Sally Helm: HISTORY This Week. March 20, 1953. I’m Sally Helm.

A dingy London cul de sac in the shadow of an old iron foundry. The last row house on the block is number 10. It’s cramped and narrow and it needs a coat of fresh paint. The foundation is sinking, so the doors and the windows look slightly tilted in places. It gives you the sense that the whole house might fall over if you just jabbed it really hard with your elbow.

In a living room just on the other side of the first-floor bay window, the tenant, a middle-aged man named John Christie, is arranging things with his new subletters. “There’s the bedroom, here’s the key.” He’s not technically supposed to be subletting at all, but he’s anxious to get out of town and he needs the money. He borrows a brown suitcase from one of the new tenants. Packs his clothes. And walks out the front door.

Almost immediately… Christie’s landlord discovers the illegal subletters. He’s not happy. He kicks them out of the apartment. But he can’t find Christie anywhere.

He lets another tenant in the building use Christie’s kitchen for the time being. And a few days later, on March 24th, that guy decides he wants to hang his radio in the kitchen. He knocks on the wall, looking for a solid place to attach a bracket. But unexpectedly he hears…a hollow sound. He gets a flashlight. Pokes a hole through the flimsy wallpaper. And finds… a body. The man will soon discover that there are in fact, not just one, but three bodies, stuffed into this hidden alcove. And the body count doesn’t end there.

Today: the case of serial killer John Christie. Why, decades later, are parts of his story still a mystery? And how did that very mystery play into a big change in the UK–the abolition of the death penalty?

[Sally Helm: In the summer of 1943, there are not yet any bodies in the walls of 10 Rillington Place. But living on the first floor, with his wife Ethel and his dog Judy, is 44-year-old John Reginald Christie.

Kate Dawson: John Christie to me is the creepiest of creepy.]
Sally Helm: Professor Kate Winkler Dawson wrote about Christie's crimes in her book "Death in the Air." She says accounts of this guy—even before he was a known killer are not flattering.

Kate Dawson: He was not charming. He was not handsome. He sort of had a large forehead. He wears glasses and he has a very awkward smile. Gosh, he's just not described very well.

Sally Helm: Growing up, he'd never quite fit in. He spent his childhood in a manufacturing town in the North of England. One of seven siblings. He didn't have a lot of friends. When all his peers started dating, he struggled:

Kate Dawson: They called him, can't do it Christy, which is a terrible nickname along with some other nicknames that I'm not going to repeat on the History Channel, and this all added up to an incredibly insecure sort of miserable man.

Sally Helm: He heads off to the army almost as soon as he turns 18. Maybe to get away from the misery. He fights in World War One and gets hit with mustard gas. He blames the attack for hurting his voice.

Kate Dawson: He could not really speak any louder than a whisper, which added to the creepiness, as you can imagine.

Sally Helm: All along though, Christie does have one trait that consistently works in his favor:

Kate Dawson: I will say the best thing about him is that he was bright.

Sally Helm: He reads a lot growing up. Doesn't like fiction--prefers technical stuff about medicine, and electricity. And after the first world war, Christie does end up meeting a woman who agrees to marry him; her name is Ethel. Right before the second world war, in 1937, the middle-aged couple moves into 10 Rillington Place.

Their home stood on a small street in the Notting Hill area of London.

Kate Dawson: If any of your listeners have been to Notting Hill, it's wonderful. It's one of my favorite areas of London. Not in the 1940s. It was a terrible place in the 1940s. It was run down. It was filled with people who were, were pretty miserable, underemployed or unemployed. There was a lot of part-time sex work so this was not a really great place for them to live.

Sally Helm: By 1943, the year our story begins, the neighborhood had already been ravaged by World War Two. You’d see bombed out buildings as you walked down the street. Christie at this time is a war reserve policeman, going out on patrol. And he’s not exactly the most moral of people.
Jonathan Oates: And he may well have been well, he certainly was, he was unfaithful to his wife because he was having an affair with a female police officer, where he worked.

