

Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry

Witness Statement of

Jasmine Anne Thomson or Bell

Support person present: No

1. My name is Jasmine Anne Thomson or Bell. My date of birth is the [REDACTED] 1946. I am 72 years old. My contact details are known to the Inquiry.
2. I want to tell you about the period of time between 1963 and 1966 when I had a very happy experience working as a care assistant at Balcary Children's Home in Hawick, Scotland.

Life before working in Balcary Children's Home, Hawick.

3. I was born and brought up in Lockerbie, Scotland and as a child I attended Lockerbie High School. I left school before sitting my exams as I wanted to work with children. I started looking for jobs in the field of childcare and responded to an advertisement for a job as a care worker at Balcary Children's Home in Hawick.
4. I recall that I had to travel to Carlisle and then get a bus to Hawick for interview. I was seventeen years old. I was interviewed by Miss O'Brien who was the person in charge. The home was run by the Barnardos organisation. I had no previous experience of working with children and there was no training provided apart from what I learned on the job. It was a residential home and I lived in there with the children and other staff members.

Working at Balcary Children's Home, Hawick 1963 – 1966.

5. I arrived at Balcary Children's Home and was put to work straight away. I loved working with children and I thoroughly enjoyed my time there. I was to remain in post for over two years and left to get married just before my twentieth birthday.
6. Balcary was a mixed sex home and had about 26 children. They were of different ages between four and sixteen. I was in charge of the younger boys who were aged up to about ten. I do remember one boy called [REDACTED] who was seventeen but was about to join the army so he stayed on. There were a lot of siblings who were there together. They were placed in the dormitories depending on age and sex. They were all aware of each other. We had a set of triplets. The bedrooms had between six and seven children although there were some smaller rooms for the older children.
7. There was one occasion when a brother and sister came into the home. The brother was very young and we made a decision that he would sit at a table with his sister until he got used to the routine. They were called [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]. This was a decision made amongst the care staff and we didn't have issues making our own decisions.
8. The home was run by Miss O'Brien. I think that Miss O'Brien had been the first person to run the home which was opened during the Second World War. She had come from London with a few children who were evacuated to avoid the bombing in London. When the home had opened she was put in charge of running it. She was known to the children as "Mamaji" which I think means mother in another language.
9. Whilst I was at Balcary Miss O'Brien retired and the running of the home was taken over by a married couple called Stuart and Joan Barron. As it happens Stuart Barron died [REDACTED]

10. Although the home was mixed sex it was segregated. The children came from all over Scotland and were all long term residents. There were whole families consisting of three siblings of differing ages and sexes. I was never told any of the history of children and as far as I was aware there were no records kept of their stay at Balcary. I was seventeen years old and only a year older than some of the resident children.

Staff at Balcary 1963 - 1966

11. There were about eight or nine staff members. [REDACTED] BHR who was a former resident of Balcary and became a care worker showed me the ropes, She had left and joined the army only to return and work at the home. She was in charge of the older boys. Miss O'Brien was in overall charge and she was succeeded by Stuart and Joan Barron who took over the running of the school when I was still there.
12. There was a woman called "Old Hutchy" who seemed to have a supervisory role. I never knew her real name. Betty McClelland looked after the small girls and Roberta looked after the older girls. I remember that Roberta came from Lockerbie.
13. Agnes Thomson covered for the staff that were having a day off. When the Barron's arrived and took over they had had a six year old boy called [REDACTED] I think that Mrs Barron had previously worked at a Barnardo's home in Balerno near Edinburgh.
14. Most of the staff resided at the home. Miss O'Brien and then the Barron family occupied a flat on the first floor of the house. I had a room on the second floor when I arrived but moved to a room on the first floor near where the children slept.

Description of Balcary House.

15. It was a big country house. On the ground floor there was a staff sitting room, a dining room, a kitchen and scullery. Miss O' Brien also had her office on the ground floor. There was an out building adjoined to the house which had the boys cloakroom and laundry. There was also a small girl's playroom.

