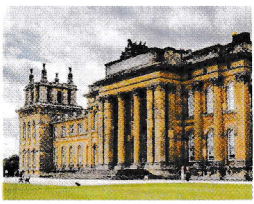
GREEN EYE

Palace intrigue

AS developers draft a development application to business secretary Jonathan Reynolds for what would be the largest solar farm in the UK, covering 3,500 acres owned by Spencer-Churchill family trusts around Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire (*pictured*), campaigners have unearthed papers contradicting claims from the cash-strapped family that the scheme will not unduly impair the heritage value of the 300-year-old seat of James Spencer-Churchill, Duke of Marlborough.

In 1987 Unesco names Blenheim Palace a World Heritage site, a status that has to be carefully guarded. Thirty years later, Blenheim published a revised management plan on how it was doing so. It waxed lyrical about the surrounding bucolic landscape. Among the "elements of Blenheim's outstanding natural value" was "the character of the setting as traditional English countryside, dotted with picturesque villages" (which will now be surrounded by solar panels).

"The grazed pastoral landscapes around the river valleys, along with the fields and woodlands are particularly significant as these reflect the land-use and character of the landscape that would have been appreciated during the 18th century." The last thing that was needed, thought the Blenheim trustees seven years ago, was "large-scale development… for example industrial development; wind turbines; solar farms, etc".



But now the biggest, er, solar farm out there *is* suitable for the estate, say the trustees. "At Blenheim we are uniquely positioned to take action to protect future generations and support global efforts to reduce carbon emissions, but also focus on the impact to our local area." There will be "new greenways, cycle routes and footpaths along with initiatives to boost biodiversity".

Why the change of heart? There is serious money up for grabs. The so-called Botley West solar farm (though a glance at a map suggests it would more aptly be called Blenheim East) is being developed by a company called SolarFive Ltd. This is part of the Photovolt Development Partners group and is co-owned by the Cypriot-resident widow of a Russian businessman who was accused of scamming a Russian bank over a non-existent goldmine (*Eyes passim*). It will make hefty lease payments to the Spencer-Churchill trusts that could run to a couple of million pounds a year over the 35- or 40-year lease.

This could be handy for trustees such as Monaco-resident Edward Spencer-Churchill (half-brother of the duke), whose own Vanderbilt property business seems to be struggling – latest accounts show it owing more than £100m to a mysterious British Virgin Islands company. Small wonder the chief executive of the trust company, Dominic Hare, has been incentivised with £2.5m in share options to hit financial returns (*Eye* 1609). That's worth surrendering a bit of England's green and pleasant for.