



In the UK, Post Office branches are the beating heart of their communities

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The scandal that rocked Britain



Was sich im britischen Postsystem über mehr als 15 Jahre hinweg abgespielt hat, klingt wie ein schlechter Film, ist aber leider traurige Wahrheit: SARAH MARTIN berichtet über eine Verkettung von Verfehlungen, Vertuschung und Inkompetenz, die Hunderte Mitarbeiter und Mitarbeiterinnen der Post um ihre Existenz gebracht und einige das Leben gekostet hat.

ADVANCED

There couldn't have been an organization more trusted or trustworthy, or so quintessentially British, than the Post Office. At least not before the Post Office scandal of 1999 to 2015, in which more than 900 sub-postmasters were convicted of theft, fraud and false accounting. It's been called one of the UK's biggest miscarriages of justice.

In the UK, Post Office branches are the beating heart of their communities. Mostly small and local, they're run by "sub-postmasters". Although these people aren't employed by the Post Office, they're the public-facing custodians of the Post Office's reputation and values. The Post Office treats them – or used to treat them – as business partners. They're trusted to handle the public's money, benefits and pensions, and to work with the Department of Work and Pensions, the Post Office's largest client.

Problems on the horizon?

In 1999, the Post Office introduced a new IT system, called Horizon IT. It was developed by Fujitsu and was to be used for accounting and stocktaking.

The system was implemented in all 18,600 Post Office branches around the UK and promised to be the dawn

of a new era. The largest non-military IT system in Europe was going to revolutionize the accounting of all branch transactions.

There were problems from the start. After two years of development, Horizon still wasn't working as it should. Talks were held to scrap the project. But it had already cost the British taxpayer too much money and the Post Office decided to keep going.

Horizon had been developed to automate transactions in Post Office branches, replacing entries made manually on paper. Now, under the new Horizon system, sub-postmasters were to upload their entries on their computers at the end of the business day.

The rollout of the software and hardware was a huge undertaking for sub-postmasters: many had very little IT experience, or none, and they received little training on the new system. So, not surprisingly, as soon as Horizon was switched on, the sub-postmasters encountered problems.

Where has all the money gone?

At first, it was just small amounts that couldn't be accounted for, end-of-day accounts that didn't balance. Many sub-postmasters made up the shortfall from their own pockets.



Paula Vennells, former Post Office chief executive, with police escort, May 2024

trustworthy

- vertrauenswürdig

quintessentially

- [ˌkwɪntɪˈsenʃli]
- durch und durch

sub-postmaster

- Postfilialleiter(in)

fraud

- [frɔːd]
- Betrug

miscarriage of justice

- Justizirrtum

custodian

- Hüter(in)

Department of Work and Pensions

- Ministerium für Arbeit und Rente

stocktaking

- Inventur, Bestands-ermittlung

implement sth.

- etw. einführen

dawn

- [dɔːn]
- Beginn

scrap sth.

- etw. abschaffen; hier: aufgeben

automate

- [ˈɔːtəmət]
- automatisieren

entry

- hier: Buchung

upload

- hochladen

rollout

- Einführung

balance

- ausgleichen, saldieren

shortfall

- Fehlbetrag

But then the problems mounted. Hundreds, and then thousands, and then hundreds of thousands of pounds “went missing” – and the sub-postmasters got the blame. When they contacted the Post Office helpline, they were told that they alone were responsible for any reporting errors.

The sub-postmasters were told – and believed – that they alone had access to their branch accounts. In reality, though, the situation was different: accounts were being altered by the Fujitsu IT system. But if anyone knew this was happening, they kept quiet.

Meanwhile, the Post Office had started taking action. When the sums of money that were missing became too large, the Post Office sent unsympathetic investigation teams to heavy-handedly audit Post Office branches, or even force them to close. The Post Office began investigating and prosecuting individual sub-postmasters, accusing them of fraud. Between 1999 and 2015, more than 900 sub-postmasters were prosecuted – 236 of them received prison sentences.

Nevertheless, the Post Office continued to insist that the Horizon IT system was “robust”. It refused to accept what sub-postmasters were telling them. The Post Office was supported in this by its own legal teams and by government civil servants.

Panic spread. Sub-postmasters’ lives were being shattered on a monumental scale. Many lost their contracts with the Post Office and faced criminal charges and financial ruin. They lost everything: their businesses, homes and livelihoods, along with their solid reputations as upstanding UK citizens. And each of them still thought it was only happening to them, and them alone.

Bugs, errors and defects

Sub-postmaster Alan Bates had invested £65,000 of his savings into running a local Post Office branch in Llandudno, north Wales. Despite a background in EPOS (Electronic Point of Sales) systems and his understanding of technology, as soon as Horizon went live, he came across accounting issues that he couldn’t explain.

Bates refused to cover the losses out of his own pocket and was convinced that something was wrong with the Horizon system. Here, too, the Post Office refused to cooperate, saying its system was “robust”. Instead, they terminated his contract as a sub-postmaster, with three months’ notice. They said he was “unmanageable”.

