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TRANSCRIPT OF “FILE ON 4” – “SECOND CLASS CITIZENS: THE POST OFFICE IT SCANDAL”

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THE ATTACHED TRANSCRIPT WAS TYPED FROM A RECORDING AND NOT COPIED FROM AN ORIGINAL SCRIPT. BECAUSE OF THE RISK OF MISHEARING AND THE DIFFICULTY IN SOME CASES OF IDENTIFYING INDIVIDUAL SPEAKERS, THE BBC CANNOT VOUCH FOR ITS COMPLETE ACCURACY.

“FILE ON 4”

Transmission: Tuesday 11th February 2020

Repeat: Sunday 16th February 2020

Producer: Mick Tucker & Nick Wallis

Reporter: Hayley Hassall

Editor: Carl Johnston

MUSIC

FELSTEAD: I was crying, I was hysterical. You know, my family were sat there watching me. They made me feel like a real big criminal. I had a set of handcuffs to both of my hands, so my hands were tied together, then I had a handcuff to one officer one side and one officer the other side, and obviously I wasn't allowed to see my family. The only thing I had was a note from them all. But yeah, erm And then I was placed in this vehicle with no idea where I was going, and then someone told me I was going to Holloway.

ACTUALITY OF PRISON CELL DOOR CLOSING, KEYS RATTLING

FELSTEAD: There were days where I was in the cell all day and I'd be fed through a hatch. It was horrid, it was cold, it was dingy, it was ... it was horrid, absolutely horrid. It was big, it's a huge prison. It's very echoey and, you know, there's a lot of banging, there's a lot of people shouting, especially at night time. It's a horrible place, it's not nice at all.

HASSALL: Nearly 20 years after being locked up in Holloway Prison, Tracy Felstead relives her time inside like it was yesterday. She tells me harrowing

HASSALL cont: stories of her incarceration and how the experience has left an indelible mark on her life. But it's the chapter before this one that is the most disturbing. It begins in 2001, when Tracy was 18. She'd just finished school and had started her first job at her local post office in Camberwell Green, South London. She was earning £14,000 a year and her mum and dad were proud of her.

FELSTEAD: I started in the back office and I was doing daily things like bagging up all the tickets. I was the youngest one there. They were lovely, I got on well with everybody.

HASSALL: But during that first few months, what started to happen?

FELSTEAD: We'd noticed a couple of things had gone wrong on the system and basically we were just told to ignore, it's not, you know, it's nothing major. We'd have a loss here, a loss there; it wasn't anything to worry about it.

HASSALL: What sort of things are you talking about? What sort of amounts?

FELSTEAD: One time I think there was like £300, between £300 and £500 figure, and basically when we tried to correct that figure, it would jump higher. And then again I was told that, you know, it would rectify itself, there wasn't a problem. And then I went away on holiday, came back and was told that my till was £11,500 short. And then, I think, I can't even remember how many days after that, I came into work and was told that I was being interviewed that morning, did I need representation, which obviously I declined. I was like, I've got nothing to hide, I don't need anybody here, to them telling me that I'd stolen this money.

HASSALL: What was your reaction to that?

FELSTEAD: Obviously I was scared. At that stage I had turned 19. I was worried obviously. When I then was suspended by the Post Office, I then began to think, okay, this is more serious than I originally thought.

ACTUALITY OF KNOCK AT DOOR

FELSTEAD: And they actually turned up at my mother-in-law's house at silly o'clock in the morning, police in tow. Basically these strapping men that were at the door, the Post Office Investigation Team wanted to interview me under caution. At first, they were asking me where has the money gone, you've just been on holiday, did you pay for your family? We gave them access to everything - bank accounts, everything. They were very forceful, everything was, 'What have you done with the money? Where has it gone?' They had it set in their mind that this money had gone and I had taken the money and that was it.

