

FOCUS



Ron Smith, father of Helen Smith, pictured after the verdict

DEATH IN JEDDAH

How Helen Smith died may remain an open question for ever, but her father's place in popular history is assured. Ron Smith has become a 20th-century Hampden, a reassurance to the world that one determined individual can still outface and defeat the closed ranks of authority.

From the day of Helen's death, an accumulating barrier of discouragement, prevarication, half-truth and obstruction created an abiding suspicion of foul play which the recent inquest has failed to dispel. The feeling that the authorities did not want an inquest was fuelled by the sudden decision of the coroner, who till then had been cheerfully holding inquests on deaths abroad, that he had no jurisdiction to do so. Ron Smith soldiered on to the Court of Appeal, who held that the Coroners Act of 1887 meant what it said (not an easy concept for lawyers) and that an inquest must be held. With two judges against him in the Divisional Court and one dissenting in the Court of Appeal, giving him overall a minority of 2 judges to 3, Ron Smith could consider himself lucky.

The inquest itself was the best thing for the press since the Royal Wedding. It is not easy to be sure of their motives. They had to follow to some extent the popular admiration which Ron Smith had by now earned. But

the story was marvellous copy: on top of the lone individual's struggle to bring the facts into the daylight, the story had sex, violence, passion, mystery, drink and death. With each day's hearing more pieces were fitted into the jigsaw and new shocks and horrors hit the headlines.

In the daily excitement, it was possible to lose sight of some simple but important facts. Helen Smith's left arm was fixed in *rigor mortis* in a raised position above her head: if she had died where she was found the arm could not have stayed elevated like that. Her face and head were covered in bruises, and microscopic examination showed them to have been sustained in life. One of them, the result of a heavy blow to the top of the head, had caused a bleed on the surface of the brain which would have produced almost instant unconsciousness; and as Ron Smith's counsel pointed out, an unconscious person cannot get up and fall over a balcony. And there were bruises to the genitals and inner thighs typical of sexual assault.

Equally curious was the evidence about her companion, the Dutch tug skipper Johannes Otten. He was found impaled on the railings below the balcony of the Arnots' flat, face down and trouserless, his head most probably toward the building, showing that he fell over backwards. With both bodies in a state of partial undress, everybody from the Jeddah police onwards found

it pruriently easy to ascribe the whole tragedy to a tipsy couple falling over a low balcony rail while making love. What were never explained away were the unmistakable signs that Helen Smith had been beaten unconscious and possibly raped, and the peculiar circumstances of Otten's death. Nor, despite great efforts to prove it possible, did the pathological evidence satisfactorily establish how a grown woman could fall 65 feet on to a rock-hard surface without a single fracture of the arms or legs or skull or spine.

By the time the last witness had left the witness box in Leeds, it was evident that the world had been watching Hamlet without either the Prince or Gertrude: by the time of the two deaths everybody, it appeared, had either gone home or gone to sleep except Timothy Hayter and Penelope Arnot — the two individuals who never came to give evidence. In their absence the coroner summed up to the jury: an impeccable summary of the evidence until he got to the bit which coroners can never resist — his own solution of the mystery. Helen Smith and Johannes Otten are making love on the balcony when Otten, with his trousers round his knees, sees his German mates getting into their car across the street. In trying to attract their attention ('Hang on, I'm just coming?') he falls over, pulling Helen with him. He lands on the railings and she is deflected off him, breaking her fall. What has happened, then, to Otten's trousers? They have fallen off in flight and been carried away by a passing Arab who wants his wallet. And Helen's facial and other injuries? Ignore the pathologists who say they were demonstrably suffered before death — 'This is too important to leave to the experts'; assume they were all suffered through manhandling after death; and hey presto, you have your verdict of accidental death.

Inspector Clouseau would have appreciated the finesse of it, but a Leeds jury were less impressed. They found that Helen Smith fell from the balcony, but their verdict on the cause of death was open. However, there has been a happy ending for Hamlet and Gertrude. Timothy Heyter has a steady job in the Far East with the company that was dredging Jeddah harbour at the time of these events; and Penelope Arnot married the son of the chairman of the same company the day after the Court of Appeal ordered an inquest. It is believed that the company is connected with the CIA, but only paranoids think there is anything in that.

John Warr