

Witness Statement given by Bob & Sue Firth to the Leveson Inquiry

In December 1997 we returned from a 4 year stay in Cyprus with the intention of opening a naturist B & B in Dorset. We have been 'fair-weather' naturists for most of our lives and in our former marriages, we were both engaged in the catering business.

We found and bought a suitable house in the small hamlet of Anderson and immediately started on plans to open in time for the summer season of 1998. We applied to the English Tourist Board to appear in their brochure, as a naturist establishment. After we had opened, we had a visit from an inspector from the ETB. He came incognito and found nothing amiss. He only revealed his credentials the next morning. We were given a 'Highly Commended' rating. In the first few weeks after opening we were well pleased with our bookings.

A few weeks later we had a phone call from someone who claimed he was working for the ETB and who has been assigned to take photos for a French magazine promoting the ETA. He came round to our house and took various photos, including one of Sue (fully clothed) giving Bob a massage. This was something we offered openly at our establishment. I should mention that we are both qualified masseurs, Bob having qualified in the late 1980s and Sue some years later.

Shortly after the visit of the photographer, we had a phone call from someone who called himself 'Neville'. He said he would like to book a massage. As we were open to non residents for this, this was quite normal. However, he began talking about his foot-fetish and how he would like to stroke Sue's feet. It wasn't something that Sue would normally have done, but he had a way of persuading us to let him do it to her. However, it didn't end there, in a later phone call he told us that he was a voyeur and really enjoyed watching people having sex as he had such a boring wife. At first we said no, but he offered to pay us for the privilege of watching us, and as he was so persuasive, we eventually agreed.

At this point I should mention that we had dabbled in a very small way in the 'swinging' lifestyle, but in our private life, not in connection with our business, so it was no big deal for us to have sex in front of him, making it absolutely clear to him that he was not to touch anything but Sue's feet, as agreed. So he came round for a normal massage but insisted on talking about sexual matters throughout, and how he enjoyed being a voyeur. Twenty minutes before the end of the massage, Sue asked him if he wanted her to finish the massage or fetch Bob so that he (Neville) could indulge his fantasy. He told her that he would like to see us having sex. He told us that he might masturbate while watching us, and indeed, for some of the time he had his hand in his trousers! We gave him several opportunities to leave during the time that he was with us but he insisted that he wanted to stay.

Afterwards, he asked if he could phone Sue in the evening to talk about his masturbatory fantasies and Sue agreed. He started to ask some leading questions, so after a few minutes Sue finished the conversation.

Three days later the first of two articles appeared in the News of the World on a

double page spread entitled, "The Guesthouse where all bedrooms come with en-suite pervert." It said that Sue 'romped with naked guests while Bob hid in cupboards to watch'; that Sue had sex with guests in the morning when she brought them breakfast in bed. (Breakfast was only ever served in the breakfast room and guests had to be clothed). Altogether there were 28 lies and allegations, many made up from the fantasies that 'Neville' had asked Sue to relate. Having crossed out all the lies, the story would have been only one sentence long; hardly sufficient for a double page spread. The journalist who wrote the article called himself Jack Tunstall.

Now comes the interesting part. Because of the strange phone calls that 'Neville' had made, Bob decided to set up a secret video camera, just to see what he was up to, so that his visit would be 'on record'. We had no idea, of course, that he was a tabloid reporter, but both his behaviour and requests were out of the ordinary.

Immediately the article was published, we phoned the NoW to complain but our complaint was dismissed out of hand. We had to cease trading as many people believed what they had read and wanted to come and stay 'for the action' they believed was going on here. We could have made a fortune if we had really behaved like the tabloid said.

We went to see a couple of libel lawyers to see if we could take action against the NoW and were strongly advised not to, as firstly, it could take years and bankrupt us, and secondly, because we had admitted having been involved in a "swinging" lifestyle. A jury might condemn us for that, we were told, irrespective of the lies that we could prove the NoW had told.

