

BOTLEY WEST SOLAR FARM EXAMINATION

WRITTEN REPRESENTATION BY BEGBROKE AND YARNTON GREEN BELT CAMPAIGN (BYG)
IN ADVANCE OF DEADLINE 1: 4 JUNE 2025 IN RESPECT OF THE APPLICANT'S FUNDING
STATEMENT (APP 022)

BYG attended ISH1 and made representations in respect of Agenda Item 3f, the DCO. These representations concerned the need for a financial bond to guarantee that, if BW were to be permitted and constructed, it would also be fully decommissioned. After our comments and the response from the Applicants, Inspector Shaikh, as noted in the transcript of the meeting, asked the Applicants *"Can you provide any assurance that the money will be available in 37.5 years time to restore the land back to its original condition?"* The response from Mr Yates was that *"The position of the applicant is in the funding statement, the fact that funds will be available and the funding statement goes into detail as to how the investment is expected between now and decommissioning, to ensure that funds are available in order to fund that decommissioning."* (Transcript ISH1 PART 3 01.05.38)

We believe the confidence Mr. Yates has in APP 022 is misplaced. BYG has undertaken detailed analysis of the finances of PVDP, its associated companies and the individuals involved with them. We have applied the knowledge gained in that analysis to an evaluation of APP 022 and reported that in our Relevant Representation (RR0092). Our view as expressed in RR0092 is that neither SolarFive nor PVDP have the resources to develop BWSF if the DCO and CPO were to be made. The description of these companies and their funding in APP 022 is, at best, inadequate, possibly misleading. That the unaudited accounts provided in APP 022 have been redacted to exclude all financial information, we suggest means the Applicant is actually trying to avoid describing its financial position.

We also provide in RR0092 a full description of the background to the Applicant, including a detailed analysis of its involvement in several projects in Japan, which has been clearly less extensive than the Applicant has indicated.

We conclude in RR0092 that *"a small undercapitalised German company, owned by a Russian national with no significant assets in the UK or any visible funding available to develop it, is asking the UK Government to entrust it with the largest solar farm to be built in this country"*. We have received no indication from the Applicants that any of our analysis in RR0092 is incorrect.

It is notable that unlike other application documents there is no author of the APP 022 is identified. Mr Yates in the exchange with Inspector extracted above indicated he could not personally provide any assurance about PVDP's financial situation. The 2 representatives of

the company at Preliminary Meeting and ISH1 do not seem to have the knowledge or authority to speak on behalf of PVDP on financial matters. Neither is a director of it or any related company. Mr Le Cointe became an employee of the company recently after a long career as a consultant with RPS Group, whilst Mr Owen-Lloyd became Director of Botley West Solar Farm in 2020; according to Companies House there is no Botley West Solar Farm company, so this appears to be an honorary title.

So not only is the information in APP 022 inadequate, and we would argue wrong and misleading, but there is also no apparent source for the information that has been provided or witness the ExA can question about it.

Given this, it would appear there is no basis for the ExA to be able to conclude that the Applicant will be able to provide resources to fund the compulsory purchase. That being the case, it follows there is no basis to believe the Applicant will be able to fund the construction, maintenance and decommissioning of the scheme either.

With almost 6 months of the Examination left perhaps the Applicant will wish to provide further evidence of its financial credibility. We suggest there are fundamental questions for it to answer. For example:

APP 022 Appendix 1 suggests the source of funding for the project appears to be the Limmasol based company, Cransseta Investments Limited, wholly owned by the Russian national Julia Lezhen and for which no financial information has been provided. Can audited accounts for this company be provided to confirm that the necessary funds are available for both the compulsory purchase costs and subsequent stages of the project? Can there also be detailed confirmation of the source or quantum of any funds that will be provided by Cransseta to the Botley West project?

We are, of course, prepared to provide further information we have relevant to this matter and assist the ExA in whatever way we can. We should add that the content of our RR was based on our own research. However, there has been extensive coverage of PVDP and BW in Private Eye, which has an established reputation for investigative journalism. The relevant copies are attached.