Bates was sure the problem must be affecting other people. He found that other sub-postmasters were similarly frustrated. Together, they decided to seek justice. In 2009, they formed the Justice for Subpostmasters Alliance (JFSA), and in 2017, more than 550 people, mostly former sub-postmasters, took the Post Office to court in a group litigation action.

They won! In 2019, the High Court judge ruled that Horizon “contained bugs, errors and defects”. This inspired sub-postmasters who had received convictions to challenge their convictions in court. In 2020, the government set up a public inquiry, which is still ongoing. The Metropolitan Police are investigating Post Office and Fujitsu employees. Former Post Office chief executive Paula Vennells has finally spoken after almost ten years of staying silent. She said there was a lot she “couldn’t remember” and a lot she’d “never been told”. Although the Post Office was almost

mount

- weiter zunehmen

unsympathetic

- mitleidlos

heavy-handedly

- mit harter Hand, hier: unsensibel

audit

- prüfen, kontrollieren

prosecute

- strafrechtlich verfolgen

prison sentence

- Gefängnisstrafe

robust

- stabil, funktionssicher

civil servant

- Beamter, Beamtin

criminal charge

- Strafanzeige

livelihood

- Lebensgrundlage, Auskommen

terminate

- beenden

notice

- Kündigung

affect

- betreffen

group litigation action

- Sammelklage

High Court judge

- Richter(in) am Obersten Gericht

challenge

- hier: anfechten

public inquiry

- öffentliche Untersuchung



Former sub-postmaster Alan Bates outside the inquiry, May 2024



Members of the public support the sub-postmasters, outside the inquiry at Aldwych House, London

certainly aware of the defects in the Horizon system, Vennells, apparently, wasn't aware of any problems.

Mr Bates vs The Post Office

Bates's story was turned into a four-part ITV drama, *Mr Bates vs The Post Office*, shown on British TV in January 2024. It was a game-changer.

As personal stories of sub-postmasters who'd lost everything were broadcast across the nation's television screens, public outrage was monumental. With 13.5 million viewers, the series was the biggest news drama in 22 years.

The fallout from the TV series saw the government hurrying to quash convictions, nearly a decade after the scandal broke. By February 2024, 100 convictions had been overturned; sub-postmasters who had been convicted, as well as those who had been affected but not convicted, became eligible for compensation. According to www.gov.uk, as of 1 March 2024, some £179 million had been paid to approximately 2,800 claimants.

However, payouts have been slow: 251 sub-postmasters died while waiting for compensation, including four who took their own lives.

BBC Broadcast journalist Nick Wallis, who has spent 14 years covering the scandal, was a series consultant on the TV drama and knows many of



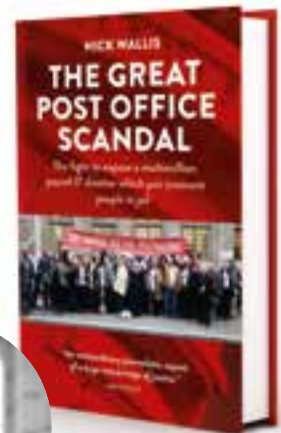
The four-part ITV drama was a game-changer

the sub-postmasters personally. In an interview, he said: "The feeling of helplessness of the victims persists to this day, more than 15 years later.

"The Post Office failed to disclose information, and there's a sense of them trying to bury the story. They didn't take into account the resourcefulness of the sub-postmasters themselves. I think the Crown Prosecution Service, as an organization, will be wholly discredited if they fail to bring charges after the inquiry has reported."

The Post Office Horizon IT inquiry is now in its fourth year. It was set up to establish "a clear account of the implementation and failings of the Horizon system over its lifetime".

Those failings were colossal and far-reaching, and the human suffering of thousands of sub-postmasters was immeasurable. Alan Bates received a knighthood in June 2024.



Journalist Nick Wallis has spent 14 years covering the scandal



"The Post Office failed to disclose information, and there's a sense of them trying to bury the story"

ITV (Independent Television)

- brit. Netzwerk aus mehreren kommerziellen Fernsehsendern

game-changer

- radikale Wende

outrage

- Empörung

fallout

- Konsequenzen

quash [kwɒʃ]

- aufheben

eligible ['elɪdʒəbəl]

- berechtigt

compensation

- Entschädigung

claimant

- Kläger(in)

consultant

- Berater(in)

persist [pə'sɪst]

- fortbestehen

disclose

- offenlegen

account: take sth. into ~

- etw. berücksichtigen, mit etw. rechnen

resourcefulness

[ri'zɔ:sfəlnəs]

- Einfallsreichtum

Crown Prosecution Service

- Strafverfolgungsbehörde für England und Wales

immeasurable

[ɪ'meʒərəbəl]

- unermesslich

knighthood: receive a ~

['naɪthud]

- in den Ritterstand erhoben werden