16. Upstairs on the first floor in the building was where all the bedrooms were. Some of the staff also had bedrooms there. I recall that on the second floor there was a hatch and when you lifted it there was a fireman's pole which went down to the first floor.
17. The first floor was where Miss O'Brien had her flat. Boys and girls had separate bedrooms. The small boys and girls were under ten and the big boys and girls went up to sixteen. Miss O'Brien had a favourite child who was the youngest boy, his name was [REDACTED] had a sister [REDACTED] and a brother [REDACTED] who were also in Balcary at the same time.
18. There was a laundry and furnace room in an outhouse which also had a washing machine and a huge tumble dryer to get the clothes dried. The tumble dryer was seldom used because of the cost. The washing was dried on pulleys or in front of the furnace. There was also a sewing room on the second floor where repairs were carried out. There were cupboards full of clothes which had been donated for the children's use.

Routine at Balcary Children's Home, Hawick 1963 – 1966.

First day

19. [REDACTED] BHR was assigned to give me the instructions on what to do. I took charge of seven young boys under the age of ten. There was no formal training and I had no previous experience of working with children. I became known as "Auntie Jas" to the children. You would always call the children by their first names. I didn't have a uniform but worked in my own clothes.

The Mornings and bedtime

20. I was responsible for the seven or so young boys and would get them up in the morning and get them ready to go down to breakfast. I would strip all the beds down

to the mattress and then make them up again. I think that I also had to turn the mattress. I would sweep the floor and apply a liquid polish. I would have to use a huge antiquated instrument to polish the floor. I remember it had a steel ball on a pole in the middle so that you could polish in a flowing movement.

21. You would then go with the children downstairs for breakfast. The children all had their own table to sit and I always sat with the younger boys. Miss Hutchison always prepared breakfast. You had to sing a grace at the start of the meal and also when the meal was finished.
22. You would get the children ready for school. I think that [REDACTED] BHR [REDACTED] took the younger ones to school in a minibus. When the children had left I would go back to finish floor polishing and buffing. You were never off duty until the children went to bed at night. I had to do a deep clean of the areas I was responsible for and they had to be cleaned once a week.
23. At bedtime the routine was that the children would fold their clothes in a specific way and leave them at the foot of their beds. The theory was that in case of fire the children could grab their clothes on the way out. I helped to do this so often as part of the routine that in later life I did it for my own son.
24. The children would come back to the home at lunchtime to be fed. We all sat at our tables and we all stood and sang grace at the start and finish of every meal. When the children went back to school in the afternoon I sometimes got a couple of hours off.
25. Thursday was wash day and I had to wash and dry all the clothes and have them ironed and put away by six o'clock at night because that is when I went off duty. I had Friday off. When [REDACTED] BHR [REDACTED] left to get married I took on the responsibility of the older boys. It meant that I double the work and responsibility for also looking after their clothes.

26. When the children were at school the staff would meet at ten o'clock every day in the dining room and have coffee. We would also have to take turns and do a reading from the bible. We always said a prayer before and after coffee.
27. The children would be able to play outside in the grounds of the home in the evenings. There were also playrooms for them if the weather was bad. There were plenty of toys and play equipment and they would play with each other. Each child had a cuddly toy on their bed.
28. If I wanted to go out late in the evening I had to ask Miss O'Brien for permission. Occasionally I was invited for afternoon tea with Miss O'Brien in her flat. I dreaded this as I was quite intimidated by Miss O'Brien.
29. The staff would take it in turn to stay in the home during the evenings to look after the children. The other staff would have the night off. We would have to get some of the children up to go to the toilet. I think that I also read stories to the younger kids at night.
30. There was one night that I got a boy called [REDACTED] out of bed and took him to the loo. He was about six years old. The route to the loo passed the main staircase. He was still half asleep and trotted on ahead. When I caught up with him he was peeing down the stairs.
31. There was another occasion when I looked in on [REDACTED] during the night. I must have been late to bed for some reason. It was obvious that he had wet the bed. I was tired and took him into my room next door. I washed him and put one of my nighties on him. I told him to get in beside me. I probably should not have done that but it seemed right to me. The upshot was that [REDACTED] wet my bed and Miss O'Brien found out. Miss O'Brien was only annoyed because I hadn't told her that I had an electric blanket.

