

Witness Name: Christine Thirsk

Statement No.: WITN09470100

Dated: 21 June 2023

POST OFFICE HORIZON IT INQUIRY

FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF CHRSTINE THIRSK

I, Christine Thirsk, will say as follows...

Introduction

1. I am a former employee of Marine Drive Post Office and held the position of Counter Clerk. At the relevant time my name was Christine Train. It is now Christine Thirsk.
2. This witness statement is made to assist the Post Office Horizon IT Inquiry (the “**Inquiry**”) with the matters set out in the Rule 9 Request dated 06 June 2023 (the “**Request**”).
3. To assist me in preparing this witness statement, I have reviewed various documents provided to me by the Inquiry. These were **POL00083641**; **POL00074092**; **POL00074091**; **POL00083031**; **POL00071592**; **POL00072786**; **POL00069282**; **POL00069279**; **LCAS0000607_004** and **POL00071236**.

Experience at Marine Drive Post Office

4. I have been asked to set out a summary of my career at Marine Drive Post Office. I started working at this branch in January 1986 under the YTS scheme at the time.

After 2 years, I became a permanent member of staff. By this time, I was working more hours in the Post Office than the sub-postmistress. When the premises were sold, I trained the next incoming Sub-postmaster ("**SPM**") and another new member of staff. When Mr. Castleton took over, I also trained him and subsequently more new staff.

5. In respect of my experience of the Horizon system prior to Mr. Castleton being appointed SPM, I can confirm we experienced no issues with the Horizon IT system.
6. In respect of my experience of working with Mr. Castleton from June 2003, I can confirm that he learnt the role extremely quickly and worked hard at getting to know the customers that we had and their needs.
7. In respect of my working relationship with Mr. Castleton, he was by far the best SPM I had worked for. We got on extremely well from the start and worked together very well to make a good team.
8. In respect of the working relationship between Catherine Oglesby and Mr. Castleton, it was polite / professional but always of a feeling that she didn't really like him for no apparent reason. Apparently, at Mr. Castleton's initial interview for SPM, Catherine Oglesby hadn't appeared impressed that he attended on his own. Mrs. Castleton did not go with him as planned due to her mother being in a car accident the day before. As a retail line manager, she had the power to close an office and had already 'threatened' the previous owners with that if they hadn't tidied up the appearance of the office. It was as if she wanted to exert her authority from day 1 over Mr. Castleton.

9. In respect of the events of the Week 42 balancing, everything was ok until the final balance showed the first shortfall. As standard practice, we went through all the cash and stock again and any relevant documentation in the office. It was unusual that nothing turned up. We declared the balance but checked everything again over the next few days but to no avail. We contacted the usual partners with a view to receiving an error notice that something had inadvertently been sent off without being accounted for but again, nothing.

10. In respect of Catherine Oglesby's visits to the branch from 16 January 2004 onwards, throughout this whole episode she insisted that someone was taking the money, which was categorically denied by us all. We requested that she involve the Fraud Dept and Police if that is what she believed but nothing happened. We were already double-checking figures before they left the office as standard working practices anyway, so we were given no new guidance or information.

11. In respect of the weeks before Mr. Castleton's suspension, to encounter continuing shortfalls was devastating and frustrating to say the least, especially after we were making daily calls to all the relevant parties that we should have done and getting no new answers as to what might have been happening. I myself was going to the Post Office at 7am and staying until 7pm going over the same figures and paperwork just to find nothing new.

12. In respect of the shortfalls, we knew no one had taken the money and all transactions had been carried out correctly. As the shortfalls began happening on such a regular basis it could only be the Horizon system in our opinion.

13. In respect of the subsequent visits made to the branch by Catherine Oglesby after 16 January 2004, her only suggestion was to start working with split stock so we each had our own stock to work with. I can't recall why it didn't happen, but I requested for us to work manually for a short period and not use the Horizon system at all. Catherine agreed to this but later denied it under oath. Instead, she called the auditors in the same week. We requested to work manually to take the Horizon system out of the equation to prove we could get an accurate balance and no more shortages. I asked Catherine Oglesby if that was an option and she agreed. At Mr. Castleton's trial, she denied it.
14. In respect of calls made to the Horizon Helpline, there were many. Daily calls were made regarding the shortfalls, but no real help given other than to tell us to do what we were already doing as normal practice (checking everything before it left the office or came in i.e. stock and cash). Both Mr. Castleton and I made all the calls to the Helpline.
15. In respect of my working relationship with Catherine Oglesby during this time, it was strained as you would expect due to her insistence that we were taking the money constantly.

