



## Light and shady

**M**ORE on plans for a 3,500-acre solar farm on land largely belonging to the Blenheim estate in Oxfordshire, which locals fear will blight countryside surrounding several villages and which, *Eye* 1597 revealed, is backed by dubious Russian money.

This month the UK company undertaking the development, SolarFive Ltd, filed a 140-page “scoping report” with the government’s national infrastructure planning inspectorate. Or rather German company Photovolt Development Partners did on its behalf. Focusing on supposed environmental benefits, the report conspicuously fails to mention who is actually behind SolarFive. According to company documents, it is one Julia Lejeune, although this is in fact the alter ego of Yulia Lezhen, a Cypriot-resident Russian and, according to US court papers, a proxy for her husband Dmitry Glukhov. He is alleged to have used numerous companies, including SolarFive, to syphon off the ill-gotten gains of a goldfield scam in his home country.

Opponents of the solar scheme have naturally pointed out this background, plus Photovolt’s uncertain record in the solar game, to regulator Ofgem. It has granted SolarFive a licence, but with the minimum of checks, and appears to be having another look. As one *Eye* reader pointed out, licences can be revoked if there was a “material misstatement” on the application. A false name, especially one used in previous scams, might just meet that test. Meanwhile, local MP Robert Courts has reassured campaigners he has “raised these concerns with the government” since “we need to understand what financial interests would be involved in critical national infrastructure or its promotion”.

That isn’t something about which the landowners – largely the trusts set up for the benefit of the Spencer-Churchill family, which own the 12,000-acre Blenheim estate, and to a much smaller extent Merton College, Oxford – seem too bothered. This might be connected to the estate’s parlous financial state. Since its formation in 2014, Blenheim Finance Ltd, which funds myriad Blenheim companies, had increased its borrowings from around £60m to around £140m by December 2021. Of this, £12m came from the entirely separate charitable foundation that runs Blenheim Palace – historic seat of the Spencer-Churchill family and currently home to the, er, troubled 12th Duke of Marlborough, James Spencer-Churchill – and exists to “safeguard the future of our world heritage site for centuries to come”. Over the following three months, the charity’s accounts show, this had risen to £17m – arguably not the most charitable use to which to put cash.

One prominent family member who could use some good financial news is the duke’s half-brother, and at least until recently a trustee, Edward Spencer-Churchill. While he gives his usual residence as Monaco, his corporate interests in the UK are also heavily indebted. Vanderbilt Topco Ltd, a company through which he holds some unprofitable property companies, was due to have repaid a bond in 2019 but this has since been deferred, with the amount outstanding £82m by the end of 2021 and possibly higher now. Which makes the solar project, regardless of where the money’s coming from, look pretty crucial for the aristocrats’ coffers.