Mealtimes / Food

32. There was a routine when you sat at the same table with the children. Before and after every meal you stood and sang a grace. The food was very good and there was plenty of it. I had never seen tinned tomatoes before and we sometimes got them for breakfast. There were no issues with children who didn't eat their food it was just left. Mrs BEH was the name of the cook. The food was varied nutritious.

Washing / bathing

33. I assisted and supervised the small boys with bathing and washing. I suppose I supervised this. I didn't get any instruction on what to do. They would often share a bath. There was a young black boy called who had a skin condition and I kept him separate from the other boys and used to apply cream to him. I remember on pay day that I would buy a bottle of Fairy Liquid and the kids would have bubbles in their baths. I bought this with my own money.

Clothing / uniform

34. All the children wore the local school uniform for attending school. There was no uniform in the home. Each child had play clothes and Sunday clothes. I recall that they had jumpers donated from the local "Pringles knitwear" factory. I do recall washing the children's T shirt's. I dried them in the tumble dryer and they shrunk. I was resourceful enough to replace it without anyone knowing.
35. Two of the older boys hated school uniforms because local children who seldom wore the uniform bullied them and called them snobs. I sourced some jeans and casual shirts for them which I had to alter in order that they fitted. The boys went to breakfast in uniform and then changed into jeans which were hidden on their route to school. They had to repeat the process in reverse when they came back for lunch. e. I think that the children did better at school because of this and they were not subjected to any bullying.

36. [REDACTED] had a kilt and accessories for wearing on a Sunday. Miss O'Brien had provided this outfit for him. I felt that [REDACTED] who had also arrived at the home and was a very young boy should have a kilt too. I remember getting a kilt from the sewing room for [REDACTED] and I altered it to fit. [REDACTED] who hadn't had the best start at the home arriving with head lice was delighted with his kilt.

School

37. All the children attended the local schools in Hawick. There were no issues with the schools and the children seemed to get on well with the local children. The children had to do homework when they came home from school and we would assist with that. There were a lot of books in the playrooms to help them with their homework.

Trips / Holidays/Leisure

38. On a Sunday afternoon we always took the children for a walk. The older children didn't have to go. If you were staff on duty you went on the walk. If the weather was bad we went to the Salvation Army Hall where they ran a sort of Sunday School. It was very casual and the children enjoyed it.
39. We often went on holiday to North Berwick. I think that there was another children's home in North Berwick and we used to swap places with the kids from that home. Miss O'Brien used to make the sandwiches on the beach. They were usually sandwich spread or marmite which was spread thickly. Like myself many of the children hated marmite so many of the sandwiches were buried in the sand.
40. I do recall that the children went for a haircut at the local barbers once a month. The older children were becoming fashion conscious and wanted to grow their hair which was the style at that time. The barber usually gave the same haircut to everyone and so the older children would try to avoid going. I would cut the hair of two of the older boys more in keeping with the fashion.

41. There was a river across the road from the home where we all used to swim in the summer. We also went sledging in the winter when the snow came. The children attended the local scout and guide groups.

Birthdays and Christmas

42. I think that the children would get a cake on their birthday. There was a huge emphasis on Christmas. On Christmas eve the children would be gathered together in the sitting room. We would listen for the sleigh bells and Santa would pull the sleigh up to the home. The sleigh which was kept in one of the outhouses. On my first Christmas as the sleigh was arriving it started to snow. Santa would then speak to all the children and they would get presents. There would be a Christmas lunch. It was a great occasion.
43. There was a man called "Uncle Doug" who would send the children the most lavish presents. I think that he came to the home on a few occasions and stayed over. He worked in Kuwait and I saw him once. I do not know what his connection was to Balcary but I think that he sponsored one of the children.

Discipline

44. There was no formal discipline that I was aware of and there was no guidance on what to do if children didn't behave. I didn't have any information on where the children came from. If I had any issues I would refer them to Miss O'Brien. As it happens I can't remember having to go to Miss O'Brien with any issues. Miss O'Brien was always wandering about the home but she didn't have much one to one contact with the children. I had no formal supervision. .
45. If the children were misbehaving I would make them sit down and not move. I suppose that you would call this time out. I would also raise my voice to the children. I might have given them the odd smack on the bottom. I remember BHR used to give the children a smack on the bottom. It didn't happen very often. It was not excessive and at the time it was deemed to be quite acceptable.

