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Duke to build thousands of solar panels after criticising ‘easy money’ green projects

Duke of Northumberland accused of hypocrisy after previously criticising landowners seduced by eco-friendly energy

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Emma Gatten
Environment Editor
08 April 2025 2:39pm BST



Walbottle resident Malcolm White says the Duke is being ‘seduced by easy money’ Credit: Mark Pinder

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The Duke of Northumberland is planning to erect thousands of solar panels on his land despite criticising landowners seduced by the “easy money” of renewable energy.

Northumberland Estates is proposing to build a 34-hectare solar farm across green belt fields next to the village of Walbottle outside Newcastle.

The solar farm is part of plans to expand renewable energy across the Duke’s estate as he seeks to protect his long-term business model.

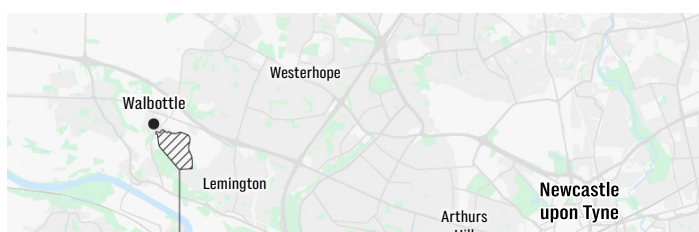
But the plans have angered residents who argue it would radically alter the nature of the village and have a negative impact on wildlife.

In 2011, the Duke criticised landowners who agreed to build wind farms on their land, telling a campaign group: “I am afraid we are all seduced by easy money, often to save crumbling assets, but ruining a countryside of which we are supposed to be custodians is a step too far.”

He told The Telegraph at the time: “I have come to the personal conclusion that wind farms divide communities, ruin landscapes, affect tourism, make a minimal contribution to our energy needs and a negligible contribution towards reducing CO2 emissions.

“The landowner and developer are enriched while the consumer is impoverished by higher energy costs.”

Location of proposed solar panel site





Newcastle City Council planning documents



Map showing area of the planned solar park in Walbottle in Northumberland

The residents of Walbottle are now gearing up for a battle against the plans for a solar farm on land which they say is vital for maintaining the semi-rural character of their village.

The Duke's reputation among some residents was already dented after a culvert on the estate's land collapsed in 2012, forcing the evacuation of 51 residents.

Proposals for the solar farm on beloved green space now threaten to worsen relations.

Objections include the 2-metre-high fences that will be erected around the perimeter of the development, as well as security cameras and motion-triggered lighting.

There are fears for local wildlife, including stoats, weasels and badgers, and for the long-term health of the agricultural land.





Alnwick Castle on the Duke of Northumberland's estate Credit: Marco Tenback

Hundreds of villagers joined a recent meeting to oppose the solar farm, which could provide enough electricity from 68,000 panels to power nearly 9,000 homes.

“He is viewed with contempt in the village because of this,” said resident Malcolm White. Referring to the Duke’s earlier comments about wind farms, he said it appeared “completely hypocritical. He didn’t want his view ruined [at the time]”.

Mr White added: “The fact that this solar farm is going to destroy our views, our whole environment, doesn’t come into it.

“He said anyone can be seduced by easy money, and that is exactly what is happening with him, in my opinion. If people accuse me of being a Nimby, I’ll plead guilty but I’m in company with, I think, everyone in the village.”



The Duke and Duchess of Northumberland pictured in 2018 Credit: Owen Humphreys/Getty Images

Richie Thompson, who leads the Walbottle Green Space group, said the Duke’s earlier comments “make your blood boil” in the context of the estate’s current support for solar panels.

“To then find that he now feels it’s right to jump on the bandwagon of renewable energy,” he said. “I know it’s solar panels in the grass, rather than up in the air. But we are facing noise and disruption.”

It is not the first time Ralph Percy, the 12th Duke of Northumberland, has found himself in the sights of locals opposed to his plans for development.

With an estimated wealth of £509 million, the Duke’s estate has a vast portfolio of commercial and residential property in the UK, Europe and the US.

He recently lost an [eight-year David and Goliath battle](#) to turn allotments at his home in Isleworth, west London, into 80 flats after the council said it would lead to the loss of local space and be detrimental to nearby listed buildings.

The row saw the Duke accused of [using “bully boy tactics”](#) by a local councillor after he said the allotments would not reopen if the flats were refused permission.

The Government wants solar power capacity to more than quadruple by 2035 to reach its goals for a net zero grid, on an area bigger than Greater Manchester.

Landowners can expect to make up to 10 times as much from leasing out fields for solar than farming arable crops.

The Government’s planning rules say solar should preferably not be sited on agricultural land classified as the “best and most valuable”, which is ranked from grades 1 to 3a. The use of lower-quality land classified from grade 3b to 5 is preferred.

A spokesman for the Duke said the site chosen for the farm was predominantly grade 3b with some areas of 3a interwoven within it, and that the fields would return to agricultural use in the future.

They said biodiversity would be boosted with plans including tree planting and creating native hedgerows.

“Vast improvements in renewables technology over the last 10 years make it a strong proposition in the fight against climate change and we are focused on [delivering net zero](#) and carbon reduction to the region in line with government and local authority policies,” the spokesman said.

“The estate has never imposed a blanket ban on renewable projects. However, in proposing this scheme, we have carefully considered the site’s location on the urban fringe, the availability of necessary supporting grid infrastructure and the scale required for a meaningful energy supply.”

The spokesman added that feedback gathered during an initial public consultation phase would be thoroughly considered.

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