

Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry

Witness Statement of

James COLEMAN known as Seamus

Support person present: No

1. My name is Seamus Coleman. My date of birth is [REDACTED] 1961. My contact details are known to the Inquiry.

Background

2. I was born in Glasgow and spent my first five years there. My family then moved to Australia for five years before returning to Glasgow for six months. We thereafter moved to Port Glasgow. I have two brothers, I had three but one is dead now. I also have two sisters. I am the second oldest. I stayed in Port Glasgow for the majority of time before going to art school in 1979. After art school I stayed in Port Glasgow for a while then went to teacher training. I went from there up to Fort Augustus. That was my first job. I then came down to Dumfriesshire and I currently work at Sanquhar Academy.
3. I went to Glasgow School of Art from 1979 until 1983. I studied graphic design. We were only just getting computers at that time, now it is full of computers. On completion of this I was with Manpower Services Commission. It was supposed to be for a year but I was there for about sixteen months. It started as doing graphic design for the council. It was like a hub, where they had all sorts of services like photography, carpentry, graphics and artists. By the end of it I was the Team leader. So I did that for a while before they had to terminate the contract.

4. From there I went to teacher training at St Andrews, Bearsden. That was for a one year PGCE. My subject was Art & Design. I think it was called, 'with religion', I'm not sure. I was qualified to teach in a Catholic school. I was brought up as a Catholic.

Applying for job at Fort Augustus Abbey School

5. I started teaching at Fort Augustus Abbey School in 1986. It was my first teaching post. I applied to all the regions in Scotland for a job. I didn't think I would be teaching at a private school but the Art teacher that was there was leaving and he called the college. It was on the last day and I was in collecting stuff. The teacher was still friendly with the technician. She told me there was a job going if I wanted to apply. So I did, got an interview and got the job.
6. There was a two day interview over the weekend. It was a sort of, come up and take a look at the place. I got a tour of the place. Father MRQ interviewed me. There must have been some sort of sit down discussion, but it was basically go there, get a tour round, meet the staff and see how the place worked. I don't know if others were interviewed. There was no-one else when I was there. About two weeks later I was informed that I had the job. I had three placements while I was training, in different schools, but for Fort Augustus I don't know if there was a probationary period. There probably was. I think it was maybe, "We'll employ you for a certain amount of time". I wasn't aware of it being a probation like you would do in a state school.
7. Fort Augustus is halfway between Inverness and Fort William. During the weekend there I stayed in a lodge. It used to be the old convent I believe. It would have been during term time. Once I got the interview I found out as much as I could about the place. I found out it was a boarding school. I was quite impressed. It was out in the countryside, a beautiful setting at the bottom end of Loch Ness. You are right on Loch Ness. It was a beautiful school. The boys were in all their uniform, a bright red uniform. Everyone was very friendly. It was a boys school. The age range was first year to sixth year. I was introduced to some of the boys in passing but not in any

great depth. I was introduced to one or two of the staff there too. Everybody seemed friendly.

Teaching at Fort Augustus Abbey School

8. There were a maximum of seven or eight lay teachers and a couple of monks that did the teaching at Fort Augustus. I was teaching Art and Design and French. I enjoyed French, I had Higher French and a couple of years before I went to Fort Augustus I spent six weeks working in France, but that was it. Because I really enjoyed it I was looking forward to it. As long as I was a couple of pages ahead of the boys, I could cope. Obviously it meant every night I was studying and learning what I was going to do. It was the very basics of French, grammar, punctuation, spelling and tenses. I was really just handed two books and told to teach from them.
9. It was just me in the art department so I was in charge, teaching Highers and 'O' grades as they were at that time. I had to follow the national curriculum. I taught from first year to sixth year. When I first went to the school there were about seventy boys and when I left there were about fifty. I was there for seven years. There were about ten to twelve boys in each class in every year. It was fairly even, maybe the sixth year was a bit thinner, not by much.
10. I went out to teach in placements while I was at St Andrews. I taught in Gourrock and Lourdes Secondary in Glasgow. I can't remember where the third one was. I taught about twenty children maximum in these placements. For all practical subjects the maximum in the class is twenty.

