

MAG – 015 – Lost John's Cave

Content Warnings

- Claustrophobia
- Thalassophobia
- Spatial disorientation
- **Discussions of:** Sibling death, tunnels & underground
- **Mentions of:** Isolation, panic
- **SFX:** Low rumbling

[The Magnus Archives Theme - Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill Presents The Magnus Archives Episode Fifteen Lost John's Cave

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro - Continues]

JONATHAN SIMS

Statement of Laura Popham, regarding her experience exploring the Three Counties System of caves with her sister Alena Sanderson. Original statement given November the 9th, 2014. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London. Statement begins.

Statement begins.

JONATHAN SIMS

(Read aloud from the archived witness statement of Laura Popham)

Caving has always been one of my hobbies. My main hobby really – all the equipment can get quite costly after a while and I don't earn enough to have more than one expensive activity like that in my life. Alena, my sister, came

along with me on a trip a few years back. She'd lost her job and her house in quick succession and was staying with me. I thought it would cheer her up. It did, and we've been doing it ever since. Stupid idea, really. I wish I'd left her crying on the sofa. At least then she'd still be alive.

We didn't really have the money to actually go potholing all that often, so I spent a lot of time reading and planning and just looking at stuff online. We averaged maybe a cave a year. Alena was never quite as into it as I was, though. Don't get me wrong, she was no claustrophobe and I wasn't forcing her to follow me into the darkness on threat of a family rift, but she mainly enjoyed the climbing, and I always ended up going a little bit deeper than she wanted. I think to be honest she would have preferred to get her exercise under the open sky or, failing that, in an above-ground gym. Maybe we should have tried cliffs or a climbing wall but caving was our thing. It had helped her when she was in a bad place, and she knew how much I loved it. She also wasn't too keen on the scrapes and bruises you always get on expeditions. She used to joke that it felt like the earth itself was trying to kick her ass. If only she had known. We did have fun, though, and she always chose to come along. I never forced her to be there. I never did that.

We'd done some of the Three Counties cave system before – a short trip of only a couple of hours into the Rift Pot caves. The whole system is huge, though, I mean there's a reason it's called the Three Counties System, so there was plenty more to explore and we'd had so much fun the first time that I wanted to try it from a different angle. We were going to go in through the Death's Head Hole, then travelling through Lost John's Cave as far as Gavel Pot before heading back. The prospect of this excited me, as in order to travel between Lost John's Cave and the Gavel Pot system we were going to have to

do some cave diving. I had never done cave diving before, and neither had Alena, although she told me that the prospect spooked her less than some of the squeezes we'd had to do get there.

We made all the arrangements, got our permits in order with the CNCC and had my husband Alistair note down all the details in case anything went wrong. You never go caving unless someone knows where you're headed and what your plan is. I had also done as much research into our route as possible as I had no intention of straying from the well-explored, thoroughly-charted caves. I was never much of a pioneer if I'm being honest and I was happy to stay to the main routes. No, what I used to love about caving was the feeling of being deep inside the earth; the cold, solid walls folding in around me. It always used to feel like they were keeping me safe though it doesn't feel like that anymore.

It was Saturday June 14th we went. I had taken the Friday before off work to prepare, and was planning to spend Sunday nursing well-earned bruises. Alena and I drove up to Lancashire, towards Death's Head Hole. I live in Manchester so it wasn't too long a trip. We parked up at Leck Fell, the closest you could legally park. I was surprised to see that we were the only ones there when we arrived. It was a sunny day in late spring and the weather was meant to be clear for days, with no chance of rain making the caves too dangerous. It was a perfect day for caving but it seemed we were the only ones taking advantage of it

Death's Head Hole is not nearly as impressive or intimidating as its name suggests. If you didn't know what you were looking for, you might end up missing it entirely. When we went, much of it was covered in wild plants and bracken. It was barely larger than we were, and I remember at the time the phrase "a perfect fit" came into my head unbidden. Still, the resin anchors

were in good condition and we hooked up and descended our ropes without incident, despite a few unexpected twists in the pothole. It was a bright day; it was almost noon when we went down, so the light filtered a lot further in that I would have expected. It was some time before we had to turn on our headlamps, but eventually we did so. By the time we hit the bottom, there was none of that sunshine left to be seen and the silent darkness of the cave swallowed us. Beneath our feet the gentle waters of the underground stream ran their course, as they had for thousands of years, undisturbed by the rough tread of humanity, and we followed them. It was a much gentler descent than that which we had come in with, but it was very slippery, and I was glad I had invested in a waterproof map case, although it made it slightly harder to read at times.