HASSALL: She didn't know it at the time, but Tracy wasn't alone. Far from it. As the months and years rolled by, hundreds more post office workers would be accused by their employer of stealing, false accounting or fraud. It's been a lifechanging experience from which they may never recover. In this episode of File on 4, we'll hear from staff just like Tracy, some of whom have been trying to clear their names for two decades. And for the first time, we'll hear from insiders at the heart of the Post Office senior team who were ignored when they tried to raise the alarm about an IT system called Horizon, which has now been blamed for the millions of pounds which went missing. [MUSIC] First though, we have to rewind to the 1990s - a decade when new technology was arriving at a dizzying pace. Technology we now take for granted. Satellite TV, mobile telephones, PlayStation and, for the first time, we could listen to digital audio like this on newly introduced MP3 players. Nothing though had the same impact as the arrival of the internet, which gave us access to the web. For the first time, we could dial it up from our homes. [MODEM NOISES] The world quite literally was at our fingertips, even if it wasn't as quick as we'd like. There was also the frustration of getting disconnected every time the phone rang, because you had to use your landline for broadband access. But its speed, its usability and its reliability quickly advanced. Big business was quick to take advantage, and the Post Office didn't want to get left behind. At the time, each Post Office branch would print off its accounts at the end of the week and send them off in an envelope to Head Office. But the internet changed all that. If they could connect to a shared server, then all the branches could work off one system - and their accounts would be automatically stored in a central finance centre. But this would have to be one of the biggest retail IT network systems in Europe. The Post Office had 20,000 post offices, more than 40,000 counters dealing with tens of millions of transactions a day -

HASSALL cont: everything from withdrawing cash, buying a Lottery ticket or paying for a TV licence. They needed a system that could do it all. So, with that in mind, the Post Office signed a deal with ICL, a global software provider, which later became known as Fujitsu. They used a computer system called Horizon and they planned to incorporate it into every Post Office branch in the UK. It was going to modernise the Post Office like nothing before. But even before Horizon was rolled out, there were concerns it wasn't up to the job. File on 4 has made contact with one of the project team. Back in 1997, it was his job to find the best software package to take the Post Office forward. When I met him, in a small park in central London, he told me how he wrote to ICL, saying he didn't believe that the software was ready.

WHISTLEBLOWER: The reason I wrote the letter was because I felt the systems that we were being offered were in a sense maybe too immature and too difficult to build on to get to the final product, but there were better things on the market that could have been used.

HASSALL: So, the software that the Post Office went with, were there errors with it or were there concerns that you thought, this could bring about problems, future problems?

WHISTLEBLOWER: So, at the time we were explaining the concept of risk, so this was all based on risk. So, if your starting point is a piece of software which is perhaps not as mature as others, you are dealing with risk, something which may happen in the future. It is almost undoubtedly that if you start from an immature piece of software, it will be harder to get to the point you want to get to, and you might uncover issues on the way. So, at the time, we could not say it was not going to work, but there were fears that it would not be as robust as it should be.

HASSALL: But despite his protestations, his concerns were dismissed. And, by the year 2000, the Horizon system had been introduced into more than 18,000 Post Office branches around the UK.

MUSIC

HASSALL: It wasn't long before our insider's worst fears were recognised.

BAKER: The calls started coming in not long after Horizon was introduced.

HASSALL: Mark Baker and his wife have been running the post office in Larkhill in Wiltshire for 32 years. Mark also represents postmasters for the Communication Workers Union.
And what sort of things were you hearing?

BAKER: Well, people were having audits done and the postmaster was not able to show an accurate balance. There were discrepancies and they would be, as a default action they would get suspended from their duty and that's when they would call me. It incrementally grew. It would start off with maybe, I don't know, two or three people a year, then it seemed to be getting to like one a month - bearing in mind I only looked after the South West region, this was going on all over the country.

ACTUALITY AT SEASIDE – SEAGULLS AND WAVES

CASTLETON: We felt there was a place where we could sort of enjoy life a little bit more and still work hard, but enjoy the other things in life, you know. It's a beautiful place to walk, it's a beautiful place. At the time, we had two young children, so it was just a really nice place to put down roots and just enjoy being here.

HASSALL: In 2003, Lee Castleton decided to leave the stresses of his stockbroker job in London behind him. He'd been travelling over a hundred miles a day working away from his family, so he bought this small post office by the sea in Bridlington.

ACTUALITY ENTERING POST OFFICE

HASSALL: This is it?

CASTLETON: Okay, yeah, this is just the rear entrance, so we'll come through. This is the main door to the post office.

HASSALL: Oh right, yeah. Gosh, everything's still there.

