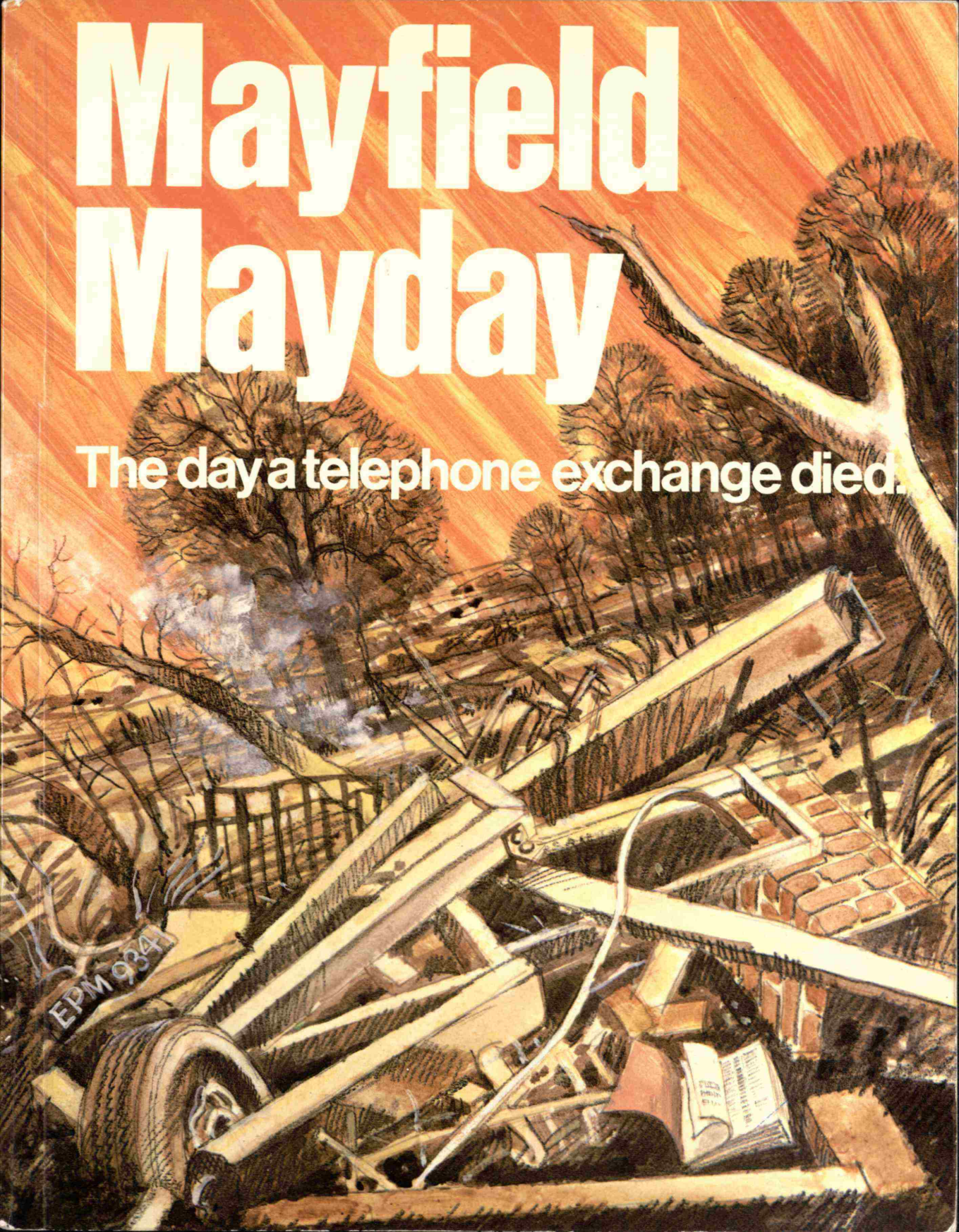


Mayfield Mayday

The day a telephone exchange died.



Phone exchange
blown to pieces

People thought
jet had crashed

'I saw school's
windows gone'

'Miracle that
no-one was'

BLAST IS BLAMED

ON - Exchange blast still has the gas experts puzzled

PERTS probing explosion at

flinging debris 50ft. into the air it is a mystery how it

£200,000 to rebuild the Mayfield exchange which

known as Raynet — are using their radios to provide a communications link between cars at the scene and of- fices at the Wells and head-

that by coincidence all seven were also Post Office employees.

Debris

Senior pupils at St. Leonards School spent yesterday picking up debris from windows

Postal praise for blast repair job

THE UNDERSTANDING of the public and the response by Post Office workers after Mayfield telephone exchange exploded in December were described as "superb" by the Tunbridge Wells Post Office general manager, Mr Sydney Shaw, on Thursday last week.

Mr Shaw said gas caused an explosion which totally demolished the building and caused considerable damage to nearby properties. Reconnecting village subscribers back to their telephones involved about 10,000 pairs of wires. The village was almost completely reconnected within six days.

Post Office staff worked night and day. He was speaking at the Tunbridge Wells and Tonbridge Post Office advisory committee meeting at Telephone House, Tunbridge Wells.

COURIER

Other matters discussed included the recently-introduced courier service operated by the Post Office. The head postmaster, Mr Stanley Thake, said that this service had grown popular with companies wanting fast delivery to London and elsewhere.

The charge was high — about £6 a parcel — but the Post Office guaranteed fast delivery.

If a parcel was handed in at Tunbridge Wells during the morning, it would be delivered in London just after lunchtime.

A parcel and its contents might not be worth £6, he said, but fast delivery might make a difference of hundreds of pounds.

The chairman of the committee, Mr George Tapp, suggested the

introduction of a uniform stamp which the public could buy to pay household bills gradually. Separate stamps for electricity, gas, television licences, and tele- phone bills were "wasting money and causing secondary problems". Mr Tapp said that one stamp should be used for all bills. It could be available from Post Offices instead of the public being asked to

buy different stamps at different places. The International Direct Dialling system from Tunbridge Wells and Sevenoaks has now been extended to include El Salvador, Costa Rica, Dominica, Fiji, Guatemala, Macao, West Malaysia, Turkey and Venezuela which now brought the total number of countries available on IDD to 86.



... the telephone engineers. In the centre are parish council chairman Mrs Kathlene Fisher, and Mr Sydney Shaw, Telephones area manager.

Village thanks wire wizards

MAYFIELD people showed their gratitude on Saturday to the engineers who made it possible

During the evening Mrs Shaw, the Telephone up which will to the person on the

MAYFIELD TELEPHONE EXCHANGE

'Thank you' to Villagers

We recently issued an invitation to villagers to attend a 'Get together' in the Village Hall to say 'thank you' for their co-operation following an explosion which demolished the village telephone exchange.

For those unable to attend, we would like to take this opportunity to offer again, our thanks for their understanding during the crisis.

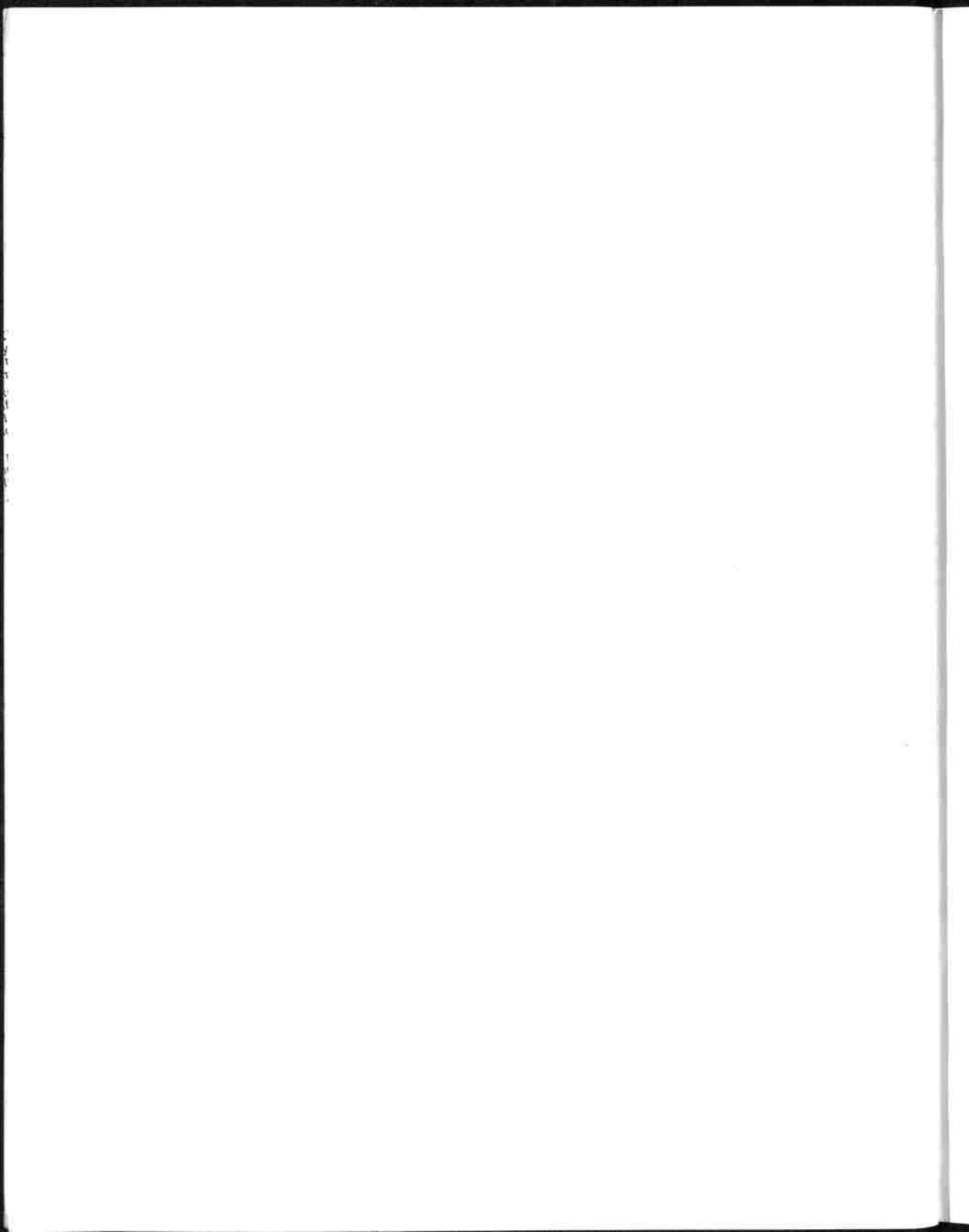
We are happy to report all lines were re-connected by 0900 hours on Sunday 3rd December.

Plans are already being progressed to replace the exchange building and install modern electronic equipment.

