

THE WILBY PAEDO FILES

IN August Peter Wilby, the former *Independent on Sunday* and *New Statesman* editor and media columnist for the *Guardian* between 2005 and 2009, was given a 10-month suspended prison sentence for child pornography offences.

To the shock of former colleagues, who had not realised his declining of freelance commissions since October last year was because he had been arrested and was awaiting trial, it emerged in court that Wilby had admitted having a sexual interest in children and accessing illegal images online since the 1990s.

For the past quarter of a century Wilby had used his various media outlets to express scepticism about reporting of the scandal surrounding child sex abuse in general, and particularly in care homes in North Wales. Initially involved in the stories about the Bryn Estyn care home in Wrexham and paedophile police superintendent Gordon Anglesea through his role as a senior executive at the *Independent on Sunday*, Wilby did his best to disassociate himself from the tale after Anglesea successfully sued several outlets including the *Sindy* and *Private Eye* for libel in 1994. "I advised against publication of his name. I was overruled. I felt vindicated," he later wrote in the *New Statesman*.

Tangled Webster

Four years later, when the BBC ran a documentary on Bryn Estyn featuring interviews with several victims alleging abuse there, Wilby had commissioned sceptic Richard Webster to write a "special report" for the *New Statesman* rubbishing both the programme and the men who appeared on it. Webster even used his piece to cast doubt on the 1994 conviction of the home's former deputy head Peter Howarth for several sexual assaults on boys. "The BBC did not mention that Howarth, now dead, always protested his innocence, or that some of his former colleagues still believe he was wrongly convicted," Webster complained.

A year later, when a public inquiry headed by retired high court judge Sir Ronald Waterhouse concluded that staff at Bryn Estyn had "habitually engaged in major sexual abuse of many of the young residents without detection", Wilby commissioned a piece by Webster rubbishing one of the key witnesses in the *New Statesman*. The woman in question, social worker Alison Taylor (*Eyes passim*), sued successfully for libel.

But this did not put Wilby off championing Webster's work: in 2008 he used his *Guardian* media column to attack press coverage of child abuse cases and recommend the doorstopper book Webster had by then published, which comprehensively rubbished the claims of abused children, subsequent investigations into the scandal and the Waterhouse inquiry itself.

"Only thanks to an exhaustively researched, 700-page book, *The Secret of Bryn Estyn*, by Richard Webster, a freelance writer, do we have an inkling of the true story," Wilby claimed. "The book, however, although shortlisted for the Orwell prize, went almost completely unnoticed in the national press. In such cases, even the usual watchdogs relax their vigilance. *Private Eye* made much of the running... on Bryn Estyn."

Revisit Anglesea

Webster, who died in 2011, made much of Anglesea's status as an innocent man and wrote off the entire episode as "a bizarre witch-hunt". He wrote that "the vindication of Gordon Anglesea at the libel trial should by rights have destroyed the entire North Wales Bryn Estyn story", which was "provoked by credulous journalists", and complained that "there is evidence some of those who worked for *Private Eye* continued to believe that at least some of the witnesses who had given evidence in the high court were telling the truth."

Wilby, in his *Guardian* analysis, thoroughly endorsed that view: "Presented with what the trade calls 'a cracking good story', reporters and editors do not waste time asking if it's true. They try to unearth more details and 'take it further'... The press is interested above all in narrative, not, as it likes to think, in that elusive and untidy entity, 'the truth'."

The truth...

In 2016 Gordon Anglesea was convicted at Mold Crown Court of three charges of indecent assault against one teenage boy and one against another teenager and jailed for 12 years (he died in prison soon afterwards). Two years earlier, police reinvestigating Anglesea's associate Howarth announced that he would have faced a further 38 charges of sexual assault on 19 different boys aged between 11 and 16 had he not died in prison following his earlier conviction. Now Wilby has joined them both as a convicted child sex offender.

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