46. There was an occasion when [REDACTED] BEQ [REDACTED] attacked me. She was a big girl for her age. She followed me into one of the bedrooms and jumped onto my back causing me to fall onto one of the beds. [REDACTED] BEQ [REDACTED] was still on top of me when her brother came in and pulled her off. Her brother [REDACTED] had seen her behaviour and realised that she was up to something and had followed her. It was just as well for me because I found the whole incident quite frightening.

Visits / Inspections/ Review of Detention/Other callers at the home.

47. I don't remember any inspections taking place in the home. I can't remember any child welfare officers calling at the home. I can only remember the father of one of the small girls coming to visit. I don't remember visits from other parents.
48. The Home had a laundry service that would call regularly. They would look after all the sheets and bedding. There was a rear entrance where the deliveries could be made.
49. At Easter some local organisations donated to the home decorated boiled eggs. There were more eggs donated than we could possible use. We had dispose of them and dug a hole in the grounds and buried them.
50. There was a photographer from the local paper who would call and take photographs of the kids on occasions. On one occasion a giant chocolate egg was donated to the home. The photographer came and we got one of the small girls to sit inside the egg. Unfortunately she had an accident and peed into the egg. I think we cleaned it up but still ate the chocolate.
51. Some former residents used to come and visit the home for weekends. One such person was [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Healthcare

52. The local doctor came to the home most Saturdays and dealt with all the ailments. There were no issues with medical care and it was available to any child that needed it. I didn't have any medical training and there was no one on the staff who was medically trained. There was a well-stocked medical cupboard and I had full access to it .
53. I remember when [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] arrived at Balcary I discovered that they had a chronic infestation of head lice. I didn't realise they had the lice until later in the day they arrived when they had already been in the company of the other children. I was worried that it would spread to the other children. Fortunately this did not happen. I got head lice treatment and a nit comb to try to help them and used them to remove as many lice and eggs as I could. I also checked all the other children
54. I also recall [REDACTED] BKZ who was a big fourteen year old boy. He couldn't stop talking and would do a lot of shouting. In this day and age he may have been diagnosed as autistic. I think that the doctor prescribed him phenobarbitone to be administered if needed. I did not administer that drug.

Running away

55. [REDACTED] BHG and [REDACTED] BEQ used to run away on occasion. The home was usually locked up at night but there were a lot of other ways to get out if they wanted. [REDACTED] BHG and [REDACTED] BEQ were running away to go to America to visit [REDACTED] BHG mother. I don't think they knew where America was. They usually ran away in their pyjamas. There was a large tree in the grounds called the "punch tree" which the kids would climb up and try and hide.
56. I recall that on one occasion I was looking out the window and saw [REDACTED] BHG and [REDACTED] BEQ up the "punch tree" trying to hide. I walked out under the tree and talked loudly so that they could hear me. I let them know that I was calling the police. When I walked away they came down from the tree and sneaked back into the house.

57. If any of the children did go missing the staff would call the police and report it. [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] used to sneak out at night. I would always have a walk round the dormitory at night and often sat and spoke to [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] I asked them where they went and they told me that they walked round the local park. They told me that it was great fun and asked me to go with them. Betty another staff member and I once went with them to the park.

Bed Wetting

58. I had one boy called [REDACTED] who frequently wet the bed and it upset him. He was about six years old. We were not given instruction on how to treat bed wetters and I never punished him.. I told [REDACTED] that I had spoken to the doctor and that he had given me some tablets to cure the problem. What they were in fact were haliborange vitamin tablets that my mother had given to me. [REDACTED] started to take one at night time. When tye tablets ran out I substituted them with glucose coloured with Ribena. This medicine also worked.
59. Unfortunately one of the older girls called [REDACTED] BEQ saw me making up the placebo and told [REDACTED] what the tablets and the drink were. I don't know why she did this. It resulted in [REDACTED] starting to wet the bed again
60. In recent years [REDACTED] told me that after I had left the home [REDACTED] BEQ would come along to his room and rub his face in the wet sheets. He called her a cruel bitch. [REDACTED] BEQ was one of the older girl residents at the home and used to help out with the younger children.