Sydney Shaw
General Manager
Tunbridge Wells Telephone Area

Post Office Telecommunications

MAYFIELD MAYDAY



MAYFIELD MAYDAY

Edited by Terry Fisher MIPR, MAIE

Reported by Post Office Staff, the residents and
children of Mayfield village, Alison Sibley
and Faith Lee

*Published by The South Eastern Telecommunications
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FOREWORD

The story of the utter destruction of the Mayfield exchange on 27 November 1978 and its restoration is told primarily to commemorate the magnificent achievement of restoring service in such a short time under bitter and adverse weather conditions. There is cause, too, to be grateful that no-one was seriously injured when the huge explosion took place, destroying the exchange and damaging surrounding properties.

Seldom in peacetime have men and women responded so willingly and enthusiastically to such a monumental task. "We're here to help you" was effectively transformed from a slogan to a living, vital demonstration of caring about service to our customers. Sydney Shaw and his staff brilliantly met that challenge, with the support of colleagues from South Eastern Telecommunications Headquarters, the Guildford Telephone Area and the Postal business. The other public undertakings and services also played an important part in the task of restoration.

In very difficult conditions, Post Office staff found nothing but help and understanding from everyone they met and I would like especially to mention, for their timely assistance and encouragement, Mrs Pither and the people of Mayfield. Without the help and goodwill of so many people, the task of restoration would have been much protracted.

Mayfield 78 will long be remembered and as a small tribute to the untiring efforts of so many people, I hope this book will help to keep alive the fellowship and the sense of purpose generated in those testing days. The 'Dunkirk spirit' lives on.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "A J Barker". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of each name being capitalized and prominent.

AJ BARKER

Director

South Eastern Telecommunications Region



A. J. Barker Esq
Director
South Eastern Telecomms Region

4 December 1978

Dear Jerry,

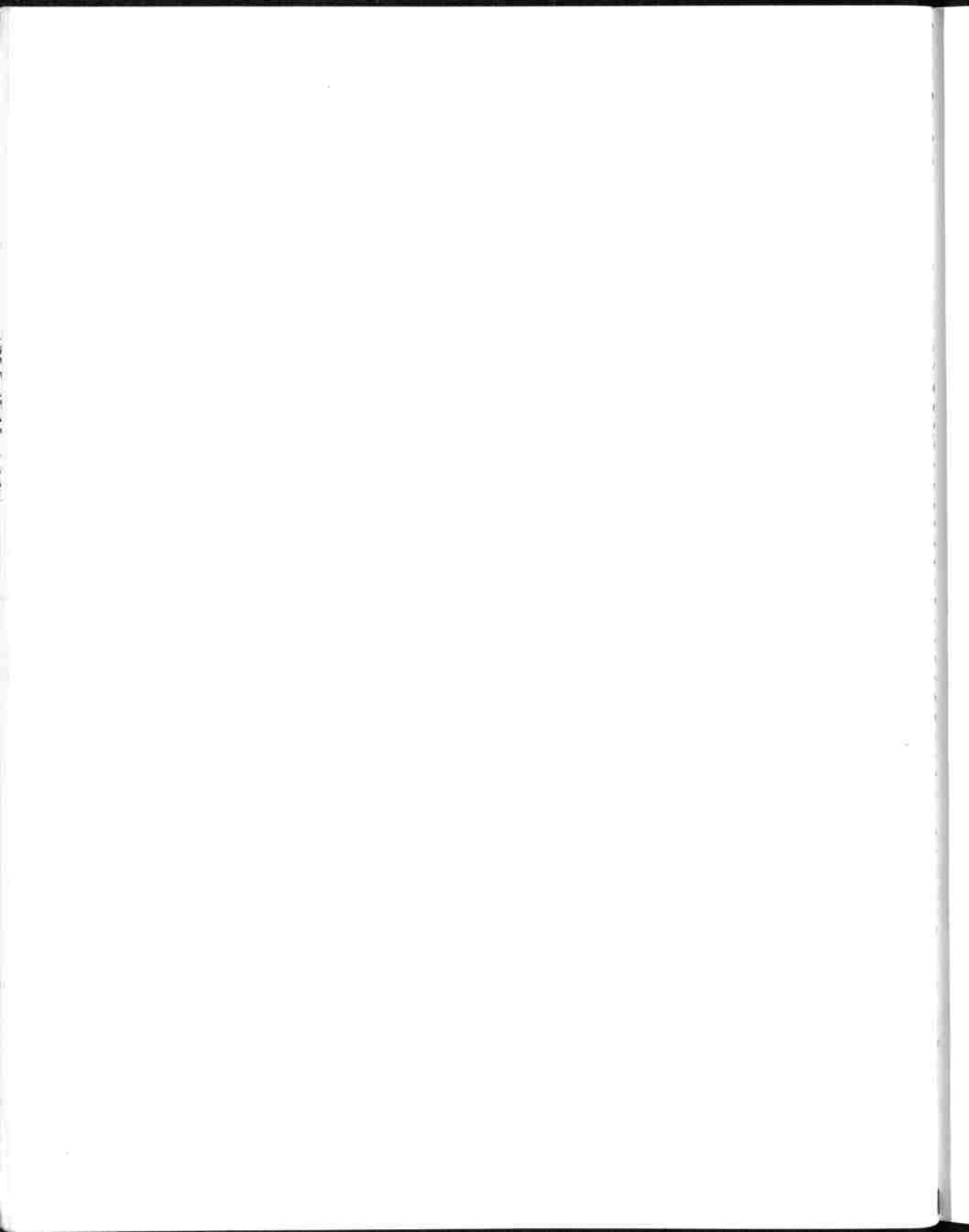
I have followed closely your helpful progress reports on the work of restoring service at Mayfield after the disastrous explosion. I would be grateful if you would convey to your management team and to all the staff involved - many of whom worked long hours in very uncongenial conditions - my appreciation of their efforts and my congratulations on their success in restoring service so promptly. It was in the best traditions of Post Office service.

Well done!

Yours sincerely,

Peter Benton

P. F. Benton
Managing Director
Post Office Telecommunications



MAYFIELD COUNTDOWN

DAY 1 November 27, 1978

7.50 pm Explosion destroys exchange completely.

11.50 pm Payphone in Village Hall connected to give first link with outside world.

3 pm Mobile exchange No 1 arrives on site.

7 pm Leaflets advising residents of position delivered at Tunbridge Wells post office for household distribution the following day in Mayfield.

9 pm Emergency caravan delivered from Guildford telephone area equipped with payphones and connected to network.

DAY 2 November 28

1 am Junction circuits completed, tested and jumpering of emergency lines begins.

10 am Mobile exchange No 2 arrives on site.

3 pm Mobile exchange No 3 arrives on site.

5 pm All emergency lines now connected and working.

DAY 3 November 29

Intensive cabling work externally and internally on mobile units.

DAY 4 November 30

Cabling work continues as for Day 3.

DAY 5 December 1

All work continues throughout the day. Engineers begin to restore non emergency lines.

6 pm One quarter (25%) of all lines now reconnected and working.

DAY 6 December 2

9 am One half (50%) of all lines now reconnected and working.

DAY 7 December 3

12 pm All lines (100%) reconnected and working.

CHARACTERS IN THE BOOK

SOUTH EASTERN TELECOMMUNICATIONS REGION

A J BARKER

Director

RON BAYFIELD

Head of Exchange Maintenance

PETER BENEFIELD

*Deputy Controller Planning — Transmission
and Lines*

JOHN BLURING

Deputy Controller Service Maintenance

TED BRICE

*Assistant Executive Engineer — Planning and
Equipment*

COLIN CAIN

Assistant Regional Catering Officer

TERRY FISHER

Regional Press Officer

GRAHAM JAMES

Civil Emergency Co-ordinating Officer

ROY SKEUS

Head of Fault Repairs

BEN VAUGHAN

Service Controller

KEN WILSON

Regional Public Relations Officer

TUNBRIDGE WELLS AREA

RAY BAILEY

Assistant Executive Engineer

KEITH BAREFIELD

Executive Engineer — Maintenance

BERT BASSETT

Night Telephonist

JOHN BOXES

Assistant Executive Engineer

TONY BURTON

Maintenance Technician at Mayfield Exchange

BETTY COLE

Telephonist

BARBARA CUBBAN

Telephone Service Representative

JOHN DAY

Executive Engineer — Local Line Planning

BERNARD FELDON

Executive Engineer on Internal Planning

BILL FOX

Head of Customer Service

DAVID GRAY

Head of Maintenance

DENNIS GUILLE

*Assistant Executive Engineer in Full Time
Charge of Mayfield Exchange*

MATTHEW HANNAN

External Plant Maintenance Control Hawkenbury

BETTY HARMAN

Telephonist

LEN HARMAN

Night Telephonist

BERNARD HATCH

Assistant Executive Engineer

JOHN W HAWKINS

Executive Engineer — External Works

YVONNE HOLCOMBE

Supervisor Telephonist

FRED HOLLAMBY

Cable Maintenance Precision Tester

HAZEL HAYWOOD

Night Telephonist

JOHN KELLY

Executive Engineer — Internal works

NEVILLE LEETE

Night Telephonist

JACK MITCHELL

Assistant Executive Engineer

ROSEMARY MITCHELL

*Chief Supervisor in charge of Tunbridge Wells
Switch Room*

GORDON NOAKES

Technical Officer

MRS PAT PALMER

Group Restaurant Manageress

DAVID PRIESTLEY

Head of External Planning

MIKE POPE

Executive Engineer

SYDNEY SHAW

General Manager — Tunbridge Wells

Telephone Area

VIC TAYLOR

Area Press Liaison Officer — Tunbridge Wells

Area

PAUL TOURLE

Technical Officer

LYNN TURNER

Pat Palmer's Assistant

RESIDENTS OF MAYFIELD

JANE BARKER

Pupil — Mayfield School

MRS CONNIE BAYS

TRACEY BELL

Pupil — Mayfield School

GILES FOX

Pupil — Mayfield School

KAREN HAMMOND

Pupil — Mayfield School

REVEREND PHILIP ILOTT

Vicar of Mayfield

SARAH LARCOMBE

Pupil — Mayfield School

DEREK LINDOP

Village Butcher

EILEEN AND TONY LINK

Proprietors Warren Bakery

AMBER MARKWICK

Pupil — Mayfield School

PETER McCARTHY

Bandsman — Mayfield Village Band

PHILIP MILLS

Pupil — Mayfield School

SISTER ANNE MURPHY

Head Mistress — St Leonards/ Mayfield Convent

MICHAEL NORCOCK

Teacher — Mayfield School

MRS KATHLEEN PITHER

Chairman Mayfield Parish Council

ADRIAN POPE

Pupil — Mayfield School

MRS JENNY PURSGLOVE

Treasurer Mayfield Band

KEN RICH

Musical Director — Mayfield Band

MARK SHEFFIELD

Pupil — Mayfield School

SUSAN STANTON

Pupil — Mayfield School

CHARLES VOCKINS

Officer in Charge of Mayfield Fire Station

MRS PEGGY WICKER

Memorial Hall Caretaker

IVOR & VERA WREN



'Complete devastation' ... 'a pile of rubble' ...

