

Witness Name: Mr Robert Thomson
Statement No.: WITN0222_01
Exhibits: None
Dated: 12-1-22.....

THE POST OFFICE HORIZON INQUIRY

FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF MR ROBERT THOMSON

I, MR ROBERT THOMSON WILL SAY as follows:

INTRODUCTION

1. I am grateful to the Chair to be invited to provide a “human impact” statement, concerning the physical, psychological, emotional, reputational and financial consequences to me and my family of being held responsible for shortfalls shown by the Horizon IT system and Post Office Limited’s actions toward me and my family. The initial paragraphs below provide a brief summary of my background, and provide context to the detail of the human impact of the Horizon scandal on me and my family. This statement does not reflect a full account of my experiences or those of my family and if necessary or required I will provide further witness statement evidence.

BACKGROUND

1. I am now 62 years of age. I am married and have two sons. I live in Alva, in Scotland; I have lived in this area of Scotland all of my life. I worked at many jobs during my life, but I was always employed.

2. My mother had worked with the post office as a relief subpostmaster for many years. She became the subpostmistress in Cambus, near Alloa, for approximately 8 years. Throughout my life, I had helped my mother in the various post offices she worked in.
3. My mother was getting older and the Post Office were talking of introducing a computerised system (Horizon). My mother felt that, given her age, she would be unable to cope with the new computer system. As such, she suggested that I take over the post office from her.
4. The post office had been a big part of my family's life, and I had helped my mother often in the post office and the small convenience store for many years. The income was small, but it was important to my mother, so I agreed to take over as subpostmaster.
5. I was a Subpostmaster of Cambus Post Office, Near Alloa from in or around 2000 to in or around April 2005. This was also my home. Additionally, I operated a retail business from the premises; a small convenience store.

TRAINING AND SUPPORT

6. I started as subpostmaster before the Horizon System was introduced. As such, I used the old paper ledger system. I never had any problems with the ledger system. It could be kept up to date every day, and any mistakes could be identified very quickly and clearly.
7. However, after about two years the Horizon System was introduced by Post Office.
8. The Post Office sent 2 trainers to work with me in the branch for the first week when the new Horizon System was introduced. The trainers stood beside me whilst I completed transactions, and would show me how to complete them if I had not done them before. I had to watch the trainers complete the transactions, but this

- was sometimes difficult to take in, as I had customers to serve at the same time. Having to complete the transactions and training in front of the customers felt awkward and I was conscious that I had to serve them as soon as possible, so I wasn't able to focus on the process itself.
9. I also attended training at a hotel in Falkirk. The training was meant to be a comprehensive overview of how to run a branch, including how to operate Horizon. Whilst the training did focus on Horizon and how to complete daily transactions and balancing, the Hotel room was small and there were too many people there, so it wasn't easy for me to ask questions when I was unsure about something.
 10. I recall that some of the Horizon terminals that the trainers were using at the hotel were not working whilst we were there. This meant there was even less opportunity to familiarise myself with Horizon and to work on it.
 11. I soon realised how inadequate the training had been because it was not tailored to the type of branch I ran.
 12. I recall being told by a trainer, although I am not sure when this was, that when an alleged shortfall arose on the system I would have to make it good by putting my own cash in. I was not told that I could dispute a shortfall, or have it investigated by Post Office.
 13. Overall I do not think the training provided by Post Office adequately prepared me to operate the branch. The in branch training was difficult to follow, and the Hotel training was too generic and far removed for me to be able to fully grasp what they were attempting to teach us.
 14. I received no further training. I requested further help and training when the issues with Horizon began to occur, but this request was never satisfied. I was told by Post

Office that I had to wait until an audit took place and that after that the issues would sort themselves out.

HELPLINE

15. I estimate that I contacted the Helpline at least 2-3 times per week with regard to problems relating to alleged shortfalls and /or balancing.
16. When I called the helpline, I explained the issues I was having. However, I was passed around by different operatives. None were able to give me any satisfactory advice on how to resolve the problems I had. The advice given was almost always the same: the alleged shortfall would sort itself out and/or be looked at during an audit.
17. I got the impression that the Helpline operatives did not really understand Horizon. If they did not know what advice to give, they would ask around their colleagues at the helpline. Additionally, as the helpline was based in south of England, sometimes operators said that they could not understand my accent, and asked me to speak more slowly.
18. Sometimes the operatives told me to 'carry over' the alleged shortfall to the following week in the hope that it would 'sort itself out'. I selected the 'carry over' option on the system and did not pay any cash in, as I understood from the Helpline that I did not have to pay cash in when selecting this option. However, if I did this it just meant the alleged shortfall continued to increase.
19. The Helpline never made me aware of other Subpostmasters having similar issues and did not mention that there might be a problem with the Horizon System, so I had to trust what the system was showing me.

