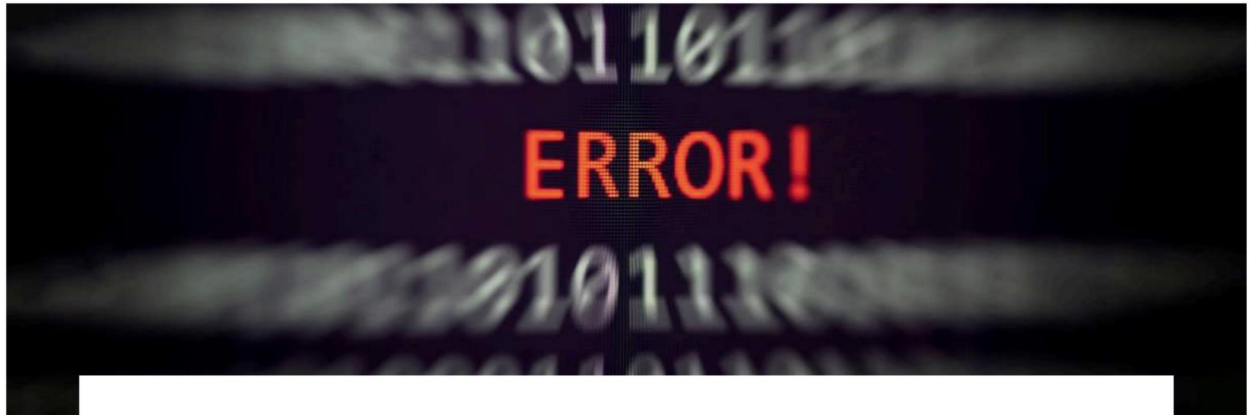


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NEWS

## Post Office scandal: How much deeper and wider can it get?

**It took decades to expose the Post Office Horizon scandal but that effort has laid the groundwork for others to seek justice and financial redress**

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The opening up of the Post Office Horizon scandal has revealed a darker, but no less devastating suffering endured by subpostmasters at the hands of the organisation, beyond users of its flawed Horizon system.

It took two decades of campaigning, a £150m High Court battle, overturned criminal convictions, a statutory public inquiry and a TV drama, among much more, to lay bare the [extent of the scandal](#) referred to as one of the biggest in UK history.

It was after the broadcast of ITV's dramatisation of the scandal, in January 2024, that another Post Office system hit the headlines. Capture, as it is known, predated Horizon, and subpostmasters using the software, like those using Horizon, suffered unexplained shortfalls, repaid so-called losses, had contracts terminated and some were convicted for financial crimes. It was only those subpostmasters saw the [Mr Bates vs The Post Office](#) drama that they had the confidence to come forward and [tell their own, often harrowing, stories](#).

About [2,000 subpostmasters used Capture](#) in the 1990s. All subpostmasters have used Horizon since 1999. A third branch system called [Ecco+ is now also under investigation](#).

[GRO](#) lost everything after having problems with Capture, while [GRO](#) was advised to plead guilty of theft and fraud to avoid jail, thereby receiving a criminal record and devastating his life. The two and others have campaigned for their cases to be looked at in the same way as Horizon cases.

Following pressure, an independent forensic analysis, [commissioned by the government](#) in May 2024, found [Capture was likely to have caused shortfalls](#) for which subpostmasters were blamed.

Last week, [the Criminal Cases Review Commission \(CCRC\) said it would review convictions of subpostmasters](#) for financial crimes when using the Post Office Capture system. The statutory body said it currently has five cases under review where the "Capture IT system could be a factor" and is "seeking further information" on eight further cases.

This has unfolded within a year of concerns being raised. In comparison, it took about 15 years and an incredible amount of campaigning for the CCRC to begin, in April 2015, to [look at the potential for wrongful convictions](#) of subpostmasters based on data from the Horizon system. It took another six years for the first wrongful convictions to be overturned in [Southwark Crown Court](#) and the [Court of Appeal](#).

Peer Kevan Jones, a former MP and long-time campaigner for victims of the Horizon scandal, [raised the Capture issue at the beginning of this year](#), demanding answers from the Post Office. He insisted that Capture victims be treated in the same way as those who suffered at the hands of Horizon.

In January, when public backlash escalated after the airing of the TV drama, then prime minister Rishi Sunak announced that all Horizon-related convictions – about 1,000 – would be overturned through legislation. About 100 had already gone through the slow process of appealing their convictions individually. There are also financial redress schemes for compensating former Horizon users.

Jones said “there can’t be two tiers of justice” so Capture convictions should also be overturned as a group.

## The rapid unravelling of the Capture controversy this year

- Jan: MP demands answers from government minister over second faulty Post Office IT system.
- Feb: More than 1,000 subpostmasters could have used second faulty Post Office system.
- Mar: Controversial Post Office Capture software was completely rewritten in 1994.
- May: Government appoints investigators to analyse Post Office Capture software used before Horizon.
- Sept: More parallels between Post Office Capture and Horizon scandal revealed.
- Sept: Investigation finds 'reasonable likelihood' Post Office Capture software caused accounting losses.
- Nov: Convictions of Post Office Capture system users to be reviewed.

