



# A brighter future

The world is witnessing a streetlighting revolution. The emergence of energy-efficient, low-maintenance LEDs is certain to lower CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and save money, but in our clamor for efficiency, are we actually harming the character of our streets?

Words | **Lee Gale**

Amid freezing temperatures and long hours of darkness, winter in the Northern Hemisphere might be a gloomy time for some, but the good news is that our winters are about to become brighter places. A streetlighting revolution is on the horizon – one that will transform our urban experience from the orange glow of sodium lights to the bright white of LEDs.

The rise of the LED has been rapid, with the UK at the forefront of this seismic shift. Ten years ago in Britain, LEDs were first installed in traffic lights, followed by white-light trials on major thoroughfares. By 2008, LEDs were able to give the same output as regular fluorescent lanterns – 90 lumens (lm) of light for 1W of energy. Today, that figure is 140 lm of light for 1W of energy.

LED technology is a positive step in almost every aspect but it isn't better-quality illumination or an increase in road safety that's forcing change – it's cost.

"You're halving your energy by turning to LEDs and as long as they're constructed in a luminaire fit for purpose, they'll last 30 years," explains Nigel Parry, past president of the Institution of Lighting Professionals in Britain and principal at LED lights manufacturer OrangeTek. "The UK is going for this in a big way because energy prices are high. When you look at a rural authority, half their budget is spent on energy and the other half on maintenance. What they're doing is borrowing money and halving their energy payments for the future. That'll pay back in five or six years. That's why we're seeing a tsunami of change."

Britain is blazing a trail with LED streetlights, while early adopters in America, also eager to slash bills, include New York and San Diego. In 2016, San Francisco will begin fitting LED luminaires to existing columns in an attempt to safeguard the city's heritage feel, but in Britain, LEDs will mean the end for life-expired concrete lampposts. And here's where a problem lies: with cost a priority for UK councils, exemplary design is no longer considered necessary. Once, lighting columns served a dual purpose – to illuminate the street and also to please the eye. Now, a few shining examples of modern design aside (such as the PearsonLloyd installations pictured above) most of the current generation of aluminum columns, often despondently referred to as 'hockey

sticks', lack any character whatsoever. Could now be the perfect moment to turn the tide?

## Exemplary design

For a concrete-lamppost enthusiast – and there aren't many of us around – the English county of Derbyshire remains something of a treasure trove. There are still 14,500 concrete columns along its highways, although visits to such strongholds are farewells rather than forays. Spalling – crumbling concrete – is a common problem for old columns. In most cases, water has leaked through at the bracket attachment, often due to poor installation, leading to the rusting of internal steel tubes and reinforcing rods. This, in turn, pushes against the concrete structure and leads to chunks falling off.

Having passed a golden-tinged, double-arm Stanton 8G of 1960's vintage on a busy junction

near Alfreton (not the most elegant structure, but photographed nonetheless), a trundle through late-summer heat haze leads to higher ground and there, from a rise near the almost silent intersection of Furlane Ends, the unmistakable silhouette of a pair of ancient Stanton 6Bs is spotted.

Towering 25ft high, with ornately curved brackets holding aloft deep-bowl 90W low-pressure sodium lights, these 6Bs are a time-travel trip to an era when footballers took public transportation and police officers clipped kids around the ears. Both are set away from the A615, standing on the perimeter of a parking lot belonging to the 17<sup>th</sup> century Peacock Inn. A senior-looking man is found who has enough patience to answer cursory questions. Facts are sparse but we're able to build an explanation as to the columns' enduring existence. The pair stand on a narrow strip of land,