Inspectorate

11. I wasn't given any instruction as to how to design the courses for each year at Fort Augustus. There was an inspection a couple of years into me being there. I was fine with that, the Inspector was happy with the Art Department. I asked to keep in touch

with the inspector. Being the only teacher there I did not have a Principal Teacher to ask for advice and guidance, and was acutely aware of my shortcomings as the sole teacher, so I tried to reach out to other people. The inspector would come down from time to time just to keep me on track, which was greatly appreciated as I was not long out of teacher training, in a school on my own and no Principal Teacher to ask for guidance.

12. I did contact the local state school because the [REDACTED] taught art up at the local school. So I was up there quite often. It's always good to have someone else's opinion. I needed a job and that was the job that came along. I didn't imagine that in my first job I would be on my own or not have a Principal Teacher. Because the school was so small there wasn't going to be another art teacher, so I felt it was up to me to keep abreast of what was going on. The school was supportive of this. It didn't involve going out too much. We had games in the afternoon, we would teach till lunch time. I taught in the morning then was involved with either rugby, hockey or football in the afternoon. On a Monday when there was no afternoon games I could pop up to the local school or contact the inspector to arrange a visit.

Routine

13. For me the typical day was, I can't recall if it was a nine o'clock start, until twelve thirty to one o'clock, then lunch. The games were from two until three thirty. They then had tea until four o'clock. There was a class after that until four fifty then a short break. The boys then had prep from five ten until six o'clock. Because I was short of time I asked for an extra class from five ten until six o'clock. I didn't think I was getting enough time compared to other subjects. This happened every day except Monday. This extra class was for Art, not French.
14. On Thursday they had CCF, Combined Cadet Force, which is the army, navy and in theory the air force, but there was no longer an air force contingent. All the boys were in one or the other. I managed to avoid this the first year then went into the army side of it. They had one of the teachers in the army section leaving. I pleaded

to go into the navy, I wanted to learn to sail, but they said no. I had to go in and do the army section.

15. I had no contact with the boys out of class time. I taught, then helped with games and then went home. There were seven or eight lay teachers and about two or three monks. **SNR** was always a monk. It started with Father **MRQ** then it was **MEW** then Father **MER** **MIH** The **MIH** who had been there for many years. He had been quite athletic in his youth. Rob Burnett, who taught geography, was very keen on sport. There were mainly four or five of us involved. Later on Cameron Donnelly became involved with the junior rugby.
16. I worked in a small former primary school building separate from the main school, which had two class rooms. Eventually I moved into the main building after the first few years. I had always taught French in the main building. I only taught first and second years. A monk took over for older boys, taking them through the Scottish Qualifications Authority, (SQA), curriculum. I was the only Art teacher and constructed the curriculum in line with the National guidelines. I loved French anyway and I enjoyed teaching that. It was a challenge I enjoyed. Later, I did frequently say that if I was a parent paying for their kid's education and an art teacher was teaching French, I would not be happy.
17. I enjoyed the games side of it too. It was mainly the first and second years I took for rugby. I didn't have much to do with the senior boys in the first few years apart from those who took art. I didn't really see them. I enjoyed rugby and hockey. I introduced football, which was frowned upon because it had been a rugby school. A lot of the boys were happy playing football because they mostly came from a footballing background in Glasgow and Edinburgh. We went away on rugby trips for the weekends. I enjoyed that.
18. The head monk was in charge of the lay teachers. We also had a Depute. Rob Burnett did this for a short while and then he gave it up at which point I took over as Prefect of Studies with responsibility for the Curriculum. I think at that point it was

mainly to introduce Standard Grade into the school and looking at the possibility of bringing in 'A' levels.

19. I probably had more contact with the SNR than the housemaster's. He taught and took the assembly and staff meetings. I can't recall how often assemblies were. I didn't have to attend that often. School holidays were slightly different to state school holidays. I think summer holidays are a bit longer, but there wasn't much of a difference.
20. Some children went home at weekends, most of them stayed. I was involved in hockey and rugby weekends from time to time but most weekends were my own apart from afternoon games. I had dealings with parents at parent/teacher meetings, which took place at least once a year, possibly more. The boys appeared just the same as the children do just now in Sanquhar. Some came across more confident, some less confident, some cocky and one or two nervous kids. As Prefect to Studies, later called Careers Master, I'd be looking to bring in companies, like Construction and Industry, give presentations and liaise with the army and air force, for them to come in and talk to them. Also promoting Universities and Colleges and disseminating information through literature such as a prospectus.
21. Vaughan and Lovat were the school houses and there were always two housemasters. The only two monks I can remember are Fathers MER and MPE. I don't know if the boys in different houses lived in separate areas. In games and competitions they were separate but I don't know if they had separate living areas. There were a couple of siblings there, just a few. If there were seventy kids there, maybe six would be related.

