

WITNESS: MILLIE CASTLETON

STATEMENT NUMBER: WITN0372

EXHIBITS: none

DATED: .....13/05/2022.....

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**POST OFFICE HORIZON IT INQUIRY**

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**FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF MILLIE-JO CASTLETON**

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I, MILLIE-JO CASTLETON of GROGRO will say as follows:**Introduction**

1. I am now 26 years' old. In 2004 when the Post Office started all this in 2004, I was aged 8. I am the daughter of Mr Lee Castleton. The Post Office brought civil proceedings against my father in the High Court of Justice in 2006. It did so on a false basis. I want to describe the consequences for me, and for my family.
2. I wrote this statement at the suggestion of my mother and father. No other person has had any part in its preparation or its content. I have not discussed it or its content with anyone else.

**Human Impact Statement**

3. For over 17 years the post office has had a significant part of my life, a looming presence that has clouded many of my late childhood memories.
4. Truthfully, I must have been 8 when I first took note the confusion, frustration and anxiety that was leeching into my home. This was before talks of court, trials and accusations of theft. This was the period that my father started noticing the IT faults that wouldn't be taken seriously for so many years. In the years running up to my father's trial in 2006 I vividly recall sitting on the staircase late at night, listening to conversations

I barely understood or could really comprehend. To a child, the answer always seemed obvious, my father hadn't done anything. Why didn't people believe him? Why is the dining room table covered in papers as well as the back office of the post office and why is he always down there late at night making phone calls and faxes? I didn't comprehend the situation back then and, frankly, at 26 I'm now just horrified about how hard that hundreds of sub-postmasters had to fight just to clear their names of a crime that not a single one of them committed. So many court dates, so many lives and reputations, all of which were dragged and beaten down over the course of two decades.

5. My family moved to run a small newsagents-post office in 2003, the start of a new life in a place that would bring new opportunities and security for all of us. I was 8 and my brother 6, all of us about to be thrown into something that would drastically shape the rest of our lives. Sometimes I've asked myself about what would be different if we started somewhere else. That's a question everyone asks, usually coming to little conclusions, small changes that are just curious to imagine. But I can say with complete confidence that our lives would have been unrecognisable in these situations. The mental and physical toll that 17 years of fighting has left every one of us with scars that we likely will always be healing from. This was an ordeal that not only cost my father legal fees, this was an event that blackened our name and branded us all with something that was unjustified. Court ruling, local gossip and unyielding arguments from the post office would lead to my whole family being branded as thieves and liars. It's deeply sickening to look back to my life in that small town. A place that would in time, fill me with anxiety to walk through. How comfortable can anyone be when people spat at you based on what you know is a lie? It was also a lonely time, the financial strain of legal fees and supporting the family saw my dad working near 100-hour weeks, often involving traveling and spending days on end away from us. He became a stranger to me, someone I barely saw and lost close relationship with. My mother worked too during the day, upholding the newsagents we still had, which was failing due to the label attached to us and it after the legal case. This time in my life stands out as my never seeing my dad and only having phone calls to speak to him rather than face to face, because he was away so much working. As a coping mechanism I found myself insisting that I clean the house or cook tea a few days out of the week. This increased as I got

older. Unknowingly, this was the beginning and the start of me seeking comfort in some kind of control in life.

6. When I started a new school based within the local area I recall feeling nervous, typical teen nerves of course, but deeply tainted with the knowledge that these strangers would have the bias that I'd seen in others. I remember feeling cold and terrified when a child on the bus in my first week asked, 'didn't your dad steal loads of money or something?' This set me on edge for a long time, causing me to become that ever so anxious child who regularly was the subject of bullying. After a few incidents of supposed friends treating me poorly, I completely disconnected. One year into my time at this school I just removed myself from social interaction other than very passive interactions with bullies and small talk with kinder folk. But the trigger was already there, I'd lost faith in everybody around me over the years. Trust wasn't something I'd afford in anyone, living in a constant cycle of fear and anxiety that lead me to not even want to go to the canteen anymore. Lunch period became a time for me to hide somewhere with a book and silence. A number of times I was asked if I was okay by concerned staff. All of which I met with a nervous comment that I was fine. I didn't want to involve anyone, nor did I see the point. To my mind the cycle was so deeply set in place that it was impossible to escape.
7. At home I was dealing with parents who were working their hardest to provide, utterly pained by the stress that the post office trial caused them. Dad was working insane hours as well as beginning to work with others to try and solve the many emerging cases of other sub-postmasters and post-mistresses like him. My mother was also working as much as she could but also dealing with a stress- induced epilepsy. She lost her driving licence as a result and had to take medication. These seizures where unpredictable at first when the medication was still new. I remember having to handle her seizures alone as a child, sometimes in the middle of the night. When dad was away, I'd sleep beside her just in case. I felt helpless, I couldn't do much to ease the financial issues of my family, I couldn't offer any help beyond household tasks like cooking, cleaning, or giving any birthday money and later money from my part time job to my mum to help. At this time in my life my need for control in my own life took on a new form. I was always so anxious, withdrawn and lost. I needed something to focus on, even if it was negative.