Religion

61. There was always a religious aspect to the home. We had to stand up and sing grace at meal times. We had staff bible readings when we met for coffee every morning.

62. On a Sunday night after the younger children had their bath they would go to the staffroom and join in singing hymns that were similar to those sung by the Salvation Army. I think that we might have gone to church on a Sunday but I can't remember.

Pocket money

63. There was pocket money handed out on a Saturday morning and most of the children bought sweets. All the younger children went to a matinee on a Saturday morning at the local cinema.

Pets at Balcary

64. When I first arrived there was a very old Labrador dog called Bruce. He slept in Miss O'Brien's flat. He must have been very old as he was struggling to walk. I think that he died very soon after I arrived.
65. There were two rabbits in a hutch in the back yard. They produced babies and I recall that [REDACTED] BHG [REDACTED] who was one of the older girls used to look after the rabbits and clean the hutch. I recall that [REDACTED] BHG [REDACTED] cleaned the hutch and during the night the doe had eaten half her babies.
66. The home had a pet donkey called Dobie. He lived in a field at the front of the home and was also a local attraction amongst the people of Hawick who would pat him and feed him. [REDACTED] was one of the older girls and she used to look after Dobie. There was an occasion during the winter when there was snow on the ground. [REDACTED] came to me and told me that Dobie appeared to be very ill.
67. I went with [REDACTED] and we could see Dobie lying in the field at the furthest point from the gate. He was jerking and his breathing was laboured. [REDACTED] and I stayed with Dobie until he died. The Barron's were away for that weekend so I phoned the local vet who wouldn't come out because there was nothing he could do. I was advised to call the knackers yard.

68. The men from the knacker's yard came and I explained to them the sensitivity surrounding the removal of Dobie. The younger children were at the cinema. The men from the knacker's yard explained that they could not enter the field with the lorry because of the snow. They attached a winch to Dobie's neck. This was terrible to watch and I insisted that they attach the winch to his legs. It took a while to get Dobie's remains onto the lorry and the young children were due back at any time.
69. I insisted that the men cover up the remains with a blanket in case the children saw them driving through the town. The men took Dobie away and later I sat down with the children amidst a lot of tears and explained that Dobie had passed away. It was my first experience of witnessing death and I found it very upsetting. I was able to speak to the Barron's on the phone and they did debrief this incident when they returned.

Other children resident at Balcary 1963 – 1966

70. The following is a list of some of the children who were resident at Balcary when I worked there.

BKZ	BHG	BEQ	
		BEW	

Change of management at Balcary in 1964.

71. When I was half way through my time at Balcary, Miss O'Brien retired and the Barron family became the management at Balcary. They were called [REDACTED] and Joan and they also had a son called BDC. They took over the flat on the first floor of the house. When they arrived at Balcary the routine became less regimented and they were easy to talk to. They stayed at Balcary until the home closed in 1974. The singing at meal times stopped which was a great relief.

72. They children always felt that they were ridiculed at school because Miss O'Brien insisted that they wear the school uniform. A lot of the local kids didn't have to do this. The Barron's allowed the children to make their own decision about this.
73. I felt that I learned a lot more about child care from the Barron's who were much more relaxed and approachable. We didn't have to get permission to go out at night we just told them that we were going to be out.
74. One of the older boys at the home called [REDACTED] sometimes came to my room and would sit and talk to me about his problems. He would ask me for a cigarette and he would sit on my bed and chat to me like we were equals. I was in fact only a year older than him.