Investigation and Audit

16. In respect of the audit on 25 March 2004, it was performed as any other would be as far as I can remember.
17. In respect of the information / documentation the auditor considered, I believe it to have been the reports produced during the working week just the same as we would have checked.

18. In respect of the auditor and the apparent shortfalls, we reiterated again that we thought the Horizon system was at fault. We now know that this was the truth and Fujitsu and the Post Office knew it.
19. In respect of Mr. Castleton's suspension, it was heartbreaking that it had come to that as we felt we had had no support whatsoever and were continuously branded as thieves.
20. In respect of Mr. Castleton's suspension, I was also removed from the office by Catherine Oglesby as on several occasions she voiced her opinion that the staff must have taken the money. When Dorothy Day began as the temporary SPM two months later, Catherine Oglesby was suddenly very keen to have me working back in the office. I don't believe Catherine Oglesby ever gave Dorothy Day a reason why she was so keen to have me back working in the post office. She asked if she would be prepared to have me working alongside her in the post office. It was a sudden turnaround of attitude as for months Catherine Oglesby had been adamant that the staff were taking the money.

Subsequent SPMs

21. In respect of an initial meeting with Ruth Simpson, I can't recall anything significant other than the usual introductions.
22. In respect of the working relationship between Catherine Oglesby and Ruth Simpson, it was very clear that they were extremely friendly. Their whole demeanor and body language gave that impression. We suspect Ruth Simpson was selected specifically by Catherine Oglesby to run the post office as should

anything occur that was to be 'covered up' then she was friendly enough with her to do it. That was the impression from how they interacted that we all got.

23. In respect of any issues experienced between 23rd March and 21st April 2004, as I was not allowed to work in the Post Office at that time I wouldn't have known if there was any unless Ruth Simpson said there was. We all felt that had there been an issue then it would have been 'covered up' anyway. As it was, she did not use the Horizon system until at least lunchtime on her first day, and no reason was given. We strongly suspected that an upgrade to the system occurred during that time. I don't recall an instance of the system requiring a reboot / screen freezing but that was a regular occurrence along with keyboard issues. If the Horizon system really had no issues as we were being told, then why did Ruth Simpson not use it straight away? If the staff were the cause of the shortages, then she should have had every confidence to use it to start a new working week. That just did not add up to any of us.

24. In respect of an initial meeting with Mr. Greg Booth, I can't recall anything significant other than the usual introductions.

25. In respect of any issues with the Horizon system between 21st April and 28th May 2004, as I was not allowed to work in the Post Office at that time I wouldn't know if there were any.

Mr. Castleton's Suspension Interview

26. In respect of the interview on 10th May 2004, this was a long time ago but was an extremely frustrating time and disappointing outcome, having felt we had had no constructive help from Catherine Oglesby, Post Office or Fujitsu looking into

anything we had said. The more shortages appeared on our weekly balance, the more certain we were. We knew neither myself nor Mr. Castleton had taken the money and we knew our working practices were good. We had had no issues for the 6 months previous even when Mr. Castleton was new in post. By the time the court case was over, more of the same scenarios and stories were hitting the news of the exact same events happening to other PM's.

Marine Drive Post Office after Mr. Castleton's Termination

27. In respect of working with Dorothy Day, she immediately listened to what had happened and began to agree with myself and Mr. Castleton. For some unexplained reason, Catherine Oglesby requested that I work with her in the Post Office. There was no reason for me to no longer be kept out of it. She supported us from day one and did everything to help get the business back on track that had been lost due to the previous two temporary SPMs. Dorothy immediately found that a double final balance had been undertaken previously which was meant to be impossible to do? Dorothy had had some unexplained outcomes of balances at the office she used to own. Nothing on the scale that we suffered but still balances showing a gain that never had a reason. When Dorothy Day began looking at the paperwork produced by Ruth Simpson, she found final balances done twice that should not have been possible to action by a SPM.

28. In respect of visits by Catherine Oglesby during Dorothy's time in the Post Office, I can't recall there being that many.

The Civil Proceedings brought against Mr. Castleton by the Post Office (Post Office Limited v Lee Castleton)

29. In respect of the Post Office bringing civil proceedings against Mr. Castleton, I believe he would have been the one to make me aware.
30. In respect of the case against Mr. Castleton, I understood it to be contractual.
31. In respect of Mr. Castleton's Defense and Counterclaim, I was aware of both and agreed with Mr. Castleton that the Horizon system was at fault as has now been proved. The Counterclaim could not be anything other than contractual as no fraud or theft had taken place and no evidence of it.
32. In respect of the letter from Stephen Dilley to me dated 22 August 2006 [POL00083319_038], after 19 years it is hard to recall that I received that, but I probably did. I would not have acted as a witness for the Post Office under the circumstances.
33. In respect of a final version of this letter, I do not remember receiving one, but a lot of years have passed and there was a lot to deal with at the time.
34. In respect of discussions with the legal representatives for the Post Office, I don't recall being contacted by anyone.
35. In respect of being a witness for Mr. Castleton, as a member of his staff working in the Post Office throughout the shortages there was no doubt that I would be a witness for him.
36. In respect of contact with Rowe Cohen, I did attend a meeting with them and Mr. Castleton in respect of our evidence / statements as you would expect to.