ALLEGED SHORTFALLS

20. In this section, I set out in very brief detail my experience of shortfalls arising from deficiencies in the Horizon IT System, and Post Office Limited's actions as a result. This is only a brief introduction to those matters, in order to provide necessary context for the explanation of the human impact which follows.
21. I would estimate that throughout my tenure in the branch, I paid (or Post Office deducted) in excess of £6,000. The problems with alleged shortfalls on Horizon were sporadic. I could go some months where I would have no problems with balancing, and other months where the system just would not balance. However, I had problems recur throughout my tenure.
22. There were various shortfalls, of up to £250, at various times throughout my time as subpostmaster. I made good the alleged shortfalls, of up to £250 as and when they arose, from my own money.
23. When the alleged shortfalls arose on the system, I attempted to check back through my transactions, but when I was unable to pinpoint the cause of the alleged shortfall I selected the 'make good by cash' option on the Horizon system and paid my own cash in to be able to balance and continue trading.
24. Around £60,000 in shortfalls accumulated over several months in 2004. I did not repay the Post Office for this alleged shortfall. When the alleged shortfall arose on the system I tracked back through my records to try to pinpoint the cause of the alleged shortfall. I couldn't find it, so I reported the issue to the Helpline. I was then advised to carry the alleged shortfall to the next week in the hope that it would resolve itself. I therefore opted to carry the alleged shortfall forward on the Horizon system and not put any money in to balance.

AUDIT AND INVESTIGATION

25. I can recall that the branch was audited twice a year whilst I was a Subpostmaster. However I do not recall ever receiving a formal audit report from Post Office.
26. Save for the audit described below, I do not recall encountering any problems at an audit. I do recall having some very small alleged shortfalls of up to £10 at a couple of the audits, but the auditors told me to carry it forward to the following week where it should resolve itself. They explained to me that in doing this I would hopefully have time to find the alleged shortfall. I cannot recall whether I ever resolved the issues or had to make them good the following week.
27. As I have said, in 2004 the Horizon System simply would not balance correctly. Each week the balance got worse and worse, with an ever increasing shortfall. I repeatedly called the helpline for help, but was just told carry over the balance. I was told that an auditor would come out to sort out the problem. The helpline also told me to read the manual to see if I could find a way to sort out the problem. This was ridiculous advice, but I trusted that when the auditors came that they would help find out what the problem was with Horizon.
28. In February 2005, auditors attended the branch without notice. The auditors told me that the audit was being conducted because they knew that I had been having trouble balancing. Initially, the auditors gave me the impression that they were going to assist me and help me to resolve the issues.
29. However, after a few hours it became clear that this was not the case when they mentioned to me that they had found an alleged shortfall of around £5,700. After they told about the shortfall, they became very quiet. They would not say much in front of me.
30. Later that afternoon, someone claiming to be my 'Contracts Manager' arrived in my branch, and told me that my branch would be closed pending further investigation. I do not recall being told at this stage that I was suspended.

31. I was not given the opportunity to verify the findings of the audit, and I do not recall receiving any paperwork to give a breakdown of the alleged shortfall that the auditors had found. The auditors did print off a breakdown of the figures on the day but they took this with them and did not give me a copy.
32. I have seen no evidence of any adequate investigation. I was given no opportunity to check the auditors' calculations or the data they used to reach their conclusions. I just had to accept what they said.
33. When alleged shortfalls arose and I reported them to the Helpline I was not under the impression that they were to, or even could, investigate them. I was always told that I had to make them good if they did not sort themselves out, and that that was the start and end of the process.
34. Following the closure of the branch, I was invited to attend an interview under caution with the Post Office Security Team. I recall being told that I could have a solicitor present, but I did not think this would be necessary as I had not done anything wrong, and the interview was not with the police.
35. As my wife was GRO at the time, the interview was conducted in my home about 2 weeks after the branch was shut. I do not recall the investigators searching my house, but I do recall the interview being recorded. I did not get a copy of the interview.
36. I sat at my dining table with Post Office investigators, who began asking me questions about the problems I was having with balancing. I told them about the issues and tried to explain that Post Office had not been helping me to resolve them, despite my reporting the issues to the Helpline. The interview was more of a relaxed chat about what was going on. I did not feel intimidated or as if Post Office thought I had done anything wrong.

