

Walking through the ruins



The path to an award-winning print can be tracked on a contact sheet. In the first of a new series **Keith Wilson** learns how Tom Stoddart found hope in the aftermath of a horrifying earthquake

The time *First week of February, 2001*
The place *Bhachau, a market town in the state of Gujarat, western India*
The event *An earthquake measuring 8.1 on the Richter scale, strikes Gujarat on the morning of 26 January, 2001. In less than a minute 30,000 people are killed, 150,000 injured and more than a million are left homeless. London-based photojournalist Tom Stoddart arrives at Bhachau five days later and stays for a week.*

WHILE TV CREWS and agency photographers were packing up and clearing out, Tom Stoddart's coverage of the relief effort had barely started. He began by photographing Médecins Sans Frontières doctors at work in Bhachau, where only one in five of its 25,000 inhabitants survived.

Most of the time Tom uses a 35mm Leica rangefinder, but when events are less chaotic he will switch to an old Rollei 6x6 TLR. Sometimes he takes the same subject on both formats, as in the case of the boy with the bandaged head on frame 1 of this contact sheet. But on frame 3 a scene of dozens of unperturbed pigeons pecking at an empty street, lends itself perfectly to the Rollei's square format. And yet something is missing.

'At the time I thought it would be great if those pigeons took off,' Tom



Above A young survivor finds time to play, chasing pigeons in the ruins of Bhachau

recalls, 'so I began to walk towards them. That's when this girl came along waving her arms and the pigeons flew off. It happened so fast, I didn't have time to focus.' Fortunately, he had set the aperture on the Rollei's 80mm lens to f/11 so the resulting depth of field ensured a sharp negative.

A week later he was back in London looking at the contact sheets and was

struck by frame 4. 'I knew then I had something interesting'. The negative was printed and used as a final image of hope in a sequence of 12 prints that earned Tom second prize in the General News (stories) category of the 2002 World Press Photo award. However, his pictures of this tragedy appeared in just one UK publication, *The Telegraph Magazine*. ○