CASTLETON: Yeah, so you've still got the counters.

HASSALL: You've got the wooden cabinets, you've got that glass front. You've even got the Post Office signs on the windows.

CASTLETON: Absolutely, yeah, we never took anything down, and that's where the safe used to be.

HASSALL: You've still got things up on the shelves.

CASTLETON: Yeah, we've still got some beach things on the shelf there. Yeah, we used to put quite a display outside of blow up toys and dinghies and things like that, you know – beach goods, footballs.

HASSALL: So, the shop's obviously been derelict for eight years, but there's still so much here that obviously used to be. You've got signs there – sticks of rock £1.20 each, 60p or four for £2.

CASTLETON: Yeah, we used to sell a lot of rock. Yeah, it was very busy. We used to have quite a range, so this whole sort of side, right down to probably 2 metres of five shelves of rock.

HASSALL: How does it making you feel, coming back in here?

CASTLETON: It's difficult really to think about all the things that happened and how it was meant to be and how it ended up really is so different.

HASSALL: Lee bought the post office and shop along with the flat upstairs in July 2003, and at first the business seemed to be doing well.

CASTLETON: We were around six months into our tenure. We'd had no problems whatsoever, everything was going really well, and we started to have losses in the post office, unexplained losses - losses that didn't seem to generate from anywhere, they just appeared on the balance day, which was every Wednesday, and we just couldn't understand where they were coming from.

HASSALL: As a former stockbroker, Lee is more capable than most when it comes to understanding accounts. But when he used the Horizon system, the numbers just didn't add up.

CASTLETON: At first you look for a mistake, because that's, at the end of the day, let's face it, we're all human. So, hours and hours and hours I spent going over cash, stock, recounting everything. I was looking for our own mistakes, which we just couldn't find. So, the first loss, I actually repaid money, one thousand, well, over £1,000. But by the following week, we had a substantial loss, it was about £4,000 and there was just no reason for it.

HASSALL: Desperate for help, Lee called the helpline set up to deal with Horizon issues nearly every day.

CASTLETON: Throughout those 12 weeks, I made in the region of 90 calls - phone calls to helplines; secondary helplines, call back systems. I had nothing to hide. No one seemed to care; it was just my fault all the time. But nobody seemed as though they were prepared to go into the underpinnings of the system just to make sure that there was nothing in the system itself that was either causing the error, and so I knew then that we needed to get somebody else exterior to the people that were involved from then, so I asked for an audit.

HASSALL: And then, when you had the audit, what did they find?

CASTLETON: They found £25,000 shortfall in total, which they said was, they didn't know about. But obviously I had call lists to say that I'd rung and rung and rung and everything in the cash account showed that each week that we'd had the shortfalls, so clearly they did know that that shortfall was there, there was nothing hidden, nothing at all

CASTLETON cont: hidden. They then called my area manager, who visited the site around lunchtime on the particular Tuesday 23rd March 2004 and I was suspended.

HASSALL: After taking away his job, the Post Office spent the next two years pursuing Lee for the missing £25,000. Then, in 2006, it ended up at the High Court in London.

CASTLETON: The Post Office decided to probably make an example of me, and I ran, ran out of legal cover, so I was left in this sorry state of having to go to London myself and defend myself.

HASSALL: And how did it go, Lee?

CASTLETON: I lost, so not very well.

HASSALL: What did that mean to you, for your life?

CASTLETON: Well, just the costs that were awarded from Post Office Limited's court case were £321,000.

HASSALL: But that was just the start of it. The impact on Lee and his family in this close-knit town was devastating.

CASTLETON: It's been really difficult. The local people presumed I was a thief, particularly when the office closed here, my children and my wife were abused in the street, my daughter has been spat at on the school bus. You know, it was really tough for the family more than anything, you know. My wife and kids probably got the brunt of all of that, because I'm probably a bit thick skinned really, but, and that, it's easy for me because I knew I hadn't taken it. [CRIES] Sorry.

HASSALL: That's okay.

CASTLETON: I knew I hadn't taken any money.

