

Anorak: Flash Wilson

I am a self-confessed pylonophile. Or, as my less generous friends would put it, I worship large steel erections. Yes, I run the Pylon Appreciation Society.

I've come to meet some interesting people (and admittedly some who are rather dull) – from engineering students to collectors of telegraph insulators.

However, mostly it's the mothers of ten year old boys who get in touch, so I created the Society for them (complete with badge and poster). Members get access to a special "spotter's guide" similar to the old I-Spy guides we used to take on long car journeys as children – featuring a different model every month!

My passion all started when I saw the National Grid privatisation adverts on TV during the 80s, where electricity pylons strode across the landscape, putting the world to rights. Through this animation I realised that pylons resemble people – with arms, legs and a head – and that while many people resent their presence, we should actually appreciate their giant benign companionship. After all, everyone wants to use electricity and it has to be carried to our houses by someone or something.

As I looked at pylons I began to realise that they weren't all the same – there are different designs to go around corners, over rivers, into substations and across hills – and a spark of interest grew to a current!

I started a website – a photo gallery of "Pylons around the world" – and found that I'm not the only one with this strange hobby. For sure, many readers take the mick, but far more will send in photos from their part of the world. I also receive various questions from readers (most commonly "Can they cause cancer?" – to which my answer is that currently there is no known scientific way that it is possible, and for every piece of research suggesting a link, there's another to disprove it). You'd be amazed at the questions I receive – "Will you make pylon greeting cards?" is going too far, even for me!

"What are your favourite pylons?" is much easier for me to answer. There are a set of three, one a design I've never seen elsewhere, in a village called Cressing in Essex. They route one line under another from a substation, and they are in a field near the main road through the village. My partner dutifully parked up so I could photograph and examine them. It's hard to explain what I like about these in particular; partly their uniqueness and partly they are pleasing on the eye. But for me, all pylons have a certain drama. Close up, they are quite imposing, and on a humid day you can often hear the wires crackle, potent.

There is one kind of pylon I've never seen and would dearly love to encounter. It's called a transposition tower, and is used to change the electricity over from one set of wires to another, so it looks like a jangled mess of wires from top to bottom. It's needed over long distances, to make sure the distance travelled by each phase of electricity is equal. Sadly we don't need them in the UK – our powerlines simply aren't long enough to require it – but I'm hoping to use this as an excuse to visit Africa one day, where I'm assured there are some good examples.

Just to impress your friends, let me share some pylon trivia with you:

* The tallest pylons in the UK span the Thames at Thurrock. At 610 feet high they are even taller than the Post Office tower

- * In 1928, architect Sir Reginald Blomfield chose the pylon design first used by the CEGB from entries in a competition
- * Each pylon is uniquely numbered, bearing its own name plate (just like a train!)

In the post-war era, pylons were seen as a positive symbol – there is a great public information film “Power and Prosperity” which portrays the erection of new pylons as a fantastic thing, part of the expansion of the National Grid which was required to bring growth and wealth.

These days pylons get a lot of bad press with the “do they / don’t they cause cancer” debate – but don’t blame the pylons, they are just inert steel structures! It’s not their fault they have to hold up the evil powerlines (...oh dear, I’m in danger of anthropomorphising again...) In fact I have a theory that pylons actually increase safety – if you were to sit under one in a thunderstorm you would be protected by your own giant Faraday cage – but I must admit I haven’t been brave enough to put this to the test!

My favourite pylon-related activity is to take a regular fluorescent tube and stand below powerlines at night, preferably where there are many high voltage lines together such as near a substation. The tube will glow – it’s a spooky moment when your very own lightsaber illuminates in your hands; you wonder if electricity is actually running through your body! This phenomenon was also demonstrated by Richard Box in “Field”, an art installation in March 2004, and it’s well known to us pylon enthusiasts. Someone once asked me if using the induced current was somehow stealing from the power companies – but this is yet another of those weird questions which I decline to answer. On the other hand, I haven’t found a good use for the glowing tubes either!

You may think I’m a little mad, but while there are pylons, there will be their fans – and if you have no idea what to buy your pre-teen grandson, membership of the Pylon Appreciation Society could be the answer!



My favourite pylons at Cressing, Essex