

Heathrow protest thwarted as police use radiowaves to jam Extinction Rebellion group drones



A Heathrow Pause protester. CREDIT: LEVIE HARRISON-CHIPPY

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By **Jamie Johnson**
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Protesters attempted to bring Heathrow airport to a standstill today by flying drones in restricted airspace. But their plan, much like their remote controlled flying vehicles, never really got off the ground.

Thwarted by a newly installed multi-million pound military grade anti-drone system, one man resorted to simply removing the batteries and holding his contraption in the air. He then sat down in a Costa Coffee, called the police on himself, and was arrested on suspicion of conspiracy to cause a public nuisance.

But James Brown broke down in tears before he handed himself in to the authorities. As farcical as his protest was in achieving its aim, he said he feared prison, but that the price was worth paying if more people woke up to the climate crisis.

The 54 year-old Northern Irishman is partially sighted, and had to be guided from his table inside Heathrow's Terminal 2 towards a group of waiting officers. He hadn't seen them gathering. Many were holding guns.

Hours earlier he says he joined in with the 'Heathrow Pause' drone protest against the airport's planned third runway.

Mindful of his poor sight, Mr Brown thought it may be difficult to fly the small contraption safely and didn't want to put anyone at risk. His passive act of aggression, he says, is still illegal if done within the designated 5km exclusion zone around the airport, and so he offered himself up to the officers.

In an uncomfortable scene, illuminated by photographer's flashbulbs, Mr Brown was handcuffed while clinging to his white cane and led through departures towards a police van parked outside the terminal. Passengers in the queue for an Air China flight looked bewildered.

A former Paralympic bronze medalist in tandem cycling at the London Olympics, Mr Brown was one of five people arrested yesterday on suspicion of conspiracy to cause a public nuisance.



A police vehicle sits on patrol near Heathrow

In actuality, there was little nuisance caused. Heathrow ran a full schedule of flights.

'Heathrow Pause' a splinter group of climate change activists Extinction Rebellion wanted to bring the airport to a standstill by flying drones within the three mile exclusion zone around the site.

Their first attempt, live streamed on social media, ended prematurely because of "a technical glitch" they claim was caused by a signal jammer.

And they were almost certainly correct.

After the Gatwick drone chaos last December, Heathrow invested millions of pounds in a weapons grade anti-drone system.

Although the specific technology used at the airport has not been disclosed, one possible piece of equipment, developed by Israel, is called the Drone Dome system, which can track devices up to six miles away and disable their communications by blocking the signal between the operators remote control and the device.

Some models, not thought to be owned by Heathrow, are even able to fire laser beams and destroy their targets.

It appeared that police also used helicopters and drones of their own to hunt the protestors. The overwhelming show of strength was simply too much.

Of three attempted flights in the morning, only one drone actually took off. The group claimed to have as many as 35 people willing to risk a prison sentence by flying a drone, but that reality never materialised.

At 6pm, there was one more attempt, this time in the middle of some woodland. The drone was tethered to the ground so as not to fly above head height. Again, no flights were grounded.

The Heathrow Pause movement had already suffered setbacks with seven pre-emptive arrests on Thursday. Suspected would-be pilots, including Extinction Rebellion co-founder, Roger Hallam, were taken into custody, and one member was apparently bitten by a police dog.

A spokesperson for the group said: "The real objective was always to trigger a sensible, honest conversation, throughout society, on the dangerous folly of Heathrow expansion."



Extinction Rebellion climate change protest during London Fashion Week

A spokesperson for Heathrow Airport said: "We agree with the need for climate change action, but illegal protest activity designed with the intention of disrupting thousands of people is not the answer."

Known for their shock protests, Extinction Rebellion were also active today, with five activists gluing themselves to a building hosting the London Fashion Week tradeshow. Others covered the ground and their white clothes in fake blood, claiming that the fashion world has 'blood on its hands' for running an industry that is more polluting than shipping and international air travel combined.

The group behind the widespread protests in April, which brought Oxford Circus and Waterloo Bridge to a standstill, has no intention of stopping soon.

"We will rebel until the end of time and space, because if we fail to do this it will be the end of time and space as we know it," they said.

"We will make our governments act now on the climate and ecological emergency if it is the last thing that we do."

Paralympic bronze medallist among arrested

A former Paralympic athlete who won a bronze medal at London 2012 has been arrested as part of the Heathrow drone protest.

James Brown, from Northern Ireland says that he fears going to prison but it is a price worth paying to raise awareness for the climate crisis.

The partially sighted former cyclist, who came third in the tandem road time trial in London, says there are as many as 35 protesters ready to fly drones in the Heathrow exclusion zone.

Police were made aware that Mr Brown was sat in terminal two and gathered at around 9:30am. At least 15 officers were on hand as Mr Brown was put into handcuffs and led away.

There are lots and lots and lots of people still out there, he said.



Heathrow Paus member James Brown, a former Paralympian, is arrested after handing himself to police at Terminal 2 CREDIT: ADAM SHAMKHOR

"Last count there was 35 people ready to fly drones over an extended period of time. We are organised into affinity groups. Mine had four in it."

Responding to suggestions that the actions had so far failed because the airport was still running a full schedule of flights, Mr Brown said:

"We are yet to see how it will transpire from here on in."

The former athlete said that because he is partially sighted, he simply held the drone above his head, because he did not want to endanger any aircrafts.

"The police came to my house last night but I had already gone by then. They had a section 17 order to gain entry to my house and my wife was there and was pretty terrified.

"A number of us stayed in a hotel in the area last night and in fact when we started hearing about the arrests we switched to a different hotel, so none of us have slept anyway.

"Because of my sight impairment and because this is a 100% safe action we are taking part in, I didn't want to take any additional risk, I have my drone in my bag and simply held it above my head. It didn't even have batteries in it, but that is still breaking the law."



Northern Ireland's Dave Randle and James Brown in the Men's Para-Sport 1000m Time Trial B Tandem Final in London 2012 CREDIT: TIM HEDLAND/PA

Mr Brown was led to a police van under a heavy security presence, supported by friends.

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