Alena stood back to let me have my ritual. There was something I always did when I first entered a cave, and that was to take a moment to turn off all the lights, and place both my hands upon the cold, earthen walls. I remember once, when I was a child, we went on a school trip to White Scar Cave up in Yorkshire. It was a lovely, safe, accessible cave and was absolutely beautiful, which I suppose is why it was popular for such trips. After we'd been down there for a few minutes, the guide led us much deeper, and told us to stand very quietly. She turned off the lights, to show us children what true darkness is like. I'd never seen anything like it. It was such a pure black, so encompassing, and in the warmth of the underground I found myself full of a joy I've never forgotten. Even among a class of thirty schoolchildren, I felt like the only presence that mattered was the cave. Ever since then I would always take a moment on any potholing trip to do the same, and feel again that utter darkness, with no sound but the gently flowing river and my own breathing. I don't think it's an uncommon practice, actually, but I rarely went caving with

anyone other than Alena and, while she indulged me, I don't think she really got anything out of it.

We turned our lights back on, and began to head deeper into the cave. I had a map, which we began to follow as closely as we could. I'm quite experienced in these things but even I find it hard sometimes to match the irregular lines and angles of the underground passages to the often abstract shapes written into the map. There were several junctions that were significantly smaller than the map would seem to show, and the point of entry into Lost John's Cave was what we would call a squeeze. It wasn't on the map, but it seemed to be the only way through.

Now, most passages you find yourself travelling through when caving are much smaller than would normally be comfortable for people to move through. After all, they were eroded by often tiny streams of water and minor tectonic events, so accommodating humans was never high on their list of priorities. A squeeze is something different, though. A squeeze can be a hole less than a foot wide, sometimes going on for a long way, the rock pressing in on all sides of you, and your helmet banging whenever you try to turn your head. In a particularly bad squeeze, there are parts where the walls and ceiling are so close that you can't move your arms or bend your legs to push forward, and you just have to squirm your way to the other side like a worm. This was a particularly bad squeeze. Near the end it got so bad that, if Alena hadn't gone in first, I would have told her to go back and forget Lost John's Cave.

About half way through I realised that it was far tighter than I had imagined. I called ahead, to make sure Alena had made it out okay. She called back, told me it was a hard one, but she was fine. I wanted to answer her, but by that point the rock was so close around me it was stopping me from doing anything

but holding my breath and willing myself forward. A hand grasped me firmly on the shoulder and pulled me through. Just like that, I was out. Alena gave me a smirk, as if to comment on the fact that she had made it through unassisted and I, the true cave aficionado, had need a hand. I wanted to shoot back some pointed comment about her being more slender than me, but by the time I had got my breathing under control again, the anger had died down and I managed a weak smile.

We made our way through the cave until we came to the Cathedral. It's a large, arching cave – quite breathtaking, though it requires a couple of sheer drops to access, one of about 40 feet. We had experience and equipment enough to make quite light work of it though, and soon we were beneath the Cathedral in what is imaginatively called the Crypt. We stopped here for a rest and a bite to eat, and Alena told me an interesting thing about Lost John's Cave. While I had been concerned with finding maps and as much information as I could on getting through, she told me she had been looking into a history of the place.

She said everyone puts the apostrophe in the wrong place when talking about Lost John's Cave, as the stories goes it was two men, both named John, who were the first to delve deep into the cave. They went too far, though, and their candles had gone out. They lost their way together in the sprawling labyrinth of tunnels and never emerged. Alena said she thought it was quite sweet, in a strange sort of way, and joked that if she ever got trapped underground, she'd want it to be with me. I smiled and nodded, though secretly the thought appalled me. It wasn't at the thought of being entombed down there – at the time it didn't seem like such an awful fate – but the thought of having to spend my last days with Alena was a bit too much. I'm sorry, that's a horrible thing to

say about the dead. I loved my sister, and I loved spending time with her, but to be lost beneath the earth is such an intensely private thing. Maybe she realised that, at the end.

