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HEATHER WRIGHT PHOTO

Brooke Fire Rescue Firefighter Trevor Oke stops at his parent's home on Henry Street in Alvinston to see the damage brought by a brief but intense storm which toppled countless trees including several of the large pines in his parent's yard. While trees blocked most streets in the community, emergency vehicles were able to get through within hours as neighbours came out with chainsaws to help public works crews and firefighters move trees off the road. There were no injuries reported in what researchers now say was a downburst.

'It was just incredible; the rain was sideways'

Heather Wright
The Independent

A storm which roared through Lambton County may have lasted only 15 minutes, but it has left a mark on Alvinston.

Countless trees were toppled in the Brooke-Alvinston community and with more destroyed in the surrounding rural areas and in Inwood in what tornado researchers now say was a downburst. (See story page 2.)

Sarnia and Point Edward were hit by the storm first and as it moved across all of southwestern Ontario, high winds of up to 130 km/h and hail left a trail through rural Lambton, bringing down a barn in Wilkesport, cutting a path through a cornfield on Petrolia Line and leaving large hail in Courtright.

At 4:16 pm, Kristina Podolinsky was in her Morrell Street home in Alvinston with her two kids when the when the wind started picking up and a tornado warning blared through her phone.

By 4:35 pm, the storm had knocked down her fence and given her quite a scare.

"Between kids screaming and me screaming, it sounded like like like a train," she told *The Independent* as neighbours cut up a large pine tree which was blocking the street near her home.

The beige siding of a neighbouring home was plastered with little bits of leaves and behind the shed, another large maple toppled into another yard.

It was a scene repeated dozens of times across town.

Several members of Brooke-Alvinston council were at the fire hall for a public meeting when the storm hit. Councillor Jenny Redick says first the antenna at the fire hall fell, hitting the side of the building. Then, she looked out the window.

"There was a little white Volkswagen and it was moving off the ground and I asked whose car it was and the lady goes, 'That's mine.' I said, 'Well, it's going.'

It's going up and up and up (off the ground), she's like, 'Oh, my God, my car.' And it was just like crazy. I was like, 'Oh, my God, I don't know what's happening. Things are just flying across the parking lot at the fire hall just one after another; it was like, crazy,' she says.

"It was just incredible, like the rain was just sideways. You couldn't see out the window for the rain...The wind was howling and howling."

The meeting was called off and Redick tried to make her way home to make sure everything there was okay.

Every street had at least one tree blocking the way.

She left her car and made her way home only to find the Memorial Garden next door was decimated. A huge willow tree was uprooted and toppled onto River Street. In the garden, two large oak trees were down, several maple trees lost half of their branches.

Neighbours brought a tractor and

pulled some of the larger branches out of the garden.

Jim Alderman of Camlachie was across the street clearing the laneway of his uncle's home. Ken Alderman had called him after hearing about the storms asking him to check on the house. The willow tree had fallen in the drive, and a branch dangled from the power line above Alderman as cut the large branch and hauled it off to the grass with the help of his wife.

Brooke volunteer firefighters were among those out in force with chainsaws helping to clear the road. Trevor Oke joined them after driving through the storm to get home from vacation. "It was scary," he said shaking his head.

Oke stopped for a moment to look at his parent's home on Henry Street. They had about a half dozen large pine trees in the yard. At least three fell - two onto the house. Oke was hopeful the damage wouldn't be too extensive. Within hours, the trees had been

pulled off the roof and lay beside the house.

Across from Oke's home on Elgin Street, volunteers were on the roof at Hope United Church. Several large branches had fallen on the roof of the fellowship hall and a lean-to at the back of the building. Chuck Baresich was using a chainsaw to cut up the largest branches while others used rakes to brush away the small stuff. Pastor Jim Breen said a summer camp would have to move out of the building for its last day because of the damage.

The sounds of chainsaws and generators could be heard constantly, but that was about the only power available. The storm had knocked out electricity to thousands across the region including a large portion of Brooke-Alvinston. The head of Bluewater Power called the damage in Alvinston "traumatic" and the worst to the local power infrastructure she's ever seen.

SEE DAUNTING PG 2

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HEATHER WRIGHT PHOTO

Chuck Baresich was on the roof of Hope United Church on Elgin Street cutting up large branches and tossing them to the ground July 20.

