

Production Note: The Tip Off was produced as an audio series. If possible, we encourage you to listen to this episode wherever you get your podcasts. The following transcript is for reference only and may contain typos. Please confirm accuracy before quoting.

Maeve: Before we start, this episode deals with some descriptions of sexual abuse and may not be suitable for all.

Maeve: Liz was anxious, sat behind the wheel of the car. This was her first project working with longtime *Newsnight* producer Meirion Jones, and she hadn't quite worked him out yet.

Liz: My first story with Meirion, I mean to say the wheels almost came off is an understatement. We were chasing a paedophile priest in Surrey.

Meirion: We had been told that this particular priest had been released from prison and was being sheltered by the church.

Maeve: That's Meirion. He wasn't too sure about Liz. She'd arrived at a *Newsnight* after presenting *BBC Breakfast* news. And Meirion, experienced in investigations, had his doubts.

Meirion: Initially, I was quite prejudiced because she was a presenter, and I thought of presenters as 'gobs on sticks,' and I didn't expect her to be any good as a reporter, a digger, etc.

Maeve: Suddenly, a man looking just like the priest they were searching for appeared in front of them, got into his car and pulled away. Liz reacted immediately.

Meirion: Liz did a screaming U-turn and set off in pursuit of him. We got to the church that this priest was driving to, got out and started asking him to check on camera if he was the paedophile priest. He wasn't.

Liz: It turned out we were chasing across the Surrey countryside, an entirely different father, who then subsequently complained. It was one of my first stories on *Newsnight*.

And I was mortified to be involved in this complaint, but it had been a rush of blood to the head. That was my first proper story with Meirion.

Maeve: It was the first, but it wouldn't be the last. And it also wouldn't be the last time the pair found themselves in hot water because of a story. I'm Maeve McClenaghan, this is *The Tip Off*...

Maeve: The story we're looking at today doesn't start during a stakeout in a car parked on a country road, nor even in the hallowed halls of *BBC Central*. It starts much, much earlier.

Years before he started working as a journalist, Meirion Jones found himself in an unusual situation. Back in the '60s and '70s, his aunt ran a kind of children's home, Duncroft Approved School, a place for emotionally disturbed teenage girls.

Meirion: And then gradually over the years, it evolved into more of a care institution. But the same staff were there, the same rules were there. And really, as an institution, it didn't change. Although not all the girls who ended up there were always criminals later on. Quite often they came from broken homes or you know, bad things had happened to them.

Maeve: The school tried using psychotherapy as a way of turning these somewhat wayward girls' lives around. It was experimental, and fascinating to many.

The school was set in this sprawling mansion building.

Meirion: It had a Jacobean wing and a Georgian wing and a Victorian wing.

Maeve: Meirion's grandmother moved in, so he ended up visiting about once a month at one point. And there were always strange things going on. Lavish parties, celebrity guests drawn in by the centre's progressive nature and the big fundraising events.

Meirion: Lots of film stars, people from the music business minor Royals, ministers, it was quite an interesting group. You would see all sorts of people, including Jimmy Savile.

Maeve: Jimmy Savile, the DJ turned TV presenter, host of *Top of the Pops* and *Jim'll Fix It*, a TV screen regular and almost ubiquitous presence in British culture. His lank, long white hair, garish tracksuits and gold jewellery made him almost cartoonish in appearance. But even a 16-year-old Marian could see there was something a bit strange about this guy. Something not quite right. Yet all the adults flocked to him. Excited to have such a celebrity in their midst.

Meirion: What was different about Savile was he just kept turning up. He wasn't there once a year. And very often you would either bump into Jimmy Savile, or you would see his convertible Rolls Royce parked on the gravel drive. And if you did see him, I always got the impression that he was sort of slightly concealing something.

He would sometimes take the girls out in his Rolls Royce without any member of staff. My parents, who were both teachers, would complain to my aunt about that and said it just wasn't, and it wasn't what you're allowed to do. It was against all the rules.

I think my aunt was partly very impressed by celebrity, you know, every surface in her house had photos of her with celebrities. But also she was trying to raise money to get mini buses for the girls to take them out on trips. And Jimmy could arrange for them to go to Television Centre, all sorts of things like this. So I think she saw him as a friend of the school and turned a blind eye to anything else that might be going on.

Maeve: Meirion went off to university and stopped visiting his aunt so often. After graduating, he got into journalism, working for various magazines and outlets before ending up at the BBC. But one day, he was flipping through the newspaper, and he came across an article by a writer he admired, Lynn Barber.

