

The Heathwick Echo

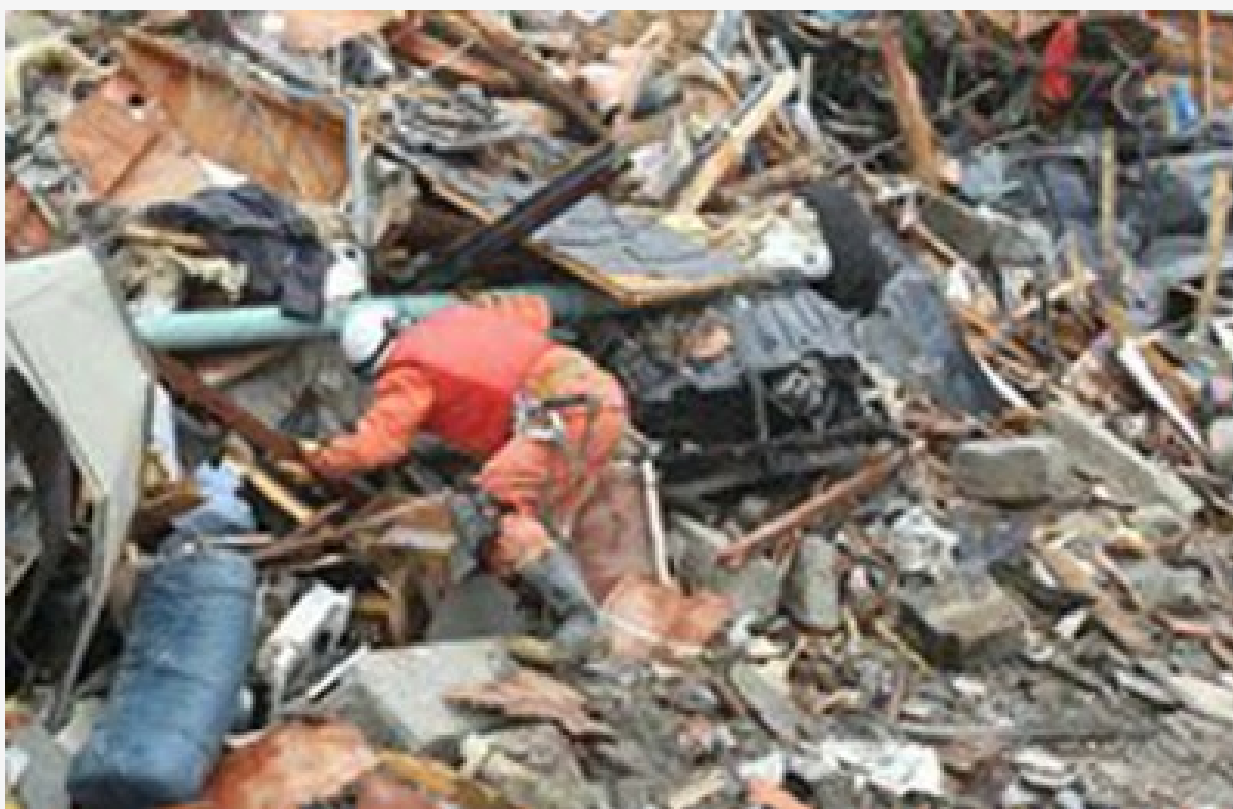
SPECIAL EDITION

December 17, 2011

FIREBALL IN HEATHWICK MANY DEAD

A note from the Editor

Heathwick is in mourning today after a catastrophe the like of which has never been seen in the area. As we go to press, 46 people are confirmed dead, and the toll is expected to rise. Among the dead are a gifted school teacher and at least eight of her students. Another teacher stands shamed for deserting his charges when they needed him most. There are questions that must be answered: by the police, by the rest of the emergency services, and by Globoil, who own the petrol station that brought horror to our town. Our own offices were destroyed. We are grateful to the Newhallen Tribune for lending us the facilities to produce this special edition of the Echo. It is devoted entirely to the events of yesterday, but we give the rest of our front page to one of the heroes of the disaster. We welcome to the Echo family Stuart Penton, a local man of whom we can all be proud.



A RESCUE WORKER FRANTICALLY SEARCHES FOR VICTIMS IN THE RUINS OF HEATHWICK HIGH STREET

I WAS THERE

An exclusive report from the first person at the scene of the Globoil explosion in Heathwick



By Stuart Penton

When I left home yesterday morning for a job interview at this newspaper, I was hoping I would one day see my byline in its pages. I never thought it would be there today, and I would give anything for it to be under different circumstances. For yesterday I was there when, at 9.22am, a fireball rose into the sky over Heathwick.

As I write, 46 people are known to have died.

Eight are still missing, and at least four are fighting for their lives in hospital. Heathwick High Street is devastated. Shops, and the homes above many of them, have collapsed. The world is asking, What happened?

I know. I was there.

Normal

It was a normal morning. The traffic was worse than usual because the High Street was blocked by a digging machine. I was about 50 metres

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DEVASTATED FROM THE EXPLOSIONS THAT SHOOK HEATHWICK AND DESTROYED SEVERAL BUSINESSES

from the Globoil petrol station, watching a man painting a sign outside St Michael's church. It showed how the generosity of local people had raised thousands of pounds towards repairing the roof.