MAYDAY . . . MAYDAY . . . MAYDAY

reported by Alison Sibley

It was just before 7 a.m. when technician Tony Burton parked his car at Mayfield telephone exchange and collected his Post Office van to drive to Tunbridge Wells. It was a normal Monday morning, but bitterly cold, and there was very little traffic about at that time of day.

About an hour later, Mayfield exchange was blown out of existence by an explosion which hurled rubble and bits of telephone equipment hundreds of yards across the normally busy main road. Nearly a thousand telephones went dead. It was believed to have been caused by gas seeping from a fractured main into the exchange through cable ducts.

A few minutes later, the site, which had been a building the size of two average houses (60 feet by 25 feet), was crawling with firemen, police, Gas Board officials and Post Office staff.

Miraculously, no-one was hurt, and later, a shaken **Tony Burton** was grateful it was just his car he had lost. Nothing was left standing of the unmanned exchange, which had served 954 people.

Into action

News of the explosion spread fast. First on the scene of devastation was the fire brigade, closely followed by the police. The first member of Post Office staff to hear of the blast officially from the police was **Yvonne Holcombe**, supervisor at Tunbridge Wells telephone exchange, who in turn telephoned various area staff according to a pre-arranged list, kept handy for emergencies.

When the telephone call came through at home for area general manager, **Sydney Shaw**, it was just 16 minutes after the explosion and he was shaving. In the first two or three seconds Mr Shaw thought it was the start of a dummy run for a simulated

disaster – which the area board had planned for the near future. “But the thought lasted just a moment”, said Mr Shaw, “this was for real. When I arrived at the office, **David Gray**, head of maintenance, was already organising a jointer’s wagon with a wireless on board to provide our first line of communication with the site.”

When the explosion rocked Mayfield, recollection of Exercise Inflamm was strong in many minds. This was the code name for the paper disaster involving a gas explosion at Ashford exchange, used by regional headquarters to test reactions of South Eastern Telecommunications Region to a major service disruption.

Although it did not take place in Tunbridge Wells, the area had made some contingency plans as a direct result of the exercise, which proved very useful at Mayfield. For example, the general manager, Mr Shaw, and head of customer service, **Bill Fox**, were able to call the area board to an ‘incident’ room already available and equipped with telephones. A radio set was also brought into the room to receive the first information from the site by radio.

Bill Fox was in charge of the area control at the general managers office for communications, staffing, canteen facilities and publicity. There was also an incident control on site. “My first job,” said Bill, “was to advise regional headquarters. We then sat back to assess the situation.

“Our priority task was to arrange communication for the people in the village, so I got on to Guildford area, who have a suite of call offices in a caravan, to ask if we could borrow it. The answer was of course yes, and it arrived at 2.30 on Monday afternoon and was working by about 4.30 p.m.”

From then on, continual progress was made during the day, and through the night, until



Sydney Shaw, area general manager

Mayfield's telephones were reconnected to the outside world late the following Sunday afternoon. That week too, saw some of the coldest nights for 50 years.

"From the very beginning we did our best to keep the customers up to date with what was happening", said Bill. "Regional headquarters printed our notices for kiosks and shop windows, and we sent a telephone service representative around to business customers early on Monday. Reaction from the villagers was extremely favourable because they could see that restoration was being carried out quickly.

"After Exercise Inflamm we thought about the possibility of needing some form of communication immediately and we came up with a portable rack, made locally, which can be plugged into the mains and which has six telephones and long lines equipment. This was taken out to Mayfield and put into use immediately, providing lines to Tunbridge Wells.

"When I got to the site I had never seen

devastation quite so complete – even after a war spent in London."

Start from scratch

From the first reports on site, it was clear that nothing had been saved from Mayfield exchange and that engineers would have to start from scratch. The obvious necessity was therefore mobile exchanges, and with nearly 1,000 subscribers, three would be necessary as each mobile could cope with 400. Next to the exchange was a well-appointed village hall and a car park. It was in this hall that all the activity took place, and the car park provided ideal parking for the mobiles.

"Firstly I had to get permission to park them", said Mr Shaw, "so when I got to the site I went to see the chairman of the parish council, **Mrs Kathleen Pither**, who lost no time at all in giving permission. She walked with me to see the devastation and to see the proposed site for the mobiles, and then we went around the village to see



Emergency service



What a mess!



Getting on with the job in hand

people, so that I could introduce myself and apologise for the inconvenience being caused."

Meanwhile, Post Office staff – around 230 altogether – were getting on with the job in hand, engineers and their staff in internal and external works, planning, building, maintenance, lines and equipment; operators and telephone service reps, public relations and restaurant staff, in the office and on the site.

As head of external planning and works, **Derek Priestley's** name was one on the list available for operators at Tunbridge Wells exchange. He knew of the explosion before he left home that morning, and was able to act quickly when he got to the office, organising an external planning team to get together drawings of the underground network at Mayfield.

"Once we had the drawings," said Derek, "we were able to plan how the external cables down the main road could be diverted to the memorial hall. My staff installed the main distribution frame, or cabinet, which was the cross-connection point for the mobiles. There were about four people trying to get around this point, like bees round a honey pot, and this was one of the major difficulties of doing the job quickly, getting enough people to work at it at one time. The situation was even worse in the mobiles, where there was room for only two people at a time to make connections."

Assistant executive engineer in maintenance, **Dennis Guile**, is in charge of Mayfield full time. He said: "I got to Mayfield a few minutes after 9 a.m. and was flabbergasted with what I saw. I walked over the rubble looking for the exchange records, but the few I found were only just legible. I could smell gas and there were a lot of people milling about."

"A single cable was being arranged to run a line back to another exchange at Rotherfield. This was the first line working. I organised another team to run two more to

Rotherfield. The first drop wire was through at 11.50 a.m. to the renter's call box in the village hall – just four hours after the explosion. My was it busy! Everyone in the hall was either waiting for, or wanting to, give information by telephone and this first line was in constant use. Later that afternoon another line was connected to a private telephone in the hall. There was also a line on the caravan. Later in the evening another group had run an aerial cable, so we had three call boxes and two telephones in the caravan open to the public."

Emergency lines

Priority was given to the restoration of service to all emergency lines. This was another urgent job for Bill Fox early that Monday morning. "I got hold of a list of all emergency subscribers, some of which were out of the range of the first mobile's numbers. These were put on temporary numbers. We sent a telex to all general managers in the



Dennis Guile, assistant executive engineer, maintenance

country saying that Mayfield was out of action, and we put a recorded announcement on the circuit for emergency messages to go to Tunbridge Wells 31151. These, in life or death cases – and we know there were some – were transmitted to the Sussex police and then relayed to their patrol car at Mayfield.

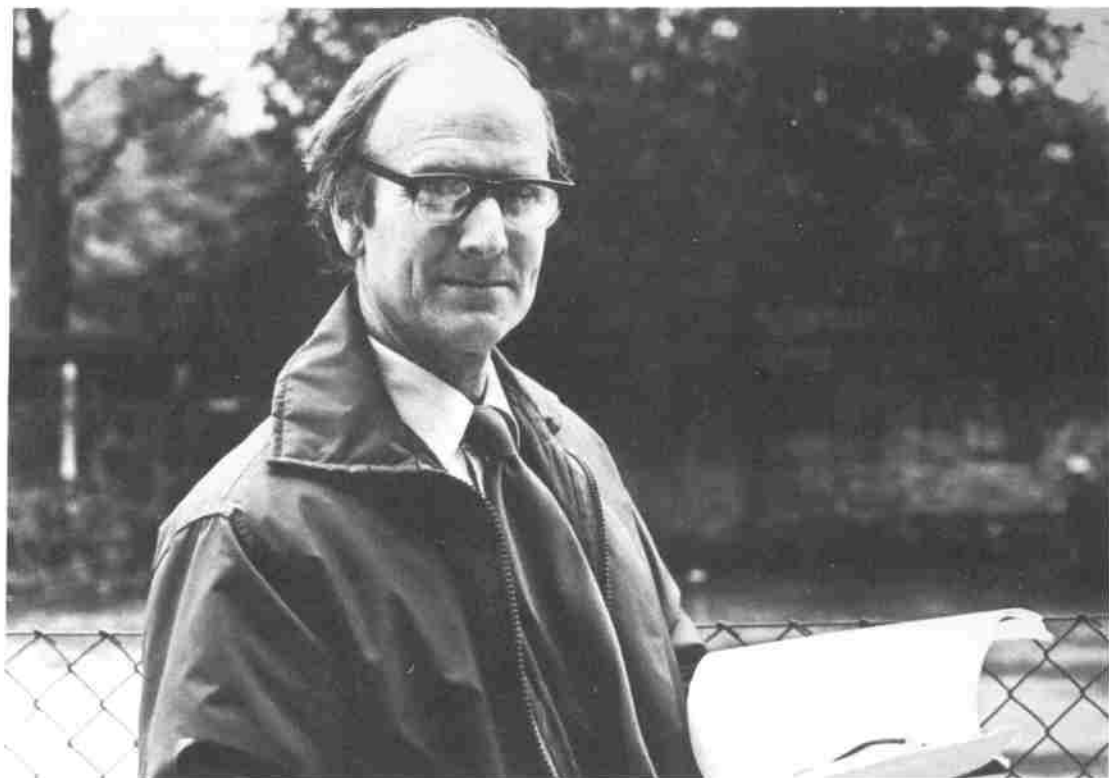
“When the junctions were opened between Mayfield and Tunbridge Wells, we again advised all general managers that urgent calls only should be given to the Tunbridge Wells operator. We then displayed on a large blackboard in the switchroom the numbers which were working, and the temporary numbers not in the range of the first mobile. We also changed the recorded announcement accordingly. All the emergency line customers, about 35, were re-connected by midday on Tuesday.”

A sketch plan and control point were the first jobs for executive engineer in internal

works, **John Kelly**, and his assistants. “We wanted key staff to connect up the mobiles when they arrived”, he said, “and from this point on it all started. The Mayfield incident was a black and white situation for us, as nothing at all remained of the exchange. Rather than begin a lengthy and difficult repair we could start from scratch.

“One of our biggest problems was that the connecting points for the mobile exchanges were all around a very small part of each caravan. We could have done with 10 people around each point but only two were possible, and everyone wanted to get to the same point at the same time.

“Another major problem was that we had to work on two fronts – on the one hand we had to reconnect the customers and on the other we had to make the three mobiles look like an exchange, in other words connect up each one to the other, involving masses of wires.”



John Kelly, executive engineer, internal works

Co-operation

Internal and external planning groups worked closely together on the restoration schedule, and Mr Kelly's opposite number in external planning, executive engineer **John W. Hawkins**, was also involved in continuous monitoring of the work in progress.

It was during one bitterly cold night on site – which John Hawkins spent alternately with executive engineer **Mick Pope** – that John Hawkins began scribbling his story of the 'Mayfield Incident'.

