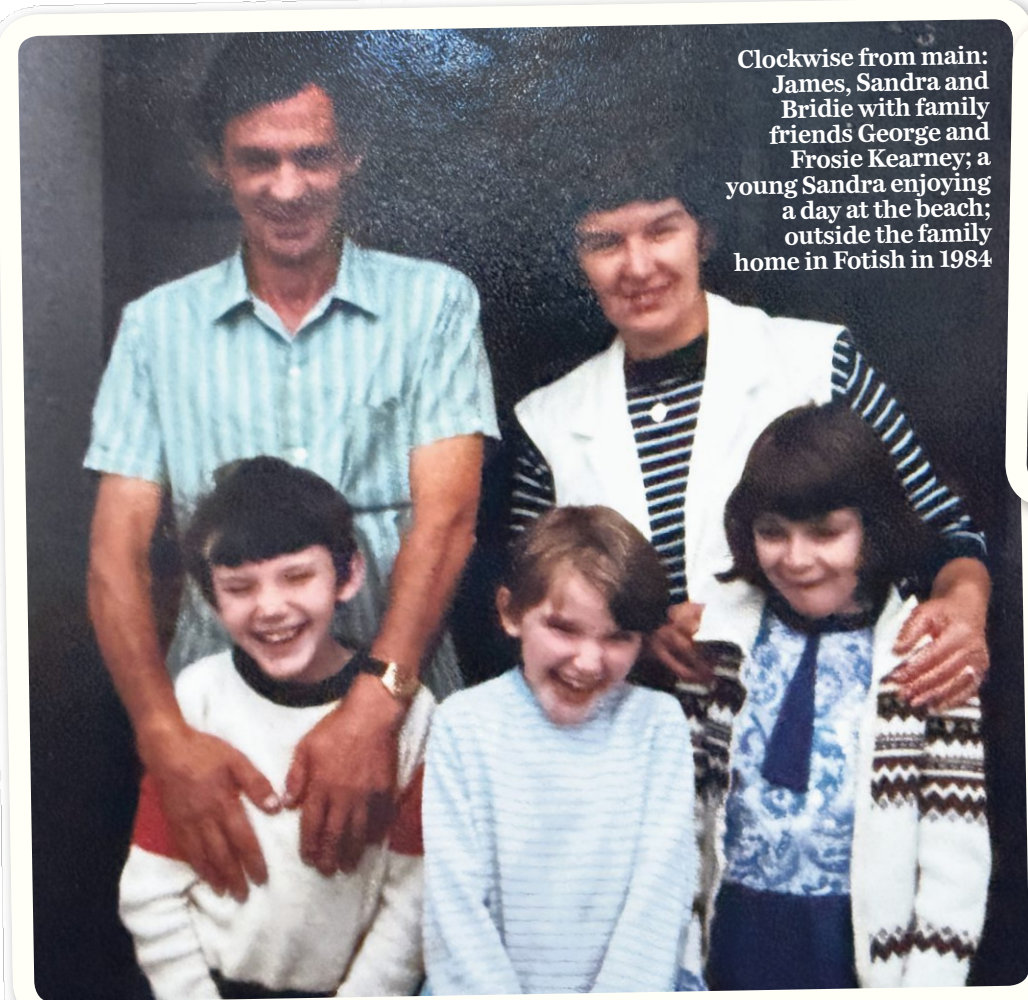
But there were darker whispers, involving a married lover and a crisis pregnancy, things her immediate family knew nothing about until 2010 when a new garda superintendent was appointed to Ballina — Peter O’Boyle, who upgraded the investigation to a murder inquiry. It was a devastating turn of events for the Collins family, who up until then had held out hope that she had simply run away from the clutches of her difficult and domineering aunt, and would one day return home to them.

A few months later, they were shocked when local married plasterer Martin Earley was arrested, questioned and released. None

of Sandra’s family had ever heard of him before.

He was arrested again and charged with Sandra’s murder in late December 2012 and stood trial in May 2014, but after almost five weeks of evidence, he was acquitted by order of the judge.

