

## **Blenheim's vast solar farm will make a fortune — but for whom?**

**An aristocrat in a tax haven helps to run the estate where Botley West will power 330,000 homes. Are Oxfordshire and the country getting a fair deal?**

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Sunday August 04 2024, 12.01am, The Sunday Times



Blenheim Palace is Winston Churchill's birthplace and the family home of the Duke of Marlborough

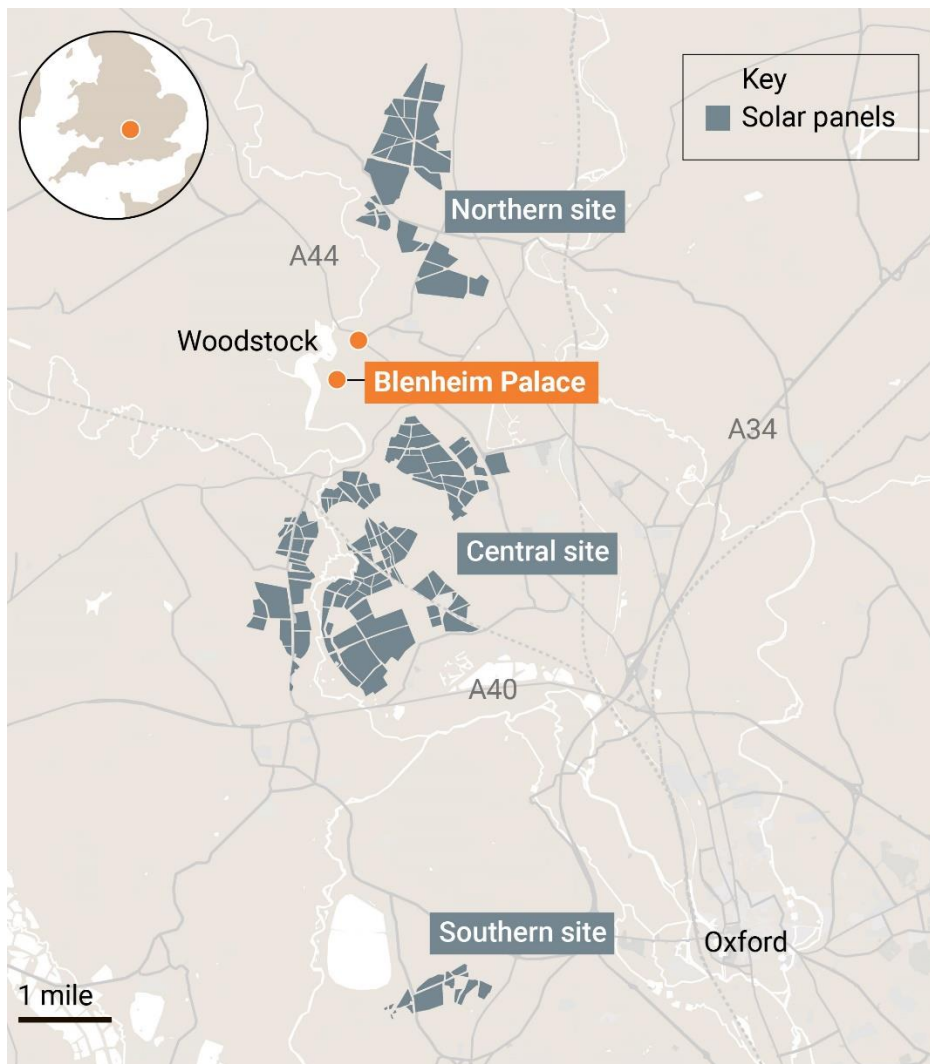
The view near the Oxfordshire cottage of Rosemary Lewis is marvellous in the summer sunshine. Rolling wheat fields, woodland to one side. In the distance tall oak trees stand alongside willows bending their leaves into a stream.

In three years' time, however, this may not exist. A total of 3,450 acres of countryside, 11 miles end to end, could host Europe's largest solar farm.

More than two million solar panels will be installed at Botley West, each up to 2.5m tall and surrounded by 2m-high security fencing. Arable farmland will be lost. Local campaigners believe substantial tax revenue will be lost too.



Rosemary Lewis, a retired maths teacher, and her husband Tom oppose the plan



Graphic by The Times and Sunday Times. Source: Botley West Solar Farm

Last year more than 1,000 planning applications for solar panels were approved in the UK. Five years ago there were six. Most of those were roof-mounted, data from the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero shows, but about 300 are solar farms.

Development has been slow. Only one of six solar sites approved in 2018 is operational and one is under construction. The other four are waiting for developers to have the time, money and resources to build them.

But there are 85 operational in Cornwall, 42 in Wiltshire, 23 in Somerset and 21 in both Shropshire and Pembrokeshire.

A further 2,153 sites with planning permission (many of them residential) are awaiting construction. Longfield solar farm, backed by EDF Renewables, was approved in June last year, boasting a capacity once installed of 500 MWe, equivalent to 1.25 million of the standard solar panels used on British homes. Located just northeast of Chelmsford, in Essex,

on a plot of land stretching four miles, it is predicted to be capable of providing enough clean energy to power more than 96,000 homes a year.

The decision to award planning permission in Oxfordshire lies with Ed Miliband, the energy secretary, who has promised to triple the amount of solar power within six years and double onshore wind and quadruple offshore wind capability.

This site could produce 840 MW of green energy to the national grid — enough to power 330,000 homes — and make millions for the nearby Blenheim Estate and the business people linked to it and tens of millions for the German firm developing the solar farm.

More than 70 per cent of the site will cover Oxfordshire green-belt land, mostly owned by the trust behind Blenheim Palace, known as the birthplace of Winston Churchill and present family seat of the Duke of Marlborough.