Sally Helm: Jonathan Oates is a historian and archivist. He spent years sifting through public records, and researching Christie, for his book, "John Christie at 10 Rillington Place." Oates told us, at some point in 1942 or 43, John Christie’s path intersects with that of another woman. A Jewish refugee from Austria named Ruth Furest.

Jonathan Oates: He says he met her in a snack bar. And he says that she told him that she was rather short of money. So, he said that he would help her out

Sally Helm: Christie claims they struck up a friendship and had long talks while he was on patrol. It's likely they began an affair. He invites her to his house several times that spring and summer, when Ethel is gone. And then:

Jonathan Oates: On the last occasion, which was in August 1943, Krista killed her

Sally Helm: Christie never fully explains why he committed this first murder.

Jonathan Oates: One possibility, one story is that when Chris and Ruth were in the house together someone knocked on the door. And it was a messenger with news for Christie that his wife and his wife's brother Henry had just arrived in London, and they were on their way to the house. Christie obviously did not want his wife and her brother finding him with a young woman, partially dressed in their house. So, he panicked and strangled her.

Sally Helm: He always maintains that it wasn't planned. But he admits to feeling something strange when he looked down and saw what he had done.

Jonathan Oates: He said, she looked more beautiful in death than she did in life.

Sally Helm: Now, John Reginald Christie has a dead body on his hands. The first body he'll hide at 10 Rillington place.

Here's Professor Dawson again:

Kate Dawson: He took her body and he buried her in the garden, and he buried her deeply enough so that he, which this is terrible, He would plant things above her. So, there were all kinds of flowers planted above her. He continued to garden.

Sally Helm: Several months go by. The flowers in Christie's garden grow, they die, they grow again. It's now 1944. Christie is working at a radio production factory. And he meets Murial Eaty.
The two become friendly, Eaty and her boyfriend go on double dates with the Christies. Then, in October Eaty comes down with bronchitis.

And, ever conscientious, Christie offers to help. Remember all that technical reading he was doing?

Kate Dawson: John Christy said, I have a first aid certificate, which sounds like something pretty silly, but you know, he knew a little bit more than the average person about medicine. He said, I can treat you for that cough. Come back to my house.

Sally Helm: Ethel's out of town. So, Christie and Eaty are alone. He brings her to the kitchen, has her sit down. And he pulls out a jar containing a solution called Friar's Balsam.

Kate Dawson: And it had kind of a, like a minty, menthol rub on your chest when you were a kid kind of smell to it.

Sally Helm: She breathes in the fumes through a tube to clear out her chest.

Kate Dawson: Which in theory could work. The issue is that he had connected another tube to the back of his furnace, which was a tap for coal gas. So, when he would release that gas. It released carbon monoxide and knocked her out.

Sally Helm: After that, John Christie sexually assaults her. Then strangles her with a cord. Just as he did with Ruth Furest, he buries Eaty in the garden. Oates told us that she is reported missing but:

Jonathan Oates: her family thought that she was probably killed in an air raid because this is during World War II. So, once again, Christy has got away with murder.

Sally Helm: Five years go by. And then in the spring of 1948, some new tenants move into the top floor. A young married couple in their 20s named Beryl and Timothy Evans. when their lives intersect with Christie's, things get complicated. In fact, deadly. The mystery of what happens between these three people will persist up to the present day.

The husband, Timothy Evans, is from Wales.

Jonathan Oates: He is a van driver by profession. He's not very intelligent, he can't read and write very much. But in order to compensate for this, he tells stories, about himself and about his family to make him sound grander and more important than he actually is.

Sally Helm: The wife, Beryl Evans, is 5 years younger than Timothy. She's described as educated, argumentative and enigmatic. She’s also a few months pregnant with their first child when the couple moves into 10 Rillington Place.
Jonathan Oates: And it's there in October 1948, that baby Geraldine Evans is born

Sally Helm: Beryl Evans and her husband are on friendly terms with the Christies downstairs. They occasionally share a neighborly cup of tea

The young couple’s relationship, meanwhile, is not going well.

Jonathan Oates: For several reasons, partly or perhaps mainly because Evans is drinking away in pubs a lot of his wages. He's also wasting money on gambling, on dogs and horses. And so not much money is coming into the house.