Having been denied justice through the courts, we set out with a vengeance to see who this 'Neville' or 'Jack Tunstall' was. It was very difficult, but eventually we found out that it was their Chief Undercover Reporter, Neville Thurlbeck, who had been hiding his local identity by using his wife's maiden name, Maxwell. All this time we had kept our possession of the video tape secret, but we decided that we had to go public at this point. So we approached Private Eye. They confirmed that the naked man on the massage table was indeed Neville Thurlbeck and wrote an article about the incident.

At the same time we wrote a letter to Phil Hall, the editor of the NoW and made a complaint to the PCC. Phil Hall wrote back to say that he had recorded conversations between Thurlbeck and Sue which proved that Thurlbeck was telling the truth and Sue was lying. This was just before Private Eye printed their article so it must have been a great shock to him when he heard that we had not only got voice recordings, but also a video of the whole incident which proved just who the liar was.

We had a phone call from Tom Cronz, their legal advisor who informed us that Stuart Kuttner and Bob Bird (assistant editor) would like to come down to our house to try and sort out the problem. Naively, we thought that they were genuinely going to try and rectify things by offering us an apology and compensation for the stress caused (and it *was* great stress) and the loss of our business. We didn't think that £250,000 was too much to ask. However, all that happened was that they had a second article printed about us. Basically accusing us of demanding money with menaces, another

lie.

We wrote another letter of complaint to the PCC and then realised that Phil Hall was on the Committee. They denied that he would have any influence on their decision, which of course went against us, for both articles. We had numerous letters of correspondence between us, but it was very obvious that they were determined to find in the favour of NoW, no matter how much proof we could provide. Their attitude was extremely arrogant and unhelpful.

We also had a web page built for us and an article by 'Bramus' in the Express brought this site to the attention of the readers. We had several thousand 'hits' in a few hours, but then the web page went blank. We phoned the web master up to find out what had happened. He was in tears and told us that he had been forced by NoW to remove the site under some sort of threats (he never revealed what they were). We then went to some American friends and they hosted the site from the US. We had the site up and running, complete with nude photos of Tharbeck, for about 10 years after which we decided to call a halt.

In addition to Private Eye and the Express, this whole incident was additionally mentioned in the Independent, the Wall St Journal, our local newspaper, the Bournemouth Echo and by George Galloway MP in Parliament. There have also been several other web sites (several still up and running) in which our story is told.

It is quite clear to us that Neville Tharbeck, Stuart Kutner, Phil Hall and probably the PCC were all in the conspiracy together, to prevent the truth from being told. They closed ranks, and protected each other to prevent the truth being told. We are therefore grateful to the inquiry for allowing us to tell the real truth.

This inquiry might consider that evidence from 2 former 'swingers' is not worth much (just as our solitifiers told us a jury might react), but our philosophy is that it's far better to have consensual sex with someone with your partner's permission, than to do so behind their back, which is what 50% of the population do! Most importantly, we believe a person's private life to be just that, private. Nothing the NoW wrote about us could ever be in the public interest. Just interesting to the public (maybe), but that's a different matter.

Finally, we take issue with much of what Peter Burden said in the witness box about us. Contrary to what he told the Committee, there was never any suggestion made to him that any of our guests could wander around the house naked, having sex ad lib. The only place that our guests were allowed to be naked was in the guest lounge or in our secluded garden. No sex ever took place between us and our guests, and none of our guests put sexual activity on display.

The events that took place between us and the reporter were as a result of our entrapment, because the reporter was cunning, and we were naive and trusting. Nothing was instigated by us.

Everything was done by the NoW to cause maximum distress to the 'victim' of such 'exposes', including calling the person (or people) to inform them they are going to be

in the paper the next morning (a common practice). Humiliating and salacious language is used in the text of the article, and any attempt at redress is blocked with a wall of arrogance.

Whilst this witness statement is just 4 pages long, the whole story will shortly be coming out in our book, which will be nearly 500 pages long. So this statement is just a very abbreviated version of the whole story.

We believe that what happened to us is important to this inquiry as we have witnessed and recorded first hand how the News of the World (and in particular, their Chief Reporter, Neville Thurbeck) operated. He has refused to talk about this incident, because he has no justification for his behaviour. This is then the true and extraordinary story behind the article that he wrote about us.

[Redacted]

Bob & Sue Firth

[Redacted]

30th January 2012