His story sets the scene during that week – in the village hall and down the manhole. He writes, in true war correspondent style: "Destruction was total. No walls were left standing and all the equipment was unusable. Large pieces of debris were thrown across the main road A267.

"By the middle of the week the village hall was a scene of great activity. In one corner, planning group, complete with

photocopier, were preparing schedules and dealing with the inevitable queues. In another corner, traffic staff were ringing customers as they were reconnected.

"Maintenance staff also set up a mini repair service centre as subscribers were reconnected. A control point was manned to report progress back to the general manager's office. Adequate phone communication had by now been established by providing Tunbridge Wells exchange lines over junction cables. Later in the week an overhaul centre was set up to clean and adjust the switches from the mobiles as they were proving sticky after a prolonged period out of use."

... and sustenance

John Hawkins also remarks on how grateful all the men were for the kitchen facilities available in the hall – and especially

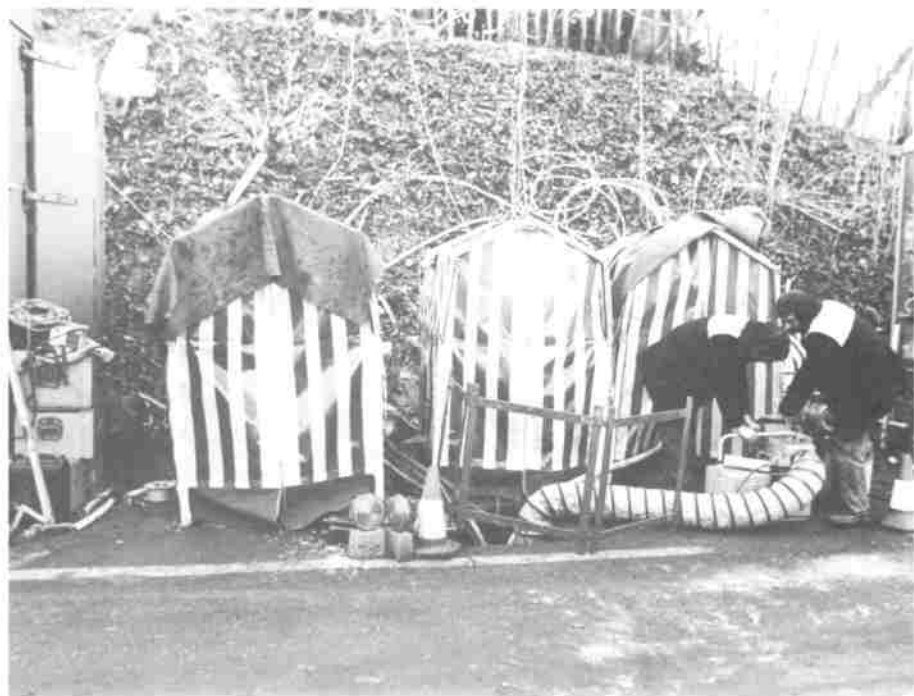
Continued on page 25



John W. Hawkins, executive engineer



Working by night . . . and day





The village hall, scene of great activity

grateful to the women who provided breakfasts, lunches, teas and hot soup during the arctic nights. Group restaurant manageress **Mrs Pat Palmer** worked through the nights from 4.30 p.m. to 8.30 a.m., while her assistant **Lynn Turner** worked at the site during the day.

"On that first Monday," said Pat, "we cooked enough beef hotpot, peas, and apple tart for 40 lunches, wrapped it in tin foil and took it by car to Mayfield. It was still hot when we arrived about 20 minutes later, and I also had fillings for sandwiches in case there were not enough lunches to go round. This was also the time of the bread strike, so it was lucky I had ordered extra bread and put it in the freezer.

"Having fed the men on the first day I could then take stock and decide what to do. I had Lynn to help me, and assistant regional catering officer, **Colin Cain**, also came to see that we were coping. After my night

shift I came into the general manager's office in the mornings, then went home to sleep, which I found difficult at first.

"I served hot soup and coffee during the nights – which were very cold – and cooked a proper meal served between 10.30 and 11.30 p.m. We served an average of 60 lunches a day and as a lot of the food was cooked at the general manager's office, we chose food which was easily transportable, such as cottage pies and meals which were filling for the men. I served 50 breakfasts, starting at 5 a.m., with 18 more or less at one sitting.

"The village hall had a nice kitchen with a six ring cooker and good washing-up facilities. There were plenty of tables and chairs and we were allowed to use the crockery there.

"The worst time of the night for me was between 2 and 4 a.m. I tended to stay in the kitchen and one night one of the men came



Time for a break: left to right, Mick Botten, Bill Bull, Bill Headdon, Colin Cain with Lynn Turner and Pat Palmer

in and found me with my feet in the oven trying to keep warm! On one occasion I sent out for bread as we were running low, and the Mayfield baker supplied three dozen rolls free of charge.

"It was an exciting time really, and it did remind me of wartime because the atmosphere and comradeship was marvellous. I made a lot of new friends and there were no grumbles. I really felt we were doing our bit by keeping the men warm. There was all the behind-the-scenes work too, by the cooks at the general manager's office and all the catering staff who held the fort."

The men on site were so appreciative of Pat Palmer's hard work in looking after them, that they made a collection for her of more than £22.

Post Office staff at Mayfield

Some Post Office staff who live in Mayfield or pass through the village on their way to work, felt the blast or saw the aftermath of the explosion. Assistant executive engineer **Jack Mitchell** was one of the first to tell "unbelievers" at Tunbridge Wells general manager's office what he had seen.

Executive engineer on maintenance and local resident, **Keith Barefield**, had no idea at first that the "almighty bang" which shook his house on the other side of the hill to the exchange, would mean a hard week's work ahead for his colleagues and himself.

"At first I thought it was a bomb", said Keith, "but just as rapidly thought it couldn't be, and that it was someone's central heating blowing up. Then when I went to the paper shop someone said the telephone exchange had blown up. I went to see for myself and was aghast. After I'd told my wife about it, I had the luck to see Fred Hollamby, who is a precision tester on cable maintenance, passing by in his radio control vehicle. I stopped him and asked him to get a message via the radio back to Tunbridge Wells, and asked him to go back to the village hall and stay there to provide com-

munication with Tunbridge Wells."

Another person to arrive at work stunned on Monday morning was telephone operator **Betty Cole**, who also lives in the village. Betty had come out of her house and seen an aircraft go over. Shortly afterwards she felt the blast of an explosion which left her short of air, and thinking the aeroplane had crashed she rushed indoors to dial 999. But of course her telephone was dead. It was only on her way to work that she saw what had happened to the exchange.

When Betty got to work, supervisor **Yvonne Holcombe** had already swung into action a few minutes after eight and was following her emergency instructions. **Rosemary Mitchell**, who is in charge of the switchroom during the day, said: "In any disaster, such as an air crash, we are prepared with our information as to who, what and where to ring. Anyone on duty at the time has her instructions handy. Our difficulty for Mayfield was not what to do but persuading people it was true!"

Betty Cole later joined colleagues **Betty Harman**, telephone service representative **Barbara Cubban** and night telephonists **Hazel Hayward**, **Neville Leete**, **Bert Bassett** and **Len Harman** in testing reconnections on site in conjunction with the engineers.

But the two Post Office staff who were actually first on site to see what could be done were technical officers **Paul Tourle** and **Gordon Noakes**, who have maintenance responsibility for Mayfield. Paul said: "We got a message from head of maintenance David Gray via Tunbridge Wells test desk at about 8.15 to go immediately to Mayfield as it had blown up. This caused some comment but it sounded like a disaster so Gordon and I left at full speed. When we first caught sight of the damage we were totally amazed - what did we do now? There was nothing left to maintain!"

"So we went to the next exchange area, Rotherfield, to telephone control the posi-



The enormity of the problem



David Gray, head of maintenance



Bernard Hatch briefing men on cable laying operations

tion, by which time wheels were already in motion. All we could do then was wait for lines from Rotherfield. These first lines were two drop wires laid in the hedges along the roadside. Later in the day an aerial cable was run. We visited the site on and off all week, because as subscribers were reconnected we helped test faults, especially on the emergency circuits."

Key man on the job at Mayfield was head of maintenance, **David Gray**. He was having breakfast when he was telephoned by the general manager's secretary. "It was a tentative message as we didn't have all the facts then", said David. "I tried to ring Keith Barefield, but of course I couldn't get through, so I rang the test desk to see if they knew the position. They didn't, so I asked them to send a lineman to get Mr Barefield out and leave a message for Dennis Guile. The test desk rang back and confirmed the explosion which was the first time, I think, the words 'a pile of rubble' were used."

"Next call was to **Matthew Hannan**, external plant maintenance control at Hawkenbury to arrange for a vehicle with a radio to go to Mayfield. As it happened, Keith Barefield had already got a mobile radio there."

"By this time it was about 8.25 so I rang the general manager and prepared to go to the site with gumboots, sweater and overcoat. All during the drive I kept wondering what I was going to find, then when I saw it, it all became real and my first thought was that we were going to need some mobiles."

"But first I introduced myself to a policeman there, a chief inspector I believe, asked if anyone was hurt, then saw Dennis Guile who told me everyone had been accounted for. I talked to Dennis about getting lines for two telephones in the village hall. Then, before we could choose a site for the mobiles, the external planners would have to look at where the cables could be run, so we radioed for Bernard Hatch and his group to come out."

Assistant executive engineer **Bernard Hatch**, who has been laying cables for more than 20 years, takes up the story: "Dave Parks and I both know the cable layouts at Mayfield. So we collected all the plans and necessary records needed to make decisions on site, and with the first lot of these, went out to Mayfield. I didn't quite believe it until I actually saw what had happened, but then we just got on with what had to be done."

"We had to know what stores we could get our hands on to start repair work so we used the control van to ask if a 60-pair cable was available from anywhere - and it was, from Hastings."

"We worked from 10.15 until after midnight the next day, only stopping to eat around 4 p.m. Our first cabling operation was completed in the dark. The cable from Hastings went into the duct track about 6 p.m., lit by mobile generators. A six-way duct was laid from a footpath by the roadside, through a rosebed, to two cabinets by the village hall, and there was floodlighting there for the duct-laying gang. This cable was connected to the first mobile at 11 p.m. and provided 44 lines to Tunbridge Wells."

"All the work we did was with the new exchange in mind. Initially we had to get Mayfield back on the telephone, and we could have put odd wires and cables all over the place. But we knew we would eventually have to transfer to the new exchange and we wanted to do that in the simplest possible way. We picked up the existing network at the old exchange site, so basically all we will have to do, when the new exchange is built, is lift it in with the transfer."

The most worrying part of the public being without telephones is that they are unable to call for help over the 999 system. David Gray was particularly concerned with this aspect on Monday morning, so he asked the police for their help. They arranged for a mobile radio to be stationed at the police house in the village where incoming 999

calls could be relayed through the police network. Those needing to make a 999 call could also do so from the police house. A loudspeaker van toured the village explaining that life or death messages could be relayed in this way. Gordon Noakes went with the van to show the police how far the subscribers on Mayfield exchange extended geographically.