Sally Helm: They're behind on rent. Timothy is having affairs with other women. And worse:

Jonathan Oates: Timothy was also a wife beater as well, especially after he came back from the pub.

Sally Helm: Tension in the household builds. And soon, the couple gets some news--unwelcome news, in their case.

Jonathan Oates: Beryl announced that she was pregnant with obviously a second child, and that added to the tension that was already very high. And the evidence we have is that she may well have tried to find some method of aborting the baby, unsuccessfully.

Sally Helm: And then...

On November 7, 1949, according to Timothy, he and Beryl have a big, blowout argument. On November 8, some workmen fixing the roof see a woman and child going out at around 10 AM. Almost certainly Beryl and Geraldine. and then, his downstairs neighbor, John Christie, says he saw Beryl going out again later that day.

Jonathan Oates: And if he's correct, that is the last time anyone saw Beryl Evans alive except of course her murderer.

Sally Helm: People won’t know for a few weeks that Beryl and Geraldine are missing. But we know now that November 8 is an important day – as Oates said, the last day they’re ever seen.

And two days later, her husband starts acting strange:

Jonathan Oates: Timothy Evans is at work, and he manages after an argument to lose his job

Sally Helm: The next day, November eleventh:
Jonathan Oates: He sells all his furniture from his rooms. On the 14th of November Timothy Evans leaves the house. And he takes a railway train to, where his aunt and uncle live in Wales.

Sally Helm: Evans is traveling alone. He tells various stories about his wife and daughter—to his aunt and uncle, he says they’re vacationing in a seaside town. Then a week or so later, he says that Beryl has left him.

Jonathan Oates: Those are his explanations, which as we will discover are not correct.

Sally Helm: On the 29th of November, Evans’s mother writes a letter to the aunt and uncle that he’s staying with

Jonathan Oates: And his mother is very angry because she says that her son has left without telling people where he’s gone to. His aunt and uncle asking him what’s going on. And he doesn’t really know what to do

Sally Helm: That afternoon, Evans shows up, of his own accord, the police station nearby.

Jonathan Oates: And he says to a police officer there. I want to report something. And the police there, what do you want to report? And then he announced to us that he has put his wife down the drain.

Sally Helm: They bring him in for questioning. And he tells them a story. He says an unnamed man gave him pills that would abort Beryl's pregnancy. She took them, and they killed her. But the police are a bit suspicious of the story.

Jonathan Oates: The story comes out very slowly and one of the detectives thinks it’s a cock and bull story.

Sally Helm: Nevertheless, it is a potential murder. So, the police get word to local officers in Notting Hill. They show up outside 10 Rillington place with crow bars, and find the sewer drain.

Kate Dawson: After a lot of effort from three or four different men, they pry open this sewer and drop down and there's nothing down there.

So, what is this guy saying? There's nothing down there and there's no way he would have done it by himself. He could not have gotten that lid up by himself.

Sally Helm: The Notting Hill police send the news back. No body. When the Welsh police confront Evans with this?

Kate Dawson: He comes out with another long story.
**Sally Helm:** Call it confession number two.

**Jonathan Oates:** This time is very different. He says, well, my first story was correct. I just told it in order to help a man called Christie

**Sally Helm:** A man called Christie.

The police have no idea that Christie has two bodies buried in the backyard. Evans likely doesn’t either. And yet: in his second confession, he points the finger right at his neighbor. He says: John Christie, performed an abortion on my wife. I was at work. And when I got home:

**Jonathan Oates:** Christie tells him, I've got some very bad news for you. It didn't work. And then Evans rooms upstairs and discovers the dead body of his wife. Christy explains that the abortion went wrong. But if you tell anybody about it, then you will be blamed, and you could be looking at a charge of murder

**Sally Helm:** Evans says that he and Christie took care of the body together. He says Christie promised to find a new home for the baby, Geraldine.

The Welsh police hold Evans in custody and send back this new story to Notting Hill. The police go to 10 Rillington place again. They look in Evans's apartment. And they talk to the Christies. John Christie denies being an abortionist—and of course doesn’t mention his history of “playing doctor” to lure victims to 10 Rillington Place.

