

= Tesco bomb campaign =

The Tesco bomb campaign was an attempted extortion against British supermarket chain Tesco which started in Bournemouth , Dorset , in August 2000 and led to one of the largest and most secretive operations ever undertaken by Dorset Police . During the campaign , a blackmailer identified by the pseudonym " Sally " sent letters to Tesco stores threatening to harm customers if his demands ? for Clubcards , modified so that the holder could withdraw cash from automated teller machines ? were not met .

Several months after the threat first came to light , " Sally " sent out several letter bombs , one of which was received and exploded in the face of the householder , causing her shock and minor injuries , while the Royal Mail intercepted several other packages , which had been held up because insufficient stamps had been put on them . In October 2000 , " Sally " threatened to use pipe bombs against Tesco customers and the threat was taken seriously enough that Tesco began the production of the modified Clubcards , but were unable to produce the required number before the deadline set by the blackmailer . In November , " Sally " claimed to have placed a pipe bomb in a garden in the Ferndown area of Dorset . No bomb was found .

Police eventually mounted a surveillance operation on the postbox to which several of the extortion letters had been traced and identified " Sally " as Robert Edward Dyer . Dyer was arrested in February 2001 , over six months since the beginning of the extortion attempt , and charged with several offences , including nine counts of blackmail and one of common assault , of which he was found guilty in May 2001 . He was sentenced to 16 @-@ years imprisonment on 12 June 2001 , later reduced to 12 on appeal . A number of similar extortion attempts against supermarket chains and other businesses and subsequent attacks on Tesco have since been compared to Dyer 's campaign by the media .

= = Beginnings = =

The campaign began in August 2000 , when John Purnell , director of security for Tesco , the United Kingdom 's largest supermarket chain , was telephoned by a newsagent in Bournemouth , Dorset , who had discovered a copy of an extortion letter left on his shop 's photocopier . The letter demanded that Tesco give away Clubcards , modified for use in cash machines , in the Bournemouth Daily Echo . Over the following days , Dorset Police received two other letters , threatening to send bombs to Tesco customers if the demands were not met .

= = Investigation = =

The police investigation into the campaign , codenamed Operation Hornbill , was one of the most secretive ever undertaken by Dorset Police and one of the largest in British policing history . After receiving the second letter , which had been damaged by fire , police made enquiries with the Royal Mail and discovered that a fire had been reported in a postbox on Bradpole Road , Bournemouth , leading to speculation that " Sally " ? the alias by which all the letters were signed ? had changed his mind and attempted to destroy the letter . They received a third letter on 29 August 2000 , in which " Sally " claimed to have prepared letter bombs to send to Tesco 's customers .

After receiving the third letter , the police attempted to communicate with " Sally " by covertly taking out a classified advert in the Bournemouth Daily Echo to buy more time . After receiving no response in three weeks , the senior investigating officer , Detective Superintendent Phil James convened a meeting with other senior officers from across the United Kingdom to assess the threat posed .

= = Bombings = =

During James ' meeting , he was informed that a letter bomb had exploded in a suburb of Bournemouth . In a documentary about the investigation in 2009 , James said " There was a knock

at the door and I was told by one of my officers that an incendiary device had just gone off . The atmosphere of the meeting changed . Clearly there was a risk and the threat was very real " . Jean Evans , the woman who opened the letter bomb , was taken to hospital with minor injuries and a bomb disposal team from the British Army was despatched to the scene . The device had used a party popper to detonate gunpowder inside the envelope . Immediately after the first letter bomb , Dorset Police alerted Royal Mail to look out for similar packages and several were found in a sorting office , having been delayed because insufficient stamps had been placed on them , and defused by the Army . A further seven of the packages were delivered to the homes of Tesco customers . Following the spate of letter bombs , the Army 's bomb disposal team was stationed in Bournemouth ? something that only usually happens when political party conferences are held in the town ? and placed on stand @-@ by .

Another threatening letter was sent in October , threatening to attack Tesco customers with pipe bombs if the demands were not met . The letter contained a cipher which allowed the police to communicate with " Sally " in code through cryptic adverts in the Bournemouth Daily Echo . James contacted the editor of the Echo and the police were allowed to place the messages in the Echo , disguised as Mensa puzzles and made to look like wordsearches . By this time , the police had narrowed the focus of their investigation on a square @-@ mile area of Bournemouth and James became convinced that they would find " Sally " through the postbox on Bradpole Road , through which the fire @-@ damaged letter had passed in August . The box was placed under surveillance and , eventually , the October letter was traced back to that box . The footage from the surveillance operation was reviewed , but the image was of poor quality .