Meirion: The best interviewer on Fleet Street and every young journalist read her interviews to try and learn from them. And slap bang in the middle of this interview with Jimmy Savile, it says every Fleet Street editor tells me he's a paedophile and you immediately start thinking, *What was it that I was really seeing back then at Duncroft? Why was this 50-year-old man hanging around with under-16-year-olds?*

Maeve: So he started asking around, talking to his new colleagues at the BBC. And it soon became clear that there were swirling rumours about Jimmy Savile's behaviour around underage girls.

Meirion: Everyone that I'd talked to has heard similar stories.

Maeve: But let's leave Meirion for a moment, puzzling over these rumours he's heard, reassessing just what it was he had seen as a teenager.

About to join the *Newsnight* team is Liz MacKean. She had cut her teeth in the BBC local radio, and quickly impressed with her empathy and ability to get people to open up to her.

Liz: I think when I started, which was sort of mid-80s, the media was still a bit of a rarefied atmosphere, and most people weren't used to it. So if you arrived, however callow, with a tape recorder saying you were from BBC Radio, and some little station, people were generally really welcoming and really friendly. And it was just such fun. And especially in those early days, weirdly you had so much responsibility, because it was a skeleton staff. So whatever the story was, you covered it pretty much in its entirety.

Maeve: I should explain. Liz passed away in 2017, at just 52 years of age. Her words come from an interview she gave a few years before her death.

She loved working for the BBC.

Liz: Those initials came to mean a lot to me and the fact that people trusted it. If you wielded the initials BBC, people trusted *you* to some extent [...] and of course, you feel proud to be part of that.

Maeve: In turn, Liz was incredible at building trust with those she reported on. A vital skill in journalism, but perhaps not one always associated with the cutthroat and often very male-dominated world of breaking news.

Liz joined *Newsnight*, this flagship BBC investigative show, in the year 2000. And after their kerfuffle with the paedophile priest car chase, she and Meirion became close colleagues, regularly working together on tough investigations. In 2009, the pair

revealed the illegal dumping of toxic waste in the Ivory Coast, by the oil trading company Trafigura. The two work together well.

Liz: We did such great stories. They were always such fun. We didn't always come at things from the same point of view at all. And that made for some quite lively conversations. But we always enjoyed the process. And I think we always felt we had more at the end than we would have done on our own, just because of working together.

Maeve: Years pass. And in quiet moments between investigations. Meirion's mind keeps coming back to Jimmy Savile. The advent of social media online was proving quite a blessing. Meirion found himself trawling through posts on the website Friends Reunited.

Meirion: I start putting Duncroft in, I start getting hints from the conversations amongst the girls there, that something had gone on.

Maeve: He mentioned Savile to Liz in passing. But it was clear, there wasn't enough to go on yet.

Liz: And I was interested, but I wasn't persuaded. I didn't think *Great, we're going to catch a really terrible paedophile and expose someone who deserves to be exposed.* I just thought, well, I've grown up listening to so many rumours about him. And I was interested to see what more there might be.

Maeve: Meirion kept on. Whenever there was a quiet moment, he'd boot up the computer.

Meirion: I would just see if anything was emerging there that was of any use.

Maeve: And then: *Boom.* Scouring the internet one day, Meirion came across a self-publishing website. And on there was an autobiography from a woman that had gone to Duncroft School. Meirion scanned through her story quickly, and then read it, again and again.

Meirion: Everything about it rang true, I could hear the voices of the members of staff who I hadn't heard in decades, when she quoted them saying things you could actually hear who it was and who's saying it. Everything about it was right.

But it would have been completely unbelievable to most people reading it to be, you know, the idea of this mansion, bars on the window, all these celebs turning up, the visits to Television Centre. Somebody else reading that would have found that incredible, but all that I knew was true. The only thing I didn't know was the extra 1%. *What happened when the car went out of the gates?*

Maeve: There it was, details about a man who would come to the school and take the girls out in his car, where he would get these vulnerable teenagers to perform sex acts on him.

The man wasn't named in the autobiography, but instead he was given initials: J.S. Immediately, Meirion knew who that must be. He mentioned the find to Liz. But they were both still wary. That's because something was looming above them. The threat of legal issues if they tried to pursue the story. Both journalists had heard that others had been shut down before. Savile had a strong legal team and came down on people hard.

Liz: And they'd been you know a case with *The Sun* where they'd had to pay damages. Meirion knew about the attempts by *The Daily Mirror* that had also met with failure because of the risk of libel. So, you knew that he was someone who would come down very heavily on anything that might be said. But your experience as a journalist tells you that doesn't mean innocence at all. It just means someone who can afford to be helped by the libel laws in this country.

Maeve: But then, something that changed everything.

[Broadcaster audio announcing Jimmy Savile's death]: *The veteran disc jockey, charity fundraiser and television personality, Sir Jimmy Savile, has died at the age of 84 - known by his trademark zany appearance, and love of big cigars. He made his name first on TV's Top of the Pops. And then the children's show he pioneered Jim'll Fix It. But despite his larger than life character, Sir Jimmy also had a reputation as a loner.*

[Audio clip ends]

Maeve: On the 29th of October 2011, Jimmy Savile died.

