



WHY PAINTER STEPHANIE IS A HIT AT LAST

Oils expert making the art world sit up and take notice at the age of 83: LEISURE WEEK

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Hunt for Tory HQ arsonists

▶ Stolen tools may provide key clues in office blaze investigation

By NATALIE STEWART

POLICE say a stolen axe and hammer may be vital clues in the hunt for the arsonists who gutted Kendal's Tory party HQ.

The tools were found in an alleyway near the Georgian building in Highgate.

The discovery came as officers revealed they were treating the fire as a suspected arson attack, but ruled out any political motive as a line of inquiry.

The inferno destroyed records and equipment and was described by local Conservative parliamentary candidate Gareth McKeever as a 'significant blow' to his General Election campaign.

Fire tore through the three-storey terraced building in the early hours of Friday, causing hundreds of thousands of pounds of damage. It took around two hours for firefighters to get the flames under control.

The alarm was raised around 4.15am by a man in a neighbouring flat, who was treated for smoke inhalation.

Westmorland and Lonsdale Conservative Party records, three years of election work, computers and other electrical equipment were lost in the blaze.



SETBACK: Tory candidate Gareth McKeever, right, says the fire, above, is a major election blow

Green Door Art Studios, also based in the building, was wrecked, destroying hundreds of paintings and pieces of art worth thousands of pounds.

A chimney stack and parts of the roof were removed by a large crane over the weekend to allow structural engineers access. Police said the engineers

found the building was in a 'state of collapse'. Forensic teams have not yet been able to get inside and assess

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Potter foils rabbits



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Shelbourn



They said it



It's not just a business but more a way of life

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Jumble Room co-owner Andy Hill

Weekend weather

Saturday
Max: 5C
Min: -2C



Sunday
Max: 6C
Min: -1C



Join the debate

Our bloggers will get you talking

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They said it

We urge walkers to avoid high land due to treacherous conditions

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Patterdale Mountain Rescue



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WEBBS

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'Big blow to election campaign'

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the scene. Once the building is safe, police plan to use sniffer dogs from Lancashire Fire and Rescue Service to find any accelerants.

Detective Chief Inspector Bob Qazi, who is leading the investigation, said the axe and hammer had been stolen from a lock-up garage in Kendal town centre a few days before the blaze.

He said: "We believe the tools may be connected to the arson attack so need to establish who had them in the area and why.

"The fact that these tools were discarded in an alleyway is suspicious.

"Despite not being allowed into the premises, we continue to conduct our own rigorous inquiries and we need the support of the community."

Officers are trawling through CCTV to trace witnesses and eliminate people from inquiries and urge people who were in the area at the time of the fire to get in touch.

Conservative candidate Mr McKeever said: "It is a significant blow. Our office was the nucleus of our

Our campaign is more than just bricks and mortar

GARETH MCKEEVER

election campaign and all our records and equipment have been destroyed.

"There is some backup but it is very limited. We've lost a lot of stuff that we can't replace."

But Mr McKeever vowed he would not let the blaze stand in his way.

"Our campaign is much more than bricks and



HUGE BLAZE:
Above, fire crews battle the fire under control. Right, the hammer and the axe which were found near the scene



mortar," he said. "It is about people and we have a fantastic team that has responded in an incredible way."

He said he hoped to have a new office in or around the Kendal area as soon as possible.

Neighbouring firms were badly affected by the fire, which is thought to be the largest to hit Kendal since the blaze at the

former Booths supermarket in Highgate in 2005.

Painting and decorating suppliers Woodbridge and Mounsey, which is next door to the Conservative offices, remains closed.

Owner Dale Woodbridge said firefighters managed to control the blaze just before it spread to the store's roof space. He thanked the 'sterling

efforts' of the emergency services.

Neighbouring properties and flats had to be evacuated.

Kendal fire chief Steve Healey said the blaze was spreading to the roof when crews arrived. They battled the flames from a staircase enclosure and used a main jet outside.

Highgate was closed to drivers until Monday.

Artists devastated as years of work is destroyed

THE fire that ripped through the Conservative HQ building has also destroyed the work of some of Lakeland's finest creative talents.

112 Highgate was the hub of Green Door Studios, a group of 85 painters, printmakers, ceramicists and other artists, which rented the space from the Conservative Party.

The blaze wiped out hundreds of paintings and other pieces of art worth thousands of pounds. It also wrecked the studio space of 13 of the artists,

leaving them with nowhere to work. One of its founders Jill Pemberton said she had lost 20 years' worth of pieces.

She said: "Everything was in there, hundreds of paintings, all my sketch books, my printing press. It's devastating. I daren't think about it. I'm not insured because it's hard to get insurance for studios."

The Georgian property had provided what was considered the only low-cost studio space in the south of Cumbria.

GDS chairman Paul Clark said:

"It's a devastating blow. We needed that space to earn a living. We have to find somewhere else to go, and urgently."

Among those affected was community artist and single mum Donna Campbell. "I'm really hoping to be able to salvage something," she said, "if I don't, I've lost a lifetime's worth of tools, materials and my portfolio. And I'll lose a lot of future income."

A project with Staveley School was also destroyed.



WRECKED: Inside the artists' studio

WEATHER



FRIDAY

There will be a mostly cloudy start to the day as overnight mist is slow to clear in some areas. There will be just a few patches of drizzle during the morning. This will become more frequent during the afternoon. Moderate south-easterly winds. Temperatures close to the average.

WEEKEND

Saturday will be increasingly bright with a few wintry showers. Outbreaks of rain and hill snow on Sunday.

GENERAL OUTLOOK

Wet on Monday with outbreaks of rain and hill snow. It is expected to be drier on Tuesday, but largely cold.

SUNRISE/SUNSET

	Rises	Sets
Thursday	07:08	17:38
Friday	07:06	17:40
Saturday	07:04	17:42
Sunday	07:01	17:44
Monday	06:59	17:46
Tuesday	06:57	17:48
Wednesday	06:54	17:50

TIDES

	Morn	Ht	Aft	Ht
Thursday	08:35	8.1	21:16	8.4
Friday	09:43	8.9	22:17	9.2
Saturday	10:36	9.8	23:07	9.9
Sunday	11:24	10.5	23:53	10.4
Monday	-	-	12:09	10.9
Tuesday	00:36	10.6	12:53	11.0
Wednesday	1:18	10.6	13:35	10.9

At Arnside Harbour. Supplied by Proudman Oceanographic Laboratory

GOING OUT?

THE FELLS:

Saturday: Cloudy at first, but it will brighten up later on. A few scattered wintry showers. Sunday: It will be dull with outbreaks of rain and hill snow.

THE LAKES:

Saturday: Increasingly bright with a light scattering of wintry showers. Sunday: Outbreaks of rain, this heavy and falling as snow at times.

THE SEA:

Saturday: Fresh southwesterly winds, showers, moderate seas, mostly good visibility. Sunday: Fresh north-easterly winds, rain, rough seas, poor visibility.

Information supplied by **MeteoGroup**