

# ATM Attack!

A wave of baffling bombings of ATMs in England triggered a massive police search to catch the mysterious band of thieves behind it.

*They came out of the blue. But once they began they wouldn't stop—attacks on automated teller machines by highly skilled and organized gangs of criminals.*

*Blowing up ATMs with shocking precision and speed, they not only got away with tens of thousands of dollars' worth of cash but baffled authorities trying to track them down. Read the dramatic account of how police finally caught one of the most successful ATM gangs and how—despite their arrest and imprisonment—their success may be a harbinger of things to come... even in the US...*

It was a dark night along the western coast of England. An Audi sports car with false plates drove down an unlit and empty street. Five people dressed in black sat inside with their work tools: axes, electronic devices, rolls of flexible tubing and two large tanks filled with compressed gas. The car was heading for a branch of Barclays Bank in the small town of Birchwood.

This particular bank was located on a dark street at the rear of a shopping mall, separated 300 feet from the road by a parking lot, and facing a small stream and railroad tracks on the other side. Anyone who was looking to rob a bank could hardly have found a better candidate.

When the car pulled up at the bank, the

clock showed 1:51 AM. It was a Friday in September 2013. The surrounding area was completely deserted. Residents nearby were fast asleep. The people in the car correctly assumed that the ATM was full of cash since the bank employees had the habit of stuffing it with more than enough cash before they left for the weekend.

The five men belonged to a group of outlaws who were responsible for a wave of attacks on cash machines across a stretch of 150 miles from Oxford to Liverpool in a six-month timeframe. In each case, they used the same method, a technique that had never before been tried in England. By now they had a great deal of experience.

## Explosion

Two men got out of the Audi. Their faces were covered. With steely calmness and professionalism they set to work. One took a three-foot crowbar and began working it into the ATM through the cash slot. He knew exactly what he was doing as he wiggled it from side to side and up and down. A third man knelt on the ground and helped them out. A fourth stationed himself at the street corner to keep a watchful eye on the roadway. The fifth stayed at the wheel of the car, ready to hit the pedal the moment the operation was complete.

After a few minutes, one of them went to the car and took out a wire and two pipes.

He stuck the tubes into the machine through the opening his colleague had created with his rod. One tube delivered oxygen while the second released acetylene gas. As soon as the two tubes were in position, the masked men opened the valves. As the oxygen and acetylene gases entered the machine they began mixing.

ATMs have a safe inside them where the cash is stored. Usually this safe has two openings: a small one in front through which the machine passes cash to clients, and a larger one in back through which bank clerks refill the machine.

For years, criminals have tried to come up with a tactic to reach the back door of the ATM's safe. Then a clever explosives expert came up with a solution: blast open the door by force. This could be accomplished by pumping oxygen and acetylene into the machine. (Acetylene is used in torches for cutting and welding in factories and at construction sites.) When a flame is introduced, the resulting blast is strong enough to blow open the rear door of the safe—its “soft spot”—yet weak enough to keep the cash relatively unscathed.

Once the machine is blasted, the thieves still have to break into the bank. Sometimes, the machine—now with a gaping hole—is located in the bank's lobby, where it is relatively easy to access. At other times, though, the back of the ATM is inside a protected vault. Still, a professional robber can find ways to access it.

If the blast is conducted properly, the cash inside the machine lies there packed in perfect bundles ready for the taking. At the worst the bundles will smell like garlic from the acetylene gas... bearable. They are certainly still usable.

The Birchwood operation went off perfectly. At 1:57, the machine was blasted, inflicting minimal damage. A bit of dust and debris settled down onto the sidewalk, but nothing more.

Now the outlaws began to move with real speed. The explosion had probably awakened some neighbors and may even have



Image from a security camera of a man approaching the ATM with a crowbar.



Another image from the security camera showing the robbers carrying the tubing that will pump gas into the ATM.



Scene of one of the attacks. The damage was minimal; some dust and debris rained down on the sidewalk but the machine was not blown apart.



A more “traditional” bank robbery: Thieves used a forklift to carry off an ATM in England.



A Barclays ATM after getting blown up by the mysterious group.

caught the attention of a night watchman in the vicinity. In the blink of an eye, they broke through a windowpane to the left of the damaged ATM. Seconds later they were unloading the bundles of cash and packing them into a black suitcase. When they were done, the thieves crawled out of the bank on their hands and knees and then made a quick dash to the getaway car. The Audi's driver made a calm U-turn and left.

The entire robbery took less than seven minutes.

There were no witnesses other than the security cameras that recorded their every movement.

## GPS Spies

The ATM bombers became more experienced and more daring with each successful operation. The Birchwood job was their 28th in England. The 27th had taken place only