‘It’s daunting’ said power chief of Alvinston damage

CON’T FROM PG 1

“This is the most devastating localized impact I can recall. It’s the worst damage,” she said Friday morning suggesting it might be Saturday before power returned. Even the impact of Hurricane Sandy – when a Bluewater Power employee lost his life in the aftermath – didn’t destroy as much infrastructure, she said.

“In some of the pockets, everything is completely destroyed. It’s daunting.”

But 28 hours later, the lights switched back on. “And it came with a big, huge sigh of relief let me tell you. There were cheers of celebration in the control room,” McMichael-Dennis tells The Independent.

“The guys truly never stopped. It was a great example of teamwork. I would

have bet money that was not going to happen until the end of day today,” she said Saturday morning.

Brooke-Alvinston Mayor Dave Ferguson says it was amazing no one was injured in the storm and its aftermath. And he applauded the community for stepping up to help. “Everybody in town is chipping and getting the roads cleared off to get vehicles through,” he said shortly after the storm eased. Ferguson brought his tractor into town to help clear some of the damage.

And neighbouring communities also offered help. Crews from St. Clair, Plympton-Wyoming and the County of Lambton arrived Friday morning with wood chippers to help shred the storm damaged trees in the back of Oke’s

Auto car lot.

Brooke-Alvinston Administrator Janet Denkers said they’d hoped to secure an industrial wood chipper, however the company felt it should not be in an urban area. Much of the debris is now being burned.

Municipal workers will be taking trucks around the community to pick up the branches which were not carted off to the temporary wood chipping station or the town works garage in the next few days.

Denkers expects it will be some time before the full extent of the storms damage will be analysed.

For more photos see page 8.

Downburst, not tornado, caused Alvinston damage

Heather Wright
The Independent

Thursday’s devastating storms spawned at least one tornado in Lambton, but it wasn’t in Alvinston or Sarnia.

Heavy storms moved through southwestern Ontario Thursday leaving thousands without power in Lambton and devastating the tree cover. Alvinston was hit particularly hard, with nearly every street in the East Lambton community blocked by a tree at one point.

Power was also out to the community for about 28 hours.

The Northern Tornadoes Project – a research team based at Western University – says and EF0 with wind speeds of up to 115 km/h tore a roof off a barn along Petrolia Line between Forest and Oakdale Road in Enniskillen township, right along Little Bear Creek. There were no injuries.

The group’s preliminary report out Monday says “An NTP ground and drone survey was completed on July 21, 2023, documenting the reported damage along with tree damage, damage to a power pole and some visible tornado damage in crops.”

The swath of damage was about 300 meters wide and lasted about three kilometres stretching into Brooke-Alvinston.

A downburst also damaged the roof of a large shed in Oil



HEATHER WRIGHT/NORTHERN TORNADO PROJECT PHOTO

A barn near Wilkesport is destroyed in the July 20 storm. Below, Brooke firefighters help clear the trees from local roads.



City the researchers said. Wind speeds there were up to 125 km/h.

A microburst with wind speeds of up to 130 km/h also took out a barn near Wilkesport researchers say.

The Northern Tornadoes Project classified the storm in Alvinston as a downburst saying the wind speeds were about 115 km/hour.

“Tree damage and damage to a power pole and antenna was reported in the Alvinston

area after a storm passed through. Damage to farm equipment, grain elevators and a construction trailer was also reported.”

Researchers added the damage in Sarnia was mostly confined to the northern part of the city with wind speeds of up to 130 km/hour.

The storms also produced a tornado in South Buxton in Chatham-Kent which removed part of a home’s roof and cut an 11 km path toward Lake Erie.

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Massive clean up after storm hits Alvinston

Neighbours break out the chainsaws to clear dozens of trees from roads so power workers can get through



HEATHER WRIGHT PHOTOS



Top right, Brodie Hart can hardly be seen working on a tree which fell on Sydenham street. Below, a man pulls a trampoline from a tree on River Street. Neighbours on Morrell Street start cutting a pine which fell. Other trees, like this one on Walnut Street, would take more work.



The series of storms which blew through Alvinston caused damage across Central Lambton. Above, a tree toppled onto a home on Eureka Street in Petrolia. One person was also taken to hospital after an accident on Oil Heritage Road during the storm. It's not clear how seriously they were injured. In Enniskillen, the Northern Tornado Project says a roof was torn from a barn in a tornado spawned in the storm. Most of the damage was caused, they say, by downbursts.