

nick wallis

Nick is a journalist, broadcaster and the presenter of Caught on Camera.

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Tuesday 7 February 2017

BBC Surrey Post Office investigation 7 Feb 2011

This blog post contains a transcript of the BBC Surrey investigation into the Post Office Horizon computer system first broadcast on 7 Feb 2011. It complements the Inside Out South television piece which was broadcast on BBC1 South at 7.30pm the same day.



I put up the Inside Out South piece pretty soon after it was broadcast ([you can watch it here](#)), but I've only just got round to transcribing the radio investigation. Six years (to the day) later, here it is. There is a lot of text, so I've broken it up with screen grabs from the Inside Out film.

Hello

Hiya, this is my blog - a mishmash of things which includes some investigative journalism, family and music-related rubbish and a lot of material about the Post Office Horizon story. Since 2018, the post office stuff has its own website: [postofficetrial.com](#).

If you want to have a look at my **presenter website**, with my TV and radio credits it's [here](#). For up to the minute stuff, **twitter is best**

Otherwise, have fun digging around on this blog. Your comments via the contact form are always welcome. Thanks!

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Popular Posts

GRO **Julian Wilson**
Julian Wilson 1949 - 2016 I only met Julian a couple of times. I spoke to him quite a bit on the phone and got to know something of his...

Post Office Second Sight report into Horizon

This blog post has been prompted by the July release of an interim report by the forensic

24/06/2024, 16:35

Nick Wallis: BBC Surrey Post Office investigation 7 Feb 2011

The Post Office are currently being sued by way of class action at the High Court by nearly 200 Subpostmasters for what will likely end up being tens of millions of pounds. More on this later. For now, have a read of my first crack at this story.

7.05am 7 Feb 2011

[BBC Surrey Jingle: "BBC Surrey. With Nick Wallis."]

NW: **[live in studio]** "Good morning. You're about to hear a special investigation by BBC Surrey Breakfast. In November last year, a listener called Davinder came to me in a bad way. His wife Seema, who was a Postmistress in West Byfleet, had been sent to Bronzefield Prison in Ashford for stealing more than £70,000 from her own Post Office. In a very emotional phone call, Davinder told me his wife had never taken a penny from the business, but had fallen foul of a problem with the Post Office's computerised accounting system. The system had showed her racking up progressively heavy losses which she would have to make good to balance the books. In order to keep the business functioning, Seema started falsifying her accounts.

NW: "Seema was pregnant when she was convicted of theft and sentenced to twelve months in jail on her son's tenth birthday. I went to see Davinder Misra at his home in West Byfleet and asked him to tell me his and Seema's story from the beginning..."



[Pre-recorded audio - Davinder: "I used to live in London, then I moved from there to Luton and from there I bought one shop in Carrington which is nearby Luton. And I bought this shop with a flat upstairs, a freehold property.

"Then I saw one shop in West Byfleet, the Post Office, and the big huge shop and we started looking to take over the business, basically..."

NW: "And from the very first day, you started using the Post Office's IT system, it was showing up that you were losing money?"

Davinder: "Yes. In front of trainer. He don't have any answer and second time when the other trainer come, there is a £500 or something missing in there and I say like "what's happening?". Even he got no clue what's happening."

NW: "What was your wife saying about the money that was supposed



accountancy firm Second Sight into the Post Of...

Post Office story in Private Eye

UPDATE: New blog post on the 2nd Sight interim report 14 Aug 2013. OLD POST: I have been working with a journalist at Private Eye magaz...



BBC Surrey Post Office investigation 7 Feb 2011

This blog post contains a transcript of the BBC Surrey investigation into the Post Office Horizon computer system first broadcast on 7 Feb 2...



What's up at the Post Office?

This story has been updated: 14 Aug 2013 In November last year, whilst on air, I got a random tweet from a man called Davinder Misra who...

Send me a message

Name

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to be going missing?"

