

Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry

Witness Statement of

Ann MATHESON

Support person present: No

1. My name is Ann Matheson. My date of birth is [REDACTED] 1944. My contact details are known to the Inquiry.

Background

2. I was a teacher, including principal teacher, of geography for approximately thirty years. I took early retirement when I was fifty which was in 1994. Thereafter I became a museum person, becoming a curator and museum manager. I ended up participating in the creating of a new museum in Biggar. I am also a writer of local histories. As a mature student I did a second degree in Scots Language and Literature. I am currently involved in Braw Clan which is the creation of a new Scottish theatre in Biggar. I was also a carer for my husband who had MS so I had a break for eight years to allow me to look after him.

Loaningdale School, Biggar

3. Loaningdale was near Biggar, just outside the town but you could walk to it.
4. My understanding of the purpose of the school was rehabilitation for the pupils to enable them at some time to return to normal schooling. I am not sure of the definition of a List D school but I knew it was related to attempting to make the children able to live in normal schools but I really had no involvement with that.

Becoming a Trustee at Loaningdale School, Biggar

5. I was only a trustee for a very short time. It must have been from the late 1980's until Loaningdale closed. I think it would have been about three or four years at the most. I cannot recall the exact dates and cannot recall when the school closed but it must have been around 1990.

6. I got to know about Loaningdale because one of my friends, Eilidh Shirrefs, was on the Board of Trustees. I just knew that but didn't ever discuss it with her. I had another very good friend, GYF [REDACTED] who was in the [REDACTED] Theatre Workshop. I think he was a house parent at Loaningdale so occasionally I would visit him for coffee. Through him I got to know some of the staff but not very many. GYF [REDACTED] was living in [REDACTED] at that time in an apartment [REDACTED]. I cannot really remember exactly where it was but I think it was [REDACTED]. I really didn't visit him all that often.

7. Before I was a trustee my only contact with the school was if I was attending an event at Loaningdale such as a Halloween party or something like that. I would go with GYF [REDACTED] and some of his friends to support it. My contact was very superficial.

8. I was always very interested in difficult children and in fact I applied for a job at Loaningdale which was Head of Education. I did not get it. There were two of us shortlisted with the other candidate having no teaching qualifications and he had no experience in teaching either.

9. I can actually remember that there was a group interview with John, some other staff, me and the guy who got the job. This young man said something like 'it is not about filling bottles but lighting candles' and that kind of toned in with Loaningdale. I remember saying that as much as I loved his metaphor these bottles are going to have things in them when you get them and what are you going to do with what is in the bottle, before you light the candle? John who was in charge of the school immediately

turned that back on me and asked what I would do. My answer was that in terms of today's ability there must be ways to test and examine the children, there must be some kind of metaphorical litmus paper that we could dip into these bottles to find out what was actually in them to allow us to do our best to neutralise or build on that.

10. I was very uneasy about the young guy's appointment because of his lack of qualifications and experience. I cannot remember the name of the man who got the job. He was only there for a short time because shortly after the place closed down. It could have only been 3-4 years, the same as my tenure as a Trustee.
11. After that I was invited to become a Trustee, I think I got a letter from the Board. I felt it would be churlish to refuse since I just hadn't got the job. After receiving the letter and me accepting I just started going to the Trustees meetings, that was all. They didn't ask me for any references and nor did they give me any period of probationary period to assess how I got on. They did not send me a letter of appointment outlining my roles and responsibilities as a Trustee which is why I am rather vague on my understanding of the remit of my role. I feel that it would have been very useful to have been given such a letter.
12. There was no training given by the school to prepare me for this role.

My Role as a Trustee

13. I never had an understanding of what my role was to be as a Trustee. I presume I was there as the educational representative from the outside world.
14. I think I must have been responsible for overseeing staff and education but I am not sure. I remember I had to sign all the redundancy cheques for the staff when Loaningdale closed.
15. The first thing I had to do was to sort timetables for the teaching staff. I arranged them to give the teaching staff some actual time for preparation which seems, to me, to be

a glaringly obvious thing to do first to help the staff. The guy they appointed was really not the person for the job. I am not saying that I was but several members of staff were a bit put out about his appointment.