In conclusion, we believe that APP 022 does not provide any reasonable basis to believe the Applicant has the necessary resources to execute the CPO or develop and decommission Botley West and unless further evidence is provided on this matter the ExA would have to report that to the SoS.

Coverage in Private Eye providing additional detail relating to the background of the Botley West applicants, their development experience and sources of funding.

Below is a complete list of the articles which have appeared in Private Eye and which are included on the following pages in the order shown:-

Issue	Title	Date
1597	Marlborough light	5 May 2023
1599	Botley contested	2 June 2023
1601	Light and shady	30 June 2023
1602	Solar opposites	14 July 2023
1605	Lezhen learned	25 August 2023
1609	Pulling the plug	20 October 2023
1612	Shady solar	1 December 2023
1617	Sun trap	16 February 2024
1623	Panel discussion	10 May 2024
1635	Palace intrigue	25 October 2024
1640	Wind of change	10 January 2025
1643	Solar flannel	21 February 2025
1647	Panel games	18 April 2025

GREEN EYE

Marlborough light

IF THE Duke of Marlborough has his way, the largest solar farm in Europe, to be built on 3,500 acres of land near his family's Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire, will be run by a company backed by some seriously dubious Russian money.

The land, neighbouring the towns of Wootton and Woodstock and more than three times the size of the largest solar farm under construction in the UK, is managed by trustees of a series of family trusts for the benefit of the Spencer-Churchill family, of which the duke, once known as jailbird Jamie Blandford, is the head.

The trusts have negotiated a deal with Photovolt Development Partners to lease what will be known as the Botley West Solar Farm, also incorporating land owned by Oxford University's Merton College. The aim is to deliver 840 megawatts of clean power to the National Grid. Residents of Wootton, Woodstock and a dozen villages who think the area will be blighted by a development the size of 1,800 football pitches are less enthusiastic.

Photovolt claims an "18-year track record of delivering large-scale solar projects in Europe and Japan". But it has less to say about who is behind the company.

Photovolt Development Partners GmbH is registered in Germany and owned by Cyprus company Cransseta Investments Ltd. The latter's sole shareholder is one Yulia Lezhen, who also gives a Cyprus address and is behind a series of other companies, some in the UK under the similar name of Julia Lejeune, alongside German businessman Peter Gerstmann.

More about Lezhen emerges, the *Eye* can reveal, from a New York court case last year involving a supposed gold field developer going bust and a creditor chasing its money. Russian company GK Amazarkan had been granted a licence to develop a gold field in the Zabaykalsky

region of Russia and had borrowed \$58m from Uralsib bank. In 2016 Amazarkan went bust, owing the bank more than 99 percent of the loan.

The court filings, obtained by the *Offshore Alert* investigatory website, reveal that the 75 percent beneficial owner of Amazarkan was Dmitry Glukhov, husband to Yulia Lezhen. She is described by Ingtorgstroy, the company to which the debt was assigned, as his "spouse and trustee" and "the nominee owner of Glukhov's business structures in Cyprus, Netherlands and other countries".

Ingtorgstroy alleged that Lezhen and others were used by Glukhov and his co-owners "to conceal their assets, and/or have improperly received funds by them in priority over [Ingtorgstroy]". The company also alleged the money was "not actually used to develop the gold field" and that "inspections of the gold fields in recent years have revealed that there is no sign of production infrastructure".

Among dozens of companies also said to have been used to conceal money as Glukhov and co "syphoned off" assets was none other than Photovolt Development Partners GmbH and Cransseta Investments, plus several UK companies – which appear to have no active business – owned and run by Lezhen (sometimes as Lejeune) and Gerstmann. Photovolt did not respond to the *Eye's* questions on the matter.

While the company professes a long record of solar delivery, it cites only one project, at Ukijima in Japan. This has yet to be finished and Photovolt sold its stake back in 2018. But then the Spencer-Churchills may be in need of quick cash: last year the duke had his top-of-the-range Porsche repossessed after failing to keep up payments.