Davinder: "When we, end of the day, when we do how much cash we have how much cheque we have, how much we sold from the system, it's not matching at all. So it means... money's gone somewhere. We call in... we call in ourselves "call the auditor. Find out what's happening here"... and the auditor come... that's the day when we started going towards disaster... [Davinder begins to cry]... they threat us: "it have to be right. Next time we'll take the Post Office away..." [he sniffs and is very emotional] After that, things didn't stop, they just kept going up and we just tried to... make it right... just going out of our minds... eleven o'clock, twelve o'clock we are sitting in the Post Office looking at paper like a mad people..." [there is a pause]

NW: "What has the last year done to you and Seema?"

Davinder: "We just... start doing fasting. Saying to our God every day... prove yourself. Now... I don't believe any more in God... I always believed this country is unique. Because... this country... small country... it can rule all over the world. Unique. Law is so great. I used to think like this... [he cries] This is like a hell..."

[Pre-recorded audio ends]

NW: **[live in studio]** "Davinder Misra there. Well I took Davinder's story to my colleagues at the BBC South investigative journalism programme Inside Out. We found that other Subpostmasters and Subpostmistresses whose accounts haven't matched up with the Post Office's computerised system. Some have found themselves accused of false accounting, some have lost their life savings trying to repay this money. Some have lost their jobs, many have lost their reputations and a few, like Seema Misra, are prosecuted for theft."

NW: "In every case we investigated, the Subpostmasters say their troubles began when the Post Office terminals installed at their branches started showing up inexplicable losses in their accounts. Losses for which they are contractually liable. The Post Office insists that their computerised accounting system, which is called Horizon is completely robust, serving 11,000 Post Offices around the country."



NW: "But in the next few weeks, fifty-five Subpostmasters are planning to launch a civil action in the courts, claiming they didn't take any money. Let's speak to Issy Hogg who is a solicitor from Basingstoke who represented Seema in court. Morning Issy."

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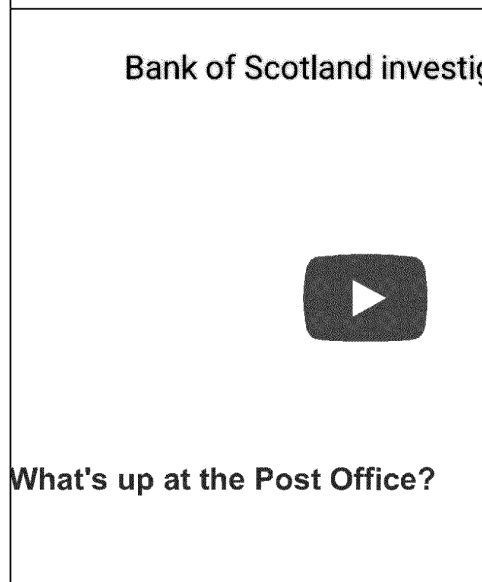
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The SAM scandal



Bank of Scotland



Issy: "Good morning."

NW: "We heard from Seema's husband Davinder a moment ago. Tell me what Seema said to you when you first took up her case."

Issy: "Well she was in trouble because she'd admitted false accounting, but she'd also been charged with theft and denied taking any money."

NW: "So if she didn't do anything wrong, why did she plead guilty to false accounting?"

Issy: "Well she was creating false accounts because as each debt came up she was trying to buy time to find out where this money was going. And also she was scared that the Post Office might dismiss her."

NW: "But Subpostmasters aren't left alone with these computer terminals are they? There's a helpline, there's advisors and trainers will come in to the post office to provide support. Did Seema try to make use of this?"

Issy: "Oh initially she did, but she was finding the advice she was given wasn't solving her problems and she was also concerned about losing her contract."

NW: "Yeah but if I handled cash for a living, and my employers said that I owed them thousands of pounds, I would dispute it. Why didn't Seema dispute it, rather than try to hide it?"

Issy: "Well the Post Office contract enables the Post Office to recover losses however they're caused and they can also terminate the contract. And also of course they can take away a business that you've invested thousands of pounds into. So clearly she was very scared - she couldn't explain the losses and they were rising faster than she could handle them."