Mealtimes / Food

22. On a Friday I had my dinner at the school but normally I would eat at home. Occasionally I would go in for the afternoon tea, but that was infrequent. The boys had afternoon tea, lunch and dinner at the refectory. When I ate with the boys everything seemed fine. The monks had their separate eating area. They were

completely separate from us. Apart from the monks on the teaching side, I had no dealings with the others. I'd speak with the monks at break, having a coffee, or if they came out to the games field, which was very rare. There was a staff room for the teachers. Father **MEZ** taught **██████** Father **MFA** taught **██████** I think and Father **MRQ** taught **██████** There was another monk who taught French. I can see his face but can't remember his name. I had contact with these monks on a daily basis.

Medical attention

23. There was a nurse at the school, Maureen Gunn. The boys didn't think she was very good. If they got an injury on the rugby field and I told them to see the nurse, they would say, "What's the point?"

Records

24. I kept a record of each child. It was pretty much like a record book. It showed the progress of each child, their academic progress and any issues that arose. It had class lists, names, test results, grades, etc. It was like they have in any state school now. I can't remember being specifically told to do this by the school. I just assumed that as I was the teacher, I should keep records. I had my records as any teacher would but as far as the headmaster/housemasters are concerned I am unaware of what records they kept or where they kept them. I would have destroyed my records when I left the school.

Being trained

25. There's nothing that comes to mind that I thought, "That shouldn't have happened". The only thing that was new to me was that they had social evenings when they were allowed a beer. That was usually Friday nights. I'm not saying every Friday night they were all socialising. I wasn't there. I think it was just the senior boys. These involved the boys and the housemaster. It could be said they were being trained to drink responsibly. This was during my time there. Nobody actually made a

point of telling me, I just found out. It seemed to be the norm for a Private School. Senior pupils were allowed a beer but they were not being "trained" to drink responsibly. This was casually mentioned by a housemaster as an explanation for allowing them. I can't remember which housemaster. I don't know how the boys spent their evenings normally.

Trips/Parents nights

26. I can't recall if there were any trips. Maybe ski trips, but I think that was just to Aviemore for the day. I remember going once with them on a ski trip there.
27. There was a parents night, but as far as I can remember that was at the beginning or the end of term, not during term. No parents ever contacted me, either directly or through the secretary, Mrs Bryce. I think the school was on a par with secondary state schools, no better, no worse. I never really looked at comparisons. I think the grades were fairly average. I think the school was good for some boys. Boys arrived at the school with behavioural/emotional issues and were turned around in the sense that they learned to cope/deal with these issues where they could not previously.
28. I think the fees were less than those of other fee paying schools. I referred to it later as the only fee paying List D school because we did get our fair share of kids who were troubled elsewhere before coming to Fort Augustus. By this I mean that in general conversations with colleagues and friends I tried to convey the notion that although it was a fee paying school, and all the connotations that this had for anyone with no personal experience of one, it had the same mix of pupils as any state school.

Religious instruction

29. Not all the boys were Catholics, most were, but there were other faiths. I don't know how the school addressed that issue. There was a requirement to go to mass every Sunday. The chapel was adjoined to the school. It wasn't part of my role but at that

time I was a practicing Catholic, not so much now, and I did attend. Not necessarily to the same service as the boys.

Home at Fort Augustus

30. I lived in a school house just outside the grounds. In the lead up to the school there's a tree lined driveway, about fifty metres from that, up on a small hill were the houses. About a three minute walk. I stayed there with my wife. I was just married. My wife had no involvement in the school. I stayed there the seven years I was employed at the school.
31. There were four teachers' houses in a cul-de-sac and another had a house in the village and when Cameron Donnelly came he moved into the village too. Nobody stayed outwith commuting distance. None of the lay teachers stayed in the school. Julian Shurgold was a History teacher and housemaster. I don't know exactly what his duties entailed in that capacity. He was only there a couple of years at most. Altogether there were about fifteen monks but we only had dealings with the three to five that taught. With regards to the monks who were not involved in teaching I have no knowledge of their day to day lives. I only had limited dealings with those who taught. The only monks I recall are named throughout this statement.

