

## **I'm no pushover: Surviving Britain's biggest miscarriage of justice**

*In the first of a new series of the [Manchester Innocence Podcast](#), Claire McGourlay, professor of legal education at the University of Manchester and executive producer of the podcast, considers an unprecedented legal scandal that saw one of Britain's most trusted institutions prosecute hundreds of innocent individuals in an effort to protect its own reputation.*

It's a David and Goliath story that's been called the biggest miscarriage of justice in British history.

Over nearly 20 years, the Post Office used its considerable resources to force local branches to take the rap for flaws in a £1bn IT system called Horizon.

In reality, the Post Office knew the system was riddled with bugs that made it look like money was going missing.

But rather than own up to the failure, the Post Office prosecuted more than 700 innocent postmasters for crimes including theft, false accounting and fraud.

One of them was Tom Hedges, who ran a rural Post Office with his wife in the small Lincolnshire village of Hogsthorpe.

They ran their branch with no issues for six years and were pillars of the community, until the Horizon system was installed and money mysteriously started going missing from their business account.

### **Unexplained discrepancies**

At first it was small amounts, like £5 or £10, but over time it escalated until unexplained discrepancies of £2,000 and more were appearing.

Post Office investigators accused Tom and his wife of stealing the cash and wouldn't accept any other explanation.

Tom said: "We were certain there was a problem with the software or the hardware, or both. I asked the question 'Surely other people are having this problem?'. They said 'No, it's entirely you. We haven't had this happen anywhere else'."

Panicking, Tom borrowed £20,000 from his mother to fill the hole in the accounts, but money kept going missing, and one day a Post Office auditor called.

Within hours, Tom was locked out of his business forever and weeks later he was summoned to court to face charges of theft and false accounting.

## **Scared stiff**

With no money to fund his defence, Tom was advised to plead guilty and ultimately received a seven-month suspended sentence and 125 hours of community service.

He said: "Like any rightminded person, I was absolutely scared stiff of ending up in prison. It was the most terrifying thing I have ever experienced and it affected my family terribly. But it also made me stronger. I resolved that I was going to fight.

"I'd heard rumours that this was happening to other people and then I came across the Justice for Sub Postmasters Alliance. It was absolutely amazing to realise I was not in this alone."

This campaigning group challenged the Horizon evidence in court and the Post Office was found to have abused the legal process.

## **Exonerated and elated**

After a decade as a convicted criminal, Tom was exonerated. He said: "I had the biggest smile you have ever seen! I was absolutely elated."

But Tom still faces a battle to get the compensation he seeks, which he calculates as being in the hundreds of thousands of pounds.

He said: "My wife and I had our lives all planned out; were going to run our Post Office until I was 65, sell up, buy a little bungalow by the seaside and have an idyllic retirement. That all got taken away from us. But these things either smash you or they make you strong. I'm not going to be a pushover."

You can listen to the [podcast](#) here.

**ENDS**