16. Other than re-jigging the timetable and the warnings I was told to give to IPW IPW which I refer to later in my statement I didn't have any further involvement with the staff at the school.
17. I cannot be sure but I think as a Trustee I would go to a meeting once a month at the school. Those are the only times I would be at the school other than the few social occasions I have mentioned. The meetings were attended by the Trustees and John.
18. I think Trustees were chosen for their different walks of life such as education, there was a policeman called John Archibald who is dead now. Eilidh Shirrefs had been deputy head at the high school. She is also dead. Jim Ness who had been my assistant at Biggar High School was also a Trustee. I also recall Hazel Gourlay being on the board as well as Ted Gordon who was a banker and also Gavin Littlejohn who was a builder. There was a guy who used to come regularly from Edinburgh who was a chartered accountant and charged enormous fees for looking after the dosh. I cannot recall his name but I think it was Graham something. I also think Stuart Houston, who was the Procurator Fiscal, was a Trustee as well at some time. I guess they were all appointed in a similar way to me but I wouldn't know.
19. I don't think any of the Trustees had any connection to the school but maybe Hazel visited the school as she had a professional background in social work. I don't remember having any obligation to visit the school or anything like that.
20. I think the Trustees could have played a bigger role but I had the feeling it was a kind of closed shop. The Trustees were there to administer the financial side of the school but nothing else. I really cannot think of any Trustee that got involved with the children. I don't think it was deliberate that the Trustees roles and the day to day running of the school were very separate, I just think it was the way things were. I will use the words

“closed shop” during my statement and that is how Loaningdale always appeared to me. It always appeared kind of mysterious.

My Impressions of Loaningdale School, Biggar

21. My first impressions of Loaningdale were before I became a Trustee when I was an occasional visitor to the school. I never had any contact with the children at the school so I have no idea really how the staff operated with them. I knew there were a lot of psychological theories going about emanating from the head. I can't remember them now but I think there seemed to be a lot of fashionable psychology.
22. When I went to the Halloween Party and any fundraisers I thought it seemed to be a fairly happy place where people actually got on quite well with one another. At Hogmanay whoever was off at Loaningdale used to go about as a bunch and GYF would always bring them into our house. They always seemed very friendly.
23. I don't ever recollect seeing the children at any events when I visited the school. The only time I do recollect seeing children was when the girls were there and I was in the school. There was a terrible screaming match where the girls were screaming at everyone and no one seemed to know quite what to do about it.
24. I think the whole organisation of Loaningdale was 'iffy' particularly the levels of professionalism. It was always like airy fairy psychology and I would have liked to have seen more guts in the administration.
25. I also think it was a closed shop and they may well have dealt with things and got them out of the way without involving the Trustees or anyone else. I don't know if that was the case, it was just an impression I had.
26. I am not able to comment on any relationships between staff and pupils as I was not in the school to observe this. I have not had any experience of other List D schools in Scotland so I have nothing to compare Loaningdale to.

27. The Trustees had no involvement in the day to day running of the school so matters such as staff training and development, policy making, strategic planning, any matters relating to the children, restraint and discipline and punishment were completely separate and not part of our remit. All these things were very much an internal thing and not discussed at our meetings.

Loaningdale Structure and Culture

Structure

28. John was in charge and I think under him was Bill Whiteside who was the head of social work although I am not sure of that. I don't recall John's surname. I don't know who the head of education was before the job was advertised. Then there were the social workers, house parents and a handful of teachers.
29. The only person I knew to be in charge of the staff was John as he was top of the tree.
30. The Trustees were quite separate and it was mostly financial things that were discussed at our meetings.
31. I cannot really answer what my impressions were of the leadership at the school as I don't know whether it was teamwork or autocratic. I know that John was quite a dominant personality. The other staff didn't seem to have much involvement in the leadership of the school at all from my limited observations.

Staff

32. Other than GYF I did meet Bill Whiteside. He was a very fine man and I liked him very much. I am not sure but he might have been head of social work. He still lives in Biggar and I taught his children so I knew him in two ways.

33. GYF was also very friendly with a woman called Shona whose surname I have forgotten. Then there was a man called Arthur Fossey but I don't know what he did. I believe the person in charge at the time, as I have mentioned, was John although I cannot recall his surname. That is all I can remember.
34. I am not aware of any volunteers working at Loaningdale but there may have been and I just didn't know about it.

Culture

35. I know that GYF was very caring about the children and I think he had very good relationships with them. I think the staff were all caring people. These are my impressions but I really don't know about the culture within the school.
36. I have never heard of the Loaningdale experiment and if there was anyone heading the Loaningdale experiment it would be John. I have not heard that term however it has been explained to me that it was looking at a new way to look after children in a List D style environment. It doesn't surprise me because I think the place floated with psychological theories which, to me, always seemed a wee bit suspect. The Trustees were all kind of practical people and not part of any kind of experiment. I would be surprised if anyone apart from Hazel knew of the Loaningdale experiment.