The Botley West development is still at the consultation stage, ahead of a planned development consent order application to Whitehall later this year. The chairman of the Spencer-Churchill family trusts, Richard Jessel, and the acting warden of Merton, professor of, ahem, corporate finance law Jennifer Payne, might want to shine a light of their own on where the money is coming from. Others might wonder whether, with renewable energy supposedly a route out of dependence on energy from overseas, funnelling cash to Glukhov's set-up is part of the solution or the problem.



tells the *Eye* he felt harassed and upset by

Mr Newitt for the confusion the letters have

Botley contested

REVELATIONS in *Eye* 1597 that the proposed largest solar farm in Europe, on the Duke of Marlborough's estate in Oxfordshire, is backed by dubious Russian money have not deterred the promoters of the Botley West scheme, even when added to fierce local opposition.

The *Eye* reported how German-based Photovolt Development Partners is owned by Cyprus resident Yulia Lezhen, wife of one Dmitry Glukhov and accused in papers filed in a US court of being a front for him. The New York case concerned a dispute in Moscow about Glukhov borrowing money for a goldfield that allegedly wasn't developed, with money "syphoned off" via companies including Photovolt and the UK company being used for the Oxfordshire development, SolarFive Ltd.

Photovolt declined to answer the *Eye*'s questions but has since informed readers on its website that it "does not accept recent allegations made against certain individuals and the financial arrangements of the company". They are, it now tells the *Eye*, "smears by association" (*With what? The evidence? Ed*), while the "shareholders for SolarFive Ltd are available for all to view on the Companies House website".

Indeed they are. And they show that in April 2021 SolarFive's ownership was transferred from Cyprus company Cransseta Investments Ltd (itself controlled by Lezhen) to Photovolt boss Peter Gerstmann and a certain "Julia Lejeune". This, none too reassuringly, is an alter-ego of Yulia Lezhen. Photovolt refused to explain the name switch.

Photovolt also insists that "Ofgem [the energy regulator] conducted due diligence on [Photovolt] and SolarFive". Ofgem's checks,

however, hardly amount to "due diligence". They cover straightforward matters such as checking for director disqualifications, but they do not examine where funds come from.

As for the source of funds for the proposed 3,500-acre farm near the duke's Blenheim Palace, this is said to be "the sale of Photovolt's projects in Japan". More information on these emerges from Photovolt's Irish holding company Mulledmont, which records that in 2018 it sold a company called TeraSol GK to Japanese company Ukujima Miraj Energy Holdings GK for €48.8m, returning a handsome gain of €43.3m. The solar farm there remains in construction.

Then the Irish company also claimed to have sold companies called BlueSol GK and PetaSol GK for proceeds totalling €158m, and an impressive overall €152m gain. But the larger of these sales, for €111m, was to Cransseta Investments in Cyprus, so from one group pocket to another. What BlueSol and PetaSol, now dissolved Japanese companies, did for their money remains unknown; there is no public sign of activity and Photovolt declined to identify any to the *Eye*.

None of this murk deters one august institution giving up a large chunk of its land, constituting around 5 percent of the proposed solar farm, alongside the trusts controlling the Marlborough estate. Merton College, Oxford, is continuing its involvement and has added to its website, a touch desperately, that "the college is neither the applicant nor the developer behind the Botley West project".

The Merton warden who initially approved the deal, Professor Irene Tracey, is now Oxford University vice-chancellor, and may want to take a closer look.



Light and shady

MORE 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.

NEWS

SOLAR OPPOSITES

THE family trusts running the Blenheim estate, seat of the Duke of Marlborough, may be keen to get much-needed (if dubious) cash by handing over land for a Russian-backed company to build Europe's largest solar farm (*Eyes passim*), but their enthusiasm for the low-carbon technology has its limits.