MUSIC

HASSALL: Lee was declared bankrupt. The couple and their two children were left with nothing. Both Tracy and Lee were repeatedly told by the Post Office that they were the only ones having problems with the Horizon system. They were the only ones having unexplained losses. And they were the only ones who refused to be held accountable. But we now know that wasn't true. Not only were Tracy and Lee not alone, the Post Office knew it, and over the next few years the organisation accused more and more of their workers of fraud and theft.

I've got here in my hand the minutes of a meeting between senior Post Office and Fujitsu employees. It clearly proves that multiple managers knew that many branches were having problems with Horizon and this was resulting in unexplained losses of thousands of pounds. On the front page of this, under the heading 'What is the issue?' it reads:

READER IN STUDIO: Discrepancies showing at the Horizon counter disappear when the branch follows certain process steps, but will still show within the back-end branch account. This is currently impacting circa 40 branches since migration onto Horizon Online, with an overall cash value of circa £20k loss. Impact:

- The branch has appeared to have balanced, whereas in fact they could have a loss or a gain.
- If widely known, could cause a loss of confidence in the Horizon system by branches.

Potential impact upon ongoing legal cases where branches are disputing the integrity of Horizon data.

HASSALL: And it gets worse. I've been speaking to a senior manager in the Post Office at the time. He saw what was happening to postmasters and he raised concerns – but he was ignored. We're calling him Jim and his words are being voiced by an actor.

JIM: A number of us began to feel increasingly uncomfortable, but there was no space for honesty, no desire for open dialogue, no appreciation that some employees might have concerns that the people running our stores were being arrested, going to prison, losing their life savings, having massive mental health issues. It felt as though doing the right thing no longer mattered; it was all about saving the image of the Post Office. A fellow member of staff asked one manager why they thought

HASSALL: The group decided to fight the Post Office. A London firm of solicitors accepted their case and began the long process of interviewing and gathering evidence. As pressure on the Post Office continued to grow, they couldn't ignore the protests any more and they employed a company of forensic accountants to look into 150 cases. They were called Second Sight, led by an investigator called Ron Warmington. He's agreed to give File on 4 his first ever interview.

WARMINGTON: It was just so, so much unlike anything I'd come across in any of the companies I'd ever worked for. Healthy companies encourage their staff and their customers and their clients to elevate, to articulate to them strange and mysterious happenings in their system. Now Post Office didn't do that.

HASSALL: So, what did you find?

WARMINGTON: Strangely enough, the first question that we asked on interviewing the sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses was, before Horizon was installed, what was the biggest error that you ever had to deal with, shortfall? And the figure was actually around about £300. Nobody came up with anything bigger than that. But afterwards, the losses were tens of thousands, twenties of thousands, hundreds of thousands in some cases - it's much, much larger. There were lots of similarities between the 150 cases. We found that there were recurring common problems that different postmasters had encountered, even though, as is on the record, many of them had been told, you're the only one that's got this problem. So, we found errors that started off as £2,000 becoming £4,000 and then £8,000 and in the end we had twenty or so recurring themes, and each of those 150 cases ticked several of those boxes.

HASSALL: When you presented your findings, how did the Post Office respond?

WARMINGTON: At first, there was immense cooperation and clearly a joint desire to seek the truth. But as our findings became more critical of Post Office, the legal department took over and progressively it became more difficult for us to get the information we needed or even to get quick answers to essential questions. We were just met with denials as Post Office was maintaining the story of Horizon's robustness and the

WARMINGTON cont: integrity of branch accounts, so we didn't penetrate as far into that as we would have liked.

HASSALL: According to our Post Office insider, Jim, senior managers didn't like what Second Sight were telling them.

JIM: When forensic accountants, Second Sight, brought on board to investigate, gave answers or views that weren't in line with what certain managers wanted to hear, they were rapidly discredited, called incompetent, naïve or accused of not really understanding what they were dealing with. There was talk of finding another firm to do the review, which seemed extraordinary. It seemed like discrediting anyone querying Horizon was the top priority – naturally that included people running the post offices.

HASSALL: In 2015, Second Sight were told to stop their work. The investigation was terminated by the Post Office without notice. Here's Ron Warmington again.

WARMINGTON: It's the way that corporations behave when things go wrong that's the acid test, and it was in that area that we found it so strange, the way Post Office was reacting - presumably to protect its brand.

HASSALL: During his investigation, Ron spoke with dozens of sub-postmasters who had been accused.