Recruitment

37. I was on the interview panel for a new maths teacher. We appointed Alex Dunbar who was a math's teacher at the local high school but then he said he wasn't taking the job. We appointed the next person in line who was a young woman whose name I forget. She was only there a very short time before the school closed. I felt very sorry for her because she lost her job so quickly after starting as the school closed down.
38. I do not know anything about the recruitment policy. For the math's teacher the job was advertised in the national press but there may well have been word of mouth recruitment but I cannot say if that happened or not.

39. As far as steps taken to establish if someone was a suitable person for the job all I knew was that they had to attend an interview. There may have been visits to the school and informal interviews with the other staff but that was not anything I was involved in. In the interview I was part of.
40. I think references would have been required and I presume they were taken up and provided. I must have seen references for the maths teacher applicants but I don't remember.

Placement of Children

41. I had no involvement in the placement of children at the school. I only know of one child who was in Loaningdale as he had been a pupil at Biggar High School. He had been a pupil of mine. He was very difficult but also very smart. He lived quite near me and he would sometimes appear at my door saying "the prosecutor fisher" was after him. The Procurator Fiscal lived up the road from me. This lad was expelled from Biggar High School and ended up being expelled from Loaningdale as well. I think he was the only person who was ever expelled from Loaningdale. He is now a very successful businessman in the town.
42. Generally I would have no knowledge of what the circumstances were likely to be for a child to end up in Loaningdale.

External Concerns

43. As far as I know there were no external agencies who had declared any concern about the school and how it dealt with the children.
44. I think there were big problems after the lassie was murdered back in the sixties but nothing in my time as a Trustee.

Child Protection - Reporting of concerns by staff or children

45. I have no idea if there was a complaint's procedure should staff or children wish to make any complaint.
46. I do not know if there was a trusted person or confidante that children could speak to and if there was, whether they worked at the school or externally. I certainly don't think there would be anyone outside Loaningdale but I do not know anyone inside Loaningdale either who would fulfil that role.
47. The children were never given the opportunity to speak with the Trustees. It would have been possible had it been part of the Trustees remit. I would have spoken to children if it was asked of me but it never was. As I have said, Trustees were quite separate from the rest of the school and this perhaps influenced why I always thought of the school as a closed shop.
48. I know because of my friendship with GYF [REDACTED] that children were allowed to go into house parent's rooms but that just made me feel uneasy. I remember saying to GYF [REDACTED] if this was alright having children going about his house. He told me that of course it was as it was part of his job. That is why I say it must have been part of the school policy. This conversation took place before I was a Trustee. That never came up again in conversation after I became a Trustee.
49. I would have no idea if during my time as a Trustee there was any definition of abuse.
50. I personally don't know if, or how, staff were given guidance about how children should be treated, cared for and protected against abuse. I do understand that they did probably receive such guidance but I have no evidence that they did. I have no knowledge of the child protection arrangements at Loaningdale.

Abusive Behaviour

51. In the few times I was at the school I never saw any behaviour that I would consider to be abusive however I didn't see much behaviour between staff and pupils in any case.
52. I cannot answer the question that had any child been subjected to abusive behaviour at the school it would have come to light. It might have come to light, it might have been dealt with or it might have been covered up. I couldn't say.

Inspections

53. I was never aware of any inspections taking place of the school.

Record Keeping

54. I just assume that records would be kept and would still be available somewhere.

Reports to the Police and Civil Claims

55. I was never involved in handling any reports to the police concerning the school or any civil claims against the school.
56. Since I was a Trustee I have never become aware of any police investigations relating to abuse at the school.
57. I have no knowledge of any person being convicted of abusing a child at Loaningdale.

