

WHEN ALL ELECTRICAL POWER STOPPED

The electrical power stopped at 6 pm. I remember that very well. On the radio Big Ben had just finished the Westminster chimes for the full hour, but before the first of the six hour strikes, the power went dead. The lights went out and the house was in darkness, it being then late November.

I wondered if our consumer unit had tripped. But looking out through the window, I saw no lights in any other house and the street lights were off. "Bother!" I called to my wife, "I guess the power's gone down for this part of town."

I was aware of shouting in the street. I took another look outside. I realized that not only were all the houses in darkness and the streetlights not working, but there were no lights anywhere. Cars had stopped along the street right in the middle of the road and none had any engine running or any lights on. People were milling around, some shouting at one another, but none had any torch working and several were frantically trying to get mobile phones to work without any success.

It quickly became obvious that it was not just the mains power that had gone down; *all* electrical power had stopped, whether it came from the main grid, from batteries or from any other source.

The street, however, was not in darkness. The sky was lit up with an eerie, diffuse light with fairly constant flecks of what appeared to be sheet lightning at a very high altitude. There had been odd flashes reported over the last two or three days. News bulletins had talked of collisions of space debris from defunct satellites. The UFO brigade had predictably been claiming an alien origin for the phenomena. But that evening the somewhat sinister flashes were almost continuous,

I thought of John Wyndham's "Day of the Triffids" and quickly came away from the window as I did not want to be blinded. But I need not have worried; although many evils did result from the events of that evening, near universal blindness was not one of them.

My wife had looked out some candles and lit them. We rummaged around in the refrigerator and put together a supper of sorts. But just as we were about to sit down and eat, we heard an almighty crash and the whole house shook.

"What's that?" my wife shrieked. "Go and see!"

I went upstairs and, taking care not to stare at the sky, took a cautious look from the bedroom windows. All I could make out was a bright glow in the sky in the north of the town; it was evident there was a huge fire raging there, but what it was I simply could not see.

We sensed that it would be dangerous to venture outside so, making sure all doors and windows were locked, we got on with our supper and spent a restless evening and night.

The next morning we found that all electrical power was still dead; and the house was cold since the central heating pump was no longer working.

After a cold breakfast, I decided to venture out to see what was happening. I soon learnt that the crash we had heard last evening had been that of an aeroplane which had come down in the north of the town and burst into flames, destroying a large part of a housing estate there. Some fires were still burning as no fire engines had been deployed.

There seemed to be a general air of apprehension. All communications were dead so no one knew if the trouble was merely confined to this area or affected the whole country. There were rumours that panic buying had started at the supermarket in the town centre. Surely it would not be open with no electrical power? I decided to walk in and have a look.

Indeed it was not open; but crowds were beginning to gather, demanding that it open up. Two policemen and a policewoman were attempting to keep control. I sensed that things might turn ugly before the end of the morning. Fortunately, our freezer was well stocked and we had quite a bit of food in the house. I left quickly.

When I got back home, I told my wife what I had heard and seen. We decided that things would only get worse in town. Indeed, by the afternoon there were rumours that looting had begun and of people being injured or killed.

It seemed to us that it would be safer to get out of town. We decided that as soon as it was light next morning we would cycle off and try to reach my brother-in-law's farm before nightfall. It would be a long ride, especially as we would avoid habitable areas as much as possible; but we thought with careful planning we could do it.

That afternoon we packed panniers and backpacks with as much food and clothing as we could and spent another cold and very uneasy night. We could hear every so often what sounded like drunken gangs roaming the streets; we just hoped that none would come our way.

Just before dawn the next morning we loaded up our bicycles and locked the house, wondering if we would see it again, and began our long ride. Fortunately, hardly any one was about at that early hour and we were soon clear of the town.

We kept our stops as few and as brief as possible and, by avoiding any towns and as many villages as we could, we had very few hold-ups and managed to reach the farm just as it was turning dark. My brother-in-law was surprised to see us as, of course, we had not been able to let him know we were coming.

He took us in but became concerned when we told him about things in the town. He was worried that armed gangs might come and cause trouble so that winter the house and farm buildings were very securely locked each evening. In fact we had very little trouble.

That winter was very hard. In the towns and cities, food soon ran short and with no heating and very little food, the death rate was high. We learnt later that bodies were left unburied and this, of course, proved a source of disease. There were even rumours of cannibalism.

For a time the cities became controlled by armed gangs. But they killed one another off as food and resources became scarcer; nor were *they* immune from disease. In January a vicious flu strain hit the country and seemed determined to kill off those who had survived malnutrition and hypothermia. The only winners were rats and the packs of feral dogs that fed on the dead and the dying.

We also learned later that several planes had crashed since, when the power went down on that fateful evening, they were also affected. Where they fell on towns and cities it caused a great deal of destruction. Large parts of cities were also burned when fires that people had started in order to keep warm had got out of control.

By the end of that winter, cities had become ruined wildernesses, inhabited mainly by rats and dogs and odd pockets of desperate and ruthless people. The towns had fared little better as resources there had also run low and the cold and hungry population had been easy prey to flu and other diseases.

That Spring, electrical power gradually returned in that battery operated equipment could be made to work. We could get cars and tractors started if batteries had not become flat. But there was still no mains electricity. Even if one got a vehicle to start, there would be little prospect of using the thing except for a few weeks as fuel was in very short supply. The survivors in the countryside reverted more and more to using horse and older technologies.

All this was many years ago now. Things did get better in the countryside; and many small towns, including our own, gradually became habitable again. But the cities still remain largely ruined and verminous. They are still avoided.

Some electrical power has now been restored and at last old style telephone communication has been re-established over much of Britain; short-wave radio enthusiasts are making contact with other counties. But there is still no nationwide electrical grid.

It does appear that the total loss of electrical power was world-wide. People argue about what caused it. Perhaps one day we shall know.

Meanwhile, here in Britain things are gradually improving. Regional councils have been set up and there are now moves to get a national government established somewhere in the Midlands. All in all, things are now going well and we look to the future with, maybe, still some apprehension but also a great deal of optimism.