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Out of the mouths of babes

The evidence of children convicted six men in the Pembroke child abuse case. Tomorrow the six will appeal

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AFTER the highly-publicised scandals over child abuse allegations in Cleveland, Rochdale and the Orkneys, social workers in Pembroke, west Wales, took no chances when they began an investigation in 1991. They sought guidance from "the best legal and paediatric brains in the country" and worked closely with the police. "Our credibility was checked and double-checked," said John Wreford, Dyfed's deputy director of social services.

The outcome was Britain's biggest-ever trial for organised child abuse, ending in June 1994 with six men receiving prison terms totalling 53 years. For the first time in post-war Britain, conspiracy charges arising out of allegations of organised ritual abuse had been successfully sustained. Afterwards Ray White, chief constable of Dyfed-Powys, voiced a pride felt by the whole team when he called the inquiry "a model of perfection".

Yet just six months later it began to unravel. In the Family Division of the High Court, Mr Justice Connell ruled that several children should be returned to their homes, criticised the methods used by social workers and pointed out that there was no evidence at all against one of the convicted men. Tomorrow, all the convictions go to appeal. Despite the precautions, it seems, there may have been a terrible miscarriage of justice.

THE story of the Pembroke child abuse case begins in 1990, with the Thorpe family. Peter and Sally Thorpe had two children, Malcolm, 10, and Jason, 8. Their marriage had broken down and Sally was at her wits' end coping with her younger son, regarded by social workers as "attention-seeking" and "a persistent liar". After separating from Peter, Sally put Jason into voluntary care while she sorted out her life. Malcolm went to stay with his grandparents.

She began divorce proceedings and moved out of their rented country cottage to an estate in Pembroke. By then, Peter had met Anne Mason, a divorcee with four children. They occasionally stayed together at the cottage.

Jason had intensive social work counselling, but at this stage there was no suggestion of abuse. In fact, such was Jason's apparent ignorance of sexual matters that his social worker, Ann Done, arranged a sex education programme for him.

Thus began a long process of therapeutic excavation, delving into his memories. Ms Done began what was termed "direct work": Jason was questioned about his past and encouraged to interpret dreams and drawings. Later, after a period in which social workers prevented him seeing his mother, he also underwent "disclosure work", using dolls and toys to help him describe his experiences.

In May 1991, he accused his father of sexual abuse. Soon, he implicated his mother, too, and suggested that other adults and children had been involved in group sex at local farms and quarries. In August Mr Thorpe was charged with abusing Jason and detained. At the same time his girlfriend, Anne Mason, was interviewed by police and three of her children were taken into care on suspicion that Thorpe had abused them.

The inquiry soon involved two related families, the Dalburys and the Watersons (the fathers were brothers), who lived on the same estate as Sally Thorpe. Although they had little in common with the Thorpes, both families were known to social services. Jason had mentioned a "Paul" as being among the children involved. Jim Waterson's eldest son, Paul, had suffered a minor molestation (by a stranger) in 1988. The matter had been reported to the police and dealt with. John Dalbury had, some years back, told his pastor that he had sexually fondled his daughter, Mary, when she was seven. There had been no complaint prior to his admission. He appeared contrite, and no action was taken.

None of the Dalbury and Waterson children confirmed Jason's allegations, and the police could not find adequate evidence against Thorpe, so the investigation stalled. In September 1991 the charges against him were dropped and he was freed.

Yet the law at that time still allowed social workers to take children away from their parents on the mere suspicion of abuse. This is what happened to Anne Mason's children. They were put into foster homes and became

wards of court. The Dalbury and Waterson children remained at home, but under social worker supervision.

Over the months that followed, social workers quizzed them all repeatedly. Some received group therapy for abuse. Their mothers were counselled and pressed to provide evidence against their husbands, partners and other suspects.