8. I didn't tell my parents about the bullying or social withdrawal. They didn't know I spent my breaks sitting alone or just walking around, they didn't know I could go a day or two without really talking. They didn't know that I was assaulted on the school bus and had to run off on the first stop, wet from water being thrown at me, being spat on and having been hit by paper balls. In my mind this was an additional stressor they didn't need. I could deal with it alone and not put more weight on their load. I just felt like such a burden all the time. A waste of effort, concern, and attention. I made myself small, I kept everything quiet and lied to them. To the point I even spent days out in town alone, walking around for hours pretending I met with friends when I didn't. By then I also developed an intense fear of spending money. My family was suffering, everything was so desperately uncertain and spending anything on myself felt utterly selfish. Even to this day I cringe and second-guess whenever I buy something that's not essential. It's a strange feeling, screaming self-deprecation and "what-if" scenarios going off in my head. Even buying a cup of basic coffee had my teenage self in knots. What if it was needed for something else? Why was I even worth that shred of money? The childhood uncertainty and fears just don't fade. I'm certain they never will.
9. These negative feelings grew. By the time I was 17 (that was in 2013) I was absolutely wrecked by feelings of self-loathing, depression and feeling like nothing more than a burden to my family- a feeling that they never did anything to validate but my mind linked heavily to the emotional rollercoaster of their stress and pain. I couldn't be another reason for it, I couldn't tolerate the idea of adding to it. They were busy, they were pained from the post office fight. I was nothing, I felt like nothing. All because I was so scared to hurt my family more than they had already. The post office just loomed too large in our lives, controlling and warping every aspect of our beings. I had spent years in self-imposed isolation, afraid of adults and peers. I often feel I had no teenage experience as I insisted on staying home and doing chores, working with my family or part-time work. I didn't have the fortitude to pursue anything with my peers. I just felt so utterly worthless and empty, like I couldn't contribute anything meaningful to anyone in my life. I just had to be useful, had to show some sort of worth or value. My sense of identity lost as the years went by. By 2014, at the age of 18, I couldn't even tell you about my favourite activities, shoes, or hobbies. I didn't put anytime into myself. At

university this spare time required filling. Studying could only carry me so long, I just had to do anything to feel productive or like I was achieving something. So, I walked. Some days, for 8 or more hours without a break, this being on a diet that was ground back to the absolute minimum, resulting in me having fainted a few times in the middle of the town and sitting in lecture halls wearing my coat and gloves throughout.

10. My late teens and early twenties were governed by my eating disorder and mental anxieties. I began to sink under the weight of it all and subsequently grabbed for some sense of control. I was anxious about going to university and leaving my family. Mum was still having seizures and Dad was still fighting a legal battle, I felt guilty. Leaving and not being able to help more. I left, already dealing with an undiagnosed at the time eating disorder. It began in my GCSE year, just eating less bit by bit and skipping out on the canteen and pack lunches to avoid questions. By this point I was visibly skinny. Living alone however gave way to me being vulnerable to all my demons. It was so easy to skip out on food or restrict my intake. This also related to the fear of spending money on anything other than something related to my family or essentials. I could finally feel a sense of control, I could finally have some stability in my life. It was shamefully addictive and disgustingly comforting. My parents became worried quickly of course, I'd moved out and dropped weight at an alarming rate. But I couldn't stop, anorexia is a beastly illness that has you 'protected' in a delusion. The truth was I just didn't care anymore, I hated myself with every fibre of my being. I wanted control but I also wanted to feel something, even if it was the pain of my aching body or the freezing chill that always felt in my underweight frame. By the end of my first year of university I had been diagnosed as anorexic and too sick to go to my second year. I spent a year out of university, recovering at least partially in a physical sense before returning. But I still was pained, still grappling with all my anxieties and self-hate. Burden, helpless, liar, useless and worthless. I couldn't escape it.

11. My lowest weight saw me weighing little more than 5-stone and having to stay in hospital for heart related issues for days on end. I'd be lying if I claimed that this wasn't a cry for help. The surrender of a broken spirit, the pain and self-loathing of someone who just couldn't escape a terrible situation. Every part of my late childhood and teens was absolutely tainted by the post office case. My anorexia was a visual manifestation of all

of the feelings I was suppressing. Hate, fear, anxiety, and frustration. I was so broken, so alone and frankly aching to just disappear forever.

12. This was the hardest part. I had to not only recognise my problems but also unpick years of mental blocks. It took years, relapses, hospital stays, scares about my heart possibly failing and a period of months in a day clinic post-graduation. I took my degree in 2017 weighing 5.5 stone. I would have graduated in 2016, but I had to take a gap year 2014-2015 because of medical intervention because of my health problems and my eating disorder. I recovered in due time, but therapy was still difficult. I remember feeling tiny in those uncomfortable chairs, telling my care-co-ordinator over and over that I felt so unworthy of help. That I'd come to hate my body, mind, and soul with all the venom I could hold. It's hard to pick away years of destructive self-defence. Harder still when you can still see ghosts of what influenced your decline all around you.
13. But I fought. I tried. I'm better for it. Not perfect but better, part of me will always feel a little broken-up. I still feel a burning fear at spending larger sums of money or doing something purely for myself. That nagging voice in my head still says ugly things sometimes. It still tells me that my past and family's struggle will define me, that it will be a branding on my skin forever. Broken, thief or liar. Even now as I go into my career I still find it so incredibly hard to trust anyone, even subconsciously I sabotage myself by not asking for help with anything. Asking for equipment, advice or resources feels terrifying. Like I'm unworthy or will be thought poorly of. I'm trying hard to break this cycle but I'm 26 and am very conscious that I may never be able to fully commit to natural trust. But my family is still fighting. I'm still fighting, as are many other hundreds involved in the Post Office trial.
14. My story won't be the only one, the mental toll that so many years of fighting has taken on so many of us is frightening.

**STATEMENT OF TRUTH**

I believe the contents of this statement to be true.

Signed: **GRO** ..... Dated: 13/05/2022 .....

**Millie Castleton**