Blenheim Estate Homes, the trusts' house-building arm, is behind the Park View development in Woodstock, which neighbours Blenheim Palace. But buyers and renters there had better not get any ideas about solar efficiency for themselves. "We believe that solar panels are more problematic [than decent insulation], in terms of achieving a good appearance from the public realm", says the operation that wants to carpet them over 3,500 acres of Oxfordshire.

● Local Lib Dem MP Layla Moran brought up the *Eye's* coverage of the affair during a Commons debate on Russian assets two weeks ago. "I ask the minister, how can we know that Russian money is not still being greenwashed through our economy here in the UK?" she asked. "I would welcome a meeting with him or Treasury ministers to get to the bottom of where the money is coming from." Junior foreign minister Leo Docherty did not respond to the point.

Lezhen learned

ALL change – or maybe not – at the murky business behind the largest proposed solar farm in Europe, on land largely owned by the Duke of Marlborough's family trusts near Blenheim Palace.

The developer of the 3,500-acre solar farm is a UK company called SolarFive Ltd, backed by German outfit Photovolt Development Partners. It's owned by one Julia Lejeune – or was, until the *Eye* recently revealed that this is a pseudonym for a Russian, Yulia Lezhen. In June and July, company filings show, Lezhen amended records for SolarFive Ltd and other companies to revert to her real, Russian name.

The *Eye* had discovered Lezhen's identity from US court records detailing allegations that her husband, Dmitry Glukhov, had ripped off a Russian bank through a supposed gold field that didn't materialise and had "syphoned off" the proceeds using Lezhen – who was said to be "nominee owner" for Glukhov – and companies including her UK ones.

As its name suggests, SolarFive is one in a series of companies. Around the time of the name reversion, further iterations – SolarEight and SolarNine – were set up with Photovolt's Henley-based director Peter Gerstmann as the sole owner, in what looks like an attempt to distance the business from Lezhen and Glukhov. Gerstmann has also set up a new British arm of his business, Photovolt (UK) Ltd.

The questionable source of the money and

corporate shenanigans haven't worried the landowners, trusts set up for the benefit of the duke's Spencer-Churchill family and, to a much smaller extent, Oxford University's Merton College, that are signing up with Lezhen. But as the knot tightens on Russian money in the UK, it may yet do so.

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, sanctions have outlawed entering into joint ventures, loosely defined, with "a person connected with Russia", which Lezhen and Glukhov appear to be. Sanctions have also been placed on providing

professional services such as accounting, legal advice and consultancy, either directly or indirectly, to a person connected with Russia. This could prove a headache for the landowners and Gerstmann, as well as

to the firm providing consultancy services, engineering and planning advisers RPS Group.

The authorities, meanwhile, seem unperturbed where the money is coming from for such a large chunk of Britain's renewable energy infrastructure. Ofgem granted SolarFive Ltd a licence last year, although it has said it is looking at information given to it about SolarFive and can revoke licences if there has been a "material misstatement" of facts. The planning inspectorate, an agency of Michael Gove's levelling-up department, has indicated it will be some way into the process before it can possibly consider the matter.

Robert Courts, the Tory MP for Witney on whose patch (as currently configured) the solar farm would be, has started a petition against it on the grounds that the "scale and design" are incompatible with the area, but tactfully not mentioning the Russian connections.



SOLAR POWER

Pulling the plug

AFTER a few months of the *Eye*'s pointing out the links between the largest proposed solar farm in Europe and its dubious Russian financial backer, one organisation that was due to provide a large chunk of land for the project, but might have been expected to be slightly concerned, has finally pulled out.

Oxford University's Merton College had set aside around 170 acres it owns near the Blenheim Palace estate in Oxfordshire to form part of the 3,500 acre, 840MW solar farm to be developed by a UK company, SolarFive, on land largely owned by the trust running the Blenheim Estate.