NW: "But when Seema's case came to court and she became your client, you couldn't prove that there was a problem with the Post Office's computer system."



Issy: "That's correct. We did as much investigation into the computer system as possible and couldn't prove it was faulty but that's when obviously we found out that there were a considerable number of people - other people - that have got similar problems."

Post Office - Inside Out Sc



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NW: "Well that's the interesting thing isn't it? But I have to ask the question - is it possible that you're being duped by some very clever people who've been creaming off money from the Post Office?"

Issy: "Well I suppose that's always a possibility. However I went to the first meeting of Subpostmasters and I don't think anyone - not even a highly sceptical criminal lawyer of 26 years like myself could have left that meeting without thinking that something was just not right."

NW: " Seema was convicted of theft, unanimously, by jury at Guildford Crown Court and for them to do that, they had to be convinced, beyond all reasonable doubt, that she took the money."

Issy: "Oh that's absolutely true and obviously I respect the decision. But it doesn't alter the fact that there are many out there with the same story."

NW: "You saw Seema recently since she's been in prison. How is she and how's her baby?"

Issy: "She's bearing up and the baby's fine."

[Break]

NW: **[live in studio]** "Good morning, you're listening to a special investigation by BBC Surrey breakfast. Earlier we heard from Davinder Misra whose wife was the West Byfleet Postmistress before she was sent to prison convicted of stealing more than £70,000 from the Post Office...."

[Pre-record of Davinder] "Feel shame on this country. They put innocent... into prison. I am a good citizen. My wife... only good citizen - we are good people! She's everything for me. They put a hammer into [indistinct]. You're putting the whole family into prison."

NW [on tape] "Have you told your son about where your wife is?"

Davinder: She's in hospital. She's in hospital."

[Pre-recorded audio ends]

NW: **[live in studio]** "Now legal action is expected to be taken against the Post Office on behalf of 55 Postmasters and Postmistresses who like Seema, claim they didn't take a penny, but believe they are victims of a flawed computerised accounting system which the Post Office says is not remotely faulty. Now - Jo Hamilton is one of six test cases who is expected to go to court first. She used to run the Post Office in North East Hampshire's South Warnborough until she was prosecuted for false accounting and told to repay £36,000 that she claims she never took. Good morning Jo... tell us your story."

Jo: "Well it started a long time ago and I got to the end of one week when I was doing the balance..."

NW: "How long ago was this then?"

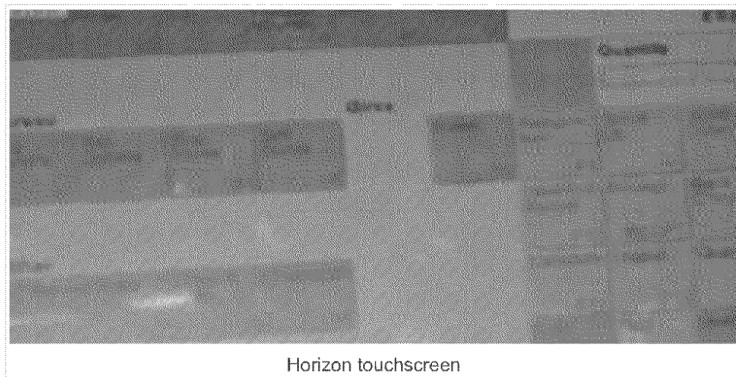
Jo: "... That was 2003. And I got to the end of the week and I was minus £2000 - that was give or take a few pounds and I rang the

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helpdesk like you're supposed to do, and they told me to do - this, this, this, which I duly did. And it doubled, the amount of money I'd rung them about."

NW: "So let's try and get an idea of your situation. You're behind the Post Office counter, you're staring at the computer terminal and it flashes up when you're doing your books at the end of the week that you owe it £2000. You owe the business £2000."



Horizon touchscreen

Jo: "Yeah what you do is rollover. You do what they call a trial balance. You rollover and it tells you how much money you're up or down and it said I was down £2000."

NW: "So that comes up on the screen so the first thing that you do is call the helpline."

