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My abuser's caught but justice fails me

For 13 years Tom Perry has battled to expose the abuse he suffered at Caldicott School. The former head has now been tried but the criminal courts cannot hear Perry's own case

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Tom Perry as an adult (Tom Stockill)

Peter Wright taught me French. Less conventionally, he taught me to masturbate. I was 12 and completely innocent. I knew nothing at all about sex. But Wright ensured that Caldicott School's rising rugby star learnt fast. His repeated assaults devastated my emotional development and echo through every aspect of my life nearly 40 years on, even as last week he was finally found guilty of 12 counts of sexual assault on pupils.

Wright was good-looking, suave, urbane. He drove an E-type Jag and gave lifts to "his boys" in the rugby team. The ladies loved him. Nobody knew what he had done to me, or my crippling shame, until I told my GP 13 years ago. We children who have been abused rarely tell our parents, but by then my mother had Alzheimer's so I was safe to speak without causing her distress.

Six months on I decided I had to make a statement to the police. I was the first Caldicott boy to do so. A kindly constable came round and took it down, the old-fashioned way with pen and paper, not on video like now. But just a single complainant, with 30 years since the abuse had happened, wasn't going to wash.

So I told the police: "There will be other people who you need to talk to." But the police said: "We can't go and get the school records or we'll be accused of trawling." And that meant they were not going to investigate.

A bit stunned, I asked: "Well, how do we proceed?"



Tom Perry at Caldicott (Tom Perry) They said: “If you know others who might have been abused and you can locate them and are prepared to tell them that you were abused — but absolutely do not say by whom — you can let them know that they may, if they wish, contact us.”

I got out my school photographs. It had been years, but I located the boy who had been my vice-captain, rang him and said simply: “I want to talk to you about things at Caldicott.” He came over with his family and while his boys were playing elsewhere I looked at him and said: “When I was at Caldicott, I was abused.”

This man paused, then silently mouthed the name of my abuser. And I said: “I’m sorry, I can’t discuss who.” That evening he rang me and said: “While I was at Caldicott, I was abused too.”

Then he said: “Do you know about my brother Alastair? He was also serially abused there.”

Three days later Alastair came to see me. He arrived at midday and left at 2am. It turned out that he had been abused a few years after me by a different teacher, Martin Carson, in the same room where I had been abused.

By November 2001 I had located and told police about four other men who had agreed to make formal complaints and testify in court to their abuse by Wright. When he was charged in February 2003 I thought we would see justice done. But in a pre-trial hearing he argued that he wouldn’t get a fair trial because too much time had elapsed since the alleged abuse; also that my involvement in prompting the police investigation had allegedly contaminated the evidence. The judge granted a stay. The case could not proceed.

I was enraged. Too many people had gone through too much to call it a day. With another Caldicott pupil who was a barrister, and a few others, we were a small but effective team turning over stones, looking for evidence.

In the end we had three generations of schoolboys who had all been abused at the same school by four teachers over two decades and I just thought: that has to be a story.

I started researching documentary makers, looking for the right person to tell it. One night I saw a documentary called *Dying for Drugs* made by Brian Woods, who owns the independent film company

True Vision, and I thought: right, that's the bloke.



Peter Wright

was found guilty last week (David Bebbler)

Chosen, the film Brian made about our abuse, was instrumental in a new case being brought. It took four years for him to get that film funded: it aired in 2008.

I had contacted Thames Valley police beforehand to say: "When people see this film, men who were abused might get in touch."

To protect any future investigation, we agreed a protocol with detectives: in the event that former pupils contacted the Chosen website, True Vision would send a police-agreed letter providing detectives' contact details. Many men got in touch by email, or by posting comments under press articles about the film.

In 2010 a new detective constable, Andy Alexander, who had joined the child abuse unit at Thames Valley police, was told to review a few boxes of our case files. That, together with our agitations, prompted the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) to open a review of our case. Meanwhile, police had started to take complaints from new victims who had come forward after the documentary.

In November 2011 I was told that our case was to be reopened. Within a fortnight Wright and another former Caldicott teacher, Hugh Henry, had been arrested.

The CPS hoped to join our case with that of another five former pupils who had come forward with allegations against Wright. An application to lift the stay was refused, so police had to proceed with a brand new case with only the five new complainants.

This autumn we tried to get the stay lifted once again, before Wright's trial started. Once again it was refused. Judge Cutts, who heard the application, said she had no authority to lift it. Judge Connor, who had ordered the stay, maintains his decision was correct.

The cases of the five men who had come forward in 2003 — myself included — could not be pursued against Wright, but we gave evidence in the trial which has just ended. When I stepped up as a witness to Wright's bad character, it was 28 years since I had seen him. He is a pathetic individual, a liar and a spiv

— being in the same room as him didn't bother me. But giving evidence is arduous because you're in a battle of wits.

I knew I would be attacked in court — and I was. Standing there, participating in this costume drama, what I quickly understood was that a trial isn't necessarily a search for the truth. It's all about tactical sparring, with the defence reinterpreting simple facts into a story you do not recognise. Someone had to defend Wright and his barrister did. But the adversarial system means whether or not that abused child, that damaged man, ever gets justice is no more or less than a lottery. It horrified me.

Before the verdicts came in, as we were waiting to be called, my heart almost popped out of my chest. But once in court I felt calm. Wright was found guilty on every count: unanimously. As the verdicts were read out I looked over at him and he showed no emotion.

The unbearable thought of abuse continuing in schools — as it does — is why I now campaign for a law that would oblige any member of staff who suspects that a child is being harmed in school to report it to an independent authority.

The Wright verdict might sound like a triumph after so long battling. But my case, and that of four other courageous men who came forward 13 years ago, is never, as far as the criminal justice system is concerned, going to be heard.

My confidence in the institutions of state and government is now zero. My children, since they were very young, have had to live with a father consumed with rage. They have not come through those years unscathed.

I am a man who wants justice. I have no option now but to resort to the civil courts to bring a case against Wright. It might seem crazy to keep going when he has been convicted and will be sentenced in February. Looking back, I realise the problem is that I have an overdeveloped sense of fair play. That's the irony. It was instilled in me at Caldicott and the man partly responsible for it was the man who abused me.

As told to Louise Tickle

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