

by Glen Keogh

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

WHEN the Fosters looked around a rural North Yorkshire farmhouse, with a view to purchasing it from the aristocratic Ropner family, what first struck them was the view from the bedroom window.

It was a beautiful sunny day, says retired charter surveyor Nigel Foster. We got up to the bedroom, looked out and immediately thought, "We have to have this" because it was such a fantastic view. It was open fields, big old trees, arable crops, streams - everything you could want to surround a family home.

That was 1997 and the Fosters happily stumped up £200,000 for the four-bedroom 18th-century property, which they bought from the late Sir John Ropner, an eccentric baronet who lived nearby in the Grade-II listed Thorp Perrow Hall.

Almost 30 years and three grown-up children later, the idyllic plot, known as Lord's Moor Farm, is worth around £1million.

It really has been like *The Good Life*, Mr Foster 63 adds, in reference to the hit 1970s sitcom. "We grow our own veg, we have our horses, sheep, dogs, hens. Our favourite pastime is probably sitting outside and enjoying the view."

Standing in their garden with chickens wandering around four feet, the vista offered by this home nestled between the village of Exelby and the historic Georgian market town of Bedale, close to the Yorkshire Dales, is indeed majestic.

Two sun-fingers, shaded by an apple tree, look out on to a wonderful British panorama reminiscent of a Constable painting. Soon, however, rather than overlooking fields of wheat and barley that attract a variety of wildlife, the Fosters could find themselves faced with something rather different.

A planning application has been lodged to carpet the 113 acres of land surrounding their property with thousands of solar panels seven metres long and three metres high, complete with an electricity substation, security fencing and CCTV cameras. Naturally, the proposal to turn this tranquil setting into the Steel Solar Farm has attracted local opposition, but no one is affected quite like the Fosters, whose house will be in the middle of the site.

The decision to sacrifice this prime patch of arable farmland lies with Sir John's son, Sir Henry Ropner, an old Etonian investment manager who reportedly once dated Princess of Wales, the then Kate Middleton, during her brief split from his former Eton schoolmate Prince William.

Sir Henry, who owns thousands of acres of land around Exelby and Bedale, has agreed to grant a 40-year lease on the area in question - currently farmed by a local tenant - to a firm called Enviromena.

To say his decision has divided this rural community would be putting it mildly.

And it's a row that's being played out across the country. This week, Energy Secretary Ed Miliband approved plans for Britain's biggest solar farm, the Tiltbridge Solar project, near Gainsborough in Lincolnshire, which will cover an area equivalent to about 2,000 football pitches. Once operational it is hoped the site will generate enough energy for 300,000 homes - when the sun is shining.

Steel Solar Farm may not be on the same scale, but Sir Henry's decision to cash in on Enviromena's offer, coupled with his backroom plan, private equity, has not gone down well with his neighbours. Exelby parish councillor Kirsty Temple, "Public enemy number one".