SolarFive Ltd is controlled by German director Peter Gerstmann of Photovolt Development Partners and Russian Yulia Lezhen, who previously used the pseudonym Julia Lejeune but changed to her real one once the *Eye* had pointed this out. As *Eye* 1597 set out, she was alleged in US court papers to be the nominee owner for her (now deceased) husband Dmitry Glukhov and to have "siphoned off" fortunes using Photovolt and SolarFive Ltd among other companies.

The *Eye* wondered how this would look to Merton's warden and professor of corporate finance law Jennifer Payne, or indeed to the university's vice-chancellor, Professor Irene Tracey, who had been warden of Merton when the deal was approved, presumably without too much scrutiny. Questions now having been asked, earlier this month Merton made a statement. "Following

further early-stage discussions," it said, "we have decided to continue with our existing approach to sustainability and biodiversity for [the land], rather than including some of our land for consideration in the Botley West Solar Farm Project."

The trust that runs the Blenheim Estate for the benefit of the Spencer-Churchill family (at the top of which sits the Duke of Marlborough), and which is separate to the charitable trust that runs the palace, is nevertheless ploughing ahead. But then there is serious money at stake and the Vanbrugh Unit Trust could use some of it.

Latest accounts for the company that finances the various property construction and other companies owned by the trust show that bank loans have risen by £38m to £164m, costing £13.7m in interest, while £12m is owed to the palace charitable trust. Small wonder the trust, chaired by Richard Jessel, is incentivising the directors of its management company Vanbrugh Management Ltd to transform the finances.

Under options agreed in 2018, chief executive Dominic Hare and chief operating officer Roger File each stand to pocket up to £2.5m if targets for financial returns and asset growth are hit by 2026 – which is the kind of dosh that could make it worth not looking too closely at where the money's coming from.

Meanwhile energy regulator Ofgem, which gave SolarFive a licence before the financial revelations, has taken no action despite receiving a complaint. Its dire record on approving electricity supply companies over the years could yet be beaten for complacency by its approach to a new generation of producers.

Shady solar

RUSSIAN court documents seen by the *Eye* show the ongoing links with Russia of the woman behind what is planned to be the largest solar farm in Europe, and pose serious questions over the scheme's compatibility with post-Ukraine invasion sanctions.

The Botley West solar farm, covering 3,500 acres of land near the Blenheim estate in Oxfordshire owned almost entirely by trusts of the Spencer-Churchill family (headed by the Duke of Marlborough), is to be constructed by a company called SolarFive Ltd. This was set up in 2020 by the Cyprus investment vehicle of one Yulia Lezhen and is now co-owned by her and Peter Gerstmann, the Henley-residing boss of German solar company Photovolt Development Partners.

As revealed in *Eye* 1597, Ms Lezhen was the wife of Russian businessman Dmitry Glukhov and was said in a US court filing to be “the nominee owner of Glukhov’s business structures in Cyprus, Netherlands and other countries”. These structures – including SolarFive Ltd itself – were alleged by a company seeking to recover \$58m in debts to have “siphoned off” money borrowed by Glukhov’s company Amazarkan from Russian bank Uralsib to supposedly develop a gold field that never materialised.

Attempts to get the money back continue in Russia, with court papers revealing the extensive wealth of Glukhov until his death in September 2022, upon which his assets were inherited by

Lezhen and his daughter. The property (now frozen) includes four apartments (one said to be an expansive 382 square metres) in Moscow and shares in half a dozen companies, including petrol company TopGaz.

The precise source of the funds being deployed by SolarFive Ltd is unclear. Investments in other solar farms, notably in Japan, have been shunted through a complex financial web, and it is the sale of some of these that Photovolt insists is the source of the money for Botley West. The Cyprus investment company owned by Lezhen has itself, however, introduced €111m by buying one of the project companies from another group company (*Eye* 1599).

Wherever the cash originates, Lezhen’s background looks even more problematic following the latest revelations. Since the Ukraine invasion, sanctions have outlawed joint ventures with “a person connected with Russia” and providing professional services to such a person. This might prove awkward not just for Gerstmann but also for the Oxfordshire-based RPS consulting group that is fronting for SolarFive on planning matters, and perhaps even the Spencer-Churchill trustees themselves.