Jo: "Well I looked back through what I'd done and I tried to see if there was anything obvious and then I phoned the helpdesk, which is always very busy at that time on a Wednesday, because everybody else is phoning up. So it took me a long time to get through and then, when I did get through they told me to do various things and it doubled, the amount of money that I'd rung them up about. So I was then minus £4,000."

NW: "So by the end of the conversation with the helpdesk, you were now £4,000 down rather than £2,000."

Jo: "Yeah."

NW: "And just give us an idea - because many people might not have been to South Wamborough - how much money were you turning over a week?"



Jo working in South Wamborough Village Stores

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Jo: "Well - probably a little bit more than that. It was a tiny sub-post office. We were doing about £2,000 worth of pensions a week, probably a thousand pounds worth of stamps."

NW: "So this would represent a massive amount of money, compared to your overall takings, to go missing."

Jo: "Yes."

NW: "What happened when the money that you were told you owed, doubled to £4,000?"

Jo: "Well they got a supervisor on the line and they tried to sort it out but whatever we did - they told me to print off the last week's transactions and the last month's transactions... and I printed everything off, sent it to them, but they still couldn't put it back to the £2,000 let alone the £4,000. And so then they asked me for the money which I didn't have so they then took it out of my wages for the next ten months."

NW: "And then, after you paid it back, your problems started again."

Jo: "Yep. I had another £750 discrepancy, which they then took out of my wages again, which left me lacking in confidence."

NW: "So what happened the next time?"

Jo: "Well, that's when it started to climb again, and I knew I didn't have the money, I knew I hadn't taken it and I didn't really know what to do because I knew if I phoned up a similar thing would happen. And the money wasn't there in the business, but I knew I hadn't taken it."

NW: "But it's not the job of the helpline to balance your books, is it?"

Jo: "No but I couldn't explain where the monies were going. I knew I hadn't had it and I didn't know how to sort it out."

NW: "So what did you start to do?"

Jo: "I started to pretend the money was there that wasn't."



Horizon terminal - keyboard and touchscreen

NW: "Which is a criminal offence - false accounting."

Jo: "Yeah, yeah."

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NW: "How long did this go on for?"

Jo: "It went on for another... about 14 months."

NW: "Until the losses had racked up to £36,000. And these losses would just keep racking up. You'd just keep seeing them. And you were absolutely certain that your books... internally..."

Jo: "... yep..."

NW: "... you weren't... there wasn't anyone else there who could have stolen the money?"

Jo: "Nope."

NW: "What happened when it got to £36,000?"

Jo: "It got to £36,000 and they rang up and said "We're concerned about the amount of cash you're holding in the post office" and I thought well I'd better..."

NW: "... what because you said "I've got... this £36,000 I have got, you haven't seen it yet, but it's all okay, it's all there" so they think that you're holding it in a safe rather than not having it all?"

Jo: "Yeah."

NW: "Right, okay."

Jo: "And they ring up and say, she said "we're concerned about the amount of cash you're holding on the premises, so we need you to remit some back." so I got in touch with the Federation of Subpostmasters and said "what shall I do?" and they said "well we'll come and get them to audit you because you haven't had an audit for several years" and they [the Post Office auditors] came out and told me how much was missing, which was the £36,000."

NW: "Then what happened?"

Jo: "Then we went through all the legal processes and I pleaded guilty to false accounting. They charged me with theft and false accounting, but they dropped the theft if I paid the money back. So I paid the money back by remortgaging the house and going to the village for £6,000 and they then, um..."

NW: "Sorry, when you say - "go to the village" - what? You...?"

Jo: "We had a meeting in the village hall and explained to everyone what had happened and they stumped up the other £6,000 for me, bless them."

NW: "What's the process like of being prosecuted? What do you go through when you are effectively committing a criminal act for whatever reason and then being prosecuted as a result?"

Jo: "It's absolutely terrifying. Really terrifying. If you're a law-abiding

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citizen, it's just terrifying."