Discipline at Fort Augustus

32. The housemasters would deal with discipline. I don't personally remember having any great issues with any of the boys so didn't report any of them to housemasters for anything. I didn't witness any abuse at the school apart from one incident. Corporal punishment had just been abolished the year before I went to Fort Augustus. I don't know if the school had the birch or the strap before this but I didn't see any of it. I think discipline would have been dealt with after school hours. I didn't see any. I don't know of anyone being taken out of classes, but I was in this other building for half the time and no-one was taken from my classes.

33. I'm not aware of any recording procedure for discipline. We had meetings every three weeks with the head teacher and housemasters on pupils' academic progress, their general attitude, achievements, how well they are doing, any issues, stuff like that. I can't recall anyone taking notes or recording them.
34. In the school prospectus, one of the pages stated there would be meetings every three weeks. Parents would see this in the prospectus. I initiated the three weekly marks on taking up the post of Acting Principal Teacher of Art and Design at Sanquhar Academy. This refers to the marks/grades each pupil achieves but soon found there were too many pupils to keep it going, but it was certainly done at Fort Augustus. The whole staff would get together and discuss the pupils. I think it was on a year group basis.

Abuse at Fort Augustus

35. The only abuse I did see was a boy, some of them had small separate bedrooms, being assaulted by [REDACTED] a [REDACTED] teacher, in his room and I pulled him off and reported him. I can't remember the time of day this happened but probably at a mid-morning break or lunchtime as none of us were in classes, but it was during the school day as [REDACTED] did not stay in school after he had finished teaching. I can't remember the reason I was going through that area of the school. There was a new area for art being built and I may have been walking through the boys area to go to this area. The boy was one of the senior boys in fourth, fifth or sixth year. He was a bit of a cheeky boy. I knew him, but I can't remember his name. I can see his face. I don't know if it was through teaching art or part of the CCF. The teacher had him on the bed and was on top of him pinning him down. [REDACTED] was clearly enraged and I think I saw swinging arms before I pulled him off. I don't know what he was doing there. The sleeping areas weren't restricted in any way that I can think. It was in an area of a series of 'duckets' I suppose, within a larger area. Like a big room sectioned off.

36. I enquired some time later, probably a few weeks to ascertain what action had been taken in light of the fact I reported the incident and there did not appear to be any tangible difference to [REDACTED] MIG position within the school either immediately after or in subsequent weeks and months. I was told it was being dealt with and that's the last I heard of it
37. I don't think any monk or teacher had a sleeping area near the boys there. I think there was in another part, where the housemasters were. I can't be sure. I reported the incident to [REDACTED] SNR Father [REDACTED] MRQ He said he would look into it. I went back later on to find out what had happened because in my opinion nothing had changed. Father [REDACTED] MRQ told me it had been dealt with. To me it was an assault. I can't be sure of the date. It was probably half way through my time at the school. I just assumed that by reporting it [REDACTED] SNR it would be dealt with. I'm not so sure it was.
38. After the incident with the [REDACTED] teacher, we were both still teaching but I had nothing to do with him. I didn't have anything to do with him before the incident. He was such an arrogant man, he was full of himself. He thought [REDACTED] was the only subject. In my opinion he thought he could lord over everyone. I didn't like the man. He continued to teach there until the school closed. I didn't speak to the boy involved about the incident. I told some of the other teaching staff, who's attitude was that I should report it. I was young, it was my first teaching job and it was completely out-with my experience. I thought something should have been done. Maybe there was and I wasn't aware of it, but on the surface nothing seemed to have changed. I was annoyed that nothing seemed to have been done about it.
39. There was one occasion of peer bullying. I saw a boy trying to 'gee' up the other boys a bit too much, so I put a stop to that. At no time did I have a boy speak to me about being abused. Likewise, I didn't hear about anyone going to another teacher about being abused, although that would have been confidential anyway. That's why it was such a shock when Murdoch Rodgers got in touch, because I never once felt that at all. To me the boys seemed happy enough. Obviously they would have their

ups and downs, good days and bad days. But there was no underlying sense of something wrong.