After our brief stop we made our way down through the Dome. It was beautiful, and this was the part that I had been dreading, as all the experienced cavers I had talked to had said that this was the hardest descent. It went easily. Very easily, actually, and at the time I remember getting a weird feeling, like I was being swallowed. Finally, we made it through the shale cavern and into the master cave. As we stood there, I felt anticipation and trepidation in equal measure. Before us lay the passage, filled with the still water of the sump. We were about to have our first cave dive.

I had always been told by experienced cave divers that you never judge the distance correctly. The first few times you try to surface, you will always hit your head on the stone above, so it's best to try and not be too alarmed by it. I reminded Alena of this as we got our equipment ready, and she told me she remembered, and then surprised me by asking to be the first one to go through, saying something or other about conquering fears. I said yes, why not, and let her go through. As I stood there alone, waiting, I began to feel something I had never before felt this far underground. I began to feel uneasy. It was as silent as it had ever been, but there was something else there, beneath the silence. Almost like a whisper.

I shook the feeling off when it came time to follow Alena, and dived into the pool. It wasn't far to the junction which would lead us on to the Gavel Pot. I pressed myself through the narrow space, half swimming, half climbing, until I thought I had gone far enough, and attempted to surface. Clunk. My helmet hit lightly against the roof of the tunnel. Fine, that was as expected. I kept

swimming another few meters and tried again. Clunk. That gave me a nasty shock, as I should have been well past the end of this first tunnel. I kept going, until I reached the end of the subterranean waterway, and went towards the surface. Clunk. I started to panic. Was this a dead end? There was no further I could go. Where was Alena? She couldn't have come back past me; the tunnel was far too narrow. In desperation I tried to come up one more time.

I broke the surface to see Alena laughing to herself, and holding a rock over the part of the water where I had been trying to emerge. I swore at her violently, not sure whether to hit her or join in her laughing. She apologised, but said she had seen the rock and couldn't resist, as I was always going on about the helmet banging on the roof. I sat there, suddenly drained. The adrenaline of my panic seemed to have sapped much of my energy, and I think my sister could see that, as she didn't press me to go on. We both knew that the passage through from this junction to the Gavel Pot itself was a much longer dive, and neither of us was really up to it. We just sat there for a while in silence.

It had taken longer to get this far than we had planned, so I suggested going back the way we came, rather than continuing to go deeper into the cave. Alena agreed but, as I turned away, she asked me how lost I was in a low, grating voice. I snapped back that we weren't lost at all, that I'd followed the map exactly, and she just gave me this look like she didn't understand what I was talking about. I shrugged and told her that I would go first on the way back, and she agreed. I was eager to get back and be above ground in a way that I had never been before. I got my equipment ready and dived back into the water, heading back towards Death's Head Hole.

That's when everything started to go really, really wrong...

To begin with, the water didn't end. I tried to surface, as I had on my first time through, and again there was that clunk as my helmet hit the roof of the tunnel. I moved on and tried again, but still no luck. I began to fight down the rising alarm, told myself that the tunnel had a definite end and I just had to reach it, but it just kept going. No light, no surface, nothing but this cramped waterway, pressing on every side waiting to claim me. I don't know how long I was desperately swimming forward, but I almost screamed with relief when I reached my hand and felt it break the surface of the water.

It wasn't the cave I expected. What stretched before me was a tunnel even smaller than the waterlogged one I had left. I scrambled forward into it, not because I wanted to go on into that unknown passage, but because I was worried about Alena being able to get out of the water behind me. I must have taken a wrong turn except that didn't make sense. I hadn't turned at all, and more than that, there weren't any turns or junctions in this part of the cave. I had checked all the maps of this area over and over and they all put it as a straight line. I waited, wanting to talk to my sister when she surfaced, and discuss where to go from here. She didn't emerge. I don't know how long I lay there; it was too cramped to check the time, but it felt like hours. I wanted to go back and check, but I couldn't even turn around to see. I just waited for a splash that never came.