37. In respect of why Mr. Castleton stopped using Rowe Cohen, he could not afford the fees once his insurance cover had reached the limit of costs. He had no choice but to defend himself.
38. In respect of my witness statement, I wrote the truth of what happened.
39. In respect of seeing other witness statements before the trial, I don't recall having access to them.
40. In respect of the attendance note of my call with Stephen Dilley [POL00072682], I don't recall it or what was discussed.
41. In respect of the approach by the Post Office in relation to these proceedings, it was nothing more than bully boy tactics and to make Mr. Castleton an example to any other SPMs claiming the Horizon system was at fault also.
42. In respect of the Approved Judgment in *Post Office Limited v Lee Castleton* [POL00004325], it was no surprise considering how much money the Post Office was prepared to spend on a top legal team.
43. In respect of the outcome of the case I don't recall being provided with a copy, but Mr. Castleton did inform me. The outcome was no surprise considering how many of the Post Office witnesses blatantly lied under oath knowing what we know now.

Other Matters

44. In respect of any issues with the Horizon IT system after the trial, I believe there was a system upgrade or intervention from the first day of Ruth Simpson being in

Marine Drive. The Horizon system was not used until lunchtime on her first day, for no reason other than 'she chose not to use it'? From the time I was able to start working in the office again until the Post Office closed the branch making me redundant, there were no significant issues.

45. In respect of any interactions with anyone involved with the trial, until the day of closure I still worked with Mrs. Dorothy Day, the other staff and also Mr. Castleton.

46. In respect of the trial, it was brought to court with the intention of making an example to other SPMs of what would happen. It was never about the money to the Post Office, it was all about proving they couldn't be beaten.

47. In respect of any other matters I wish to draw to the attention of the Chair, as everyone now knows the hundreds of SPM's in this position were right with what we were saying and to constantly hear on the news how much was covered up by the Post Office and Fujitsu is frankly an insult and disgusting. It has been extremely hard to revisit this period of my life and I am certain anyone that has been requested to provide a witness statement will feel the same. I don't doubt that any of the people in certain positions will ever be accountable for the lies they told under oath in court, but justice needs to be done for all involved.

Statement of Truth

I believe the content of this statement to be true.

Signed:

GRO

Dated: 21 June 2023

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No.	URN	Document Description	Control Number
1	POL00083641	First Witness Statement of Christine Train in POL v Lee Castleton Claim No: HQ05X02706	POL-0080204
2	POL00074092	First Witness Statement of Lee Castleton in POL v Lee Castleton	POL-0070655
3	POL00074091	First Witness Statement of Gregory John Booth in POL v Lee Castleton	POL-0070654
4	POL00083031	First Witness Statement of Catherine Oglesby in POL v Lee Castleton	POL-0079594
5	POL00071592	Second Witness Statement of Catherine Oglesby in POL v Lee Castleton	POL-0068155
6	POL00072786	First Witness Statement of Ruth Simpson in POL v Lee Castleton	POL-0070654
7	POL00069282	Telephone attendance note by Stephen Dilley for Royal Mail Group PLC Sub Postmaster Litigation Re Mr. Lee Castleton (Peter Sewell attending)	POL-0065845
8	POL00069279	First Witness Statement of Dorothy Day in Post Office Limited V Lee Castleton	POL-0065845

9	LCAS0000607_004	Audit of Post Office Marine Drive branch, FAD 213337, from Helen Hollingworth to Cath Oglesby	VIS00010847_004
10	POL00071236	Termination letter from Cath Oglesby re: Mr. Lee Castleton (Subpostmaster for Post Office Marine Drive branch) with interview notes dated 10 May 2004 and handwritten letter appealing termination from Lee Castleton dated 23 May 2004	POL-0068155
11	POL00083319_038	Letter from Stephen Dilley to Christine Train re Post Office Limited v Mr. Lee Castleton	POL-0079882_038
12	POL00072682	Telephone attendance note by Stephen Dilley for Royal Mail Group PLC Sub Postmaster Litigation Re Mr. Lee Castleton (Peter Sewell attending)	POL-0070654
13	POL00004325	Approved Judgment of Post Office Limited v Lee Castleton	VIS00005393