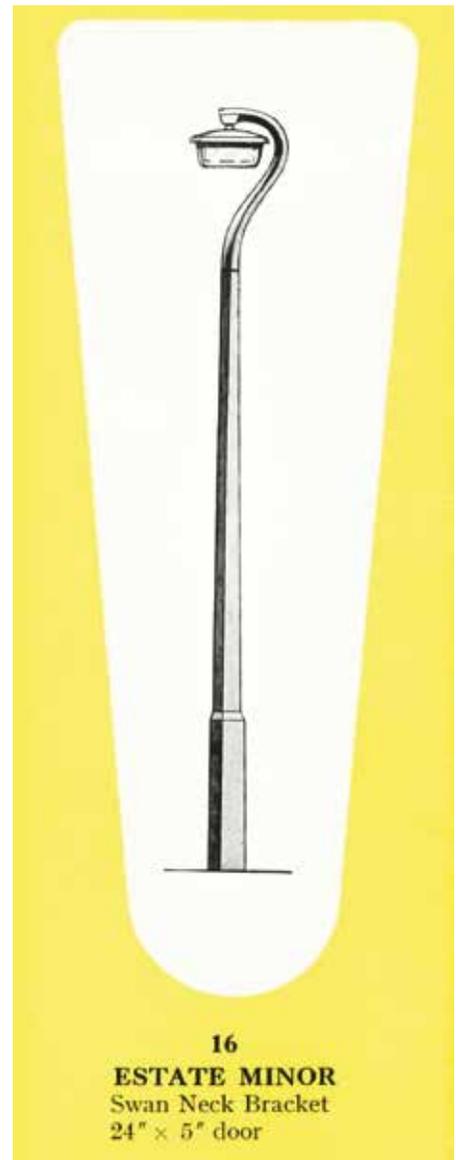
(Above) **Streetlighting design by PearsonLloyd, in London's Victoria, bucks the trend for the purely functional by successfully referencing older, classic designs such as the Stanton 6B (above left) while using modern materials and adding contemporary design flourishes**



Photograph: PearsonLloyd

(Right and below right)  
**A pair of Stanton 6Bs await their fate on scrub land next to a new housing development near Doncaster, UK**

(Far right and below)  
**Images from Stanton and Concrete Utilities catalogue archives show the variety of lighting column designs that were once available in the UK**



no more than a few feet wide, which neither pub nor council claims to own. It appears that these 6Bs have survived through a misunderstanding.

Nowadays, finding a 6B is like catching a coelacanth during a routine fishing excursion. They were designed pre-war at the nearby Stanton Ironworks in Ilkeston, but have an almost Ancient Egyptian aesthetic. They wouldn't look out of place illuminating the paws of the Sphinx. Only a scattering of 6Bs remain from the tens of thousands that once lit such disparate districts as Purley, Nottingham and Dunstable. With health and

safety a primary concern, aging columns are quickly removed and soon there may be no 6Bs left at all. If this happens, it'll be a crime against industrial design. But does anybody care?

Streetlighting is seriously niche territory and enthusiasts are scarce. Of these, Simon Cornwell from Cambridge stands bracket and lantern above his peers. With his website, Cornwell is the guardian of the British-streetlight story and thus the grand high priest of the 'illuminati'. A collector, restorer and urban investigator, he's been documenting his discoveries since 1997.

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*Simon Cornwell, collector, restorer and urban investigator*

“A streetlight installation is so old and unchanging that it's taken as a permanent part of the environment,” Cornwell states. “This view changes once new columns go in. Residents suddenly become aware that something pertinent to their street has been ripped out for something bland. At this point, it's too late. There have been occasions recently where people have chained themselves to columns. This is nothing new and also occurred in the 1950s, when cast-iron, decorative gas lamps were replaced with newer, more functional steel and concrete columns. But the outcome is the same.”

#### **Honoring the past**

If we're to secure a handful of columns for posterity, the next five years are crucial.



(Left and above) **Andrew Saton has faithfully recreated quarter-scale 1950s street in his back yard, featuring a wide variety of streetlighting designs**  
 (Right) **Perhaps the most ornate concrete lamppost of all time: Concrete Utilities' Avenue 4D Special, featuring a dragon sculpture**



Cornwell's solution is simple: streetlights could pass into the collections of already existing museums. Condemned columns can be acquired for as little as £50 (US\$76) from council yards but first-generation Group A (main road) concrete models are in scant supply. They're occasionally found on wasteland or ground awaiting redevelopment. In Adwick-le-Street, Doncaster, for example, two further 6Bs can be spotted among scrub in a fenced-off area by a water-pumping station. Both remain perpendicular, although a swathe of new housing nearby hints at their fate.

Stanton's great rival, Concrete Utilities in Hertfordshire, manufactured equally impressive pieces, but when it comes to streetlights executors show little brand loyalty. Last year in Southgate, London, a CU Avenue 3D Arc 2 with a serpent-like bracket was given the chop having shone its golden glow on a village-green roundabout for over 60 years. Instantly, the tone of the environment dipped.