Liz: The day he died, or the day after, Meirion came back to me and said, "Right, nothing to stop us now." That whole libel concern disappeared. And then things happened very quickly. We spoke to our editor, Peter Ripon, who was interested. Within a few days, I presented him with a series of other potential stories, and he told me no, prioritise Savile.

Maeve: But they knew I was going to be sensitive. Savile had been a staple of the BBC for decades. While there he had worked with and around many young people.

Liz: Clearly, it would obviously be tricky within the BBC, because it was the BBC who'd helped make him the figure he was and if he was untouchable, it was the BBC, who'd largely helped him achieve that position. So we did anticipate problems internally with the story. Which is why when we approached it, you know, we tried to keep that from letting the powers that be know too much about it for as long as possible.

Maeve: The first thing to do was clear: Get in touch with the author of that online account Meirion had found. Her name was Karin Ward. And so Meirion got in touch.

Meirion: I was about to fly off to America on another story, I was gonna be out of the country for about 10 days. So I was working with Liz, and Hannah Livingston, who was our researcher, it was basically her first story at the BBC and she'd sort of volunteered to come work with me. And she found Karin's number. I then rang her immediately. And we had a very long conversation, maybe an hour. And of course, you know, I could say, I've read your book, I know that everything else you're saying in there is true, because I saw all that. And we were able to reminisce about all, all the people who were there, everything we remembered about it. And that built trust, and I was then able to ask about what had happened with Savile. We talked it all through. And we arranged that when I got back from America, we would go and interview her.

Maeve: Meanwhile, Liz and Hannah, the junior journalist, were hard at work too, searching all the online sites where Duncroft alumni might be talking.

Liz: And the most useful website was Friends Reunited. And this was where you began to pick up on the chatter, that the moment Savile died, people started talking openly

about him and, you know, *rest in peace and rot in hell*. Just comments that made you realise, yes, they were remembering him, not at all fondly, and certainly not in the way that he was being celebrated nationally, and not least on the BBC, at the time that he died. That was really our starting point to start talking to people and to start hearing accounts of what Savile had done.

Maeve: They started making calls, talking to as many women as possible.

Liz: The more we spoke to people, I mean, they weren't easy to get hold of, and some were incredibly reluctant to speak. We began to gather enough evidence from people that broadly corroborated one with the other, they weren't the same in all respects. They weren't all victims, a number of them just said, "Oh, yes, I saw that, or yeah, I was there when that happened, it didn't happen to me." And some of them were people like Karin, who it had happened to, and they all told roughly the same story.

And I remember thinking, gosh, he groomed them really carefully. And he you know, he would give them cigarettes, he would offer them trips to the BBC to see recordings of his shows. He gave them records. He made it worth their while, he offered them something that they weren't getting. But that was when I started to understand more about what grooming actually does, and how sinister it is. Because what he did was he made them complicit because they were getting something from him, when in return, they gave him oral sex at his instructions in his Rolls Royce in a countryside in Surrey.

And another really telling detail of what a number of them said to me over the course of those few weeks was it was only when they were older, and perhaps had children of their own, that they came to understand that what had happened to them was wrong.

And the other thing that happened was the way that Savile was eulogised on his death. That was the straw that broke the camel's back. And a lot of them said that to us, that they just couldn't stomach how he was being seen and held up. And it was finally time for them to speak.

Maeve: Their teammate, Hannah was making important breakthroughs too. Karin Ward, and some of the other Duncroft girls, had told them they had been on one of Jimmy Savile's shows called *Clunk Click* back in the mid-70s. It seemed like a vital detail that they would be able to verify, something that would back up at least part of the women's story.

So Hannah got to work searching the BBC's vast archive. She wasn't the only one though. Lots of the news programmes had pulled out all the old footage of Savile to make glowing obituary reels. Still, she persevered and eventually found the old *Clunk Click* recordings, but she hit a major problem. Back then shows were filmed on tape, and once it had been used, sometimes it was recorded over. Hannah managed to find the archive from *Clunk Click*, this obscure programme from the '70s. But, disaster. The episodes she needed *had* been recorded over.

It was a big blow, but Hannah pressed on. Eventually after a lot of searching, she found a taster reel for the show, a kind of advert, on it was lots of clips and sure enough, there in one of them in the studio were the Duncroft girls. Their frozen black-and-white images matched photos they had shared on Friends Reunited. It was proof. The girls *had* been there in the studio with Savile, just like they said they had. The team was ready. It was time to start filming. They needed to get an on-camera interview with Karin Ward.

