

On the evening of 26th November 2000, Leeds teenager Leanne Tiernan, 16, was on her way home when she disappeared. Studying for her GCSEs, Tiernan had been shopping for Christmas gifts in the city with her friend, Sarah Whitehouse. The girls had shared a bus ride into the suburb of Bramley and parted near Whitehouse's home. Tiernan then continued alone towards her own home but never arrived.

John Taylor had been lurking in the woods, waiting for a likely victim. It turned out to be Tiernan. As she walked alone along the unlit path known as Houghley Gill that she frequently used, Taylor grabbed her from behind. Whilst there were no eyewitnesses, it was later reported that someone had heard a stifled scream. Taylor put his hand over her mouth, blindfolded her and led her to his house. There he tied her hands behind her back and during the course of a sexual assault, strangled her with a scarf and a plastic ligature.

Tiernan's parents, Michael Tiernan and Sharon Hawkhead, were divorced and her father was away on holiday at the time. When Tiernan did not return home from shopping, her mother immediately reported her missing to the police. She described her daughter as happy, confident, streetwise and never having gone missing before.

Police Investigation

Detective Superintendent Chris Gregg of the West Yorkshire Police led the investigation into Tiernan's missing person case. A week after her disappearance, investigators reconstructed Tiernan's last movements. Her sister Michelle, 19, and friend, Sarah Whitehouse, wearing the same clothing as Tiernan and Whitehouse had on 26th November, followed the same route home. Unfortunately this did not produce any further clues. Tiernan's parents both made emotional appeals to the public for any assistance they may provide in the search for Leanne. There were several reports of possible sightings of Tiernan, which police investigated, but to no avail.

Complicating the police search was the fact that the area in which Tiernan had disappeared consisted of vastly varying terrain. There were more than 700 houses, open areas, woodland, canals, drainage shafts and wells. Police conducted an extensive house-to-house inquiry and the search eventually grew enormous, involving uniformed officers, operational support, the dog section, the mounted section, underwater search and air support.

On Monday 20th August 2001, nine months after she disappeared, Leanne Tiernan's body was discovered near Otley on the border of North and West Yorkshire, 16 miles from her house and several miles from the scene of the crime. A man, out walking his dog in Lindley Woods near the Warren Point car park, stumbled across her body, wrapped in a floral duvet cover and buried in a shallow grave. It transpired that a few days before the body was discovered, a retired couple had seen a man carrying a large floral-patterned bundle from the boot of his car into the woods. Inside the duvet cover, Leanne's body had been wrapped in green plastic bin-liners, tied with twine. Covering her head was a black bin-liner, held in place with a dog collar tied tightly around her neck. Her hands had been bound together with cable ties and around her neck were more cable ties and a scarf.

The post mortem examination concluded that the degree of decomposition of the body was inconsistent with burial in the ground for the full nine months since Tiernan's disappearance. Investigators were therefore hopeful that enough forensic evidence would be present to lead them to the killer. Police officers, forensic and scientific experts conducted a fingertip search of the dense woodland where Tiernan's body had been buried and expanded this to cover an area of 20,000 square metres.

Leanne Tiernan's funeral was held on Friday 28th September 2001, a day after what would have been her 17th birthday. The service was held less than a mile from where she disappeared and close to her home, at the Sandford Methodist Church in Bramley.

About a hundred people packed into the small church, where Tiernan had been baptised, whilst other mourners had to stand outside and hear a relayed version of the service, led by Sister Janet Durbin. Deaconess Durbin said, "Leanne was a normal, happy, fun-loving teenager, half child and half young lady."

Amongst those in attendance were Tiernan's mother Sharon Hawkhead, her sister Michelle, her friend Sarah Whitehouse, and Detective Superintendent Chris Gregg. The private burial took place at the nearby Hill Top Cemetery.

Animal DNA

During their investigation, the West Yorkshire police learned that Taylor had often been seen hunting small animals in Lindley Woods, where Tiernan's body was discovered and he was placed onto their list of suspects. Forensic investigators found dog hairs on Tiernan's body and needed further information. The dog hair DNA sample was sent to a university in Texas, which had developed a DNA profiling technique for pedigreed pets. The university produced a partial profile for a dog but unfortunately police were unable to link this to Taylor, as the dog he owned at the time of Tiernan's murder had subsequently died. This was the first time dog DNA had been used in a British criminal case.

The knitted scarf found around Tiernan's neck contained human hair in the knot. Initial conventional DNA tests of the hair roots failed, so forensic experts used Mitochondrial DNA testing. Using these results, they managed to create a DNA profile from the minute amounts of DNA inside the hair shaft and it was a match to Taylor.

John Taylor, 45, was arrested on 16th October 2001 and taken to a police station in Leeds for questioning. Police immediately sealed off his house in Cockshott Drive, putting up seven-foot high wooden screens and began their search. Investigators dug up the garden and discovered the bodies of 28 ferrets and the skeletons of four dogs, one with a crushed skull. Detective Superintendent Gregg commented, "Taylor appears to have been an ordinary man but he is not. He has a dangerous, extremely dangerous nature. This is displayed in the way in which he treated animals throughout his life."

Further investigation provided more evidence in their case against Taylor. The tan leather dog collar found on Tiernan's body, had been made by a company in Nottingham. This company sold the collars to wholesalers, including a mail order company in Liverpool, one of whose customers was Taylor.