40. If the boys had any issues they would probably have reported it to their housemaster to discuss it with them. Obviously they could have gone to any member of staff they felt comfortable with, housemaster or possibly prefects. The housemasters when I was there were Brother [REDACTED] MPE who became Father [REDACTED] MPE. Father [REDACTED] MER was one for a while and Julian Shergold for a short period. That's the ones I remember. The prefects were senior boys.

Contact from Murdoch Rodgers

41. I believed everything to be all positive at the school. I was really surprised when Murdoch Rodgers got in touch with me and started asking questions about the school. That was the first I'd heard anything about any alleged abuse that had gone on and that took me aback. I was absolutely unaware of any abuse taking place. I would have expected to know if there had been, being in my position. It's a small community teaching the boys, I got on really well with them. I had been there seven years and thought one of the boys would have said something in all that time that would have made me suspicious.
42. I heard nothing at all about sexual or physical abuse at Fort Augustus. I was told that Murdoch was trying to find me when he was making his programme "Sins of our Fathers", as a BBC producer, but he couldn't find me for some reason. He was told to look for me under the name Seamus Coleman rather than James. His wife Wendy told him to do that. I knew Wendy when I was a student. This was only last year. I was completely surprised and shocked that, firstly, abuse happened, and secondly, that I didn't know about it. More than anything, I didn't have a clue about any abuse, and I think I should have. I thought one of the kids would have told me something because I knew them in different situations, in my capacity as Art teacher, Games Master, CCF, Junior school plays and Prefect of Studies/Careers Master.

43. The housemasters were in charge of the welfare of the children. I was teaching Art & Design, French and games, so I had a lot of contact with the boys in different scenarios and none of them intimated, mentioned or alluded to anything like that at all, which I find strange. There was one of them, [REDACTED] MIE [REDACTED], who told Murdoch that he thought of me as one of the normal people at the school. If that was his opinion I would have thought he might have confided in me. I haven't seen the programme so I don't know who was on it or what was said.
44. I am not aware of any complaints or allegations against me. Murdoch asked if I minded if [REDACTED] MIE [REDACTED] had my email address if he wanted to get in touch with me. I told him that it was fine. I can picture [REDACTED] MIE [REDACTED] being in second or third year, so I have no idea what he would look like now. Murdoch didn't divulge what was said between him and [REDACTED] MIE [REDACTED] but he had definitely been in contact with him [REDACTED] MIE [REDACTED] hasn't contacted me. That was about six or seven weeks ago, maybe two months. I am not in touch with any of the teachers from Fort Augustus. The only one I would possibly have kept in touch with is Bob Burnett.
45. When Murdoch Rodgers contacted me, he mentioned he had spoken to someone who had said there were no meetings. I produced the Prospectus stating meetings would be every three weeks, so there was a definite discrepancy there.

Leaving Fort Augustus

46. The school closed in 1993. I got a couple of weeks' notice. They had spoken of closing the year before I went there. I didn't know this, but I heard about it later. They were also talking about the numbers' of pupils going down. There was always talk of this. So I did a few years and I really enjoyed it but I needed to get out. I had been there on my own for four or five years and needed more experience. As well as this, the school looked like it may close fairly soon and my family was growing so I needed long term security. I had started looking for another job by this time. My dealings with the school were all positive.

Hopes for the Inquiry

47. I would hope that the Inquiry would be able to access all parties concerned and establish exactly what has occurred and when. Also that all findings would be transparent whilst still upholding the wishes and right to privacy of those adversely affected by time spent at Fort Augustus. I would also hope that people will get some closure and redress from the Inquiry and for it to become the norm for people to come forward with their accounts rather than wait to be chased up. If there are any other members of staff that have information I would hope that they would come forward. I don't know if Murdoch has contacted other teachers.

Other information

48. I have no objection to my witness statement being published as part of the evidence to the Inquiry. I believe the facts stated in this witness statement are true.

Signed.....



Dated.....

13/6/2019