David Gray said: "Next we needed a site for the mobiles and a place for an incident centre, necessary because so much engineering work had to be done on site. The village hall and car park looked ideal, and then we had to obtain permission for both.

"By the time all this was achieved it was about 11.30 and we had a little meeting on site to see where we were going. There was **Bernard Feldon**, executive engineer on internal planning, **Bernard Hatch**, the general manager and myself, and from regional headquarters, **Peter Benefield** and **Roy Skues**. We decided who was going to do what, and then work really started to progress during the day and for the rest of the week.

"The first telephones in use for the public were free, but there wasn't a mad rush to use them, just the steady trickle one would expect. Again Keith Barefield arranged the loudspeaker van to let everyone know those telephones were available.

"During the first day", David Gray continues, "lots of people came up to me and said they supposed it would be months before they were back on the telephone, and they were so pleased to learn it would be just a few days.

"Before Pat Palmer arrived to feed us, the women of the village were very good to us organising coffee, soup and sandwiches. Everyone became very friendly and Kathleen Pither, chairman of the parish council, told us one day that her daughter was due any day from America, but that of course she hadn't heard from her. She wouldn't hear of us organising a call to America, protesting

we were far too busy. When her daughter finally arrived, she brought her up to see us.

"It was miraculous no-one was hurt and we were very lucky as to the location of the exchange. Even so, it was a tremendous job from beginning to end, tremendous because everyone seemed to know what they were supposed to do, got stuck into it and did it."

Service restored

It took just seven days to put Mayfield back on the map. John Hawkins outlined some of the problems and some of the lighter moments of the week. He said: "The two main engineering problems were firstly to interconnect the three mobiles to work as a complete exchange, and secondly to link this new exchange to the existing cable network. The inter-connection of the mobiles involved running cables between them of about 1,000 wires. Space in the mobiles was at a premium and men were almost standing on top of each other running and terminating cables.

"Work around the exchange manhole was hampered by gas in the hole and SEGAS workmen repairing the fracture. Jointing of some of the cables was carried out above ground to enable jointers to make three joints at the same time. But passing the completed joints and cable loops back down the manhole was a tricky operation and not completed until much later.

"Emergency subscribers were identified by 'tapping back' from the DPs (distribution points). The connection of emergency lines which occurred in all cables, left a bird's nest of interconnection at the exchange manhole site. From then on external and exchange staff worked in unison to ensure that lines were connected as the cable pair became available, using schedules of connections in cable order produced by the external planning staff working on the site. Friendly rivalry developed between internal and external staff to see which group completed a page of schedules first.



Engineers work cheerfully in cramped conditions

"The week was a very busy one but not without its amusing moments. For instance, the Vicar of the local parish church arrived one day and asked who was in charge - only to be told it was Mr Pope. The Vicar later held a service of thanksgiving in the village. There was some good news too for the villagers when they came to meet us at the end of the week - that the Post Office would not be able to charge for dialled units made since the last meter reading as the charge meters had been destroyed in the blast."

John Hawkins of external planning is now busy preparing for the new exchange at Mayfield, which had been due for new equipment. It is hoped the new building will be completed by March 1980 and that the new electronic exchange, TXE2, will be installed by October the same year.

So the mobiles will be a familiar sight to the villagers for some time. Bill Fox said: "Afterwards, we put special equipment in at Mayfield to test the service given by the mobiles, and it was extremely satisfactory. This in itself was a good end to a week when everyone had risen magnificently to the occasion."

Dennis Guile added: "Special jobs we did included running a mile of drop wire to a Mayfield school, and we had to rob other

exchanges of all sorts of equipment such as selectors, fuses and jumper wire.

"On Friday we brought out equipment, spares and testers to bring the mobile exchange up to first class condition, and we had people working 12 hour shifts from Friday to Monday morning.

"It was eerie visiting the site on the Monday evening a week after the explosion, to find for the first time that there was no-one about. No-one working, no-one singing - or swearing as the case might have been."

Praise indeed

Last word must go to area general manager, Sydney Shaw: "I can only say that the staff reacted marvellously, as they always seem to do when the occasion arises. They all pulled together and made the most of the situation, in spite of working in cramped, ice cold conditions through the day and through the night. The atmosphere was one of enormous encouragement and spirit, and many good ideas came out of it in terms of speeding up the restoration of service to Mayfield. The men and women, who all got into gear so quickly from the very first morning, created an atmosphere which, so happily, was unmarred by any injuries or deaths in the explosion."



A cuppa all round . . . Mr Shaw with Mayfield residents

The General Manager
Mr S. Shaw
Telephone House
Church Road
Tunbridge Wells
Kent

6 December 1978

Dear Mr Shaw,

I have been asked by our members, who have been involved in the recent urgent work at Mayfield Telephone Exchange, to write to you.

They wish me to convey their appreciation of the leadership displayed by yourself and the Heads of the Engineering Divisions during the provision of a new telephone exchange, together with the underground cables and services, following the total destruction of the old U14 exchange, due to an explosion.

It is particularly appreciated that excellent welfare facilities, together with hot meals and hot drinks, were available to our members. This was made even more welcome by the low temperatures prevailing at the time. Without any doubt whatsoever, this made a tremendous contribution to the speed at which telephone service was restored to the village, following the total destruction of their exchange.

The members working on the site are especially grateful to Mrs Palmer, Miss Turner and the Regional Catering Officer, for the way in which they looked after them.

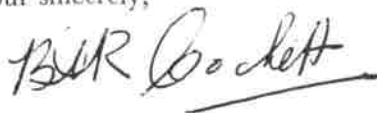
We should like you to pass on our most sincere thanks to the good ladies of Mayfield, who so willingly gave help, by looking after the inner man on the day of the explosion, so enabling the work to get speedily under way.

On behalf of our union, I should like to thank you and Mr D. A. Gray for keeping me, as the POEU representative, fully informed of the progress of the work and the welfare arrangements during the time the job was going on.

I should like to express my personal appreciation of the consideration shown to one of our members, who lost a considerable value of personal property in the explosion. Without assistance, he and his family would have suffered great inconvenience, for a long time.

Our branch is very pleased that no loss of life or serious personal injury resulted from the accident, that can only be described as reminiscent of the war time blitz.

Your sincerely,



B. A. R. Cockett
Branch Secretary
POEU

Tunbridge Wells Branch

MAYFIELD and FIVE ASHES SOCIETY

Registered with the Civic Trust.

Member of the Federation of Sussex Amenity Societies.

Petrons: Sir John and Lady Glubb, The Lady Godber of Mayfield, JP. President: R.W. Boss, OBE.

Four Winds
High Street
Mayfield

TN20 6AH

West Street, Mayfield, East Sussex TN20 6DS Telephone Mayfield 2173

16 January, 1979.

to at
sta

and Manager,
The Telecommunications
Authority, 11th Floor,



Dear Sir,
I have to thank you for your letter of 11 January, about steps taken by your Department in consequence of the explosion at Mayfield on 29 November. I appreciate your concern, and take this opportunity to express my appreciation of the work done.

Sincerely,
R.W. Boss

HUNTS BARN
MAYFIELD
SUSSEX
MAYFIELD (043 951 011)

19th January 1979.

Mr. Shaw,

I feel I must write to congratulate you and your staff on the speed and efficiency with which you handled the restoration of the telephone service to Mayfield following the explosion last November. The work must have been made all the more difficult by the severe weather conditions prevailing at the time.

I should be grateful if you would pass on my thanks to those involved.

Yours sincerely,

R. Thirkell-Smith



ROSE COTTAGE
LAKE STREET
MAYFIELD
SUSSEX
MAYFIELD 3592

Thank you for your letter of 11 January, about steps taken by your Department in consequence of the explosion at Mayfield on 29 November. I appreciate your concern, and take this opportunity to express my appreciation of the work done.

FROM MRS. R. G. BLOWER, PENE, MAYFIELD, SUSSEX, TN20 6NB
TELEPHONE: MAYFIELD 3555

Our grateful thanks to all those who are working so hard in such unpleasant conditions - to restore normal services. We feel everyone has done a really wonderful job.
P. Blower.

MAYFIELD AND THE EXPLOSION

reported by Faith Lee

Monday, November 27th dawned quite normally for the 3,500 residents of Mayfield. Men got up as usual, had their breakfast and set off for work, while mothers got children ready for school. Youngsters were out delivering the morning papers and shopkeepers prepared for another week's trading.

The serenity was short-lived. At 7.50 a.m. the entire village shook in a massive explosion, far louder and more violent than anything experienced during the Second World War. Windows rattled, doors slammed and buildings rocked. Villagers who looked out of their windows saw a large cloud of smoke billowing skywards, and many immediately realised there had been an explosion of some magnitude. One or two blamed aircraft and even Concorde's sonic bangs.

The Mayfield Telephone Exchange Explosion was a miracle, in every sense of the

word. A miracle that no-one was killed or seriously injured, and a miracle that the Post Office managed to restore telephone links within seven days.

No-one actually saw the explosion. The exchange was situated beside the A267 Tunbridge Wells to Mayfield road, just outside the village. Chunks of brickwork and a steel girder hurtled across the A267 seconds after a car had passed. Rubble and fragments of metal rained down on the surrounding land hundreds of feet away. Pieces of the switchgear framing were buried inches deep in the roadside bank, and a parked car was literally flattened against a brick wall.

First witnesses

First on the scene were **Ivor and Vera Wren** of North Street, Rotherfield. Mrs Wren, a 42-year-old housewife, recalled: "We must have been about 500 yards away.



Ivor Wren and his wife Vera of Rotherfield who were first on the scene after the explosion



All that remained of engineer Tony Burton's car. Note the wellington boot on the left hand side



Broken windows in St Gabriel's House, St Leonards-Mayfield Convent. St Gabriel's overlooks the former exchange

All we saw was a terrific cloud of smoke." Incredibly the couple did not feel or hear the explosion, they believe it must have been masked by the sound of their car engine and the heater motor. Piles of rubble, concrete and bricks blocked the road and they pulled to a halt.

As they got out of the car the dust from the explosion began settling around them. "Everything was deathly quiet," said Mrs Wren. "The silence was uncanny and it was quite eerie." Behind them was the Convent building, part of St Leonards-Mayfield School, with all its windows broken and curtains billowing out in the early morning breeze. Alone in the freezing cold – it was one of the coldest mornings of the year – they surveyed the scene of devastation, helplessly wondering what to do. One thing was certain – it was no good trying to telephone for help!

They spotted Post Office Engineer Tony Burton's flattened Ford Cortina and hoped and prayed that it had been empty. Mr Wren, a builder, tugged at the wellington boot poking out of the rubble – happily it was not attached to a foot. Another boot hung from a nearby tree.