Leaving Balcary House to get married

75. I left Balcary House in 1966. I was very upset at leaving and I remember that I cried all the way home. It was such a good place to work and I loved all the children. I was so affected that when I got home to Lockerbie I was prescribed a sedative by the local doctor. I would describe Balcary as being a very happy home.
76. I remember that I sat down with [REDACTED] and told him that I was leaving. He got very upset and he thought that I would never see him again. It was very close to the 6th of June 1966 and I told him that I would meet him again at 7pm on the 7th of July 1977 outside the gates of the home. When I turned up on that date [REDACTED] was there to meet me at the gates. We repeated the process for 8pm on the 8th of August 1988. We have had occasional contact ever since.
77. I was engaged to be married and a job had come up at a children's home in Dumfries. The job was with the local Council and the agreement was that I had to stay at the job for a year. The post was as an assistant housemother in a home.

78. I remained for a year and then got married and gave up working because it was a residential home. I was 21 years old and I concentrated on being a housewife and mother. Later in life I worked in a school library. I then worked as a social work assistant in a family centre. Between 1989 and 1991 I did my as a social work training at Jordanhill in Glasgow and worked in a child care team. I retired in 2008..

Contact with staff and residents at Balcary after leaving

79. I would met some of the former children of Balcary at organised reunions. I kept in occasional touch with [REDACTED] and had arrangements to meet him very occasionally. When his marriage broke up he found the Christmas and New Year very hard so I invited him to come and stay with my family over the festive period.
80. One day out of the blue I was phoned by [REDACTED] BHG who had managed to get my number through phoning the library in Lockerbie and then being passed on to my brother's business number. She knew that I lived in Lockerbie and was worried that I might have been affected by the 1988 Air Disaster. She wanted to know that I was okay. I maintain contact with her to this day.
81. I attended a few Balcary Reunions for former residents and staff at Balcary. One of the original children at the home called [REDACTED] was tye organiser. . He was at the home before I arrived and I never came across him at Balcary. After [REDACTED] passed away [REDACTED] BKZ arranged a reunion.
82. I recall being at a reunion in Edinburgh and also at the former home which is now the Balcary House Hotel. I also kept up with some of the other people on social media. It was [REDACTED] BHG that told me about the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry and so I decided to contact you.

Abuse reported to me in later life by former residents of Balcary.

83. I was not aware of any abuse when I was working at Balcary Children's Home. It was not until later life that I learned of some instances which I never witnessed or was told about.
84. One of the former boys I met at the reunions of Balcary was called [REDACTED] although he was known as [REDACTED] when he was at the home. He told me that he had had something that he wanted to tell me and it was the reason he was sent away from the home. He sent me a private message on Facebook. He told me that when he was at Balcary and was about fourteen he had a weekend job at the [REDACTED] owned by Mr [REDACTED] BHQ who is now deceased.
85. Mr [REDACTED] BHQ and some of his friends would rape and sexually abuse [REDACTED] every weekend that he worked at the [REDACTED]. I don't know where this happened but it wasn't in the home. [REDACTED] said that he didn't want to work anymore and the staff were fine with that but pointed out that it was extra pocket money that he was missing out on. [REDACTED] was unable to tell anybody the real reason why he left.
86. [REDACTED] BHQ on occasion came to the home and asked if [REDACTED] could come back to work for the day as he was so busy. It resulted in [REDACTED] being sexually abused and raped again. [REDACTED] never told any of the staff. [REDACTED] said that his behaviour deteriorated and the home couldn't cope with him so he was moved somewhere else where they could deal with him. He was still under sixteen.
87. [REDACTED] went on to have a hard life and I kept in touch with him after I made contact with him through the reunions. I recall on one occasion he asked to borrow money from me while I was on holiday in Greece. It was the only time that he asked and I knew that he must have been desperate because he had never done it before. I arranged through [REDACTED] BHG to get some money to him.

88. [REDACTED] who was one of the older boys told me in later life that the staff member [REDACTED] BHR [REDACTED] used to rub his face in the wet sheets when he wet the bed and then he was forced to carry them down to the wash house.

Records

89. All the time that I was at Balcary I never had to maintain any records on the children. I was unaware of any records being kept. Miss O'Brien never shared with the staff the background of any of the children and I don't think that there was any way of finding out. In hindsight may have been detrimental to my care of them.
90. I have no objection to my witness statement being published as part of evidence to the Inquiry. I believe the facts stated in this witness statement are true.

Signed Jabell.....

Dated 22/8/18.....