Last month, the Horizon Compensation Advisory Board, of which Jones is a member, wrote to the secretary of state for justice urging the government to legislate to overturn the convictions of subpostmasters based on the Capture system.

The Ministry of Justice said: “The CCRC is looking into a small number of convictions which may be based on evidence from the Capture computer system. If they consider that there is a real possibility that these convictions are unsafe, they will be referred to the Court of Appeal.”

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Peer James Arbuthnot, another [long-time campaigner for subpostmasters](#) since his days as an MP, went further in July 2023 when he [called for all Post Office prosecutions to be reviewed](#) – even those not related to Horizon.

At the time, Arbuthnot said: “No Post Office prosecution is safe unless there is the clearest of evidence that the person convicted has committed a crime. All of the Post Office’s convictions need to be reviewed with the presumption of innocence at the forefront of those reviews. The Post Office’s approach to prosecutions, to disclosure and to investigations, contravened the established rules of justice.”

There is much talk about the Capture system being a second Post Office scandal, but it is one and the same. Tech errors triggered the problem, but the scandal happened because of the way the Post Office dealt with them. Software doesn’t always work properly, but how errors are responded to is a human decision.



Post Office-branded Capture installation disk

Arbuthnot, who also sits on the Horizon Compensation Advisory Board, told Computer Weekly: “The government needs to legislate on exactly the same basis as it did with Horizon, but with even greater urgency. Any other course would lead to further prolonged injustice, and the country will not want that.”

In the latest twist, the government has confirmed it is [looking into](#)

[a third software system](#) used by subpostmasters called Ecco+, which potentially caused unexplained shortfalls that branch workers and subpostmasters were blamed for.

As reported by Computer Weekly last month, the National Federation of Subpostmasters (NFSP) [wrote to the minister](#) in charge of the Post Office requesting

a review of problems experienced by users of Ecco+.

Last week, NFSP CEO Calum Greenhow and legal representatives from Howe & Co solicitors met with civil servants involved in the Capture investigation to discuss Ecco+.

Greenhow said the government was taking it “very seriously” and had “approached the Post Office for information about the Ecco+ system”. The system was mainly used in Crown branches managed directly by the Post Office, but some were sold to subpostmasters who continued to use Ecco+. Evidence has also emerged that the software, like Capture used in the 1990s, was sold to subpostmasters.

David Enright, partner at Howe & Co Solicitors, has represented hundreds of subpostmasters fighting for justice in the Post Office scandal. “This is the moment that the decks must be cleared,” he said. “The Post Office and the government are issuing statements of intent about the future, but all issues must be resolved first.”

## Read more about Ecco+

- [Government looking into third faulty Post Office IT system.](#)
- [Federation requests government investigation into third Post Office branch system.](#)

Sir Alan Bates, the former subpostmaster who led the fight for justice for over 20 years, said: “The one thing in common with Horizon, Capture, the second Post Office IT system under investigation, and now Ecco+, is that they were all subject to the same Post Office culture that eventually led to the failures of the Horizon system – they all form part of the Post Office scandal.”

One issue that is still unresolved is compensation for victims of the Horizon scandal. Bates welcomed the developments regarding Capture and Ecco+, but urged the government to act quicker on financial redress.

“It’s all well and good government wanting to correct previous mistakes, but I wish they’d put as much effort into first resolving the financial redress for the GLO group who first exposed these IT problems and cover-up by Post Office,” he told Computer Weekly.

Computer Weekly [first exposed the scandal in 2009](#), revealing the stories of seven subpostmasters and the problems they suffered due to Horizon accounting software, which led to the most widespread miscarriage of justice in British history (*see below timeline of Computer Weekly articles about the scandal since 2009*).

## Timeline: Computer Weekly articles about the scandal since 2009

- May 2009: [Bankruptcy, prosecution and disrupted livelihoods – postmasters tell their story.](#)
- September 2009: [Post-masters form action group after accounts shortfall.](#)
- November 2009: [Post Office theft case deferred over IT questions.](#)
- May 2010: [A pilot of the new Horizon Online system at Royal Mail has been scaled back after connectivity problems and outages.](#)
- February 2011: [Post Office faces legal action over alleged accounting system failures.](#)
- October 2011: [85 subpostmasters seek legal support in claims against Post Office computer system.](#)
- June 2012: [Post Office launches external review of system at centre of legal disputes.](#)
- January 2013: [Post Office admits Horizon system needs more investigation.](#)
- January 2013: [Post Office announces amnesty for Horizon evidence.](#)
- January 2013: [Post Office wants to get to bottom of IT system allegations.](#)
- June 2013: [Investigation into Post Office accounting system to drill down on strongest cases.](#)
- July 2013: [Post Office Horizon system investigation reveals concerns.](#)
- October 2013: [End in sight for subpostmaster claims against Post Office's Horizon accounting system.](#)
- October 2013: [Former Lord Justice of Appeal Hooper joins Post Office Horizon investigation.](#)
- November 2013: [150 subpostmasters file claims over "faulty" Horizon accounting system.](#)