HOME IN RURAL IDYLL



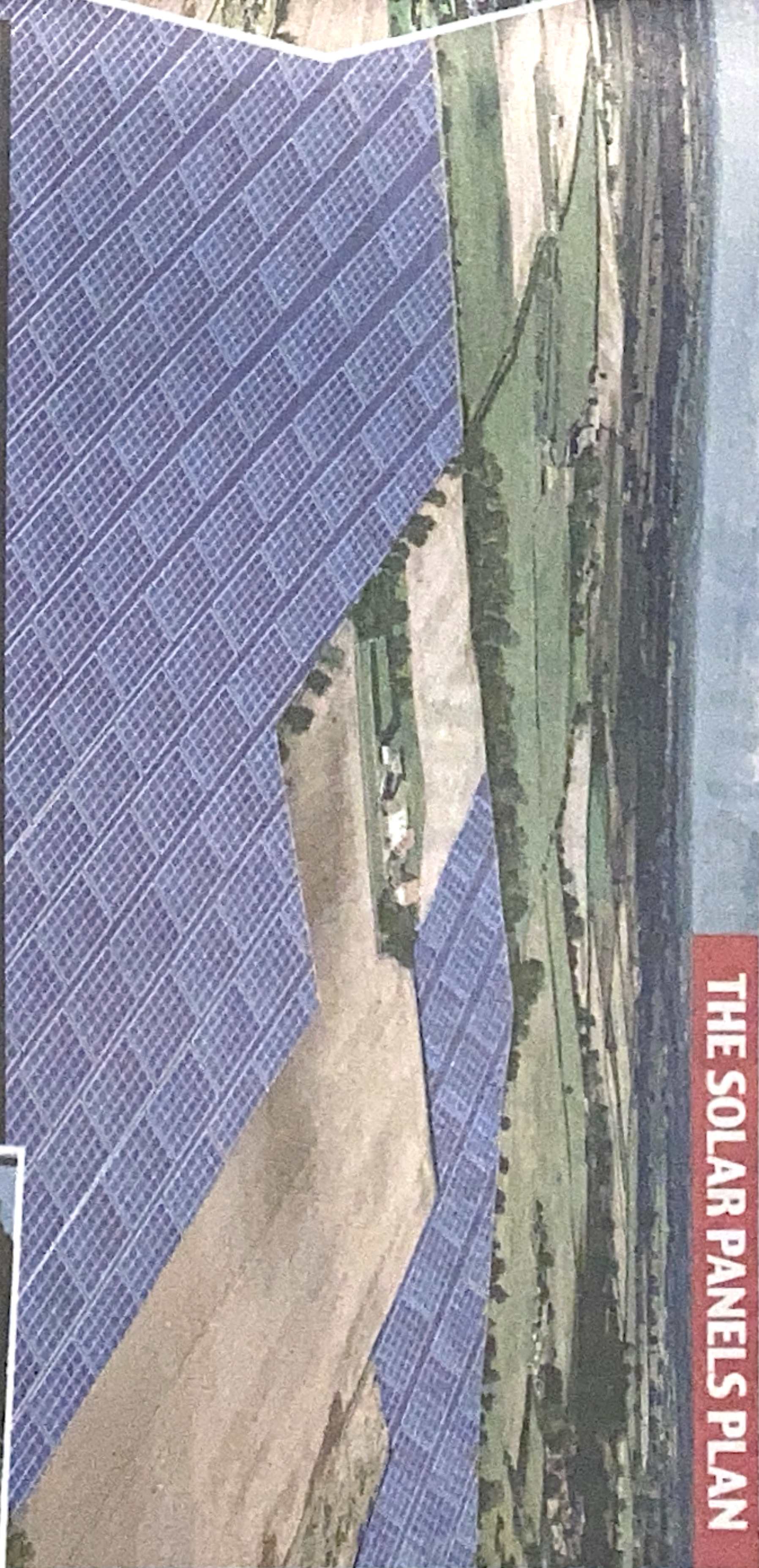
How an Old Etonian said to have dated Kate Middleton has outraged his neighbours with a plan to carpet a heavenly corner of the Dales with gigantic solar panels

with the same outlook and philosophy he wouldn't do this sort of thing to his neighbours," he says. "It's an unusual thing to do to a neighbour you live next door to. A neighbour is a particular relationship and most people work hard to get on with their neighbours. It doesn't pay to fall out but, crickey, he couldn't have done much more than fall out with his neighbours than what he has done. He's

either in a desperate situation or it's just driven by money. It's difficult to imagine Sir Henry struggling. His home, Thorp Perrow Hall, is an imposing 18th-century mansion set in landscaped grounds. Its grand pillared entrance is flanked by two canons reportedly once used by his father to fire croquet balls. Three Land Rovers were parked outside when the Daily Mail visited last month but a member of staff said Sir Henry, who lives at the property with his wife Natasha and four children, was away.

