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Team may be close to finding Charlie Armstrong's remains

Interview Expert tells of progress in search for Disappeared

By Allison Morris

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The expert leading the search for Northern Ireland's Disappeared has told The Irish News his team may be close to reclaiming the remains of a man who went missing almost 30 years ago.

As head of the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims Remains, Geoff Knupfer is the man credited with recent success in the search for missing victims of the Troubles.

In November last year the commission traced the remains of west Belfast man Danny McIlhone, who was abducted and murdered by the IRA in 1981.

The discovery followed a painstaking search of more than 20 acres of remote peatland in the Wicklow hills 50 miles south of Dublin.

Mr Knupfer, who led the search for the bodies of the victims of Moors murderers Ian Brady and Myra Hindley, said he believed his team might have located the area where south Armagh father-of-two Charlie Armstrong was secretly buried.

This week he appealed for past members of republican groups who might have been involved in the Disappeared murders to come forward with information.

A former senior English detective, Mr Knupfer said that, with more accurate information, he was confident his team could trace other victims, having come close to locating the remains of Mr Armstrong, who went missing from his Crossmaglen home in August 1981.

In 1999 the IRA admitted killing and secretly burying nine people in separate incidents.

However, Mr Armstrong did not appear on the list.

While the circumstances behind his abduction remain cloaked in secrecy, the commission said it was now of the opinion that it had located the general area of the clandestine burial place of the 57-year-old.

"We have looked at one site in relation to Charlie Armstrong and have done an awful lot of work on that," Mr Knupfer said.

"It isn't a long way from the site that was investigated in 1999/2000 so we have cause to believe that Charlie Armstrong may be in that general area. It's now just a matter of fine-tuning that information."

Mr Knupfer's team of experts have added new impetus to the search but he said that despite advances in technology it was still information from those involved in the secret burials that was needed.

"Since we started, a number of new sites have been brought to our attention," he said.

"When a new site appears we don't just go digging holes in it straight away – a lot of background work and historical research goes on to try and evaluate the site first.

The commission was set up by the British and Irish governments 10 years ago.

On the day it was announced the remains of Eamon Molloy were left in a coffin in a Co Louth graveyard.

The remains of Brian McKinney and John McClory were recovered at a site in Co Monaghan in June 1999 as a direct result of information given over by the IRA.

Mother-of-10 Jean McConville's remains were recovered on a beach in Co Louth in 2003.

Mr Knupfer said that as time went on the accuracy of information provided in relation to the Disappeared was in danger of fading.

"Some of the information we received was clearly not as effective as it could have been," he said.

"I'm not suggesting that people sent us on a wild goose chase but memories fade and there can be lots of perfectly reasonable explanations as to why the information we receive was not as useful as it could be. When these sites were chosen they were chosen for the very reason of their blandness and anonymity, so that they wouldn't be identified in the future and here we are 20 or 30 years trying to do just that.

"In terms of where we are now, we have received several pieces of information and have identified three new areas and are looking at those. We have had a look at some using geophysical technologies and others we are currently evaluating and it may be the case that we do some work on them later in the year.

"We have a very close relationship with the families and we try and make it clear to them how we view the information and the quality of it – that can be subjective, obviously.

"We're not in the business of raising false hopes so we try and give a realistic view of how things are and how we view them."

While Mr Knupfer said the commission had stayed out of the politics of the situation, concentrating instead on recovery, Northern Ireland's changing political situation has indirectly affected the investigations.

Members of the IRA who might have information on the secret burials but who have since left the organisation or changed political alliances have proved harder to reach.

"I think we are absolutely satisfied that all the organisations involved are trying to assist us. They want closure as well and we are absolutely clear about that," Mr Knupfer said.

"The problem is that the people who were involved 20 or 30 years ago may now have nothing to do with the organisations.

"And so the organisations don't have any influence over them.


“Some are now miles apart in the way that things have developed over the years and so tracing those individuals hasn't always been easy.

“What I would ask is for anyone who may have since left the organisation and who has any information to please get in touch with the commission or come to us through any other source.

“We are forbidden by law to pass on the information to any other agency and the information will only be used for the purposes of location and repatriation of victims to their families.”

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