The aftermath

The brunt of the blast was taken by the buildings surrounding the 25-year-old exchange: the Convent School, Mayfield Band's headquarters, and the two homes at the entrance to the village playing field, Court Meadow and Maplehurst.

Schoolgirls at St Leonards-Mayfield Convent had a miraculous escape from injury. Debris from the explosion landed in the convent grounds and the blast shattered hundreds of windows. Two 14-year-old girls suffered slight cuts and shock, and were dealt with by the school's own infirmary. Eighty of the Convent's 360 boarders were tidying up in the modern St Gabriel's House block, overlooking the exchange, when the windows crashed in. The Headmistress,

Sister Anne Murphy, praised her girls' behaviour. She said they were very sensible, did not panic and came out of the building as though it was a fire drill. Sister Anne said: "The staff had just finished breakfast and we heard this very big blast. My first thought was that the boiler had gone up – I knew there was something odd about the blast. The whole place shook." The girls in St Gabriel's were just getting up – had the explosion been a minute or two later they would have been sitting down to breakfast, and many would have been seriously hurt.

The major worry for Sister Anne was how to let parents know that everyone was alright. She asked local newspapers to say that there was no need for alarm or panic. Lessons went on as normally as possible with the pupils dressed in winter outfits, while workmen boarded up the broken windows. About half the classrooms were temporarily out of action and senior pupils joined in the clear-up operation, armed with brooms and dustpans, to sweep up the broken glass and debris. Almost every window in St Gabriel's, facing the exchange, was broken and several doors were blown almost off their hinges. Many windows in other parts of the convent complex were also shattered.

The Officer in Charge of Mayfield's retained fire station, 49-year-old **Charlie Vockins** was loading up his builder's truck ready to start work when the ground shook beneath his feet. "It was one hell of an explosion", he said. "I saw a mushroom of smoke and rubble go up into the sky". He dropped everything and ran from his Alexandra Road home to the fire station to find that the blast had shattered the lock and the large red doors were standing open, waiting for him. The blast had severed all communications into and out of Mayfield and no-one could have called the Fire Brigade had they been needed. But the entire crew, acting as one man, reacted to the explosion and all turned in. "We realised

there was trouble somewhere in the village," said Sub Officer Vockins.

They were among the first on the scene, radioing to a surprised Fire Brigade Control in Lewes that they were going to investigate an explosion. It was the Mayfield firemen's radio message, after arriving on the scene, that broke the news to the rest of the world. In those early moments, the firemen were the only method of communication in and out of the village, and they sent an SOS for the Police and Post Office engineers. Mr Vockins said he had never seen anything like it in all his 23 years as a part-time fireman. He said the Post Office response was marvellous. "They were magnificent. They had a telephone working from within the village before 12 noon. They linked it to Rotherfield and really deserve all the praise they get".

In Spring 1979 East Sussex County Council will commence building a new fire station in Mayfield - on land next to the telephone exchange site.

'Smile and be happy'

Many a Mayfield bandsman had studied the card on the wall of their headquarters, overlooking the Mayfield telephone exchange. It read:

'Smile and be happy.

Things could get worse.

So I smiled and was happy.

And behold! Things did get worse.'

Musical Director **Ken Rich** salvaged the illuminating card from the band's wrecked headquarters, and declared wryly that he would pin it back up again. The six-year-old cedar building looked a sorry sight. Mr Rich reckoned the blast blew in the end wall and went out again at both sides. One end wall was blown in at an angle, practically every window was smashed, doors were flattened and the floor was covered in broken glass. Experts later declared the only safe part remaining was the floor. Incredibly the blast left chairs and music stands upright where they had been left after the last practice



Members of Mayfield Fire Brigade. Back row: left to right. Jim Vockins, Dave Martin, Geoff Wicker, Willy Richardson and Ron Simpson. Front row: left to right. Les Vockins, Charlie Vockins and John Smith.

night, but everything was surrounded by inches of glass and debris.

For the 40 bandmen it was a heart-breaking moment. They had spent many hours back in 1971 and 1972 digging out foundations and putting the hut up themselves. Now they face a £3,000 repair bill. Band treasurer, **Mrs Jenny Pursglove** heard the explosion at her Alderbrook Close, Crowborough home, seven miles away. While Mr Rich was salvaging the band's property from the hut with the help of **Peter McCarthy**, there was a knock at the door in one upright wall. **Mrs Connie Bays** appeared bearing two flasks of hot coffee for the rescuers and asked hesitantly: "Can I come in?" Mr Rich replied: "Yes. But don't make a mess". Another person suggested that she should wipe her feet first. The jovial remarks, in the face of disaster, were typical of the spirit portrayed throughout by the villagers. The bandmen, faced with the destruction of seven years hard work, still

found time for a joke.

The Youth Club's wooden building, a few yards from the band headquarters, lost windows and a door frame was wrenched away from the wall. The Memorial Hall suffered exterior damage and internal light fittings were shaken loose, while windows of houses in Fletching Street and The Warren, half a mile away, were also damaged. Flying debris landed on the roof of the Carpenters Arms, and the explosion was heard as far away as Heathfield, Crowborough and Rotherfield.

In the High Street the window of Blakes, the butchers, was blown out. Village butcher, **Derek Lindop**, 49, was walking along the passageway to his shop when he heard the sound of breaking glass. His first thought was that someone had collided with the milk float, delivering pintas just up the road. Then he saw that his 12 ft by 8 ft plate glass window has been blown across the road. A few fragments of glass had landed on the



Mayfield Band's headquarters after the explosion. The picture shows the end nearest to the exchange

six turkeys left in the window over the weekend.

Memorial Hall caretaker, **Mrs Peggy Wicker**, arrived for work as usual that morning to find all the light fittings hanging from the ceiling. The lights, however, were intact. She quickly switched off the gas and electricity and was still wondering what to do when someone asked if they could use the hall. The hall was equipped with everything to use in a state of emergency, and as soon as Mrs Wicker got the all clear to switch on the gas, she set up a canteen service.

More sustenance

She went to a nearby shop and spent £4.50 of her own money on tea, coffee, sugar, milk, packet soup and cheese biscuits. From 9.20 a.m. until 4.30 p.m., when the Post Office canteen ladies arrived, Mrs Wicker, together with her sister **Mrs Bubbles Smith** and friend **Mrs Jessie Richardson**, provided a non-stop stream of hot drinks for the hard-working engineers and anyone else who

needed a drink. "It was a bitter cold day and the men had to have a drink," she said. "I just happened to be there and thought it was the thing to do. I think I ran the local stores out of milk and sugar."

Mrs Wicker initially paid for all the refreshments, without a thought as to whether she would get any of the money back. "It was an emergency and it was essential to provide something," she said. Later in the morning Sydney Shaw, General Manager of Tunbridge Wells Telephone Area found out who was providing the refreshments and gave Mrs Wicker a £5 note from his wallet. By Tuesday morning the Post Office canteen staff were running a professional kitchen for the men, and Mrs Wicker was greeted with the appetising smell of bacon and eggs as she went to work.

Village organisations cancelled meetings and functions planned for the hall during the week, and gladly turned it over to the Post Office engineers. They in turn transformed it into a canteen-cum-clubroom for the duration of their stay.

Mrs Wicker's actions were typical of the village in general. Wives of the firemen provided refreshments on the first day, and engineers who called at the Warren Bakery (The Campbell-Kerr Grocery Stores) were handed out free hot rolls from the proprietors, **Eileen** and **Tony Link**. "We were only too pleased to help them out when they were in trouble", said Mr Link, who started an appreciation fund in his shop for the engineers. Later the parish council organised an appeal on a much larger basis, and Mr Link sent the council a cheque for £62.50 from his customers. "The engineers did a wonderful job," he said. "And after all they were working for our benefit."



Super tea lady and caretaker at Mayfield Village Hall, Peggy Wicker

'Thank you all for a fantastic job well done'

There was a tremendous appreciation of the engineers' work among the residents and traders of Mayfield. Chamber of Trade President, Peter McCarthy, proprietor of The Armoury in the High Street, summed it up in a letter to the Kent and Sussex Courier:

"It is reassuring to know that our civil services, telephone, gas and water authorities have demonstrated that they are more than able to deal with an emergency on such a scale. Our thanks go to all those who worked unceasingly day and night in very adverse weather conditions to reconnect the services. The situation demonstrated clearly that the British wartime spirit is not dead and past as many had lamented. The younger generation has proved to all that it can pull its weight when called up to do so, when faced with such a situation. To all those concerned in the operations, we the 40 or so traders of Mayfield, say: 'Thank you all for a fantastic job well done'."

Mr McCarthy lives at the opposite end of the village to the exchange and heard the explosion as he was about to sit down to breakfast. He did not know what had happened until a police car toured the village with an explanation, and telling residents that a 999 link was available from the Police House if needed.

Mr McCarthy said: "Everyone just faced the facts. After all the loss of a telephone is an inconvenience in this day and age, but it isn't the be all and end all. It was only for a week."

Parish Council chairman Mrs Kathleen Pither has a good reason to remember November 27th — it was the day she left home in such a hurry to help the Post Office that she put ralgie balm on her hair instead of hair spray. "I stunk like a pole cat," she recalled. When she heard the explosion Mrs Pither looked out of her window in Rotherfield Lane and saw a mushroom cloud

hanging over Mayfield and she immediately thought a plane had exploded. Sydney Shaw, General Manager for Tunbridge Wells Telephone Area, called on Mrs Pither to see if engineers could use the Memorial Hall and Mrs Pither remembers: "It was first thing in the morning and my hair looked as if I had gone through a hedge backwards. I wanted to spray it to smooth it down and then put a cap on. I only had a split second and picked up the wrong can." Mr Shaw, no doubt, was too polite to comment on his companion's aroma.

The entire village reacted instantly to the telephone crisis and was amazed and delighted when the Post Office managed to restore communications within a week. The parish council immediately launched a public appeal to raise money for a thank you party for the engineers who worked round the clock. "They worked day and night," said Mrs Pither, "and they enjoyed it. As I went round the village I saw engineers singing from the top of telephone poles, just



Peter McCarthy, President of Mayfield Parish Chamber of Trade.

like Buzby." The village has now presented a silver cup to Tunbridge Wells Telephone Area to be awarded to the best apprentice each year.

It was the first explosion in the village in living memory and everyone hopes it will be the last. "There was nothing like it, even during the blitz," said Mrs Pither who has been a resident since 1939 and a parish councillor since 1956.

It was the first explosion in living memory and everyone hopes it will be the last. "There was nothing like it, even during the blitz", said Mrs Pither who has been a resident since 1939 and a parish councillor since 1956.

In some parts of the village people carried on as if nothing had happened. The parish council was about to fence off a piece of land on the playing field as an adventure playground for children. While engineers sifted through the debris on November 27th, a man could be seen digging out holes for laying concrete foundations for the fence

posts, oblivious to the bricks and mortar strewn on the ground around him and the dozens of people milling around.