In June 1992, Mary Dalbury, 14, ran away from home, saying her father had raped her over a number of years. John Dalbury was arrested and confessed. He was charged with rape, and his wife with aiding and abetting him. Both pleaded guilty. In December 1992, they were sentenced to seven and four years' imprisonment respectively.

By the summer, the police and social services, putting Jason's and Mary's allegations together with what other children had told them, were convinced they had discovered something horrifying in their quiet corner of Wales: a paedophile network.

THE ARRESTS began on 8 December 1992 and ultimately 18 children from nine families were taken into care while 11 men and two women were charged. They included Thorpe, the alleged ringleader, his wife Sally, Waterson and Dalbury, as well as friends of Thorpe's, other farmers and a civil servant whose children, taken into care after his wife had suffered a mental breakdown, had been in the same foster home as Paul Waterson.

Opening the prosecution case in Swansea Crown Court in January 1994, Gerard Elias QC told the jury that children were victims of "the most depraved and revolting conduct imaginable ... [to] a degree of degradation that sometimes almost defies belief

By now the accusations ranged widely. One social worker said that Mary Dalbury estimated that "around 200 people were involved", and the judge told the jury that "if everyone named had been charged, the case would have gone on for ever".

The charges covered the period 1983-91. Mr Elias said the adults had conspired to abuse their own and other children. Abuse had included ritual sex orgies in homes and outlying places such as derelict sheds, an old airfield, tunnels and seaside caves.

The children, forced to participate from a very young age, were silenced by death threats from the men. Wives were similarly threatened, forced to watch and sometimes to take part. The 12 defendants (the charges against

Sally Thorpe were held over, and dropped soon afterwards) all pleaded not guilty.

Eight children aged from six to 15 recounted their experiences. Jason and the others gave evidence through pre-recorded videos and were cross-examined through a video link. The prosecution said their testimony, gathered independently, was consistent and amounted to compelling evidence. But Mr Elias stressed that the Crown case did not depend on the words of children alone: "They are supported in material ways by the detailed evidence of two mothers, who will tell of some of the abuse they witnessed and of the threats made to them to prevent their coming forward."

When they took the stand, the two women indeed spoke of threats - but threats from the authorities. Both claimed they had been emotionally blackmailed. Anne Mason said she was forced to make up allegations by social workers and told that if she wanted to see her children again, she had to stick to her story.

The defence questioned the social workers closely. Nigel Mylne QC accused one, Tudor Walters, of leading a "blinkered crusade to convict the defendants". This was denied.

Three defendants were acquitted in March on the direction of the judge, and two others were cleared before the trial ended. In all, 120 witnesses were called. During the course of the inquiry 500 statements were taken and 9,000 pages of evidence assembled. Ultimately, however, the case rested on the credibility of the children.

The jury took five days to reach its verdicts. One defendant, an English farmer, was cleared of all charges. The civil servant was acquitted of conspiracy but found guilty of serious sexual assault. The remaining five were found guilty of conspiracy, with Peter Thorpe being convicted of an additional charge of gross indecency with a child. He was imprisoned for 15 years. The others received sentences of between five and 11 years. The judge told the jury: "The whole community should be extremely grateful to you. I certainly am."

YET there were many disquieting aspects to the case. Not one child had made an allegation of abuse before being interviewed by social workers. No dates were ever mentioned, so defendants could not bring forward alibi evidence. There was no forensic evidence to speak of, although the circumstances of many of the alleged incidents suggested that there ought to have been. (For example, Jason pointed out sheds where, he said, his

father had fired through the roof to frighten children; yet Crown scientific experts could locate no bullet-holes in the roof.) Several children referred to the use of cameras and camcorders at the paedophilia sessions; but no photographs, film or equipment were ever discovered.

Medical evidence was scant and defence lawyers were unhappy with the way it was presented. Some Crown experts couched their testimony in equivocal terms: "I could not find any evidence of the abuse as described, but that does not preclude such abuse having taken place; and I would expect that in the timespan between the alleged abuse and my examination, injuries arising as a result of such abuse would have healed."

