

WHEN anyone talks about unspoilt English countryside I have in my mind's eye that part of North Wiltshire intersected by the Roman road, the Fosse Way. The ancient trees either side of the Fosse are full of bats and have probably seen the armies of several English civil wars pass by.

These trees give the landscape a parkland feeling, a savannah landscape stretching back into pre-history, though since the Enclosure Acts of the 18th and 19th centuries got rid of common land it has been a patchwork of small fields bordered by thick hedges.

There are small family farms here, mostly with a rich mosaic of pasture grazed by cattle and fields of cereals turning from brown to green to gold and back again as they have for millennia. Fields that are haunted by kestrels by day and barn owls by night.

And in the deep ditches and ponds, ducks nest every spring and cuckoos can still be heard calling in the willows. Walk across those fields and you would still be guaranteed to put up a hare and perhaps send a skylark soaring chatting into the sky.

But all of that is about to change. One of the largest solar-power complexes in the country is set to turn more than 2,000 acres of glorious countryside in North Wiltshire from agricultural land into a dystopian vision of steel and glass.

Unless local residents can stop it, the Lime Down Solar Park will scar the landscape in a triangle between the market towns of Marlborough, Tetbury and Chippenham.

It is every homeowner's worst nightmare. Walk up to discover that the idyllic countryside surrounding your family's beloved home is earmarked for a national infrastructure project. Meaning that your property may immediately be worth as much as 50 per cent less — if you can sell it at all — and could be blighted for years, even if the development doesn't ultimately go ahead, as with parts of the

at least, if you are going to have a motorway or high-speed railway within yards of your front door you may have your house compulsorily purchased.

BUT that doesn't seem to be the case with a growing number of the large solar parks scheduled to be built all over the country.

If you are wondering where Lime Down is then don't bother looking on a map of Wiltshire. The name seems to have been conjured up in some focus group so that it can be as anonymous and inoffensive as possible.

But it will dominate the picturesque villages of Hullavington, Norton, Sherston, Roughton, Alderton and Girtford when the railway goes back to the Domesday Book and beyond.

While there is no law against calling an industrial complex a park, it seems rather dishonest way to describe three and a half square miles of 14-ft-high solar panels surrounded by security fencing and floodlights.

If you live elsewhere in Wiltshire, you can't afford to relax either. The development of this vast power complex will need extra infrastructure to transport the electricity over 18 miles to the sub-station at Melksham.

It will require dozens of hideous and highly combustible battery storage units, and miles and miles of road disruption to get the electricity to Melksham and into the Grid.

And I doubt that, within the 40-year period lifespan of Lime Down, the area under panels will be designated a brownfield site and eventually disappear under housing for ever, making a vast



A solar farm of more than three square miles is planned in the Wiltshire countryside. Here, a writer whose wife grew up in the farmhouse (above) it will engulf says the project will sacrifice a slice of paradise to the god of Net Zero...

This is what the greens can SAVE THE ENVIRONMENT!



by Jamie Blackett

super-city linking Swindon to Bath and Bristol. People outside Wiltshire can't relax either. If it could happen in such unspoilt countryside, it could happen anywhere. At this point I should declare an interest. Ground zero of the planned project is Fosse Farm, a farmhouse beside the Fosse Way where my wife grew up. The fields I have described are where we taught our children to fly kites and walked many long dead dogs. My brother-in-law and his wife live there now and my wife owns the adjoining cottage, which is tenanted. They have not slept since finding out from a neighbour that they could soon be surrounded

window, giving prospective buyers a taste of what idyllic rural life might be like. That won't be possible any more. There are Airbnbs in the locality, but they won't find it easy to attract holidaymakers. The impact on tourism in the local area, which relies heavily on hospitality, may be significant. And the agricultural jobs that will disappear will not be replaced by employment on the solar installation, which is largely maintenance free. Worse, the impact on food production will affect us all. The farmland being threatened with solar panels is classified as Grade 3B, so not the best in the country. Solar development is not allowed on Grade 1-3A land, and had to start again in this country. My brother-in-law is a property buying agent specialising in finding homes for people relocating out of London and his home has acted as his shop

by glass 'vanity mirrors'. Their lives are on hold while they help to coordinate an action group of outraged residents. Their house is on the edge of an area of outstanding natural beauty and currently you can't see another human habitation in any direction from Fosse Farm, just trees and hedges changing colour with the seasons as far as the eye can see. It is a bitter blow for a family that lost everything in Zimbabwe and had to start again in this country. My brother-in-law is a property buying agent specialising in finding homes for people relocating out of London and his home has acted as his shop

with demand increasing as the world's population grows, any land taken out of production

HOW SOLAR FARM COULD LOOK



Blot on the landscape: Fosse Farm (above, far left) and an artist's impression. Left, protesters against the proposed plan

sucked up money — so most of the income may end up overseas. The company has been widely accused of piling up debt at Thames Water, which it owned from 2006 to 2017, contributing to the problems at the water company.

With so many question marks over the environmental credentials of solar parks, it should be a cause for deep concern that Macquarie is involved in his opinion.