In November 2000 , " Sally " lost patience and sent a letter in which he said he would place a pipe bomb in the garden of a Tesco customer if his demands were not met , prompting the police to seriously consider producing the modified Clubcards . They discovered that they could not produce sufficient cards by 12 December , the deadline " Sally " had set . Approximately 100 @,@ 000 clubcards , modified for use in ATMs , were eventually produced , but none were distributed . At the end of November , " Sally " sent another letter , telling the police that he had planted a bomb in a garden in the Ferndown area , giving a grid reference which included over 500 houses . The claim prompted the mobilisation of hundreds of police officers to the area , but no bomb was found .

= = Arrest = =

The police received another letter from " Sally " on 7 December . Once again , the letter was traced back to the Bradpole road postbox , where the surveillance operation had continued . The operation had captured good @-@ quality footage of all the users of the postbox that day , but , as it was close to Christmas , the postbox was busier than normal , with 172 items posted by 38 people . Royal Mail regulations meant that detectives could not open or delay the letters , so they made enquiries with the recipients to identify the senders . They eventually managed to identify all but a small number of the senders .

On 17 February 2001 ? over six months after the receipt of the first demand and three months since the last letter from " Sally " ? the police made a major breakthrough . Detective Constable Alan Swanton , a junior detective on the case , spotted one of the people caught by the surveillance of the postbox who had yet to be identified . The man was carrying a fuel container , which Swanton believed had come from a nearby filling station . Officers obtained CCTV footage from the filling station , where their suspect had paid by cheque , and identified the man as Robert Edward Dyer .

Dyer , who , at the time , was a 51 @-@ year @-@ old widower and unsuccessful businessman living with his two teenage daughters , was placed under surveillance . The surveillance operation did not yield any results , so the police decided to confront Dyer and visited him at his home on 19 February , where they found an extortion note on his computer and cryptic notes in his handwriting . Dyer was arrested and interviewed . The police later intercepted the final letter from " Sally " , which surveillance footage showed Dyer posting the day before he was arrested and which was an exact match to the letter found on Dyer 's computer . Detective Superintendent James later revealed that Dyer " was an individual in desperate need of money and believing that Tesco was the answer to all

his problems . "

= = Conviction = =

Dyer was charged and , in May 2001 , pleaded guilty on nine counts of blackmail , as well as a sole count of common assault against Jean Evans , the woman who opened the letter bomb . On 12 June 2001 , he was sentenced to 16 @-@ years imprisonment by a judge at Dorchester Crown Court . The sentence was reduced to 12 @-@ years imprisonment on appeal and Dyer was released from prison in 2007 .

During the trial , it emerged that Dyer had worn gloves to avoid leaving fingerprints on the letters and used water to stick the stamps rather than licking them , but that he had made errors , such as leaving a copy of an extortion demand on a newsagent 's photocopier . Although Dyer initially demanded only £ 200 @,@ 000 , Tesco would have lost an estimated £ 5 million had they complied with Dyer 's demand to place cards in every copy of the Bournemouth Echo .

= = Aftermath = =

The investigation was one of the largest and most secretive that had ever been undertaken by Dorset Police . The campaign was compared in the media to other similar extortion attempts against Tesco and other British businesses . Dyer got inspiration for the campaign from an article he read about Rodney Witchelo , who attempted to extort £ 4 million from H.J. Heinz Company by spiking jars of baby food . Witchelo was sentenced to 17 @-@ years imprisonment in 1990 . Dyer 's campaign was also compared to that of Edgar Pearce , dubbed the " Mardi Gras bomber " by the media . Over three years , Pearce had used bombs in an attempt to extort money from Barclays Bank and Sainsbury 's supermarkets . He was sentenced to 21 @-@ years imprisonment in 1999 . Later incidents have also been compared to Dyer 's campaign , including another against Tesco in 2007 .

A documentary about the campaign was made in 2009 and broadcast by ITV . The documentary featured interviews with Neal Butterworth , then @-@ editor of the Bournemouth Daily Echo and DSI James , the police officer who led the investigation .