

# Let's turn analogue off tomorrow!

The longer it takes to roll out a digital service, the longer cowboy aerial installers will have to swipe huge wads of customers' cash for no good reason. Bill Wright explains

**W**hitehaven has taken the plunge, and I think the rest of the UK should follow in short order. Some heavily populated areas are not due for analogue switch-off (ASO) until 2012. That's ridiculous and in a moment I'll tell you why, but first, here's a bit of history.

In the 1960s/70s it took the UK 13 years to change over completely from 405-line to 625-line television. But to receive 625-line transmissions everyone needed a new TV set, and in those days TV sets cost a month's wages. All that's needed in 2008 to receive DTT is a set-top box costing £25.

'But,' I hear you cry, 'what about the digital aerial?' And that's the point, or at least a big part of it.

The aerial trade would rather you didn't know this, but as long as the transition period drags on the public is wasting a fortune on TV aerials. There are far more aerial installers around than there used to be, many of them using flash new vans to do deplorably bad work. When any trade has a boom the reputable traders plod on as always while all sorts of low-life crawls out to join in the fun.

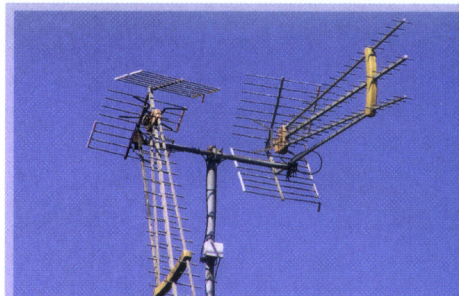
Why is the lingering death of analogue causing the aerial trade to boom? There are many reasons. Right through to ASO the DTT signals will have to remain at their current very low levels or they will interfere with the analogue channels. After ASO the digital transmission power will be increased hugely. This means that lots of the very big expensive high-gain aerials and masthead amplifiers being installed now will be quite unnecessary after ASO.

When analogue ends many transmitters will move all the DTT signals into the present channel group. So the current fetish for replacing perfectly good grouped aerials with wideband ones (with their inherently poorer performance) will end.

## Drowning signals

After ASO the thousands of low-powered analogue-only relay transmitters will provide digital signals. But as we wait, some people in areas best served by the relays are installing big aerials and masthead amplifiers so they can get DTT from the nearest main station which, of course, provides only very poor signals in the area. Despite the availability of the three commercial multiplexes as well as the PSB ones from the main stations, it seems that many of these nearly new big aerials and amplifiers will be redundant when analogue ends.

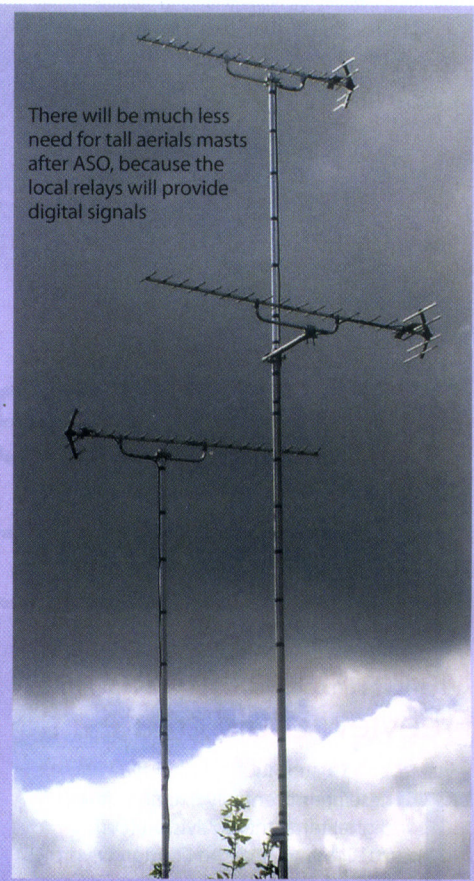
Until ASO some of the main stations can't transmit DTT at full power in all directions because if they did they would interfere with analogue reception from other stations. This means that large



Some of the huge aerials needed for the weak pre-ASO digital signals are not being installed to the highest standards!



After analogue switch off the increased power of the digital signals will make many big aerials like these unnecessary



There will be much less need for tall aerial masts after ASO, because the local relays will provide digital signals

parts of the UK can't have DTT until analogue ends. The Sheffield transmitter, for instance, transmits pathetically weak digital signals to the south because there's a little local relay in that direction that uses the same channels. So to protect analogue reception in Totley village, a swathe of Sheffield city will have no DTT reception until 2011.

Hannington transmitter is another example. The analogue signals cover parts of Hampshire, Wiltshire, and Berkshire. But Hannington's DTT uses the same channels as Guildford's analogue relay. So Hannington transmits only a weedy DTT signal to the east, making reception near-impossible in Wokingham, Bracknell, Camberley, Fleet, Hook, Farnborough, and parts of Basingstoke. The alternative is Crystal Palace, but in many places the Crystal Palace signals are too weak to use as well. Customers just can't get their heads round it when their Hannington analogue reception is fine. Only after ASO in 2012 will Hannington's shackles be removed and full power transmitted everywhere.

Even in places where DTT signals are available there are serious problems with many communal TV systems, caused by the great inequalities in the strength of the analogue and digital transmissions. Distribution equipment will only operate across a narrow range of signal levels, so many systems have elaborate filters fitted to equalise the levels. This is expensive and it isn't always completely successful. During the present flats building boom we really shouldn't be forced to add hundreds of pounds' worth of equipment to every distribution head end when it will be redundant by 2012.

We've had nine years of digital terrestrial TV in the UK. Nine years to get ready for the end of analogue transmissions, yet some parts of the country still have four-and-a-half years to wait! In Sweden the change happened almost overnight, and there was little fuss. The Whitehaven switch has gone smoothly. The powers-that-be should take that as a sign for a rethink about the analogue switch-off. Let's not draw out the agony! ■