Mrs Pither was very impressed by Mr Shaw's public relations work in visiting every home and building affected by the blast.

The Vicar of Mayfield, the **Rev Philip Ilott**, held a special thanksgiving service in St Dunstan's Parish Church which was very well attended by villagers of all denominations. The Vicar said he was thankful that no-one was seriously injured, as within minutes of the explosion hundreds of Convent schoolgirls would have been sitting down to breakfast, and a bus was due to pass the exchange.

Post Office engineer Tony Burton, 36, has been feeling the villagers' generosity personally. Tony, who lives at Mist Cottages, Mayfield has been maintenance linesman based at the Mayfield exchange for more than three years, and his wife was in charge of clearing the building. He went into the exchange at 6.45 on the morning it exploded



A toast to Tony Link and his baker William Stephens (left) who handed out free bread and cakes to Post Office staff, left to right, Vic Weddell, Paul Feakes, Tony Burton, Des Mansfield, Mick Jeffery and Pete Fleming

to sign on duty and spent half an hour in the building, before leaving to work in Tunbridge Wells for the week. He believes the secondment to Tunbridge Wells saved his life, because he left the building just about 30 minutes before it blew up. He parked his 14-year-old immaculate Mark I Ford Cortina outside the exchange and went to Tunbridge Wells in a Post Office van.

The explosion completely flattened Tony's £225 car leaving a barely recognisable framework of metal and tyres among the rubble. Since then Tony, his wife and three children, have received four offers from villagers who wanted to loan him a car, one of which he gratefully accepted.

The villagers' spontaneous generosity towards the engineers culminated on February 3rd when they laid on a thank you party in the Memorial Hall for the engineers and their wives.

Mayfield Primary

Pupils at Mayfield Primary School were equally impressed by the engineers' speed

and efficiency. At Christmas the 36 pupils in Class 2-3 decided to send a card to the engineers saying: "Thank you for getting our phones working so quickly. We think it was so clever." Teacher **Michael Norcock** said the children felt the exchange belonged to them because it was so close to the school buildings, and they had a special kind of affinity towards it. In November, the children had been discussing time capsules, and they wanted to find a new building in Mayfield where they could place a container with photographs of the village and school, together with local newspapers. They hope the Post Office will let them place one in the foundations of the new exchange when it is built.

In the week following the explosion, school work inevitably centred around the incident. Children wrote essays about what they heard and saw, while others drew amusing Buzby cartoons with a Mayfield theme. The 7-9 year olds in Class 2-3 wrote Buzby's Lament in verse form.



Tony Burton in the car kindly loaned to him by the local doctor and his wife, when his was totally wrecked in the explosion (inset)

I had a little trouble
A week ago or two
My feather's were a little torn
My feelings ruffled too.

But after the explosion
Where my Mayfield nest had been
My friends from the Post Office
Were soon upon the scene.

With yellow vans and green exchanges
They came from all directions,
To reconnect your telephones
And establish communications.

They worked by day, they worked by night
With nothing to distract them.
And within a few days of the bang
We had our phones in action.

from

staff and pupils of
mayfield Primary
School.

DEC. 1978

The 'Thankyou' card sent to Post Office staff



The children of Mayfield Primary School with Post Office staff and 'Thankyou' card

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The children of Mayfield Primary School with Post Office staff and 'Thankyou' card



Mark Sheffield, aged 11

I had just got out of bed when I heard an enormous bang. I looked out of the window and couldn't see anything so I went downstairs and got ready for school. Our car was going in for a service so Mum needed a lift back and she tried to phone up a friend but the phone was completely dead. I said it might be the telephone exchange but Dad thought it was Concorde at first breaking the sound barrier.



Sarah Larcombe

Sarah Larcombe, aged 11

There were rumours going round that the band hut had fallen down. And we were later to find, the phone exchange was a memory left behind.

Tracy Bell, aged 11

There was a terrific bang and our bedroom windows rattled and our door opened and shut. I banged my head on the wall because I was in bed. There were people in the road looking up at the car park, there was some orange smoke. We didn't know where it was coming from.



Tracy Bell



Giles Fox, aged nine

Thankyou for doing our telephones for us. It is incredible that five days was all you needed. And someone could have had to go to the telephone because they might have been ill. But you did it so quickly that the old people, if they were ill, they only had to wait two or three days. Thank you all.

Adrian Pope, aged nine

In the morning there was a big bang
Just like an earthquake beginning to go off
Some people fell out of their beds or had a
big bump
Some people fell in the flower bed and had
a dirty face
Some people's gramophone fell off the table
and smashed

And all that fuss for nothing
Only an exchange blowing to bits.



Adrian Pope

Amber Markwick, aged 10

What a pity it was
the Big Explosion
BANG!
Luckily nobody was hurt
So everybody
SANG!
The telephones
No longer
RANG!
Now thanks to all the engineers
They all go
CLANG CLANG CLANG!



Amber Markwick with her Buzby poster

WHEN YOU HEAR A
"BANG"



Buzby cartoon by Karen Hammond

General Manager
Telephone House
Church Road
Tunbridge Wells
Kent
TN1 1BA

30 November 1978

Dear Sir,

We must offer to you and all your staff our most sincere appreciation of the absolutely outstanding achievement in restoring the Mayfield telephone service following the explosion which destroyed the exchange on Monday morning.

One comes to take telephone and telex for granted and it is only in situations such as this that one realises the impossibility of carrying on today's business without these instruments.

The speed with which the service has been restored staggers us to say the least. In addition to this the information that was provided together with the assistance given to us has been magnificent.

Please convey to all your staff our most sincere thanks for a job done superbly.

Yours faithfully



Leon Banks
The Middle House Hotel
Mayfield
Sussex

The Telephone Manager,
Engineers' Department,
Post Office Telecommunications,
Telephone House,
Church Road,
Tunbridge Wells,
Kent.

1st December, 1978

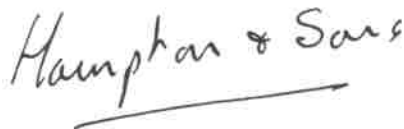
Dear Sir,

We would all like to express our sincere appreciation at the efficiency shown by your Engineers in dealing with the recent explosion at the Mayfield Telephone Exchange.

We were fully expecting not to be re-connected to the telephone for a considerable period and it was with the utmost surprise that this office had telephone facilities restored the day after the explosion.

We feel that this is a marvellous achievement and a reflection of the hard work and efficiency shown by your Engineers.

Yours faithfully,





FUN TIME

The Post Office's Party

Apart from providing food and drink in great quantities for staff during the intensive week of mopping up operations, Mrs Pat Palmer was also busy at the end of the week providing refreshments at a party.

The party was given by the Post Office in the Village Hall for the people of Mayfield to give them all a chance to meet the staff who had worked on the restoration of the exchange. It was also an ideal opportunity for the Post Office and its staff to say thankyou to the villagers for their unstinting generosity and assistance during the previous week. The party was also visited by the regional director, Mr A J Barker and Ron Martin, senior director of Customer Service THQ. They took the opportunity to give their personal thanks to all the assistance given by the staff.

Mr Barker announced that he was arranging for a special Buzby tie with the motif "Mayfield 1978", to be produced in limited numbers. These, he said, were to be presented to all the men who had taken part in the restoration work.

The Village Party

However Pat was able to sit back and enjoy herself at the next party, which was given by the villagers for the Post Office on February 3rd.

There was also a spontaneous reaction from villagers who began raising money at special coffee mornings, and by way of raffles and collections.

This was the village's own special thank-you to everyone involved in restoring telephone communications after the explosion which happened on November 27th. A public appeal, launched by Mayfield

Parish Council, raised funds for the party and for the purchase of a silver cup.

Council chairman, Kathleen Pither, officially handed the cup to Sydney Shaw, general manager of the Tunbridge Wells Telephone Area. The cup will be competed for annually by employees in the area.

Mayfield Silver Band, whose headquarters were shattered in the explosion, provided music for dancing, with musical director Ken Rich conducting. Mayfield Evening Women's Institute provided the entertainment.

Altogether 290 Post Office employees and their wives were present at the party which was held at the hall which became the operations centre during the crucial week. Mrs Pither underlined all the villagers' feelings when she announced: "It was a miracle that they managed to restore our phones in six days instead of six weeks. We invited everyone from the Post Office who had anything to do with the Mayfield incident and it was a very enjoyable evening."



Mayfield.
SUSSEX.
TH20 0RH
612.78

The Manager
Tunbridge Wells Telephones
Tunbridge Wells.

IRVINGS GYLL COTTAGE
MAYFIELD.
SUSSEX TN20 0TJ
MAYFIELD 2181

16 January 1979

Dear Sir

I was away from home when disaster struck the telephone exchange at...

S. Shaw Esq.
General Manager
Tunbridge Wells Telephone Area

Dear Sir 12/1/79

I am in your telephone...

2. calling for
newick lane
Mayfield.
East Sussex.
23.1.78.



Telephone Manager
Tunbridge Wells



THE LITTLE HOUSE
KNOWLE PARK ROAD
MAYFIELD
SUSSEX
MAYFIELD 2181

10/1/79

Dear Sir, I would like to express our admiration for the emergency work carried out by the recent staff of Mayfield. I am sure you have to give credit to the staff.

Dear Sir. This is a little late, in three years

but was all who the day may be blew to the to co

TARN HOUSE,
MARK CROSS,
CROWBOROUGH,
SUSSEX TN8 3NT
MAYFIELD 3100

13 Jan 79

Dear Mr. Shaw

Thank you for your letter of 11 Jan. I much appreciate the handsome allowance you are making for the inconvenience caused by the destruction of the Mayfield exchange and would like to thank you for the prompt repair you carried out.

Yours sincerely
H. E. Keble

The Post Office's Emergency System

The Emergency Restoration Team, consisting of key management staff at South Eastern Regional Headquarters, was set up as a direct result of Exercise Inflammé.

The team, chaired by deputy controller of service maintenance, **John Bluring**, exists all the time so that in any emergency, such as the Mayfield explosion, its members can meet to direct and advise.

The man responsible for communication between the team's members is **Graham James**, civil emergency co-ordinating officer. He is also responsible for passing and receiving information between regional headquarters, telecommunications headquarters in London and the six areas of South Eastern Telecommunications Region.

So it was Graham James who received the first news of the explosion from Bill Fox, head of customer services in Tunbridge Wells, and who passed it on to senior management.

"For the first second or two I couldn't believe it", said Graham. "I had just got back from a national civil emergency seminar and news of the blast was my first telephone call of the morning."

"I think Exercise Inflammé helped towards the efficient handling of the Mayfield emergency, not least perhaps with communications. The first thing I did was establish a contact in Tunbridge Wells and during the day I received news to sift into various channels, then got out a series of situation reports for headquarters service division and the regional board."

John Bluring, who was working in London on the day of the explosion, said: "Mayfield was a peculiar case. I've never known an exchange to be entirely demolished - normally in a blast the walls are blown out and the roof is left resting on the racks - but on this occasion it was a case of going back to the beginning."

