

Clouds on the horizon...

Solar farm proposal threatens family idyll



Aerial view of Lords Lane farm, if the application goes ahead, it will be surrounded on all sides by solar panels

Leeches were once gathered hereabouts for medicinal purposes, but since the Snape Mire swamp was drained in the 1770s, this landscape has been farmed — the soil, rich in glacial deposits, producing healthy crops.

Yields were so good that a model farm (possibly designed by John Carr, Yorkshire's bridgemaster) complete with an architecturally important carriage barn, was constructed in the middle of this panorama in the late 1700s.

From this spot can be glimpsed the fortified church tower of St Gregory's in Bedale, the red tiled rooftops of the village of Exelby, and through the mature clusters of oak, ash and alder, Thorp Perrow Hall.

Cutting through the fields are two well-trodden footpaths, much used by locals walking between Exelby and Bedale.

This is a gently rolling landscape of hawthorn hedgerows, where red deer and badgers can be spotted, kingfishers and warblers seen and the sweet song of skylarks high above fill the heavens.

History runs deep here: there is evidence of pre-Roman connections to the Neolithic Thornborough Henges, medieval settlements developed here, and Catherine Parr, final wife of Henry VIII, famously lived here.

Nearly thirty years ago, land agent Nigel Foster and his wife Crystal fell in love with this spot and made their home here in the former model farm where they raised their now grown-up children and planned to end their days gazing out over the fields which wrap themselves in a golden embrace around their smallholding, where they have a couple of sheep, chickens and horses.

But hundreds of miles from here, plans are being hatched to change this elemental idyll and turn Lords Moor Farm, the Fosters' home, from an oasis embraced by farmland, into an enclave encircled by solar panels.

Multi-national corporation Enviromena (headquartered in Reading but with offices in Dubai, the UAE and Rome) is hoping to develop a forty-six hectare solar farm here which would surround the Fosters.

The land is owned by the Thorp Perrow Estate, home of the acclaimed arboretum, which is overseen by Sir Henry Ropner, the 3rd Baronet.

"I feel like I'm stuck on the battlefield between Napoleon and Wellington at Waterloo and I can't seem to get to talk to either of them," says Nigel, about the Thorp Perrow Estate and Enviromena.

"My wife and I were looking forward to our retirement here, but who knows now. What we want is an Environmental Impact Assessment," he says, referring to a detailed investigation into the proposals and their effects.

"But even that could take several years to complete and all of that time, this proposal will be hanging over us."

So far, scores of objections to the plans have been submitted to North Yorkshire Council, with two in support.

John Walker, of Exelby, is one of dozens of protestors who have written opposing the plan. He says: "This is not simply a kneejerk NIMBY response. Many of those commenting on the proposal are all in favour of the development of clean, renewable energy, but this is clearly not the right place to do it. Should it proceed, it would result in significant and unacceptable harm to the landscape and the heritage assets both within it and connected to it.

"The Local Access Forum has commented that this application should be withdrawn and certainly not proceed without a full Environmental Impact Assessment taking place."

Fellow local Justyn Castle, adds: "This is an area steeped in history, borne out of a glacial lake which was drained in the 1770s for agricultural improvements, this has been a place of refuge for centuries under the protection of Snape Castle — this is not the place for such a development."

Historic England has also said it feared the impact the farm would have on the surrounding area and adds: "In very simple terms, the



Justyn Castle, John Walker, Crystal and Nigel Foster and Winnie the dog



Nigel, Crystal, Justyn and John, with a campaign banner



*An artist's impression of how Lords Lane
may look if the solar farm is approved*

application site sits within a landscape shaped by human activity over a considerable time-depth and therefore demands a high level of archaeological assessment.”

These views are vigorously opposed by Lee Adams, chief commercial officer at Enviromena, which wants to erect about 50,000 solar panels, capable of powering about 13,000 homes a year, on the site at a cost of £25-30 million and is keen to dispel what he terms “the myths” surrounding the company’s plans.

“We are UK headquartered and are owned by a British-run pension fund and have been operating for seventeen years in the UK and Europe, we have a regional office in Italy and historically have done a lot of work in the Middle East,” says Adams, “and are committed to the UK government’s net zero target.”

He is at pains to point out that the company receives no taxpayer subsidies and that, “we are not putting storage on this site. Some projects require battery storage, but not this”.

Instead, the electricity generated will be directly fed into Northern Powergrid underground — “there will be no additional pylons,” says Adams.

Furthermore, he maintains that once the project is finished, the land will be returned to agricultural use. “There is no lasting impact on the environment after forty years,” he says emphatically.

With the two sides diametrically opposed, it is now up to the planning authority to decide the outcome of such a sensitive matter which is likely to be repeated across Yorkshire and beyond in the coming months and years. 🐾