NW: "Well, let's keep you here Jo if we can for the time being as I just want to explain what the Post Office have told us about it.... they are absolutely categorical in their support of the Horizon computer system. Unfortunately they wouldn't be interviewed for this programme, but they did send us quite a detailed statement and our producer Jack Fiehn is here to tell us what they said. Jack."

Jack: "Morning Nick. Well the Post Office have told us they're fully confident of the Horizon computer system in its branches and all the accounting processes around it are absolutely accurate and reliable at all times. They say the system has been subjected to full, independently-assured, robust testing procedures. The Horizon information security processes meet the relevant industry standards which apply to such organisations as banks and building societies. Subpostmasters are given fully appropriate training and can also ring a dedicated helpline for advice. The Horizon system has operated successfully for over ten years across the Post Office network, which currently stands at more than 11,500 branches."

NW: "So the Post Office - robust in their defence of this system then?"



Odiham Post Office 2011

Jack: "Yes, and the Post Office go on to say the National Federation of Subpostmasters, which vigorously represents the views and interests of Subpostmasters around the entire country has gone on record on a number of occasions to express its full confidence in the accuracy and robustness of the Horizon system. The Horizon system provides detailed records of every transaction, no matter how small or large in any individual Post Office branch. Separate records of every keystroke in the system are stored in a tamper-proof way. Finally they say that the Post Office handles large sums of public money as well as the money entrusted to it by the twenty million people who visit the branches each week. The Post Office rightly makes every effort and takes all reasonable steps to protect the money in its care. Now - BBC Surrey has also approached the Postal Affairs Minister and Kingston and Surbiton Lib Dem MP Ed Davey - he also wouldn't come on this morning but he made this comment, he said "I have recently met representatives from the Justice for Subpostmasters Alliance to hear their concern, whilst this system is a matter for Post Office Ltd, I have however asked them to look into the matter and they've expressed their full confidence in it."

NW: "Thanks Jack. Well Jo, I want you to have a listen to this because we've mentioned the National Federation of

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Subpostmasters, which is effectively the Subpostmistresses and Subpostmasters' union. This is what Mark Baker, from that organisation had to say."

[Pre-recorded audio - Mark Baker]: "If you cannot balance those accounts then you should just simply say to the Post Office - "I cannot balance my account and I do not wish to make good the money because I feel there are reasons why I should not, therefore this branch will not open until I can have a debate with you and get to the bottom as to whether or not I am responsible for the shortage, or indeed there's another reason as to why the shortage has occurred."

[Pre-recorded audio ends]

NW: **[live in studio]** "So was this an option for you, Jo?"

Jo: "No, well, I didn't realise I could close it. I thought I was contractually bound to keep it open. And whilst it went on and they held the money in what they called a suspense account until they couldn't sort it out and I had to pay the money back I didn't realise that I could actually close, so I carried on trading whilst all this was happening."

NW: "There are some interesting issues about training there as well, aren't there? Jo's lawyer Issy Hogg is still with us. Issy last October you actually went to see the Minister for Postal Affairs Ed Davey about all of this. What did he say?"

Issy: "Well he gave us a very sympathetic ear, listened to us for quite some time, but I have to say I'm not sure how it's moved on since then."

NW: "Mm okay well I understand a letter has been sent again, referring us back to the Post Office who say they have full confidence in the system, so at the moment he's not getting involved. Issy Hogg and Jo Hamilton thank you very much for coming in this morning.

"After 8 o'clock this morning we're going to hear what Jo's MP James Arbuthnot has to say about her situation and we'll be speaking to the Woking MP Jonathan Lord who's taken a special interest in this story. Don't forget you can watch all this if you live in the BBC South region tonight on BBC1 the Inside out programme starts at 7.30"

[The programme then continues, focusing on other matters until 8.05am and then we repeat, word for word, the introduction we broadcast at 7.05am into the Davinder Misra, pre-recorded audio. I pick up off the back with]:

NW: **[live in studio]** "Davinder Misra, who's wife Seema has been jailed for theft. Well Issy Hogg is Seema's lawyer. Earlier I asked her why Seema didn't simply dispute the discrepancies which were coming up on her computer terminal.