I decided to go on, press forward until I at least found somewhere wide enough that I could turn. As crawled on, I scraped against the jagged rocks until I felt them pressing into my bare skin where my clothes had ripped. I can deal with it when I'm out, I kept thinking, but the passage just got smaller and smaller, until at last I couldn't move any further. I finally accepted that I was going to have to try and squeeze back the way I had come without even

turning round. I started to shuffle backwards, and my feet touched against solid rock. The tunnel was gone. It was then that I screamed. And my light went out.

I said earlier that I enjoyed the pure dark of the cave. I was wrong. I had never truly known a darkness like this. Unable to move, barely with breathing space enough to cry for help. Even as I lay there it felt as though the walls pressed me further, and I knew that the stone I had always believed to be my friend and protector, was going to entomb me here.

In the distance I saw the faintest point of light. It looked like a candle flame, far down the tunnel, so weak that it lit nothing but itself. It grew closer, but any hope it might have given me quickly died as it grew. It was coming towards me so slowly, and deep down I knew that it was... of this place. It meant me harm.

As it got closer, I saw the pale hand that held it, and I heard something. It was Alena. It sounded far off and muffled, but I was sure she was calling for help. I shut my eyes, for all the good it did in that place, and tried desperately to will it all away. When I opened my eyes again, the light was still there, but it had changed somehow. It seemed brighter and, as I looked, I realised it was no longer coming from a candle. I could hardly believe it, but it looked like daylight.

With every last ounce of strength I possessed I pushed myself forward. Had I been climbing this whole time? My clothes were ragged and torn, my skin scraped and bloody, but after nearly an hour I broke onto the surface through a small opening not on any of the maps. I breathed in fresh, cool air and I screamed as long and loud as I could. That was how Alistair and the cave rescue team found me. Apparently I'd been underground for almost twenty-four hours, and he had called in the cave rescue service.

I was well cared for, as I waited for news of Alena. My wounds were treated and I was given food and water. It took another day before the rescue team told me what I think I already knew: there was no sign of her anywhere. I never saw her again, and she was added to the list of fatalities, so I suppose that's an end of it. I haven't been underground since, and I don't intend to.

JONATHAN SIMS

Statement ends.

This is a strange one. I have rarely come across a statement written with such conviction, yet where so many of the details are provably false. The CNCC have no record of Ms. Popham getting a permit for this expedition, and the number of other permits they issued for June 14th would indicate that they certainly weren't the only ones in the cave that day. Beyond that, Death's Head Hole and Lost John's Cave are, as Ms. Popham pointed out, well-documented in layout and, according to Sasha's reckoning, the route she described is borderline nonsensical.

What is true is that on 15th of June the Yorkshire Dales Cave Rescue Organisation was contacted by Mr. Alistair Popham, who told them his wife and sister-in-law had gone caving the day before and had not returned. I sent Tim to check the details – Martin declined to help with this investigation as he's "a bit claustrophobic" – and he found some more bizarre discrepancies. Ms. Popham was not found above ground, as she claimed. She was found a few yards from the bottom of Death's Head Hole, unresponsive and kneeling next to a small pile of burned out candles. Alistair Popham claims not to have seen any such things being packed. She only came out of this stupor when brought above ground, at which point she started shouting about her sister Alena, demanding they go and "save her".

There is also the matter of the recording. She does not mention it in her statement at all, but Ms. Popham took a camera with her into the cave system. It was never claimed back from the CRO after her rescue, and Tim managed to gain enough access to copy the footage. Best not to ask how, I think. Most of it is mundane footage of Ms. Popham and her sister cave climbing, which seemed to match her statement, but the last recording is... somewhat alarming. The timestamp puts it at just past two o'clock in the morning of June 15th. It is completely black, though whether this is because it was in a pitch dark cave or simply because the lens cap was still on is unclear. The audio is what concerns me, and here I will play a sample:

[Underground Water Splashing]

LAURA POPHAM

(Increasing to crescendo) Take her not me, take her not me, take her not me, take her not me.

Recording Ends.

[The Magnus Archives Theme - Outro]

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