Bang

I didn't hear the bang. Instead I felt an irresistible blast that threw me onto my back. I was standing behind a tree. I think that tree probably saved my life. I don't know how long I was lying on the grass. When I stood up, the man and his ladder had gone. I ran towards where they had been, and saw the man lying on the road, with a river of red streaming down the hill, away from his crumpled form. It was only when I reached him that I realised it was the paint he had been using for the sign. A moment's relief was crushed when I touched his body. It was lifeless. The man I now know to have been Matthew Larkin (76) was the first of many victims I would see that day.

Heat

The Rev Jonathan Davis (64) was preparing to conduct a funeral service at the church. After the blast, he too ran towards Mr Larkin. I suggested that we should see whether we could help anyone at the petrol station. The centre of the forecourt, where the pumps had been, was ablaze, but we could see that part of the shop was still intact. We fought our way against the overpowering heat, and called out. There was no reply, but through a hole in the back wall, we could see a man, pinned

down by a toppled display cabinet. He was still conscious, and calling for help. I squeezed through the hole, and lifted the debris off his legs. Together, Rev Davis and I tugged him to safety, praying that the shop would not catch fire, or disappear in a new blast. We dragged the man up the hill, and propped him against the tree that had saved me. I will always love that tree.

Prayer

The man was shocked, but he could speak. He told me that his name was Brian Smiley (27) and that he lived in Newhallen. He seemed weak. We feared we might lose him at any moment. Rev Davis offered to say a prayer. I knew we had to find out what had happened, so I asked Mr Smiley to tell us all he had seen. He said that just before the blast he had sold a man a jerry can and four litres of petrol. The man's van had run out of fuel just as he was leaving the car park in the middle of town.

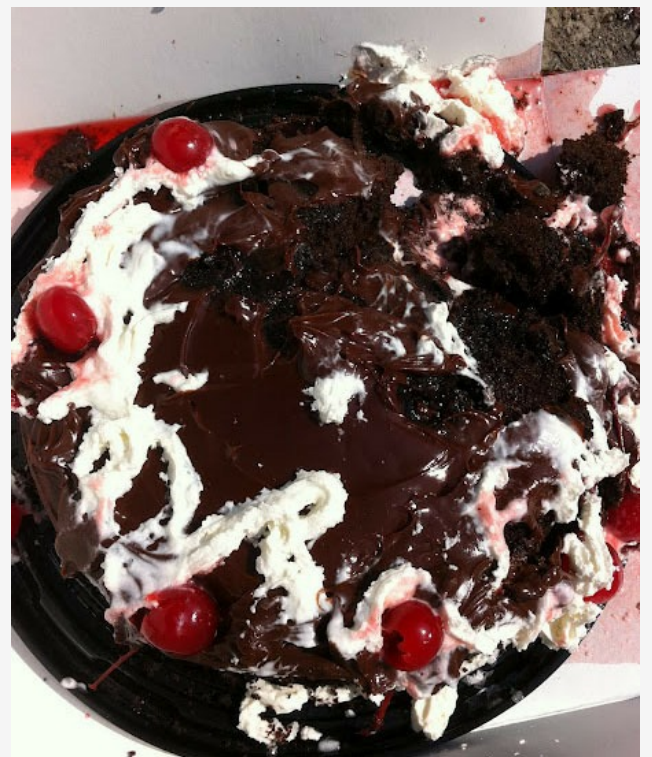
Spill

Mr Smiley said the man was running as he crossed the forecourt. He was anxious to get to get back to his van, which was causing an obstruction. Mr Smiley thought the top of the can must have been loose. He thought he'd seen the man trip. Some of the petrol might have splashed onto the ground. It wasn't the first spill. Only seconds earlier, Mr Smiley had seen a taxi driver fuel dripping from a nozzle on a tanker which was making a delivery to the site. It was a recipe for disaster.

After what seemed like an eternity, the police arrived, and soon after that, an ambulance took Mr Smiley to hospital. We could see that the taxi driver and the man with the petrol can had stood no chance of survival. At that stage, we thought they and Mr Larkin were the only victims of the terrible event. Only as the day wore on did the true extent of the disaster become apparent. The full details are on pages 2 – 17. Friday 16th December 2011 is a day that Heathwick, and the whole country, will never forget. I hope I never have to report on anything like it.



Local Councillor Anthony Dougall, who survived the blasts, with his wife, Gillie, who was still missing as we went to press. He believes she had just collected his birthday cake, filmed amidst the rubble by a TV crew who were at the scene before police cleared the area for safety reasons.



COUNCILLOR DOUGALL'S BIRTHDAY CAKE LIES IN THE RUBBLE - A CHILLING IMAGE OF HAPPY LIVES SHATTERED. MRS DOUGAL HAS NOT YET BEEN ACCOUNTED FOR.

STOP PRESS

Since Stuart Penton filed his report, casualty figures have been rising all the time. Although one missing person - believed to be a child from the school coach - was found wandering dazed in nearby countryside long after dark, it is now feared that the death toll may reach more than sixty. Police say anyone still worried about relatives who may have been in the Heathwick area yesterday morning should call the special emergency number: 08130 777706.

Designed by Alicia Rice & Arundati Dandapani