WARMINGTON: I've spent decades dealing with some of the worst criminals in the world. What struck me here was that I wasn't dealing with people like that. These were ordinary people that had simply found something that they couldn't deal with, they sought help, didn't get it and were put in a situation that, frankly, was life-changing for them.

MUSIC

ROLL: We had access to the entire Post Office system, so that if anything went wrong anywhere, we could fix it.

HASSALL: Now, many of the sub-postmasters that we've spoken to were told that Horizon systems couldn't be altered away from the sub-postmasters themselves. Is that true?

ROLL: No. Horizon could be altered, we could alter it. We could go into counters and alter data without the postmaster knowing. We could have sold a stamp while he was working and he wouldn't have known.

HASSALL: So, can you explain to me how you'd do that, how can you log into a sub-postmaster's computer?

ROLL: We had the authority, software-wise, to log in from our work station in Bracknell, go up to the servers and then we could piggyback from those servers through the gateways, down into the Post Office, using the secure network, and then log on to an individual counter within the Post Office, whichever post office we wanted to. So there's the data being entered on the post office counter. Every transaction would have generated lines of code. If at any time there was some data corruption at that level, then the data in one of those lines of code in the database would become corrupted. And what would happen would be that the counter then would stop communicating. The postmaster would carry on working and all the data would be going in, as far as he was concerned, but that counter, from that point onwards, was not sending any data to the gateway server or back up to the systems.

HASSALL: So, the sub-postmaster often wouldn't even know you'd logged onto their system?

ROLL: Often they wouldn't know we'd logged into their systems, no.

HASSALL: Now I've read that Fujitsu could be fined if errors were noticed by the Post Office.

ROLL: Yes.

HASSALL: Do you think therefore that could lead to Fujitsu hiding or denying errors that were happening?

ROLL: The way that I remember it, there were service level agreements and if we didn't resolve errors within a set timeframe, then yes, Fujitsu could be fined. I suppose at the time we weren't really, we didn't know what was going on, we just couldn't resolve them, so that was it, and then, as I say, it would then get, from what I found out later, quite often the postmaster would get the blame for that.

HASSALL: Do you think that ever happened?

ROLL: Yes.

HASSALL: Okay, so let me be clear about this. Are you telling me that there is a certain amount of pressure on Fujitsu workers to find a problem within a certain amount of time or they'd get fined? If they couldn't find a problem within that time, they'd refer back and say, 'We can't find a problem.' That would often be passed on to the sub-postmasters that it was their problem and their lives could be affected by that.

ROLL: Broadly speaking, yes

EXTRACT FROM SPEECH IN HOUSE OF COMMONS

CAMERON: ... the Post Office, representatives of sub-postmasters to discuss their concerns and see what should happen next.

HASSALL: On 1st July 2015, Prime Minister David Cameron said he was going to delve deeper into the accusations.

CAMERON: ... but get to the bottom of the issue we must.

HASSALL: A number of MPs called on the Chief Executive Officer of the Post Office, Paula Vennells, to come to a Select Committee to answer questions on who could access branch accounts.

I've got a copy of an email sent from Paula Vennells to Post Office senior managers. It's dated January 2015. Just days before she was due to give evidence to the MPs. She asks them:

READER IN STUDIO: Is it possible to access the system remotely? We are told it is. Now what is the true answer? I hope it is that we know that this is not possible and that we are able to explain why that is. I need to say no, it is not possible.

MUSIC

HASSALL: So how much did the Post Office know? And how much were they prepared to admit? In 2016, 555 postmasters took the Post Office to the High Court. Given the complexity of the case, the judge ordered that there should be a series of trials, the first involving postmasters and their contracts. Should they be held liable for any missing money? The judge, Sir Peter Fraser, ruled that key parts of the contracts were unfair and that the postmasters shouldn't be held accountable for all losses however they arise. The second High Court hearing dealt with the frailties of the Horizon system itself. Again, the judge ruled in favour of the postmasters. He said it was obvious that Fujitsu could remotely access branch accounts. He also ruled that, for many years, Horizon was not remotely robust.