The family wealth stems from Sir Henry's great-great-grandfather, Sir Robert Ropner a German shipbuilding company and later became a Conservative MP. Sir Henry's grandfather, Colonel Sir Leonard Ropner, was also a Tory

THE SOLAR PANELS PLAN



Pictures: GLEN MINIKIN; SWNS; CAMERA PRESS/MARK STEWART

Worried: Nigel and Crystal Foster fear solar panels will ruin life at their Yorkshire farmhouse

important in the north of England. After he died in 2016, Sir Henry succeeded to the baronetcy.

The Fosters claim he has refused to engage in discussions about the project since the day last year that he turned up at their farmhouse to inform them he was leasing the land for solar power. "I thought it was the worst news Henry could have given me," Mr Foster says.

And despite the scale of the opposition to his solar deal, Sir Henry is yet to publicly address the issue. He hasn't been seen at any local council meetings, leaving an Enviromena spokesman to take the flak on his behalf, and didn't respond to a request for comment from the Daily Mail.

From a financial standpoint, it's easy to see why Sir Henry and others in his position might be swayed by a lucrative offer from a solar power provider at a time when farmers are being hit by inheritance tax.

Landowners can expect an annual rent of £150 to £200 an acre if they let their fields to tenant farmers, as Sir Henry does. But solar farms have been known to pay more than £1,000 per acre.

Not that this cuts much ice with many locals who see his decision as the latest example of an aristocrat lordling it over ordinary folk.

"They [the Ropner family] are quite high up the pecking order, the hierarchy and we are just not normal people," says Mr Foster.

His wife, Crystal, 56, also a former chartered surveyor, adds: "This has been weighing heavily on us for nearly two years. It has caused a lot of sleepless nights, a lot of stress. We hope it isn't going ahead, but if it does, we will live in the middle of it. And it is a year of construction just to build it. The traffic, the noise. And then to watch this countryside being ruined will be soul-destroying."

Old flame: Sir Henry Ropner dated Kate Middleton briefly

down to an obsession with the bottom line. "The company is inhuman and cruel and just interested in money," he claims. "If they can get away with this without buying us out they will make more money. They don't give a monkey's about the people it affects."

The situation faced by the Fosters and their fellow villagers is one being experienced by thousands of others across the country, with Britain in the midst of a solar gold rush as the Labour Government targets a reduction in carbon emissions to net zero by 2050. "This means solar and wind farms are big business. Large-scale developments are considered nationally significant infrastructure projects, which means that, rather than being approved at local council level, they go to the office of the Energy Secretary."

In his first eight weeks in office alone, Ed Miliband gave the go-ahead to four large projects in the face of local opposition.

And at the Labour Party conference, which concluded earlier this month, the eco-zealot announced that the Government will ban fracking for shale gas in England - putting the party at odds with the manufacturing of the panels and their transportation. But why doesn't Enviromena, which originally operated in the Middle East and is now owned by asset management company Arjun Infrastructure Partners, simply buy the Fosters out?

After all, Mr Foster has made it clear that, should the plans be approved, he will reluctantly sell up. But, according to Enviromena, such a buy-out is "not an option. No further explanation has been provided."

smaller in scale, Enviromena's planning application - submitted in July - must be approved by North Yorkshire Council.

Of more than 150 comments on the plans submitted to the council, the vast majority are in opposition, while a petition to block it has gathered more than 1,000 signatures. No date has been set for the council's decision.

Groups such as the British Horse Society have also raised concerns, pointing out that the site is next to a popular bridleway - the only footpath linking Exelby and Bedale - used by equestrians, ramblers and dog walkers.

Historic England - an arm's-length government body - has also objected, saying the site is located within a sensitive heritage landscape dominated by evidence of post-medieval rural farming communities (and) country estate residences."

Somewhat ironically, it names Thorp Perrow Hall as one of these.

The Fosters' cause has been taken up by other villagers in Exelby, including Juvyn Castle, chair of the Stoop Steel Solar Farm campaign group, who moved to the village from Darrington in 2014 for the rural life... which will be diminished.

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