In the absence of John Bluring, the restoration team was gathered together by head of exchange maintenance, **Ron Bayfield**. He hadn't been in the office long before receiving the news from service controller, **Ben Vaughan**. Another area of contact at regional HQ in an emergency is the Network Co-ordinating Centre (NCC) run by assistant executive engineers **John Boyes** and **Ray Bailey**.

"The first task was to enquire at the NCC", said Ron Bayfield, "but the rumour had not then been confirmed. By 9.30 I had made sure all the country's NCCs knew of the emergency. I also advised, via Graham James, two heads of department at telecommunications HQ."

"Our first meeting here, with all those heads of staff concerned in the emergency went on for over half an hour, but as the exchange had been wiped out, service division played a small part. We would have been more involved if, for instance, a fire had affected just part of the exchange."

Regional staff quickly on the scene at Mayfield were Peter Benefield, deputy controller planning equipment, **Ted Brice**, an assistant executive engineer in planning equipment; Roy Skues, head of group fault repair service and maintenance and **John Day**, executive engineer for local line planning in four areas of the region, including Tunbridge Wells.

"On my particular duty", said John, "I'm here to give advice if it is required, firstly, on the best way to restore service quickly, and secondly, on how to get a permanent exchange working again. Also, here at region we have access to urgent stores and cables which we can reach quickly."

"In the event, Tunbridge Wells area was able to get themselves out of trouble without a lot of help from us."

"By the time we got to Mayfield all the emergency services were there, fire, police, gas officials, maintenance and construction staff from the area. There was a lot of general confusion and a strong smell of gas which was a bit frightening. I'd never seen anything like it.

"We had a meeting in the village hall between ourselves and equipment and local line people in the area and discussed how best to restore service in the exchange, but the decisions as to what men and equipment would be used for the job were made by Tunbridge Wells area. I listened to the discussions there, and advised, but the ultimate decisions were made by the area staff. As it turned out, equipment needed for the job, including a 1,200 pair cable taking most of the ordinary telephone circuits to the mobile exchange, was found in the area."

John Day left Mayfield when the first mobile arrived, about 3 p.m., but Peter Benefield was there until late at night. Once work was in progress there was little additional help that the regional office could give, except standing by with equipment if needed. Two temporary cabinets were erected on the village hall site and covered with a tarpaulin. "But this was not very successful," said John, "so quite a novel idea came from the area for giving protection and keeping the cabinets dry. A large, ordinary garden shed, bought locally, was erected over them.

"It is essential that the cabinets are kept dry and every time someone in the village wants a telephone or a customer wants his telephone altered, changes have to be made in these cabinets which cannot be done in the pouring rain without protection. So the garden shed has been very successful."

This was the first occasion John Day has had to deal with anything on the scale of Mayfield. "We're now making plans for the new Mayfield on the old site," he said. "We hope to have the new building by early 1980

and we're keeping our fingers crossed that we may be able to bring the new exchange into service by the end of 1980. It will be a record as far as we're concerned because to build and equip an exchange from scratch normally takes three to four years. We're trying to do the whole thing in about a third of the time, which means having the co-operation of everybody."

PRESS AND PUBLICITY

The public relations office at regional headquarters received its first enquiry from the press about Mayfield at 10.50 a.m. This was only a few moments before regional public relations officer, **Ken Wilson**, and his team, had obtained approval for a statement prepared from the information available at that time from the emergency restoration team.

"In circumstances like the Mayfield explosion," said Ken Wilson, "there is a lot to do and everything else has to wait. But I do remember that, after we pulled out all the stops to get information to the local evening papers before they went to press, one news editor remarked he already had the story, filed only 40 minutes after the explosion. The reporter must either have lived at Mayfield or have been passing through! It was a bit like having cold water thrown in your face."

The PR team was alerted a few minutes before 9 o'clock and after regional director, Jerry Barker, had confirmed the extent of the damage at Mayfield exchange, the team set about establishing its lines of communication to the general public, and those outside Mayfield who would need to know of the situation.

First contact at 9 o'clock was with Tunbridge Wells area press liaison officer, Vic Taylor, who already knew of the blast but could not at that stage give enough information for a news release. He confirmed there were no serious injuries and that necessary steps to inform customers and the local community would be agreed with head of customer services, Bill Fox.

Ken said, "At RHQ we don't know the local community so telephone area staff are the best people to decide the best way of letting the villagers know what is going on. In the first instance this was a loudspeaker van and the police, then it was quickly

decided that posters would be needed and also a leaflet for every home. This is where we are geared up to meet area needs.

"At the same time we had to consider the wider aspect of the job. By 9.30 we had alerted the press office at Post Office headquarters and when the scale of the disaster became apparent it was later agreed that CHQ would answer enquiries from the national press and we would handle regional press enquiries. I also let all the other RPROs in the country know - a little unusual but I've found in the past that in a situation like this it can be useful - because when the local press anywhere hear about a happening, their first contact is the local press officer. So all regional press offices knew information was available from us.

"As it was believed gas caused the explosion, we liaised with the press and PR officers of the Gas Board.

"By the time the emergency restoration team met that morning at 9.45, we knew it was a major breakdown and a whole community was off the air, but for various reasons hard facts were difficult to obtain. **Terry Fisher** the regional press and publicity officer was impatient to get out the first news bulletin as the daily evening papers would shortly be going to press. I talked to service controller, Ben Vaughan, and a simple report was drafted saying that the exchange was extensively damaged, that all telephone links were severed and we were making every effort to restore service.

"When this was agreed we telexed copies to CHQ, Vic Taylor and other area press liaison officers and started to telephone the statement to about a dozen local newspapers, Southern Television, BBC Television (Southampton) and Radio Brighton. By this time we were getting enquiries coming in, firstly from the London evenings.

"Tunbridge Wells area agreed with us the copy for leaflets and posters and we managed to find a typesetter who was prepared to drop everything to set them. Our own print unit at regional headquarters stopped a job they were doing, cleaned the machine and got cracking on ours."

The leaflets and posters were delivered to the head postmaster at Tunbridge Wells at 7 p.m. by Terry Fisher, and they went out with the first delivery the next morning.

During the rest of the week the public relations group, dealt with numerous press enquiries and issued regular news bulletins about emergency arrangements and progress. The staff newspaper, South East, which was due to go to press, also printed a story and pictures with splash headings about the Mayfield explosion.

"An early task was to establish the deadlines for advertising in the press," said Ken, "and we had to move quickly to get adverts into the Evening Argus and Sussex Express. The adverts apologised for the inconvenience caused, gave a clear picture of the situation, and said that it was hoped service would be restored by the weekend.

"For us it was quite a PR job but for the telephone area staff it was an immensely demanding task. Despite all the problems they built up a tremendous amount of mutual goodwill with the villagers and we were happy to provide for the party given the following weekend a number of Buzby giveaways for the children, such as cutouts, balloons, badges and stickers.

"Our first task on behalf of the general manager, was to produce a limited number of specially made Buzby ties and handbag mirrors for ladies overprinted with 'Mayfield 1978' which the GM presented to all the staff involved in the restoration work."

A village's message to Buzby

TAKE someone happy with a phone call says Buzby. Well his working chums in the Post Office left a whole village over-joyed.

the Post Office Benevolent Fund.

Council chairman Mrs Kathleen Pither officially handed the cup to Mr Sydney Shaw, general manager of the Tunbridge Wells



THE POST Office was in festive mood yesterday. It threw a party to celebrate the return of phone services to the village of Mayfield.

Residents and Post Office engineers crowded into the village hall to receive both praise and rewards.

And South-East regional telecommunications director Mr Jerry Barker was there wielding a teapot. He is pictured serving parish council chairman Mrs Kay Pither.

For seven days, since a mystery explosion completely destroyed the village's 25-year-old exchange, Mayfield has been a hive of activity. Engineers have been singing from the top of telephone poles as they reconnected the village's 950 phones to mobile exchanges.

The party yesterday was a chance for both sides to meet and chat about what has become known as the Mayfield Incident.

GOOD NEWS for the residents was that the explosion destroyed the automatic counter unit and there are no records of calls made since November 6 — the last time the dials were read.

Villagers have therefore had free calls — by courtesy of the Post Office — from then until yesterday, plus a

Buzby's party goes with, well, a bang!

week's free rental to cover inconvenience caused during the past seven days.

GOOD NEWS for the dozens of engineers who congratulations from their boss and a personal memento each — a Buzby tie with "Mayfield" inscribed on it.

Applause

Mr Syd Shaw, general manager of Tunbridge Wells area telephones, said it was mercurial and almost a miracle that no one was hurt in the explosion.

"That a telephone exchange can be destroyed and virtually restored in seven days is a remarkable achievement," he told the packed hall amid applause.

All 950 lines were reconnected by Sunday morning and only a handful of faults still needed ironing out. The achievement was dependent on two things: the "complete and total cooperation of the community of Mayfield and the splendid response from Post Office staff."

had blown up and he had lost his car. "I thought they were taking the micky," he said today.

When Mr Burton, married

Mr Barker said the restoration of phone links to Mayfield was proof of the high reputation Tunbridge Wells engineers had built up for themselves in this country.

Said Mrs Pither: "We are damn proud to live in England and have such a fine telephone service. I am very proud of everybody involved, especially the telephone engineers."



FLASHBACK to November 27: Mayfield telephone exchange is reduced to a pile of rubble.

Man who counts his blessings

MAINTENANCE lineman Tony Burton, 36, reckons he is the luckiest man alive — and he still can't believe it.

Mark II Cortina was a squashed strip of metal just one foot wide.

"My reaction was complete disbelief," he said. "I only bought the car two months

same Christmas presents as last year — fishing tackle."

Claim

He is making a claim for compensation against both the Post Office and Segas but does not know what the out-

Schoolgirls in phone blast escape

by Faith Lee

HUNDREDS of schoolgirls had a miracle escape when an explosion flattened a village telephone exchange.

Girls from 11 schools in the area were at the exchange when it exploded.

The village and hoped to link up at least 900 facilities and phones for essential users.

The blast wrecked a Cor-

Phone exchange blast workers earn praise

TOP POST Office executives went to Mayfield on Tuesday to thank the men who worked round the clock to get phones working again last week which destroyed the special tribute to the co-operators community.

Engineers and villagers

providing the Memorial Hall, the

Post Office Emergency Centre, for

their rapid operation. Award Mr

Shaw the Tunbridge Wells

area, praise the skill and

effort of the staff and

exchange within six

hours from the time the

blast occurred.

Mr Barker, the south east

telecommunications

director, Mr Shaw

'No smell of gas' before explosion

MAINTENANCE lineman Tony Burton, 36, went into Mayfield

to check the exchange on November 27, but

even though he was told there was

no smell of gas, he was

convinced the exchange was

unsafe and he had started

work on it.

When he discovered the truth his

panic, Mr Burton might have

been inside the building when it

exploded.