The Collins family say that after all these years, they are no longer interested in justice, that they just want to know where Sandra is so they can give her a Christian funeral and lay her in the same grave as their par-



Clockwise from main: James, Sandra and Bridie with family friends George and Frosie Kearney; a young Sandra enjoying a day at the beach; outside the family home in Fotish in 1984



ents and James.

Investigators believe that after she was murdered, her body was buried somewhere in the surrounding countryside.

“I wonder does she know how much she was loved and does she know what we’re doing to find her?” says her sister Bridie.

“I’d love to think that

she’s up there going, ‘Oh look, they’re at it again and they’re trying to find me, and I really matter’.

“The thing I’m saddest about is the fact that somebody out there decided that in death she didn’t matter, and that it doesn’t matter where they’ve put her, that it’s okay that she’s not in a

proper grave, that she’s not in a coffin.

“And that she didn’t get the wake, she didn’t get the funeral home or people walking behind the hearse to the graveyard. She didn’t get dressed in her favourite clothes, no flowers, no mass, no nothing.

“That other human being out there thinks that’s okay

for her and for us. Well, I’m telling you now, it certainly isn’t okay, for her or for us. It’s bad enough that they took her out of our lives and that she has missed out on so many things.”

The Collins family fervently believe that the key to where Sandra now lies is in the picturesque seaside

village where she lived for more than a decade. They believe secrets are still being kept in Killala.

‘Ghost: The Disappearance of Sandra Collins’, a brand-new Crime World podcast, will be launched on Tuesday, May 19, along with an accompanying YouTube documentary

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'SHATTERED': FAMILY STILL HOPE REMAINS CAN BE FOUND

APPEAL:
Patrick Collins
and Bridie Conway
with a poster of
missing Sandra

EXCLUSIVE
BY JENNY FRIEL

THE sister of missing Mayo woman Sandra Collins has told how she spent ten years believing she was still alive and would one day return home.

In a new interview with the *Crime World* podcast, Bridie Conway explained that from December 4, 2000, the night Sandra disappeared, until 2010 when she was informed by gardai that her sister's case had been upgraded to a murder inquiry, she'd assumed Sandra had simply run away.

"I still thought that she was out there, she was out there somewhere and in her own good time, when she was ready or when she had herself set up some place, that she'd come home," Bridie explained.

"She'd come back to us, and she'd tell us what she had done.

"I think it was easier to think that [she'd run away] than to think anything bad had happened to her."

Sandra Collins was 28 years old and had just discovered she was pregnant when she went missing from the fishing village of Killala in north Mayo.

She was last seen at 11.15pm in the local takeaway buying a bag of chips.

The following morning, her elderly disabled aunt who she'd been living with and looking after since she was 15 years old, raised the alarm when she failed to return home.

The recently released *Crime World* nine-part series, *Ghost: The Disappearance of Sandra Collins*, explores Sandra's Mayo childhood and her difficult life with her aunt Ann O'Grady.

TRIAL

It charts her mysterious disappearance, the arrest of a local man who she'd had a brief sexual relationship with, and his subsequent murder trial.

After almost five weeks of evidence, Martin Earley was acquitted by order of the judge.

Featuring interviews with Sandra's family, local politicians and residents, as well as the garda detective who searched for Sandra for the last 16 years of his career, the Collins family desperately hope it will persuade someone with any information that could lead them to where her body now lies to finally come forward.

Her siblings vividly recall being told in late 2010 that there was no chance Sandra was alive.

"I remember how shattered I was because the dream was over that she'd come home the way we wanted her to come home," her brother Patrick Collins told the podcast.

"I always used to look forward to the day that I'd see her again and I'd say, 'Oh, guess what, Sandra? I did my Leaving Cert... and I bought my first car.'"

After all this time, the Collins family just want Sandra back so they can bury her with her brother James and their parents.

"You'd hope that with all the good people out there listening to the podcast and getting a better sense of what Sandra was like... that it might something in them that they might say, 'she deserves to be brought home, she deserves to be back with her family'."

All nine episodes of *Ghost: The Disappearance of Sandra Collins* are now available to subscribers of *crimeworld.com*

'I STILL THOUGHT SANDRA WAS ALIVE'

Siblings of missing woman say they believed she had run away and were broken when case became murder probe