Awareness of abuse

58. As a Trustee I had to give IPW [REDACTED] a warning. He was the PE teacher and had been accused of lingering in the girl's dressing rooms. I later had to advise him that disciplinary action would be taken against him.
59. I think it must have been the girls who made the complaints against him. The girls were only there for a short time before the school closed and they were not really equipped to deal with girls because the staff were predominately men.
60. I was asked to deal with this at a Trustee's meeting. I have no idea who asked specifically but I was asked to do it. I can't honestly think why I was asked to do it because I had no experience of anything that was going on in the school really.
61. I have no idea how the decision came about that a warning was to be given. I was really just like a foot soldier carrying out duties. It was discussed at a Trustee's meeting and it was apparently part of my job, part of my remit, to do the business.
62. I am unable to say if the decision about how to deal with the first complaint was discussed at the Trustee's meeting or not. I remember that there was discussion that it should be me who gave the warning. I also do not know if there was any other form of investigation carried out into the allegation made by the girls. I would suspect that there will be minutes of those meetings held by the Scottish Office or elsewhere which might shed more light on this. I believe Hazel Gourlay, who was the Chairperson of the Trustees, would be worth speaking to as she is likely to know more about this than I do. Also, she has a very good memory.
63. I gave IPW [REDACTED] the warning as requested and it was okay, he took it on the chin. There didn't seem to be any ill feeling. As far as the girl, or girls, who made the allegations are concerned I do not know if their parents were made aware.
64. About a year later I was asked to speak to him again. This time it was pretty much the same. The allegation was similar and I was asked to advise him that he would be

subject of disciplinary action. I met with him and he just accepted the warning. I don't know what other action happened after I spoke to him. I was never going to be the person who would carry out any disciplinary action as I had no official role. I don't know what the people employed there would do, particularly John who was the person who was in charge. I have no idea what happened to him, he may have left or he may have continued to work there because it was getting near to the time the school was closing. He may have got his redundancy payment. I am aware he is dead now, he died when he was young.

65. There was no involvement with the Trustees about what was to happen with [IPW] as far as I know at any stage when any of these allegations were made. My memory does have blanks and I am sorry about that. I do not know who made these decisions and at what point they were made.
66. I do not know if there were any other disciplinary matters involving staff as these are the only two that I came across. I never heard of any other disciplinary matters with staff.

Allegations of abuse after Loaningdale closed

67. The only person who worked there that I knew really well was [GYF] and I am sure children trusted him. [GYF] actually ended up taking his own life following a child stealing stuff from him. He charged the child because it was quite a lot he had stolen and the child accused him of sexual abuse. [GYF] would not abuse a child. This is hard for me to talk about. This all happened in the 1990's just after Loaningdale closed. I think the incident was alleged to have happened in [GYF]'s house because he was a houseparent. It seemed to be the case that the children did sometimes go to the house parent's house. This must have been part of the school policy. It always made me a bit uneasy in that they were troubled children. It seemed to be the way things operated. I know it was a boy who made the allegation but I don't know who he was but I had assumed, or someone had said, it was a child from Loaningdale. I was never asked to give a statement to the police about that.

Specific alleged abusers

GYF

68. All I can say is GYF would never abuse a child. I would swear in court that was the case. He was just a very fine man. He was very kind and what you saw is what you got. He was also a very private person but he became a very good friend and he would often call in to see my husband and chat with him when he was disabled by MS. I loved GYF to bits and I am a fairly good judge of a person's character. I had been friends with him from 1979 until he died.
69. I did see him with the kids and he had lovely relationships with them. They used to watch Newcastle United because GYF was from Newcastle. They would have Newcastle United football games on and that is all I remember. It always seemed a happy atmosphere.
70. At that time, before the school closed, I never heard any allegations of abuse against GYF

Mr LUJ

71. I do not recall that name.

Mr HIA

72. I recall HIA who was working at Biggar High School in 1971 which was the year I started. He was a technical teacher. I think he moved to work at Loaningdale sometime after that.

Mr HHX

73. I do not recall that name.

Mr HGK

74. I did not know a Mr HGK.

Leaving my Trustee Post – Loaningdale School, Biggar

75. I left my post when the school closed. I was not interested in administrating the Trust.

Thoughts about why allegations of abuse were made

76. In the case of GYF the child had stolen from him and he actually charged the child with theft and the allegation was retaliation.

Helping the Inquiry

77. I have been told that the Inquiry has information that the experiences of abuse of some children has continued to affect them and impact on their lives. I have been asked if I can help the Inquiry explain how that can be. There is really nothing I can add to that.
78. As far as the lessons that can be learned to protect children in care from abuse are concerned my thoughts are there are just so many variants of abuse and I find it difficult to know what is abuse now. It has become such a wide subject but I have no idea how to protect children in care from abuse. It has not been my professional business for a long time. I don't think I can answer that question because I don't have the professional background to be able to say how to protect children.

79. I would say that I think that adults also need protection. This is my second child abuse situation and the other was one I was not involved with either. I had a friend who was a priest and he was accused of historical sexual abuse and my God he didn't deserve it. I had to see him through that and he ended up in Barlinnie. So I think protection is needed on both sides for those accused of being abusers and those who are abused.

Other information

80. 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..... *3 Aug 2023*