Fortunately for Christie, when the police search the premises for Beryl’s body, they aren’t totally attentive. When they pass through the backyard gate:

**Kate Dawson:** What they don't see, inexplicably, they don't see a weird stick. That's propping up part of the gate.

**Sally Helm:** That stick is actually a femur bone from one of Christie's first two victims.

**Kate Dawson:** They walked right by a femur bone. Didn't notice it.

**Sally Helm:** The police do check to see if there are signs of recent digging in the garden—they're aren't. So, Christie’s secret remains safe.

And a few days later, the police find Beryl's body in the outhouse. She's been strangled. Sadly, so was baby Geraldine. Her body is found not far from her mother’s.

**Jonathan Oates:** So, this is now a murder investigation and chief inspector Jennings tells Evans that he's charging him with the death of his wife and child. “Do you have anything to say?”
Sally Helm: It's here that Evans makes his third and final confession:

Jonathan Oates: Now the longer statement is important because he makes it very quickly.

Sally Helm: Unlike his first two, which Oates says were slow. In confession number three, Evan’s story is this. He killed his wife, Beryl. They were arguing. And he strangled her with a rope. Later, he admits to a police officer that he killed Geraldine, too. He says he did it because she wouldn't stop crying.

Evans is ultimately charged with the murder of Geraldine. In the UK at the time, murder suspects were only tried for one murder, even if they are accused of committing multiple crimes. facing a trial, and the death penalty...Evans recants his confession. He tells his mom, "I know I made all those statements, mum, but only one of them is true. The one in which I said Christie had done it."

But at the trial, Christie is the prosecution’s star witness against Evans. He takes the stand and points the finger right back at his neighbor. And who's the jury to believe? John Christie--respectable veteran? Or Timothy Evans--a drunk, unemployed man who lies, and who abused his wife. No one can think of a reason why Christie would randomly kill Evans’s wife and child – even Evans can’t. When the prosecution asks him what Christie’s motive would have been:

Kate Dawson: Evan says, well, he was at home at the time. And, the prosecution council says, yes, but why should he kill them? Why what's the motive? And Evans has no answer today. So, he does, he can’t bring up anything,

Sally Helm: After a short 40 minutes of deliberation, Evans is found guilty and sentenced to death.

Few people, besides the family, pay any attention to Evans's trial or his execution.

Kate Dawson: This would have been just sort of your humdrum, normal domestic violence that we saw all the time in the fifties in London wrapped up in a newspaper. It was a blip.

Sally Helm: Life proceeds as normal at 10 Rillington Place. Until December of 1952, when an unusually heavy and suffocating smog wafts over London. It can't have helped with the already irritable mood inside the Christie home. The city is shutting down. People are stuck inside and right then; Christie decides to quit his job. So now he and Ethel are stuck at home together in this bizarre weather.

Kate Dawson: And as my, a friend of mine once said, sort of tongue in cheek, she said, there's no worse news to a serial killer than being stuck in your house with your wife or for five or six days straight. And when the fog ends, everything lifts, and everything calms down. And then a few days later, he looks at Ethel and decides that it's time to kill her.
Sally Helm: Christie strangles his wife, Ethel. And hides her body in the living room. Beneath some loose floorboards.

Kate Dawson: And then he sleeps by the floorboards to be close to her. It is so beyond bizarre what he does.

Sally Helm: Not long after the murder, a burglar steals some cookies from a local bakery. He runs into 10 Rillington place -- of all the houses -- to hide from the police. But he's caught, and a police officer, a man named Len Trevilian, comes back to apologize to Christie for the disturbance. Christie thanks him. Trevilian goes to leave. But then he pauses:

Kate Dawson: And he looks around and he says to Christie, what's that smell? And Christie says, Ugh, the neighbors. They cook all this disgusting food and Lynn Trevelyan says, okay, and leaves,

Sally Helm: Despite this close call, Christie seemingly feels free to do...whatever he'd like. In the next few months, in quick succession, he commits three more murders at 10 Rillington place. As with his first crimes, few notice the disappearances.

