



Power cables – just don't!

Over the years the FSC's accident investigators have examined the background to a number of fatalities involving power cables. There are also reports of pilots colliding with power cables and surviving; these outnumber the fatalities, but not by many. As with our advice on landing in water – don't do it, it's usually fatal – so with power cables ... you probably won't survive the encounter.

Electric power cables in the UK usually come in several types. High tension cables that are part of the National Grid distribution system carry voltages of either 275,000 or 400,000 volts; intermediate cables are of 132,000 or 33,000 volts, and cables involved in distribution to outlying villages and farms are either 11,000 or 400 volts. Some are insulated and some aren't; it doesn't really matter – all should be treated as uninsulated lines. In the UK, pilots have collided with all these types. Encountering any of them is likely to be fatal; the very least that will happen is the destruction of your equipment and a fall from height.

Some sites have power cables of varying voltages in the vicinity. These are usually visible, well marked on sites guides and well known to local pilots. Sites that have cables in dangerous positions in certain wind conditions should be avoided. The biggest problem, however, is with landing fields. Some club bottom landings have cables that are far too close for comfort, and many an XC pilot has packed up their gear after an outlanding and suddenly thought, 'Blimey, I never saw those!'

Incidents with power cables come in two types: the cables you thought you could get

over, and the cables you never saw. Fatalities have resulted from encounters with both. The bottom line is this – a collision with any power cable is likely to be fatal, either through electrocution or falling to earth after your glider has burnt through in an instant.

There are cases on record of pilots who knew very well that power cables existed in their regular or occasional landing fields. All it takes is a moment's forgetfulness, a little bit of sink or turbulence, or more headwind than you had imagined ... and you are toast! Often pilots simply do not notice cables through tiredness, eagerness, cutting corners or even exhilaration. They can be difficult to spot, in low light or when part-buried in trees surrounding a field. Change your flying habits now to include these precautions ...

- Make a habit of searching a field carefully for exposed and/or concealed cables
- Never make low approaches or turns over cables
- Never take the over-the-wires option for a shorter walk to the gate

- If there are cables present, double or treble your safety margin over or alongside them
- If another pilot is following you in, identify the cables by pointing or by radio
- If there's the remotest possibility of a collision, turn away as early as possible.

Electric power cables have claimed too many of our pilots. Whether you didn't see them or you thought you'd glide over them, the result of contact is always the same: catastrophic! As with so much in our sport, the price of freedom is eternal vigilance.

Note: Regarding landing in water (above), clearly there are cases, usually on SIV courses and competitions involving landing on floating rafts, where well-drilled teams on fast motorboats make landing in water all part of what the pilots signed up for. This does not detract from the FSC's stance: don't land in water, it's usually fatal.

When power cables are concerned there are no 'Yes, but what about...?' situations. A collision with a power cable will most likely prove fatal.