Oxford University’s Merton College, which had been providing around 5 percent of the land for Botley West, has recently pulled out (*Eye* 1609). On the other hand, Ofgem, the regulator that has already granted a licence for the project, seems uninterested in the provenance of the millions backing the biggest solar scheme on its books.

Sun trap

AS THE consultation ahead of “development consent” for building what would be Europe’s largest solar farm – covering 3,500 acres of mostly green belt Oxfordshire on the Blenheim estate – draws to a close, conclusive evidence emerges to link a deceased Russian businessman who was accused of a bank fraud centred on a fake gold mining project to the money behind the scheme.

Last year, *Eye* 1597 first reported on the backers of the planned 840-megawatt Botley West solar farm, said to be a Russian-Cypriot, Yulia Lezhen, and German Peter Gerstmann of Photovolt Development Partners. Lezhen, who occasionally also went by the name Lejeune, was the wife of Russian Dmitry Glukhov (who died in September 2022) and was said in a US court document to have acted as a nominee owner for him.

The Botley Farm team swiftly responded to the *Eye*’s revelation with a press notice insisting: “Mr Gerstmann and Ms Lejeune are both EU citizens and have been successfully working together on the development of solar projects since 2011.” No mention of Glukhov. The *Eye*’s report was a “smear by association”.

In its attempts to persuade residents of

their bona fides, the Botley backers have listed a number of projects in Europe and Japan they claim to have developed. The second largest is the 183MW farm at Osaki in Japan, which a few years ago Photovolt tried to sell to Thai Solar Energy. Alas, a report from the latter’s advisers made its way online, with some revealing information. It shows that the Japanese plant was owned by a Belize-registered company called Kamisol, which in turn was owned by another offshore company. The report confirms that the beneficial owners behind what looks intended to have been an opaque structure were: “Mr Peter Gerstmann, German nation [*sic*] and Mr Dmitry Glukhov, Russian nation [*sic*].”

It was, a Photovolt spokesman told the *Eye* last year, returns from selling projects including the one at Osaki that were being invested in UK solar projects – so certainly at least one company that had been controlled by Glukhov (although the largest sale was to a Cypriot company controlled by Lezhen herself).

After the *Eye* raised concerns, another participant in the Botley scheme, Oxford’s Merton College, withdrew its land (*Eye* 1609). Local MP Robert Courts (now solicitor-general) has spoken out against the scheme on environmental grounds but hasn’t yet mentioned the Russians. Perhaps it’s time he did.

Panel discussion

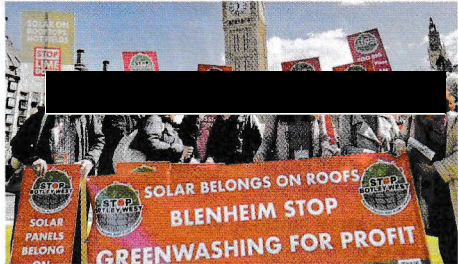
THE campaign to stop what would be Britain's largest solar farm – covering 3,500 acres of Oxfordshire countryside in panels – reached Westminster last month, as locals descended on parliament bearing placards declaring: “Too big, wrong place, Russian-owned.”

Inside Westminster Hall, MPs debating large-scale solar farms heard plenty about the first two concerns in relation to the 840-megawatt Botley West project – to be built on land belonging to trusts of which the beneficiaries are members of the Spencer-Churchill family, headed by the Duke of Marlborough in his neighbouring Blenheim Palace seat.

Lincolnshire MP Caroline Johnson said the plan “poses a disproportionate threat to agricultural land, much of which is of best and most versatile status, and will result in the loss of swathes of open countryside”. Local MPs “actively campaigning against” it (but not attending the debate) were said by Johnson to include solicitor-general Robert Courts (Witney), not to mention attorney general Victoria Prentis (Banbury).