GRO

Dave Bristow, former Odiham Subpostmaster

[Issy and NW audio recorded just after 7.05am: "The Post Office contract enables the Post Office to recover losses however they're caused and they can also terminate the contract. And also of course they can take away a business that you've invested thousands of pounds into. So clearly she was very scared - she couldn't explain the losses and they were rising faster than she could handle them."

W: "But when Seema's case came to court and she became your client, you couldn't prove that there was a problem with the Post Office's computer system."

Issy: "That's correct. We did as much investigation into the computer system as possible and couldn't prove it was faulty but that's when obviously we found out that there were a considerable number of people - other people - that have got similar problems."

NW: "Well that's the interesting thing isn't it? But I have to ask the question - is it possible that you're being duped by some very clever people who've been creaming off money from the Post Office?"

Issy: "Well I suppose that's always a possibility. However I went to the first meeting of Subpostmasters and I don't think anyone - not even a highly sceptical criminal lawyer of 26 years like myself could have left that meeting without thinking that something was just not right."

[Pre-recorded audio ends]

NW **[live]**: "And yet, Seema Misra was found guilty, unanimously, by a jury at Guildford Crown Court of theft, and sent to jail. However, in the next few weeks a civil action on behalf of 55 Subpostmasters is expected to be launched in the courts. They all claim they never took any money. Jo Hamilton is one of six test cases which is expected to go to court first. She used to run the post office in South Warnborough near Odiham until she pleaded guilty to false accounting and was told to repay £36,000 which again, she claims, she never stole. Here's what she told me earlier..."

[Recorded audio with Jo from interview after 7.05am: "I couldn't explain where the monies were going. I knew I hadn't had it and I didn't know how to sort it out."

NW: "So what did you start to do?"

Jo: "I started to pretend the money was there that wasn't."

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NW: "Which is a criminal offence - false accounting."

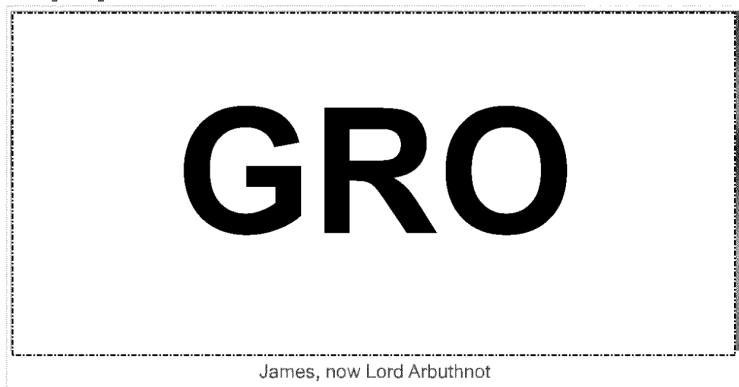
Jo: "Yeah, yeah."

NW: "How long did this go on for?"

Jo: "It went on for another... about 14 months."]

[Pre-recorded audio ends]

NW **[live]**: "Well Jo Hamilton's MP is James Arbuthnot."



[Pre-recorded clip with James Arbuthnot from Inside Out South:

"I find it very difficult to believe that all these Subpostmasters and Subpostmistresses are suddenly found to be dishonest if the alternative may be that it is a public-sector computer system which has gone wrong. We've heard of that before."]

[Pre-recorded audio ends]

NW **[live]**: "Well listening to his parliamentary colleague and the story of Jo and Seema is Jonathan Lord, the MP for Woking whose constituency covers West Byfleet. Jonathan - good morning."

JL: "Good morning."

NW: "What do you think is going on here?"

JL: "Well it's difficult to be entirely sure. Obviously some very sad stories with some very sad outcomes and I just want to make sure we get to the bottom of this, that there's a full investigation and that systems are put in place where... that people think are fair and robust."