To mitigate the impact on the landscape, the solar farm, with a 40-year lifespan, is described as temporary in planning documents.

“I would be over 100 if I lived to see the end of it,” says Anthony Thompson, 62, a former Marks & Spencer retail director who lives in the neighbouring village of Church Hanborough. “The history books say farmland lost is farmland lost for ever.”



Anthony Thompson: “You need to swap the word ‘nimby’ for ‘whistleblower’”

Last month Miliband announced that three smaller solar projects would be approved, fuelling concern among opponents of Botley West. John Orme, a member of the Stop Botley West campaign group, said leaving the decision in the hands of the secretary of state rather than a local planning level (given its size, Botley West is classed as a “nationally significant infrastructure project”) was “a deficit of democracy”.



As part of its plans to decarbonise the electricity network, Labour [has launched GB Energy](#), which will “own, manage and operate clean power projects” across the UK and should be “owned by the British people, built by the British people and benefit the British people”.

### **The web of firms linked to Blenheim**

Botley West, should it be approved, will be operated not by GB Energy but by Photovolt Development Partners (PVDP), a German company. Also involved are a string of firms and trusts linked to the Blenheim Estate, a private business that is part of Blenheim Palace, the family home of the Duke of Marlborough.

A trust was established in 1994 to run the estate when the duke at the time feared his son, James Blandford, who at the time had well-publicised drug problems, would not be able to look after the palace once it was inherited.

However, in 2014 Blandford inherited the title and rights to the palace on his father’s death after cleaning up his act. The trust remains. One of its trustees is the duke’s half-brother, Lord Edward Spencer-Churchill, 49, an investment banker who lives in the tax haven of Monaco. Estimates suggest that the Blenheim Estate could receive more than £2.2 million a year for leasing its land to PVDP for solar farm use. Developers are willing to pay about £1,000 per acre — considerably more than the £150 per acre from tenant farmers who use the land for agriculture. Over the 40-year term of the project, which is expected to create 2,400 acres of panelling, this equates to more than £90 million.



Lord Edward Spencer-Churchill and his wife Kimberly Hammerstroem at a Dior show at Blenheim in 2017

PVDP can earn at least £51.2 million per year for the energy it produces, meaning it would take more than 15 years to recoup the £800 million construction costs.

Under share options agreed in 2018, Blenheim Palace's chief executive, Dominic Hare, stands to earn £2.5 million if targets relating to the running of the estate are hit by 2026.

Hare has directorships of many private companies acting for the benefit of the family trust. He is a trustee of the Blenheim Palace Heritage Foundation charity, which is designed to protect the palace's reputation as a Unesco world heritage site and is exempt from income tax.

Meanwhile, Spencer-Churchill is a trustee and director of trusts and companies also tied to Blenheim.

The complex nature of the financial agreements means campaigners are asking for clarity about who will benefit from the scheme.

**'I'd support a community solar farm in my backyard'**



The central site viewed from Purwell Farm, looking northwest towards Church Hanborough.

Thompson, who has also been chief executive of Blackwell's bookshops and the clothing chain Fat Face, said: "If you think Blenheim and PVDP are there for a selfless civic duty you are being naive. This is about tonnes of cash going directly to their purses.

"GB Energy needs to benefit the Great British people. I would support a community-led solar farm right in my backyard — you mustn't mistake this for a group that doesn't support solar.



You need to swap the word ‘nimby’ for ‘whistleblower’. We are saying, ‘Hang on. This isn’t the right scheme. It’s the wrong scheme in the wrong place.’”

Concerns about [a solar gold rush](#) are not limited to Botley West.

In Wiltshire, Island Green Power, the developer of another large proposed solar farm, Lime Down, is 50 per cent owned by the Australian investment firm Macquarie. Nicknamed the “vampire kangaroo”, it is known in Britain for its ownership of Thames Water for 11 years until 2017. It loaded the privatised water service with £10 billion debt while rewarding shareholders and paying handsome dividends.

Hare, Blenheim Palace’s chief executive and a former investment banker, has denied claims that the solar farm project is simply a “money-making exercise”.

He said last year: “What kind of crazy world would we live in if the oil giants were allowed to generate power for a profit, but those who want to generate clean energy are condemned if they make money in the process?”



The central site from the western boundary looking east.

Alex David Rogers, co-chair of Stop Botley West, who has solar panels installed on the roof of his own home, said: “UK plc is unlikely to see much in the way of tax benefits coming out of this as well, because I would think it’s going to be set up in a way where a lot of the proceeds are simply going to disappear overseas.”

Hare, chief executive of the estate, said: “We are proud to advocate for this grid-scale clean energy solution.” He said that to protect future generations Britain needed to decarbonise

energy production by using sites of relatively poor land near major grid infrastructure, criteria met by Botley West.

He added: “On this basis, Botley West is an utterly compelling green energy site. We will add to that a package of community benefit and land rejuvenation which will set new benchmarks for all future sites.” He said commercial arrangements were confidential but that it was a profitable business model. “If this were not the case, that burden would sadly fall on governments — and the required progress would be made too slowly to make a difference.”

Mark Owen-Lloyd, an energy trader and director of the Botley West project for PVDP, said the firm had always been transparent about its finances.

He said that all taxes would be paid in the UK as PVDP has set up the company SolarFive Ltd as a special purpose vehicle for the project, on which they will pay corporation tax. He said: “In terms of opposition, I would say those who oppose us are very vocal, and those who support us, of course, by their very nature, they tend to just get on with their lives.”

A government spokesman said that solar power was a crucial source of cleaner, cheaper energy. “It is also important that local views are taken into account, and where communities live near clean energy infrastructure, they should benefit directly from it,” they said.