One point too delicate for the Tory MPs who dominated the debate to bring up, though, was the provenance of the funds to which the placards referred. While the project is not strictly Russian-owned, there is, as *Eye* readers will know, more than a whiff of Moscow about the money behind it. This poses an increasing threat as experts look more closely at sanctions imposed after the invasion of Ukraine.

Botley West is being developed by a UK company called SolarFive Ltd, which is jointly owned by a German national, Peter Gerstmann, and a Cypriot/Russian woman named Yulia Lezhen. A year ago, *Eye* 1597 revealed how Lezhen had been named in US court papers as a front, along with a string of companies including SolarFive Ltd, for her (now deceased) husband Dmitry Glukhov. He had been accused



of ripping off a Russian bank funding a gold field that didn't materialise, with Lezhen and various companies said to have been used to “syphon off” money. Subsequent information showed Gerstmann had also been a long-time business associate of Glukhov (*Eye* 1617). This prompts financial and legal concerns. Lezhen is being pursued through the Moscow courts as beneficiary of Glukhov's estate.

The Spencer-Churchill trustees appear to need some good financial news, however. Their finance company, which used to fund commercial activities such as house-building, has borrowings running to £164m at the last count. The business of one family member, the duke's half-brother Lord Edward Spencer-Churchill, looks to be in dire straits. His land development group is racking up £10m-a-year costs on offshore financing that it shows no sign of being able to repay, and owes £94m while holding no assets to speak of.

The trustees are at least unlikely to be troubled by the regulators when it comes to the Botley West plans. The government's planning inspectorate, which approves large projects, has confirmed it is not interested in applicants' background. Ofgem does no serious due diligence (as recent electricity company collapses attest) and so has licensed SolarFive. Companies House, meanwhile, isn't concerned with who owns companies.

Given that MP Courts – in whose constituency the bulk of Botley West lies – is actively campaigning against the plans, might he, as the government's second most senior law officer, wish to look into all this?

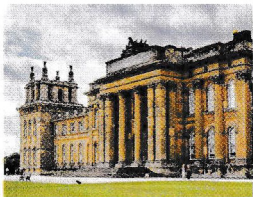
Palace intrigue

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.

EYE TOLD YOU SO

THE current spate of headlines about anti-corruption City minister Tulip Siddiq's close links to deposed Bangladeshi prime minister Sheikh Hasina (her aunt) will be no surprise to *Eye* readers.

As long ago as 2016, *Eye* 1431 contrasted the Hampstead and Highgate MP's commendable support for the welfare of her constituent Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, then held hostage in Iran, with her apparent indifference to, and silence on, serious and well-documented human rights abuses in Bangladesh, including scores of extra-judicial murders, disappearances and illegal detentions of dissidents. The *Eye* then highlighted the provision of rent-free property in London to family members provided by businessmen with close links to her aunt's regime in issue 1590, *two years* ago!

WIND OF CHANGE

"I'M fortunate today to be giving you this New Year's message from Blenheim Palace," began Nigel Farage in his address to the nation, followed by standard blathering about how "we are actually teaching kids at school that people like Winston Churchill, born in this palace, are bad people and that our country's history is something to be ashamed of".

Farage nevertheless made an odd house guest for the Spencer-Churchill family, at the head of

which sits the Duke of Marlborough (aka Jamie Blandford), given how he went on to bemoan net zero plans that will "put up everybody's bills and close down British manufacturing industry". One of his particular bugbears is solar farms. "Productive land must be farmed, not be used for solar farms," said Farage's Reform party manifesto six months ago.

The landowner with the largest plan in the UK to turn productive farming land into a huge solar farm is... the Spencer-Churchill family. Under the Botley West project, it will lease 3,200 acres of land around the Blenheim Palace estate for a solar farm project (*Eyes passim*). Not only will this blight several nearby villages, say locals, but 38 percent of the land is in the "best and most versatile" category for agriculture.

Still, the Spencer-Churchills aren't known for turning down a few quid for use of their corner of British heritage and it seems unlikely they will have opened their doors to Reform without being paid for the privilege.