NW: "We tried to get Mr Davey, who is the minister for postal affairs on the programme this morning. Sadly he was unavailable, but he did tell us this was an operational matter for the Post Office and that they have expressed to him full confidence in their computer system. Jonathan Lord - Ed Davey is a coalition partner of yours - is he right to be sitting on his hands here?"

JL: "Well the Post Office is ultimately responsible to the parliament and through parliament to the people, and I suspect there's a little bit more going on behind the scenes than the minister is willing to let on. I hope that is the case because when you have constituents in these

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sorts of issues, you want to know that a publicly-owned and managed institution is treating people fairly.:

NW: "You say you want to see a full investigation. What form should that investigation take?"

JL: "Well I think we need absolutely independent, double-checking of the Horizon computer system, but the other aspect..."

NW: "The Post Office have said "independently-assured" - I'm not quite sure myself what that means but they are saying that it is pretty robust."

JL: "Well I would certainly like to hear more about that. But I think also the processes that is... that happens if discrepancies are shown up within a Subpostmasters' systems. I think that needs looking into. I think our Postmasters need to be able to contact the Post Office in the knowledge that things will be looked at in a fair, balanced and compassionate way. Peoples' livelihoods are on the line here. They might have... they almost certainly have invested thousands if not tens of thousands of pounds in their businesses, and if they don't feel secure in going to the Post Office and saying "Look - there's a discrepancy here. I need help", rather than thinking the Post Office, because of the contract they've signed is going to pounce on them and potentially take them out of the business they've worked so hard to build up and put so much money into, then you can understand why they feel worried and why that side of things certainly needs looking at as far as I'm concerned."

NW: "Seema, your constituent, is pregnant, she's in jail, despite never having any convictions against her in the past. There is, apparently, the threat of deportation hanging over her because she has an Indian passport and then she has to repay the £74,000 she has been unanimously convicted of stealing, yet no one has ever found this money and Seema says it was she who alerted the Post Office to losses in her branch in the first place. Where do your sympathies lie?"

JL: "Well you played the audio of Mr Misra and I think it's very difficult not to have sympathy with Mr and Mrs Misra. The law must run its course. Obviously, as their constituency MP I'm going to do everything that I can to help that family. Mrs Misra is pregnant, she has a ten year old son. I will be doing my duty for my constituents, but there is a wider issue here. This is one case, one tragedy, there are many others out there and I think we just have to be absolutely sure that the system is robust and that people if they get into difficulties because of what they believe are glitches in the system, that that is dealt with promptly, fairly and that they feel that they can go to the Post Office authorities and have it dealt with in a fair and proper way without feeling that their livelihood is immediately at risk and I think that is what some of them feel at the moment."

NW: "From what you've heard and from what you know about this situation, do you think either with regard specifically to Seema or in the round with the number of cases that have come to our attention that there has been a miscarriage of justice somewhere along the way?"



JL: "Well let's hope that this civil action gets to the bottom of most of the outstanding questions. But it does appear to me and one or two colleagues who have had constituents in a similar position - some of us feel that these are probably upstanding citizens and their cases need reviewing and that's certainly how I feel about things."

NW: "Jonathan Lord, MP for Woking, thank you. Unfortunately no one from the Post Office was available to be interviewed this morning, however it is worth reiterating that the Post Office says it has "complete faith" in its Horizon IT system and says there is "no evidence whatsoever pointing to any fault" with its technology. You've been listening to a special investigation by BBC Surrey Breakfast and you can see more on this story on the BBC South edition of Inside Out tonight at 7.30 on BBC1 - it will be available online to everyone who has broadband access to the BBC iplayer shortly afterwards. It's twenty-one minutes past eight."

[Ends]

For further information on the Post Office Horizon story, you can have a look at the **Justice For Subpostmasters' Alliance** website, and read some of the **Post Office responses** to various allegations on their corporate site.

Or you can **click around** this **blog**.

If you are a former Subpostmaster, Subpostmaster's Assistant (ie Sub Post Office employee) or an employee of a Crown Post Office and wish to join the class action against the Post Office, you can find out more **here**. You've got until 26 July 2017 to sign up.

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Posted by Nick Wallis at **11:45** 

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