37. However, I did cry during the interview because of the pressure they were putting me under and the stress it was causing me.
38. At the end of the interview I was told that they would review their findings and get back to me. The Security Team did not give the impression that anything would be taken further or that there were any issues.
39. After the recording had ended, one of the Security Team told me that it was in my interests to resign. She was very nice and I thought she was there to help. The Security Team and I then had a cup of tea together before they left.
40. I did not hear anything further about the investigation or attend any other interviews with Post Office and I did not receive an investigation report from them detailing their findings. Overall, I do not think the purported investigation undertaken by Post Office was genuine and it did not appear to me as if they looked into the problems with Horizon.

SUSPENSION AND TERMINATION

41. I do not recall when I was told I was suspended by Post Office, but they later said in court that I had been suspended from the day of the audit.
42. My branch was closed, and no temporary subpostmaster was appointed. I was not provided with any documents following the audit and the same day and the auditors took away my keys and access codes to the branch.
43. Following the advice from the Security Team during my interview under caution, I resigned my position. I handed in my resignation around 2 weeks after the branch was audited. I took advice from the Security Team, as I trusted them to help me. I

was under the impression that if I resigned that would be the resolution to the problems.

44. I tried to continue to run the convenience shop after the branch closed. However, the retail business quickly failed without the post office being open; and I had no option but to shut the shop around 4 months after the audit.
45. I managed to sell some of the stock and slowly ran it down. The shop and post office had been in our family for some 17 years. Closing it caused huge embarrassment and sadness.
46. My mother was deeply upset I felt I had failed her. I explain this further below.
47. I estimate the retail business was worth around £12,000. This may not seem a lot to others, but it was everything to us.
48. I lost my salary from my postmaster position both then and for the following years, as I would have continued in post until at least retirement age, like my mother. I also lost the income from the convenience store.

CIVIL AND CRIMINAL PROCEEDINGS

49. The Post Office pursued criminal proceedings against me. I was charged with 8 counts of theft amounting to around £5,700. I entered a plea of not guilty, because I knew that I had not taken the money and wanted to fight the case.
50. I attended trial in front of a jury which lasted for around 8 days.
51. I found the trial very confusing and started to become nervous about what might happen. Towards the end of the trial, my solicitor advised that if I pleaded guilty on the final day I might be able to avoid going to prison. I told my solicitor that I had done nothing. He gave me the impression that he thought I would go to prison. In

fact he had said this from the beginning, but I had insisted that I was innocent and wanted to fight the allegations. However, I was frightened as I thought that if I went to prison that my wife, young sons and mother would be left at home alone. My wife had a very bad back, and could not work. I therefore took the advice of my solicitor and pleaded guilty, because I was frightened and did not want to leave my family alone at home without me.

52. The Judge sentenced me to 250 hours of community service and I was ordered to pay Post Office £6,990, at £100 per month.
53. I overpaid and paid off the fine/repayment within a year, which was very hard.

HUMAN IMPACT

54. After my conviction, the local newspaper ran a front page story about my prosecution and conviction. This, along with the unexpected closure of the branch, led to widespread comment and rumours about me in the local community.
55. Ours was and is a small, close knit Scottish community. Everyone in the community knows everyone else's business. Our post office had been in the family for a long time. My conviction and the closure of the post office was a local scandal. It is hard to explain how shaming and humiliating this was for me and my family to someone who does not live in a close knit rural community.
56. A few close friends and family stuck by me. However, the wider community including my old customers, saw me as a thief and I struggled to cope as a result.
57. At the time everything happened, my wife had had a back operation and was unable to go back to work. I was therefore the main breadwinner, and so I was under an immense amount of financial pressure.

