

IN THE WINCHESTER CROWN COURT
CASE NO: T2007 0043

BETWEEN:-

REGINA

-v-

JOSEPHINE HAMILTON

CASE OPENING

This note is provided as an outline to the Crown's case for the assistance of the Court and the Defence. It is not and does not purport to be a comprehensive analysis of the evidence. The Crown may rely on matters not mentioned in this summary.

Parties

Indictment

Summary

1. This case involves the theft of over £36,000 from the Post Office by the defendant, Josephine Hamilton. At the time of the offending she was the sub post mistress and had responsibility for the effective running of the post office at South Warnborough. Like many such premises, the post office is situated within a shop.

Background

2. Mrs Hamilton, now 50 years old, had been the sub-post mistress there since 21st October 2003. This is a paid position. She is permitted to employ her own staff to assist in the running of the Post Office, and in this case she employed someone called Mrs June Partridge.
3. The defendant had been trained in the use of the Post Office computer system, known as 'Horizon', and in the running of the Post Office generally. The Horizon system records the details of all transactions made at the premises. Every Wednesday the office must prepare

weekly accounts, known as the cash account. The accounting week runs from Thursday morning to Wednesday evening. On 5th October 2005 the system of accounting changed to one involving Branch Trading Periods, and thereafter monthly Trading Statements were produced.

4. This sub-post office, as with all such post offices, carries out a number of functions. As well as selling items like stamps, and distributing forms for eg passport applications, post offices act as agents for the Department of Work and Pensions in providing benefits to members of the public. These take many forms: retirement benefit, incapacity benefit, disability benefit etc. These transactions are recorded on 'Horizon'. This system is connected nationwide.

Facts of this case

5. On Monday 6th March 2006 Rebecca Portch, who works within the Retail Cash Management Team for the Post Office, contacted the premises and spoke to someone, believed to be the defendant. Mrs Portch explained that the reason for her call was the very high level of cash reported as being kept on the premises. Although cash on hand is needed at any Post Office, high levels of cash represent a security risk. Mrs Portch requested that the defendant return at least £25,000 to the Post Office by 8th March. The defendant soon after contacted her union representative and indicated that there were problems at the post office.
6. The next day, on 7th March, the defendant 'went sick' and was signed off by her doctor for four weeks. Because of the concerns about the information provided, and the failure to return the cash as requested, Graham Brander [post office investigator], Elaine Ridge [Area Intervention Manager] and Alan Stuart [auditor] attended at the South Warnborough Post Office on 9th March 2006. After a check of all the documents and accounts, it was found that the post office was short by £36, 644.89. Later that morning investigators attended the defendant's home address and invited her to attend an interview.
7. Subsequent analysis of the documentation revealed that the cash on hand figure recorded on the weekly cash accounting documents had steadily increased from about £15,000 at the end of 2004 through to over £35,000 by February 2006. The prosecution indicates that this represents the defendant's efforts to hide the fact that she was in fact taking money from the post office during this time, and by recording the high cash figure was trying to cover up the

fact that she had taken it. This would never have come to light until or unless a physical check or audit had been carried out or the money had been replaced. Had the defendant had genuine concerns or problems regarding the post office or any aspect of it there is in place a Helpline and other internal avenues that can be pursued to assist with such difficulties.

8. After liaising with the defendant's solicitor in order to secure a convenient time to conduct an interview, the defendant was interviewed by Post Office investigators about these matters on 5th May 2006. The defendant was provided with documentation outlining the allegations being made against her. She in turn provided a prepared statement indicating, in short, that she did not consider that she had received adequate training and that the post office systems were inadequate. She asserted in it that she had never stolen any money or acted dishonestly. Having read out the prepared statement the defendant was asked a number of particular questions, to which she responded by saying 'no comment'.
9. After interview the defendant was asked about her financial situation. She indicated that she owns a property worth about £420,000 on which they have a mortgage of £230,000. Both her sons have left home. She said that she and her husband pay £600/month towards the cost of her mortgage and post office remuneration is in the region of £500/month.
10. Mrs Partridge, who was employed by the defendant and worked within the shop and post office from January 2005, says that the defendant always did the cash accounting. During her time there, Mrs Partridge says that only she and the defendant worked there. Mrs Partridge denies that she had taken any of the missing money. She also says that she did not have access to the safe where the cash would be held.

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Conclusion

11. The truth is that the defendant had been inflating the cash on hand figure at the post office over a period of several months prior to the audit on 9th March 2006. She had done this in order to disguise her thefts of cash. She was the only one with responsibility for cash accounting at the premises. She prepared all of the formal documentation. She was the only one with access to the safe where cash was kept. There is no doubt the money has been taken and that the Post Office have therefore lost over £36,000. There is no explanation as to why she falsified the accounts to represent that the cash was in fact held at the post office.

There is no report by her of any problems with procedure. Records held by Network Business Support Centre [NBSC], the helpline (currently in Unused, Item 6) show a number of calls between 1st December 2003 – 3rd February 2004 referring to losses, including specific amounts of £2,082, £2,000, £4,183.53 and £3,191. There is no other person who could have taken the cash without her knowing it had gone missing.

Burden/standard of proof

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25th June 2007