Kathleen Maloney, who he met at a bar. Rita Nelson, who was six months pregnant at the time of her death. And lastly, Hectorina MacLennan, who had come over to 10 Rillington place with her boyfriend to discuss subletting Christie's room.

Each time, Christie's MO is the same. He uses gas to knock the women out. He sexually assaults and then strangles them. And he puts the bodies of these three women in a little alcove behind a kitchen cupboard.

Meanwhile, Ethel's family hasn't heard from her in months. They start asking Christie questions. And the boyfriend of Hectorina MacLennan, Christie’s latest victim, gets suspicious as well. He comes to 10 Rillington place looking for her.

Kate Dawson: This is all making John Reginal Christie incredibly nervous. He then decides this is probably the last person I'm going to be able to get away with this with, and he wallpapers the three women in.

Sally Helm: And in March of 1953, he decides to get away for a while. He finds those illegal subletters and leaves 10 Rillington Place for good.

Kate Dawson: I just can't even believe he's got bodies all over the place. And this is the decision that he makes. Again, smart man but boy, does he make a big mistake.
Sally Helm: A few days later...the tenant from upstairs finds the first body. He calls the police. They tear down the wallpaper and find all three bodies in the alcove. Then they find Ethel's body beneath the floorboards. And Christie...is nowhere to be found. Almost instantly, the story is all over England.

Kate Dawson: His picture is printed everywhere, and the headlines were really pretty alarming, like they called him the Notting hill killer, Jack the strangle, and then they said search for the moon mad killer because there's a full moon that would trigger Christy is what people thought.

Sally Helm: Everyone is looking for him. His image and his description are making the rounds. It's a bad time to be bald in London.

Jonathan Oates: If you got a bald head and your middle-aged man, you're being brought into police station. So, you can prove that you're not Christie.

Sally Helm: Meanwhile the real Christie hasn't gone far.

He's still in London. And he’s not doing a great job of hiding. His luck officially runs out on March 31st, after a little over a week on the run. A police officer sees him on a bridge and approaches him.

Jonathan Oates: He said, well, who are you? And Christie gives a false name and a false identity, the policeman asked him to remove his hat. And he moved his hat and he said, you're Christie, aren't you?

Sally Helm: Christie is arrested and taken into the police station, where he admits to murdering the four women found in his home. And in an odd twist, Len Trevalian, that police officer who smelled the funny smell at 10 Rillington place, is guarding Christie's cell.

Kate Dawson: And Christie says, do you recognize me? And Trevelyan says, of course I do. And Christie smiles and says, I guess, you know what that smell was at this point, you were standing right above my wife.

Sally Helm: The public is shocked by the body count. And the press is starting to ask, hey what about that case of Timothy Evans? Didn’t he live there too? Could there really have been two killers living under the same roof?

And then just a few weeks after Christie is arrested, he makes a dramatic statement. He says: I murdered Beryl Evans. Oddly though, he does not admit to killing Geraldine.
Some people believe him right away—after all, it's another body at 10 Rillington place. But others are skeptical. Christie is going for an insanity plea, and so in a way, this latest confession could work in his favor. Christie even says to the jail chaplain:

**Jonathan Oates:** The more, the madder.

**Sally Helm:** The police eventually find the two additional bodies in the garden – Ruth Furest and Muriel Eatly. Christie admits to those murders. And he confesses to several other murders that the officers can't prove ever happened.

But there’s no doubt he's guilty of killing at least six women: Ruth Furest, Muriel Eatly, Ethel Christie, Kathleen Maloney, Rita Nelson, and Hectorina MacLennan.

Which of course fuels the suspicions already swirling: couldn’t he be telling the truth about murdering Beryl? Was Timothy Evans an innocent man? Did Christie lie at the trial, so that Evans would be executed in his place?

**Julian Knowles:** Now, the problem with this case is Evans was a liar. Christy was a liar. They lied about each other, they lied about everything. And it was very, very difficult, was difficult and it's difficult now to actually establish what really happened.

