

WITNESS: HUGHIE NOEL THOMAS

STATEMENT NO: WITN0162_02

EXHIBIT: WITN0162_02/2

POST OFFICE HORIZON IT INQUIRY

EXHIBIT 2

The following documentation comprises the exhibit referenced as exhibit **WITN0162_02/2** in the witness statement of Mr Hughie Noel Thomas referenced WITN0162_02.

Village whipround saves postmistress from prison after she admits £36,000 fraud

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Former postmistress Jo Hamilton: Committed £36,000 fraud but was saved from prison thanks to villagers' support

A postmistress who admitted a £36,000 fraud has walked free from court after villagers rallied round to save her from prison.

In an extraordinary show of support, they raised £9,000 to help pay back the missing cash after Jo Hamilton staged a village meeting to try to explain her actions.

Hamilton, 51, blamed the fraud on the fact that she "didn't have a clue" about using the post office's computer system.

More than 60 relatives and friends from the north Hampshire village of South Wamborough packed into the public gallery at Winchester Crown Court as she pleaded guilty to 14 counts of false accounting.

Personal references from nearly everyone who lives in the picturesque village were handed to Judge Patrick Hooton, and the parish priest, the Rev Jane Leese spoke in Hamilton's defence.

She said: "She loves serving the people of our community. In many ways, I feel that she is more of a priest in the village than I am."

Prosecutor Richard Jory said that when Hamilton took over the post office services in 2003, she found it difficult to get to grips with the computerised system. A Post Office audit in 2005 revealed a shortfall of £36,644.89.

Hamilton told the organisation's bosses that she was suffering "systematic difficulties" with the computerised system. However, she did not accept that she had taken the cash.

Mr Jory said that despite her initial insistence that she had not taken the money, by her guilty pleas she had now accepted acting dishonestly.



Customers and friends raised £9,000 to help repay the cash lost from the South Warnborough post office where Jo Hamilton was postmistress Anita Saran, defending, said Hamilton "didn't have a clue what she was doing" with the computerised system.

Despite trying to get help from the Post Office, she let it get on top of her. "My client was taking money to try to balance the books, but it just wasn't balancing."

When Judge Hooton asked where the cash had gone, Miss Saran said the postmistress could not answer.

She said Hamilton had not spent it on luxuries. She still lived in the house she always had with her husband and her parents, and continued to work in the village shop.

Miss Saran said Hamilton explained what had happened to her colleagues, friends and customers at a meeting in the village.

She added: "None of them could believe what was happening, but they agreed to stand by her."

With the help of the villagers' donations, Hamilton has now fully repaid the shortfall, which Miss Saran said had left her in severe financial difficulties.

Judge Hooton ordered her to comply with a community order, with a supervision requirement of 12 months.

After the hearing, Hamilton said: "I have been overwhelmed by the support of the people in the village.

"I just cannot believe it. I was expecting to go to prison. I had packed a bag and everything."

Jane Thomas of Royal Mail Group said Hamilton's contract was terminated in May 2006.

She added: "Subpostmasters are in a unique position of trust and it is always disappointing when that trust is breached."