Power cuts are so 1970s. But they’re on the way back. How can we stop them?

‘KEEPING THE LIGHTS ON’ has a slightly old-fashioned ring about it. Why ‘the lights’, in particular?

As a boy during the miners’ strike of 40 years ago, the Three Day Week seemed more of an adventure than a crisis.

Sometimes there was no power. But we didn’t have a freezer, a washing machine or even a television at that time anyway. No one had a home computer or the need for a mobile phone charger. We did have a record player, electric oven and bar fire but you knew there was a power cut when the lights went out and everyone would groan, “Power cut... again...” Then we’d eat sandwiches and play Monopoly by candlelight. That’s why we talk about “keeping the lights on”.

Forty years later, I’m a family man with all of the above appliances (including the same record player, I’m pleased to say) plus a whole lot more. Most of them, as my children unfortunately keep reminding me, weren’t even invented when I was their age.

A whole generation has grown up taking the power socket and the light switch for granted. That is about to change. An academic paper published in January warns of a perfect storm of neglected infrastructure, peak oil, political instability, global warming and a shift to renewables will bring back the power cuts.

In this month’s cover story (p66), Penny Hitchin finds out how the power industry is planning to proove the doom merchants wrong. Can the outages be avoided – and if so, at what cost?

There’s the question of whether LED lamps will make more friends than the compact fluorescents (p40)? And will smart meters live up to the hype or become another disappointment (p44)?

We take a look at the latest bright hope for biofuels (p56) and map the world’s nuclear power plans (p54).

There are many parts of the world where it’s unusual to find the power on rather than off. Anyone under 40 and living in Britain today won’t remember a time when the lights went out before bed.

Ten years after the Three Day Week the miners struck again, but this time the politics had moved on and they were defeated. On the 30th anniversary of that bitter battle, we look at the productive pits and what little is left of Britain’s mining industry (p50), as two more mines get ready for closure this year (http://bit.ly/eandt-news-mine-closures).

At the end of last month the International Panel on Climate Change produced its scariest report yet, in an already frightening series on global warming. Nick Smith talks to climatologist Professor Mark Maslin (p60) about the role of the engineer in dealing with climate change. “Engineers,” he says, “are the most reticent group I can think of when it comes to trusting scientists.” Let us know why in our LinkedIn Group at http://bit.ly/eandt-linked.