**Sally Helm:** That's Sir Julian Knowles. He has studied the Evans case in his work as a legal scholar.

He told us; Christie is found guilty at his trial. And afterwards, as he awaits execution, the public demands that the government take another look at the Evans case. So, they do. They hire an independent reviewer who conducts a speedy assessment in the summer of 1953. That review concludes:

**Julian Knowles:** Evans was indeed guilty. Christie's confessions to murdering barrel were false. And therefore, there was no miscarriage of justice

**Sally Helm:** So, the ruling in the Evans case stands. John Christie, a convicted murderer, is hanged. Just like Timothy Evans before him.

But the case doesn’t leave the public eye. And before long, it becomes part of another public discussion happening around this time. Whether or not the UK should abolish the death penalty.

It’s not the first time this debate has come up. But for a variety of reasons, in the mid 1950s and early 1960s, it’s gaining a lot of traction. And for those against capital punishment, the case of Timothy Evans becomes a rallying cry. They say look: an innocent man might have been hanged.

**Julian Knowles:** The Evans case was very heavily debated as an example of a, of a miscarriage of justice public opinion never went away, that Timothy Evans had been wrongly executed and
people were just not prepared, to pass up with it or less improper answer was found to what had actually happened.

Sally Helm: So, in 1965, as the death penalty discussion is continuing, the government launches a second inquiry into the case, this one finds:

Julian Knowles: No jury would ever have convicted Evans had they known of what Christie had done. Let alone what he was about to do.

Sally Helm: Christie wouldn’t have looked like such a star witness. But the report’s final conclusion is perplexing. It states:

Julian Knowles: That Evans probably had killed Beryl, but probably had not killed Geraldine.

Sally Helm: The bodies were found together, both strangled. So, it was typically thought:

Julian Knowles: Whoever killed barrel killed Geraldine, and that had always been accepted by everybody

Sally Helm: So, this second report raises more questions. But it certainly doesn't absolve Evans completely.

Meanwhile, the argument against the death penalty in the UK does prevail. In 1965, capital punishment for murder is suspended. And in 1969, it's permanently abolished. Many people think that the furor over the Evans case, along with a handful of other controversial cases, ultimately had an impact on that decision.

So, the Evans case is remembered in large part because it has a hand in changing the criminal justice system in the UK. But also, because it’s a mystery that can’t be quite fully resolved. Because when Timothy Evans was accused of murder, the death penalty was used in the UK. And he was hanged. Whatever secrets he had; he took them to the grave.

Decades after the deaths of Beryl and Geraldine, in 2003, a family member of Timothy Evans goes to the high court of England and Wales to ask to have Evans’s case reassessed again. The request is ultimately denied – it happened so long ago. But the court does make an unofficial public statement saying:

Julian Knowles: We ourselves are happy to say that Timothy Evans was wrongly convicted, was wrongly executed. So, by an indirect route, the court formally declared Evan's innocence, albeit not in a criminal appeal, which would actually crush the conviction.
Sally Helm: Sir Knowles agrees with the 2003 assessment of the case. He believes that the evidence points to Evans’ innocence. On the other hand, Jonathan Oates, thinks the evidence points to Evans’ guilt.

Jonathan Oates: I think it's part of the due to Evan's character being, being violent and drunken and abusive, but also the information that we know how Christy kill people

Sally Helm: He says the MO in the Beryl case was different—there was no gas involved, for one thing, and, according to Oates’s review of the archival materials, the original police investigation didn't find any evidence of rape.

And in a way, your judgment of who’s guilty might come down to how you feel about the nature of coincidence. As Sir Knowles put it:

Julian Knowles: I just come back to the fundamental point is I think convinces most people, the chances of two men unknown to each other, killing women in exactly the, same way in the same small house in West London. These just vanishingly small.

Sally Helm: But to Professor Dawson's mind:

Kate Dawson: Two serial killers. Living in the same house at the same time seems outlandish one serial killer in an abusive husband who has abused his wife before, who was capable of snapping in post-war depressed, terrible London. Oh yeah, I totally believe that.

Sally Helm: It's a weird coincidence, sure. But she thinks it's possible that there really did happen to be two killers living in the same tiny house at 10 Rillington place.