The local MP, James Gray, who is against the scheme, blames 'Wall Street hooligans' for inflicting the envy and bitterness a British company would deal with the local community more sensitively.

Mr Gray will clearly be vocal in his opposition. And this will no doubt be taken into account by the Secretary of State. But he has

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anywhere in the world is likely to be replaced by chopping down rainforests or ploughing up other virgin habitats somewhere else. That never enters the calculation. Lime Down would also be terrible for wildlife. The developers, Island Green Power, an Irish company, chaired by the former lairdessach Bertie Aherne, claim that there will be biodiversity net gain. Their website shows photographs of wild flowers and of sheep grazing around the panels. But, while the environmental impact assessment may be swayed by commitments to establish nectar-bearing plants, the overall effects could be devastating for a number of endangered species. For example, swallows and house martins rely on insect-rich pastures spattered with cowpats to feed. Remove the cows and you drastically reduce their food supply. And skylarks and other ground nesting birds need open areas in

which to incubate and raise their broods successfully. Fields full of solar panels provide perches for the crows and would spell disaster for hares as well as some of our most threatened bird species. Barn owls would find their hunting grounds diminished by the light pollution. All of these objections would probably lead a local council to throw out the application. And Wiltshire Council could do so with a clear conscience. The county already makes a huge contribution to renewable energy. Of the ten largest solar parks in England, eight are in Wiltshire. The council's 2030 carbon neutral target for solar renewables is 590MW, which has already been exceeded.

But so desperate is the Government to meet its international commitment to Net Zero, agreed by Theresa May, that it has ruled that the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, Claire Coutinho, will decide

applications for large-scale solar farms like Lime Down, which can bypass local democracy. And it updated its energy national policy statements in January to state that the development of low-carbon infrastructure, such as solar farms, is a 'critical national priority'. This means that the Secretary of State 'should generally grant consent to low-carbon infrastructure'.

The result is that this very un-conservative Government has signalled a green light to globalist speculators who are eyeing up England's green and pleasant land as ripe for solar development, mostly with panels manufactured in China.

The finance behind Lime Down is being provided by Macquarie Bank, an Australian company dubbed the Vampire Kangaroo — an Antipodean adaptation of the 'vampire squid' label applied to Goldman Sachs for the way it

said that he would not resign the Tory whip over the issue and will not be following Lee Anderson to the Reform Party.

He says this is not a party political issue as all the mainstream parties are fully behind Net Zero, as he is. He argues a Starmer-led government would be even more determined to push through Net Zero policies.

And therein lies the problem. The whole political class appears to be ranged against the rural community of North Wiltshire and their votes have nowhere to go on this issue except to fringe parties who have no hope of forming a government. So there is little political pressure on the Secretary of State to turn it down.

Many local residents are furious that 'landowners have been secrecy in negotiation with Island Green and there are accusations of greed. On several estates, the

land being offered for solar development has recently been taken back from tenant farmers. The rent being offered is a closely guarded secret, but sums in excess of £1,000 per acre per year are routinely advertised by renewables companies on the internet, perhaps five times the return that might be expected from farming.

Some farmers have been open in saying that they did not think there was a future in farming others have been offered a lifeline. Others have thus told by the developers that they would be surprised whether they liked it or not, and had taken the attitude that if they couldn't beat the development they might as well join it.

In less than a week from the announcement of the plan, divisions have appeared in this close-knit community and friends, and even families, have split over the issue. Landowners who have committed to the scheme have become pariahs and it may be several generations before anyone speaks to them again.

It's all so unnecessary. We would not be in this position if successive governments had not lacked the courage to renew nuclear power stations.

AND there is scope to cover the sides of railways with panels. The warehousing sector alone could deliver the entire UK requirement for 2030 forecast by the National Grid's Future Energy Scenarios (FES) which represent credible ways of decarbonising our energy system.

That would save what remains of our precious countryside and safeguard our food security. Yet just down the road from 'Lime Down' there is a vast warehouse development at Junction 7 of the M4 with not a solar panel in sight.

The countryside is, in fact, easily able to play its part in replacing fossil fuels without destroying itself. Wiltshire is a dairy county and the dairy industry has been innovative in developing 'poop power' — energy generated by burning the biogas from slurry to produce electricity.

It is almost invisible — a couple of shipping containers in the corner of a farmyard — and has far less smell than there is if the slurry is spread back on the land without having the biogas burnt off it. The largest dairy processor

estimates that with more than 1.2 million tonnes of cow slurry available in North Wiltshire from its 2,240 farms alone, the farmer-owned co-operative could generate enough green energy to power 4 per cent of UK households while still producing food. Extrapolated across the entire UK dairy herd that figure rises to 16 per cent.

Meanwhile the situation for local people in North Wiltshire is grim. But morale has been boosted by support from local celebrity Christine Hamilton, self-declared 'batleaze', alongside my mother-in-law, another former farmwife batleaze. The Lime Down developers may have bitten off more than they can chew.

JAMIE BLACKETT farms in Dunfrieshire and is the author of Red Rag to a Bull, Rural Life In An Urban Age. The fee for this campaign is being donated to the campaign (stoplimedown.com).