58. Following everything that happened at the branch I struggled to go out and went to visit my doctor to talk about it. My doctor diagnosed me with depression and I was prescribed medication. I managed to get well enough to get off of the antidepressants eventually, but I still struggle to talk about these issues.
59. As I have said, the news of the conviction was on the front page of the Aloa Advertiser News Paper. The whole community knew of it and was talking of it. I was branded a thief.
60. During the trial I had to sit my two sons (then, 13 and, 10 years old) down to explain what had happened, as I knew that this would come up at their school. My boys were frightened and thought that I would be going to prison.
61. My sons started to be teased, at school and in the street, about how their dad was a thief and had stolen from the Post Office. As a result, my boys stopped socialising and playing in the street.
62. My wife just would not go up to the local shops in our area. Rather, she would drive outside of our area, because she was afraid of what people would say to her.
63. I tried my best to keep the news from my mother. However, she found out from various people. I had to sit down and try to explain it to her; she could not understand. My mother was a proud and honest woman. She was so embarrassed and ashamed.
64. My mother started to keep herself in the house. Rather than go out, she would get my sons or my wife **GRO** to go for her shopping. She became depressed, but would not go to see doctor.
65. As a result of the shame, and the depression it brought on her, my mother simply stopped going out of her house. She lived as a recluse for the next 4 years. She started **GRO** not keeping the house tidy, which was just not her; she

- was so house proud. She did not have dementia, she had full use of her faculties, she had just given up caring.
66. I kept asking my mum if there anything I could do, but all she said she that she was sorry she could not help me with the situation I was in. She was so ashamed and embarrassed.
 67. On 15 December 2014 I got a phone call from one of my mum's neighbours saying her light has been on all night and asking if I could come along and check my on my mum. I got to her house and the door keys were left in door. I called the police and they got in and found my mum dead.
 68. To this day I blame myself, because I embarrassed and shamed my mother with the trouble I had at the post office.
 69. I had been her '*blue eyed boy*'. What happened to me broke her heart; and her shame broke my heart also. To this day, I cry whenever I think of her and what all this did to her.
 70. Things seemed so bad, that I decided to commit suicide by jumping off a local bridge over the River Devon. I went to the bridge and sat on its edge, ready to jump. I then heard a lamb that was stuck on the bank. The lamb was crying and its cries brought me back to myself. I climbed back down and went home and told my wife what I had been about to do, and she took me to Falkirk Hospital.
 71. I began to regain some hope when I was party to the group litigation (Bates & Others v Post Office Limited). The case went on for a very long time, and Post Office fought all the way. The case proved that Post Office's Horizon System was faulty and that Post Office knew it.
 72. After this, subpostmasters began to fight to get their convictions overturned.

73. The Post Office has been contacted about assisting me in having my criminal conviction quashed. However, the Post Office advised that, as I am in Scotland, I must make an application to the Scottish Criminal Cases Review Commission. I am in the process of doing this.
74. I hope and believe that my name will be cleared. This will do something for my wife, and my boys. I hope also that if my conviction is quashed that my community in Alloa hear of it, and know that I was an innocent man.
75. However, even if that conviction is quashed, I, my wife, and my boys will never get back the dark years when I was branded as a thief and they were unable to play in the street or go to the local shops.
76. Most of all, my mother will never know that I did not let her down and blacken her good name. I was not a thief and she was not the mother of a thief.

CONCLUSION

77. I have done my best to give an account of what happened to me and the impact it had on me and my family. I know I am not the only one, but I was the only one in Alloa, where I still live.
78. What happened to me shattered me, hurt my wife and children and killed my mother with shame. The Post Office acted like judge, jury and executioner. They certainly killed years of my life, almost broke me and my family and they did break my mother.
79. I want justice. I want the world to know what was done to me and people like me up and down the country. Hundreds of subpostmasters were convicted like me, but no one at the Post Office has been held to account. I want to know why no one has been held to account.

- 80. I also want those responsible at the Post Office to face people like me, and to hear at first-hand what they did to our lives and our families.
- 81. I want the Post Office to know that I am still receiving weekly mental health support to address that continuing difficulties I have about what the Post Office did to me and the death of my mother.
- 82. I am an ordinary decent man. I want the Post Office to be confronted with what they did to ordinary decent people up and down the country.

STATEMENT OF TRUTH

I believe the contents of this statement to be true.

Signed **GRO** Dated 12-Jan-22.....
Robert Thomson