Just over two weeks after Savile's death, the team set out to meet her.

Liz: The day we interviewed Karin Ward, in a way it was the most important day of the investigation. Because although by then we got a lot of other testimonies, people had told us things, we really felt we had quite a lot of evidence.

What Karin was willing to do was actually go on camera and sit there as herself and talk about what had happened. And this had never happened before. And we knew that it would be the most important thing in our investigation.

Meirion: We deliberately took a big team, because I wanted as many eyes as possible on her. So we had Liz, myself, Hannah, and the cameraman Simon Monk. So we all were there, I wanted everyone to be watching her and see what they thought.

Maeve: Meirion had spoken to Karin before. But he wanted others to see her, to gauge for themselves whether they thought her story held up. The car pulled up outside her house. This was it. The team walked to the front door and knocked.

Liz: We arrived at her house in Shropshire. She herself, at the time, was extremely ill—she was facing surgery. And she seemed exhausted. She seemed sort of weary and

jaded. I mean, she was perfectly [...] not exactly friendly. But she welcomed us in, sat us down, someone was there with her who made cups of tea. And we began to have the sort of chat about the interview. And she just seemed tired of it all. But without doubt she was determined to speak. It required no persuasion, she just wanted to finally get this out into the open.

Maeve: They set up for the interview in the living room of Karin's house.

Meirion: We probably spoke to her for an hour before we started the interview. And then the interview was probably another hour.

Maeve: Here's what Karin told them.

Karin: He wanted me to do things for him. He wanted me to fondle him. He asked me for oral sex. And I didn't want to. And he promised me that if I gave him oral sex, that he would arrange for me and my friends to go to Television Centre and be on his television show. I can't believe that I allowed such things to happen. That I didn't immediately rush and scream it from the rooftops: make this stop, just make it stop. But I didn't, none of us did. I just carried on. Lulled into a kind of false sense of that's how these things have to be. That's what we're for.

Maeve: As she spoke, Liz listened carefully. Not just to what she said, but how she said it.

Liz: You just know when someone's telling you the truth, really. I mean, how many interviews had I done before I'd interviewed Karin Ward? Hundreds. In all sorts of situations, and you just have a feeling for it, you just know. And by the time we did interview her, we'd spoken to so many other people who'd been at Duncroft school, that *all* were telling a very similar story, often about the same events, like recordings of *Clunk Click* at BBC Television Centre where Karin had been present and others. And I hadn't spoken to her before the interview, I'd read her accounts of what happened. But it was meeting her and talking to her. That was it, then, I absolutely knew that she was telling the truth. And yes, some of the details were vague, but in the sort of broad sense of what had happened and what had gone on, she was absolutely telling the truth. I didn't have any doubt about it.

Maeve: They wound up the interview and started to say their goodbyes. At the doorway, Karin turned to Meirion.

Meirion: She said to me, the BBC will stop this. They won't let you put this out. And I said, you know, the BBC was bad in the past. They did terrible things. They're not like that now. I promise you, we will get this story out.

Maeve: Meirion, Liz, Hannah and the cameraman bundled back into the car. There was a moment of stunned silence.

Liz: And the first thing we said was, what did you think? And we *all* thought—that was a moment actually of excitement, the first time I felt really excited about the story—she was really good. She really believed what she said. And we all thought, yes, she was telling us the truth.

Maeve: They set off towards the train station. Simon, the cameraman, was doing the driving, and he flicked on the radio.

Liz: And suddenly, it was announced that there were to be tribute programmes to Jimmy Savile, for the Christmas schedules. And the timing was amazing. And we all started giggling like, nervously like, oh goodness, they're going to have to pull those tribute programmes we thought. Because we were so convinced by what we had, Karin and all the other women that we'd spoken to, that it didn't occur to us that, no: the ones that would get pulled were *us*.

Maeve: Next time on *The Tip Off*...

(Preview) Episode 56: Meirion: We were both having blazing rows with our editor. I mean Liz, in particular, would go into his office and leave the door open so the whole office could hear what she was saying to him. And it gradually becomes more and more apparent to me that this is going to be blocked. And that whatever we do, they will stop this story coming out.

Maeve: That's all for this episode of *The Tip Off*. Please do review, subscribe and pass on word to your friends. And visit our new website, thetipoffpodcast.com, to explore show notes, past seasons, transcripts and more. This show is a co-production of Studio to be. Our co-executive producers are Joaquin Alvarado and Ken Ikeda. Maeve

McClenaghan – that's me – created this podcast. Olivia Aylmer produces the show. Chloe Behrens handles audio editing. Claudia Meza does our audio mixing and sound design. Thanks also to Soobin Kim and Rushana Miller for their transcription support. Dice Muse composed our theme music.

As always, stay tuned for more stories behind the headlines.