

**STIRLING BEFORE PYLONS**

**acting with**

**FRIENDS OF THE OCHILS**

**as a Relevant Person Group**

**for the purposes of the**

**STIRLING SESSION**

**of the Public Inquiry into  
Scottish and Southern Energy's proposals for the  
Beauly to Denny 400 KV Steel Tower Double Circuit  
Overhead Electricity Transmission Line**

**SUMMARY PRECOGNITION**

**Dr Fiona Watson**

**Stirling and the Ochils:  
A historic landscape at the heart of the nation**

## **SUMMARY**

My name is Fiona Jane Watson

I am currently a freelance historian and writer and was formerly a senior lecturer in History and Director of the Centre for Environmental History at the University of Stirling. I have a Ph.D. in Medieval Scottish History and a degree in Medieval History. I have published numerous articles on Scottish History and three books. I have presented and contributed to numerous TV and radio programmes for both UK and US audiences on medieval Scottish history.

### **Introduction**

I intend in this submission to show why this landscape is so important at a local, national and international level, what it has meant – as a place of beauty and of historic value – for such a long time, and to argue that the benefits of placing pylons within it are negligible when compared to the potential damage to the tourist industry, including film and television interest, and the less quantifiable, but equally important, well-being of the nation.

### **Stirling, the nation's theatre of war**

In this section, I provide an overview of the impressive and important history of the Stirling area to indicate the crucial place that it has occupied, from time immemorial, in Scotland's development, as a seat of government and royal recreation, as one of the four original medieval burghs, and, most crucially, as a theatre of war comprising the rock of Stirling, the Carse and the Ochils. This propensity for hosting battles was already noted by the reign of James VI (1566-1625) when a viewing platform was planned for the king and his court to survey the 'brooch' (ie. the place where Scotland is held together) at the centre of his historic kingdom ['Stirling Castle', *The Oxford Companion to Scottish History*, ed. Michael Lynch (Oxford University Press, 2001), p.592].

### **The historic environment**

In this section, I consider definitions of the historic environment and the difficulties in providing for its protection. In particular, I highlight the ongoing

Scotland's Historic Environment Audit, currently being undertaken by Historic Scotland, which will assess what might constitute the Historic Environment, what it means in terms of the relationship between people and place, and what might be done in the future to highlight and maintain such areas. I argue that, given the embryonic nature of this process, we should operate the precautionary principle against implementing any scheme likely to have a significant effect on important historic environments. The current proposal to build pylons through the Stirling Historic Environment would, I argue, certainly fall within that category.

I then go on to provide a selection of examples from past writers indicating the variety of reasons why they have found the Stirling area to be particularly aesthetically and historically precious. These help to create a vivid sense of the area's dramatic history, but make clear that that understanding is inspired by the beauty of its present (whenever the writer is looking!), part of which arises from the vestiges of the past that still remain and help the viewer to connect with that history.

### **The Battle of Stirling Bridge and the National Wallace Monument**

The battle of Stirling Bridge (1297) is one of the most famous in Scottish History. Its appeal – the tiny Scottish David taking on and beating the English Goliath – is international, especially after the success of Mel Gibson's *Braveheart* in 1996. The success of its commander, Sir William Wallace, at the battle was commemorated, nearly 600 years later, by the construction, through public subscription, of the National Wallace Monument, which towers above the causeway of Stirling.

As well as arguing for the fundamental importance of the National Wallace Monument in the national psyche, and noting its importance as an international tourist destination, I also argue that the view from the castle which encompasses the Monument and the Ochils is at least as important as the view west from the royal lodgings. I also point out that archaeologists and historians do not always share the same point of view on the Historic Landscape, the former having a

primary concern with material culture and the latter with the meaning and interpretation of actions and events. Since Historic Scotland is predominantly staffed by archaeologist this perhaps helps to explain their stance on the current proposal, but it is not the only view held by professionals engaged in understanding the past. Finally, I note the number of times that film and TV crews have used the area as a dramatic backdrop, some of which I have been personally involved in. The pylons would have a significant impact on the ability to portray this area - the crucible of Scottish History - in the future.

### **Conclusions**

I have aimed in my submission to underline and complement the evidence presented by Elspeth Smith and Virginia Wills, to show the coherent and long-standing nature of the Stirling/Ochils historic environment and the importance, both aesthetically and historically, of the view both to and from the western extremity of the Ochils in general, and to and from the Castle/Abbey Craig in particular. This area is uniquely important to the national psyche, presiding as it does over some of the most crucial moments in the nation's past. This is not merely my own personal opinion reading history in a certain way to argue a particular case; the images of the area used time and again on television, in books and on postcards and prints are testament to the general truth of that opinion. In particular, the battle of Stirling Bridge, which arguably changed the course of Scottish history, encompasses within its story both Stirling castle *and* the Ochils/Abbey Craig, as well as the Bridge over which the battle was actually fought. Its commemoration in the national Wallace monument was meant to be the highest honour that Scotland could conceive to the memory of its victor, Sir William Wallace. As George Reid says (*The Herald*, December 13, 2005):

I cannot think of any other country which would permit such a blight so close to a landmark which symbolises the right of the people to be a nation.

To borrow Simon Schama's poignant evocation of a historic environment, I would argue that visitor and resident alike experience something similar to Pook's Hill when standing on the battlements of Stirling Castle or at the top of the National Wallace Monument. The imprint of the modern world fades away

under our gaze as we imagine Wallace's men marching down the Sheriffmuir road, taking up position to watch the English across the Forth, before gathering up their courage to go out and meet them. Over five hundred years later, two other armies met on the Ochils; this time it was British government forces that marched up the Sheriffmuir road to meet a Jacobite army. This is precisely the area that will be affected most heavily by the pylons, which would, by their size, fundamentally alter the scale of the landscape, drawing the eye away from that to which it is, and has for so long been, attracted, the aesthetic and historic nature of the area. The paraphernalia of the twenty-first century must not, for the sake of both Scotland's economy and Scotland's sense of self, be allowed to change our ability to reach back into the past, a past that sells Scotland to tourists and filmmakers, and teaches us who we are. Though the costs of undergrounding will certainly be much higher than overhead pylons, it is more than worth it for the sake of preserving this unique and iconic landscape.