NUMBER CRUNCHING

£300 Fall in annual GDP per head in last eight recorded quarters, which Nigel Farage cites as the reason people are 'economically angry; we are getting poorer'

£1,000 Loss of annual GDP per head caused by Brexit so far





Solar flannel

CRUNCH time approaches for what is planned to be Britain's largest solar farm, stretching across 3,500 acres of Oxfordshire on land belonging to the Spencer-Churchill family (whose head is the very much anti-solar, Reform Party-supporting Duke of Marlborough).

As Ed Miliband's energy department ponders whether to grant a "development consent order" (ie planning permission), troubling holes in the financial case for the project continue to emerge.

Botley West solar farm is being developed by a UK company called SolarFive Ltd, which is jointly owned by a German national, Peter Gerstmann, and Cypriot/Russian Yulia Lezhen. In 2023 *Eye* 1599 reported how the latter had been named, in US court papers concerning a Russian legal dispute, as a front, along with companies including SolarFive Ltd, for her (now deceased) husband Dmitry Glukhov. He had been accused of ripping off a Russian bank that was funding a gold field that didn't materialise, with Lezhen and several companies said to have been used to "siphon off" the money.

Limassol-resident Lezhen and Henley-based Gerstmann operate through a German company, Photovolt Development Partners GmbH, a spokesman for which told the *Eye* that the action against Glukhov had been thrown out as it involved a forged document, but declined to provide evidence of the resolution of the case.

Now Photovolt has submitted the "funding statement" that should show where the £820m to build the 840MW solar farm is coming from. Except it doesn't, just vaguely stating: "Through cooperation with investment banks and specialised consultants such as EY, the applicant has the ability to procure the financial resources necessary to fund the works."

Accompanying this are Photovolt's unaudited accounts, with all the numbers blanked out and carrying the not very reassuring disclaimer from EY that "the engagement did not include an assessment of the plausibility of the documents and the books and records on which the annual financial statements are based". This is a far cry from the significant financial backing evidenced by comparable large solar projects.

Photovolt is also at pains to stress its track record of solar farm delivery, writing in its application that it has "1.0GW built to date". Yet even its own publicity material says its projects are "delivered ready to build [by someone else]". And the largest project in its supposed 1.0GW record – a 480MW in Japan, initiated by Photovolt in 2012 before it sold up in 2018 – is still not "built". The Japanese press reports that Photovolt quit after encountering difficulty acquiring all the required land.

Panel games

CONTROVERSY continues to rage around the development of what would be Europe's largest solar farm, on 3,500 acres of land in Oxfordshire, with the beleaguered National Grid now dragged into it.

The *Eye* has often pointed out the questionable background of those behind the proposed Botley West solar farm, notably Cyprus-resident Yulia Lezhen, widow of a late Russian businessman who was accused of ripping off a Russian bank. Evidence for the funding for the 840MW project is merely the unaudited accounts of a German company through which Lezhen and her partner Peter Gerstmann operate.

Locals, meanwhile, object to the disfiguring of land, owned by Spencer-Churchill family trusts, near Blenheim Palace and surrounding a number of villages. They also point out that a relatively high proportion is on so-called "best and most versatile" agricultural land.

Despite energy secretary Ed Miliband's solar enthusiasm, Botley West may be a panel too far – so its backers have stepped their campaigning up a notch. Last month a Botley West spokesman told the *Oxford Mail*: "We are not doing this as an act of vandalism," and "in long discussions with the National Grid, they say the solar farm is needed in this area. Oxfordshire's grids are completely at capacity."

Really? The National Grid says it does not recommend the siting of projects and has an obligation to connect whatever is legitimately requested. Botley West declined to point to any record of its discussions with the National Grid.

As for the idea that Oxfordshire's grids are at capacity, there are indeed constraints and local network operator SSEN is investing in improvements. But the idea that a new solar farm generating electricity, and without additional storage capacity, will help address them is also nonsense.