

The Battle of the Pylons

Our correspondent finds himself moved from happy memories of the past to fears for the future at the Pylons Inquiry.

BY IAN MCLAREN

Ah, the ballroom of the Golden Lion Hotel! Memories of dances and weddings past, of Folk Club evenings with Chapter Four, of the Stirling County Championship-winning dinner.

Now it presents a scene of hushed concentration, with a rectangular set of paper-strewn tables, backed by banked ranks of reference files like library shelves. The official inquiry into the proposed Beauly to Denny arrived in Stirling last December.

On one side, are the three principal Reporters, endlessly recording evidence. To their right, at parallel lines of tables, were up to a dozen smartly-suited young lawyers, representing the power companies who propose to build the new, giant pylons.

Opposite them, a single line of tables with representatives of the objectors: Stirling Council, Scottish National Heritage, Stirling Before Pylons, looking like David facing Goliath. Completing the rectangle, members of the public, including your *Times* correspondent, trying to capture a flavour of what it all might mean for Bridge of Allan and its hinterland.

First, it was all very reminiscent for anyone who had read - or seen - *Bleak House* of the endlessly repetitious Jarndyce versus Jarndyce case, where the legal system is seen at work - or perhaps more accurately - not at work.

But gradually, the implications became clear. References to obscure map references in subsection X of para Y became real when it emerged that they were debating the impact of the pylons on the views on that lovely walk from Bridge of Allan. The one through the Yellowcraigs woods to Dumyat and Sheriffmuir, where Roy Baker - who provides the fascinating back page of



A 400kv pylon

the Bridge of Allan Times - does so much invaluable maintenance work. Those who had most impact as witnesses tended to be individuals: Mrs Lorna Mair, Stirling Council archaeologist, who had to face rigorous cross-examination over her view of the damage which would be done to the site of the Battle of Sheriffmuir. Or Dr Richard Simpson warning of the health implications for anyone living close to the new route.

Especially effective were the people who lived close to them. With 16 pylons to be built between Cromlix and Sheriffmuir, there was Clare Clark from Kinbuck who feared for the health of her children denied access to favourite play areas near the route. Or another local resident, Mike Wilson, who would see the new giant pylons from every window in his house, "except my garden shed - if I keep the door shut!"

When asked why he had not been present at an earlier stage of the

Inquiry to object to what he saw as a biased judgement which favoured the electricity companies, he drew vocal support from the sizeable audience when he replied, "Because I have a job!"

As for the impact on Bridge of Allan, I recognised that there may be little immediate impact on our village, apart from the possible health effects on those living within several hundred yards of the new route. But there will be a striking visual impact for those who enjoy a walk up into the Ochils. And during the construction phase, there will certainly be a major impact on our roads as the building components of pylons, three times the size of the present ones, plus the materials for all the access roads are transported via Dunblane and Bridge of Allan.

There is however the question of the legacy we leave to our children. Do we spend extra money to bury the cable underground or lay it undersea down the East coast rather than allow a line of giant pylons to stride across our glorious countryside?

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