"I can't see concrete columns being around in 10 years," says Cornwell. "I know two collectors who have columns in their gardens, so some examples will survive. But concrete is a difficult material to preserve, particularly if the strengthening rods are corroding. The real losses are the Stanton and Concrete Utilities columns that were installed in the post-war years. There were some magnificent 1950s designs, before everything became too functional."

Although the Stanton 6B has sumptuous lines, it pales into insignificance next to the now-extinct Concrete Utilities Avenue 4D Special that was erected along Morecambe's seafront after the war. Its bracket was a stylized dragon perched on a post, clasping a lantern in its jaw. Britain's tragedy is that we may never see such visionary imagination again. The 4D stands in stark contrast to what you'll find in today's Battersea, London. Take a stroll down Queenstown Road and you'll endure grubby metal poles carrying high-pressure sodium lights housed in late-1990s upturned washing-up bowls, all liberally

splattered with pigeon droppings. Our columns need a serious re-think.

### **Aesthetic nostalgia**

While the future is sealed for LED streetlights and barely perceptible aluminum columns, could we not secure our past as well? The motoring industry constantly references former glories – look at the Mini and Fiat 500. They're nearly as popular now as they were in the 1950s. What we need is a national repository for street furniture. Imagine strolling down vintage avenues, gazing at pre-Jock Kinnear/Margaret Calvert road signs, SGE two-color traffic lights and elegant lampposts. It's an idea shared by Andrew Saton, whose Quadhurst project aims to recreate a living 1950s village.

"The idea for Quadhurst came from a lifelong interest in how our streets looked," explains Saton. "As a child, I perceived that things disappearing were replaced by equivalents that were aesthetically inferior. It was also clear that these elements, principally streetlighting, telegraph poles

“We’re in danger of losing a massive part of our industrial and technological past”

*Andrew Staton, owner of the Quadhurst project, UK*

(Right) **Visionary designers at London’s PearsonLloyd show that it’s still possible to lend character to urban landscapes with inspired streetlighting**

and road signs, were uniquely British and set us apart in the same way as pounds, shillings and pence did.”

If Staton can attract investment, his prime aim is to buy land and present a post-war idyll. The major problem is that few road signs, telegraph poles or lighting columns ever reached private collections, but there are enough surviving manufacturers’ catalogs for skilled modelers to produce authentic copies. This has already been done successfully by Staton as a quarter-scale pilot 1950s street.

“As a nation, we’re proud of our heritage and keen to preserve it,” Staton says. “We do Victoriana and Edwardian very well but what we’re bad at is recognizing the prosaic and the more recently departed heritage as meriting conservation. There has been an imperceptible disappearance; people simply aren’t aware. We’re in danger of losing a massive part of our industrial and technological past. This was the idea behind Quadhurst, to develop a setting where people can experience what our streetscape once looked like.”

There’s no backing yet but there’s little doubt that Quadhurst would prove a tourist draw in much the same way as people flock to Portmeirion, the Italianate village made famous by 1960s spy show *The Prisoner*. Staton believes that established tourist attractions with land to spare might benefit from such a folly.

### A way forward

Looking to what’s already out there, it’s heartening to note that some designers do still have an eye for the aesthetic. Take a promenade through the bustle of Victoria, London and you’ll notice lines of sculpted protrusions by British design studio PearsonLloyd. They’re already 10 years old, but with a triangular base and effortlessly smooth curve into the road, they



Photographs: PearsonLloyd

offer a scintillating glimpse of how future streets might look if councils have a little foresight. And now, as the LED street-lighting revolution sweeps the world, what better time to think more about this future?

While even spectacular examples of lighting columns may currently be deemed too monotonous for heritage collections, if the subject were presented in a suitable setting, along with a wider selection of street arcana, we might even grow to love

our aged lampposts. We know that the past has the power to inform the present. If we let students meander along pavements of preserved columns and allow them to examine images of lost, classic structures, they might realize that style flourishes once had the power to propel civic pride. So as we install more efficient lighting we might also be able to invest in better-looking lighting columns, adding to the visual appeal of our roads, both night and day. ■