

Flash founded an appreciation society for these landmarks

# Pink electricity pylon became a movie star

## The Honest Truth

**O**NE of Scotland's cityscapes changed for ever last week as the iconic line of electricity pylons that split the east of Dundee in two was dismantled and replaced with underground cables.

The pylons that marched down Greendykes Road in the city had stood for more than 70 years and were removed in an operation described as "akin to taking apart a giant Meccano set".

But if they can be torn down in Dundee why is there an ongoing debate about plans to erect new pylons in beauty spots including Snowdonia and the Kent Downs?

Two years ago a public inquiry heard angry submissions from campaigners against plans to run pylons between Denny and Beaully through the Highlands and Ochil hills.

While it seems most people either hate pylons for blighting the landscape or are at best ambivalent, there's a section of society that admires and cherishes them. Flash Bristow set up the Pylon Appreciation Society for those people and its membership grows every week.

One thing is certain — that everyone appreciates the work pylons do bringing electricity to homes across the country. Flash told James Millar *The Honest Truth* about pylons.



■ Flash Bristow.

### WHAT ARE pylons?

Metal structures holding up the lines that transfer electricity between a place of generation and a substation where it's changed down to provide power for homes and businesses.

### WHO INVENTED them?

In 1928 the Central Electric Board realised they'd need a national grid so they ran a competition to design a way of carrying the cables, judged by eminent architect Sir Reginald Blomfield. A firm called Milliken Brothers won and although pylons were smaller then all pylons today are based on that design.

### WHERE WAS the first one?

In Bonnybridge in 1928. There's a clip of the event at [www.itnsources.com](http://www.itnsources.com)

### WHERE DOES the name come from?

There are structures from ancient Egypt called pylons, tapering towers which form the gateway to a temple. Nowadays we use the word pylon for many different kinds of tapering structure, for example, in America they call traffic cones pylons.

### ANY FAMOUS ones?

The 1998 film *Among Giants* was about a group of people painting pylons and a pylon near Rochdale was painted pink for the film. It was left that way and it became something of an attraction. Sadly it was taken down in 2003.

In 1933 Stephen Spender wrote a poem *The Pylons* about their advance across the country. Louis MacNeice, Cecil Day-Lewis and WH Auden were known as the Pylon Poets because they wrote about the effects of industry on the landscape.

### WHY DO they look the way they do?

They have to be strong



■ The end of an era as the giants that marched through Dundee are taken down.

enough to hold up three or six cables and tall enough to have plenty of ground clearance and take into account that the cables sag in hot weather. They're always a lattice design because if they were solid they'd be more likely to be blown over and they'd look worse.

They're not always grey. Near airports they're often painted red and white to improve visibility. In France I've seen them painted green or blue to fit in with the background.

### HOW TALL are they?

Modern designs are generally 46 to 49 metres. The tallest are 190 metres at Dartford where cables cross the Thames.

### ARE THERE different kinds?

Designs evolve. For example the L2 series was used in 1956, the L6 in 1960 and the L12 came along in 1980. But within each series there are suspension models, where insulators hang straight down from each arm and the wire is attached to the bottom of the insulators, and tension models where the insulator

string goes out horizontally. Tension pylons are usually for going round corners and are designated D10, D30, D60 or D90 depending on the angle. There are also terminal towers at the end of a line and junction towers.

### HOW MANY pylons are there?

Around 72,000 in the UK generally at third-of-a-mile intervals.

### ARE THEY dangerous?

You have to make a distinction between the pylons and the wires. The pylons just hold up the cables so they're completely innocent.

Having said that, climbing them is a bad idea because the wires are dangerous. There are always fatalities in the electricity industry, around a dozen every year.

People remember the old public information film with the boy flying a kite that hits overhead cables or the one where someone kicks a football into an electricity substation, but in both cases common sense tells you it's dangerous.

Recently a boy climbed a pylon, grabbed a cable and was electrocuted. He'd

ignored the many warnings, the barbed wire fence and his friends' pleas.

### ARE MANY being replaced by buried cables?

Numbers remain fairly stable. Some are taken down and replaced with underground cables but new lines are being put up.

The reason pylons were favoured over underground cables is that it costs between two and 25 times as much to put cables underground. Then there's the question of how you get under a motorway or a river. It's easier to go over.

While some say pylons spoil the landscape it's more disruptive to dig a hole, lay a cable and cover the hole again for miles and miles. If there's a fault with the line it's harder, more expensive and takes longer to fix.

### ARE THEY bad for health?

There have been a lot of surveys, the biggest being the UK Childhood Cancer Survey which found no evidence that living close to power lines affected health. There are lots of electrical items in your house, so if anything is going to do you

harm it's more likely to be in your room than something many metres above your head.

### DO THEY buzz?

If it's a humid or damp day the power lines crackle. They carry such a high voltage that there's a large electric field around them. The crackle is the sound of that field ionising the air around it — literally tearing the air apart. It's called "corona discharge".

### WHY DON'T birds sitting on the wires get electrocuted?

Because they aren't making a circuit with the ground. Electricity is trying to get to ground as quickly as possible and the metal wire in the cable conducts so well that the electricity carries on down it rather than going through a bird.

### ARE CAMPAIGNS against pylons ever successful?

Rarely. Sometimes they win concessions such as deviating the route round a site of special scientific interest, going underground for a small distance or tree planting around pylons to preserve the landscape.

### WHY SET up an appreciation society?

At the time of electricity privatisation there was an advert featuring pylons marching across the landscape. It caught my attention, then on car journeys I'd look out the window at pylons and notice there were different types.

Years ago I was working in IT and trying to keep awake on nightshifts I taught myself to make websites. As practice I set up a website about pylons around the world and people started sending me holiday snaps of pylons. Now we've around 32 countries covered.

The interest was such that I set up the Pylon Appreciation Society which now has 226 members, mainly in the UK but a few in America and Australia, and gains more each week. Members include engineers, children doing school projects and people who are just interested. Some post pics of unusual sights and then engineers will come on and explain them.

### HOW DO people react to your interest in pylons?

They often think I'm a bit mad, but then they start noticing the different types and doing things like taking pictures on their holidays to pass to me.

Pylons are something we take for granted but once you start noticing them they are fascinating.

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