READER IN STUDIO: It was possible for bugs, errors or defects of the nature alleged by the claimants to have the potential to cause apparent or alleged discrepancies or shortfalls relating to sub-postmasters' branch accounts or transactions, further all the evidence in the Horizon Issues trial shows not only was there the potential for this to occur, but it actually has happened, and on numerous occasions.

HASSALL: He also criticised the behaviour of the Post Office, saying the company demonstrates:

READER IN STUDIO: ... a simple institutional obstinacy or refusal to consider any possible alternatives to their view of Horizon, which was maintained regardless of the weight of factual evidence to the contrary. This approach by the Post Office has amounted, in reality, to bare assertions and denials that ignore what has actually occurred. It amounts to the 21st century equivalent of maintaining that the earth is flat.

HASSALL: The judge's ruling was the first step towards overturning the convictions of more than 50 postmasters. Even before his decision, the Post Office agreed to pay the claimants £58 million in a group settlement. The Post Office wouldn't talk to File on 4. Instead, they gave us a statement in which they said they accepted their past shortcomings and have sincerely apologised to those affected. They say that lessons have been learned, they are changing the way they work with postmasters and they're making extensive changes to their culture. They also say they'll be announcing details of a scheme aimed at addressing historic branch shortfalls for postmasters who were not part of the recent settlement. As for Fujitsu, the judge said he wasn't impressed by what he called the company's party line and found that one witness had tried to mislead him. He then went on to say:

READER IN STUDIO: I have very grave concerns regarding the veracity of evidence given by Fujitsu employees to other courts in previous proceedings about the known existence of bugs, errors and defects in the Horizon system.

HASSALL: He's now written to the Director of Public Prosecutions about his concerns and File on 4 has been told the Metropolitan Police is considering whether to investigate. We asked Fujitsu for an interview but the company turned us down. Instead they sent a short statement, saying they take the judgement very seriously and are conducting a thorough process to review the court's statements in detail. The Government told us it was pleased a resolution to the litigation has been reached, adding that it will support the Post Office as it continues to become a more modern and dynamic organisation.

MUSIC

HASSALL: But even today, File on 4 has learned there are still issues with Horizon, and according to postmaster and union rep, Mark Baker, the Post Office are still blaming counter staff.

BAKER: Horizon goes wrong on a daily basis.

HASSALL: Still?

BAKER: Yeah, nothing's really changed to any significant degree. If a postmaster reports a discrepancy, there is some cursory investigation done by the Post Office accounts department, but I mean, if they can't find anything wrong, they are still sending invoices to the postmasters asking them to pay it.

HASSALL: Are you still getting calls from postmasters with problems?

BAKER: Every day, every day. Even as recently as yesterday, I had a member contact me to say they're being chased by our financial headquarters in Chesterfield to make good a discrepancy that he had reported.

HASSALL: We asked the Post Office why nothing's changed, and they told us that they're making changes, including providing new support for postmasters.

ACTUALITY OF TRACY WITH CHILDREN

FELSTEAD: How hungry are you?

CHILD:

HASSALL: Tracy is now 37. She has three children and has moved 200 miles away from that post office in Camberwell Green. She wanted a fresh start. But nearly 20 years after her time in prison, she's still suffering.

FELSTEAD: I'd been locked up. People have obviously thought that I'd stolen this money, so family, friends have been lost, our home had been repossessed. It had a huge impact on my life, my marriage. I remember going to the Job Centre and the lady was asking me questions and I said I'd been in prison and she said, 'There's not much we can do for you at the moment,' and I, I sat there and I thought, I can't even get a job, I can't, I can't even get out of this nightmare.

MUSIC

HASSALL: Tracy's conviction is currently being reviewed by the Criminal Cases Review Commission. It will decide next month whether she and more than fifty others like her will have their cases referred to the Court of Appeal, meaning there's a chance she could finally have her criminal record overturned.

FELSTEAD: It would mean the world; that's the most important thing to me, just to have that piece of paper to say there's nothing on there would be fantastic.

HASSALL: You were 18 when this first started. Your life, your whole life really has been affected by what the Post Office did, hasn't it?

FELSTEAD: Totally. I was actually in therapy the other day and I said to my therapist that this wasn't my life; somebody's taken my life, I haven't had a life as such. I've lived with this nightmare for years; I don't feel I've had a life. I actually feel like somebody has taken it away from me.