There were no independent witnesses, although the allegations were so sweeping there surely should have been. Large numbers of people had supposedly abused children in a children's playground in the middle of a housing estate; in sheds that adjoined houses; and on Angle beach, behind the Texaco oil refinery at the most western point of Wales. Yet not one person, it appeared, had ever noticed anything untoward. And the jury was given no opportunity to inspect these various sites.

Four prosecution witnesses - both the adults and two of the children - retracted their evidence. For example, Paul Waterson, 12, became confused under cross-examination and then stated that the allegations were untrue. There were indications that children had been threatened with punishment if they refused to say anything (Stephen Mason said social workers told him he wouldn't go home unless he and his mother admitted knowing about abuse); and rewarded when they made allegations. A social worker recorded one meeting with Mary Dalbury in June 1993: "Mary was quite annoyed about her holiday ... she had been promised so much and things were not being delivered ... would I take her horse-riding on Thursday?"

Indeed, there was considerable evidence that investigators approached the case in the certainty that abuse had occurred. In doing so, they ignored new procedural guidelines on the collection of video evidence and flouted recommendations in the 1988 Butler-Sloss report on the Cleveland abuse debacle. They used play props, which were known to have a distorting effect; and investigation and therapy were intertwined, which also contaminates evidence.

Perhaps most disturbing of all is the evidence that the investigation team was influenced by Ray Wyre, a former probation officer who describes himself as "an independent sexual abuse consultant". Though the local authority refused to admit it, the investigators attended a special three-day training programme in October 1991 organised by Mr Wyre's Gracewell

Institute. Only after this did they begin group therapy sessions for the children. Subsequently, the allegations began to flow.

It was Mr Wyre who, at a conference of social work directors in Scotland in 1990, told delegates that they must "think the unthinkable, believe the unbelievable and imagine the unimaginable". And it was Mr Wyre who had played an important role in advising social workers and foster parents during a child abuse investigation in Nottingham in 1988-89. After that investigation had broken down amid recriminations between police and social workers, an inquiry was held. It blamed Mr Wyre for creating unfounded fears of a Satanic abuse network. Interviewing and therapy techniques were faulty, it said, and the evidence produced was a reflection of social workers' obsessions. The report concluded that "unless action was taken, witch-hunts could develop in this country and grave injustice result".

This report was suppressed by Nottinghamshire social services and the Department of Health, and has never been published. Instead, the Government set up another inquiry into the existence of satanic abuse, under Jean La Fontaine, professor of anthropology at the London School of Economics. She found no evidence that there was any such thing as Satanic abuse, but her report did not appear until May 1994, as the Pembroke case trial was ending.

WHATEVER the outcome of the Pembroke appeal, families have been devastated. Anne Mason has endured more than most. She has never even been charged with any offence and yet she has been parted from her children longer than anyone else in the case.

"I was supposed to say all these dreadful things had happened," she says. "The social workers prepared me for court, and told me to focus on a piece of wood at the back of the jury. I thought, if I go through with it my children will be home, and if I don't, I'll lose them for ever.

"But I knew I had to tell the truth. I've been brought up a Catholic, and that's what I believe in ... When I said, 'it's all lies', all I could hear was someone in the public gallery exclaiming 'Yes!' It was just a blur."

After the trial she watched social workers sending out invitations to a celebration party, even as they were curtailing her visits to her own children. Since then, she sees her daughter four times a year, for two hours. "I begged and begged them to let me see her on her eighth birthday, but they won't allow it." She believes her son Walter is very distressed, and recently tried to kill himself.

When the appeal begins in London tomorrow, the central issues will be the credibility of the children's evidence and the credibility of the investigating techniques used. Did the children's testimony reflect what they remembered, or the preconceptions of the social workers? And did the authorities act as protectors, or as persecutors?

All names in this article which might identify the children have been changed.