

Closing Statement

In the three years since the first consultation in November 2022, the applicant has not responded to requests for information or for change, as amply demonstrated throughout the Examination process. The Adequacy of Consultation issues raised by SBW and others in early 2024 were ignored and questions left unanswered but the same headline concerns remain to be adequately addressed in the last week of the examination.

Ignoring requests for information for three years could be seen as a tactic to avoid scrutiny and to reduce commitments when selling on to a large investor that may not appreciate obligations. It could certainly be very costly to a Local Authority charged with ensuring compliance on issues left to 'detailed design', and impossible for local parish councils.

Constant claims that issues will be dealt with at the detailed design stage are not acceptable for a project of this size. Size is not a justification for not complying with requests for information. It is just the opposite.

The larger the amount of countryside demanded for a solar farm, the more detail is required to assess the harm. The size of the site compounds the opportunities for harm.

For Example:

Driving skylarks off 100 acres will not result in the same scale of harm as driving them off 30 times as many acres. Destroying the underlying field drains and compacting the clay in one flat field well away from villages is not the same as the cumulative effect of destroying land drains and compacting clay on thousands of undulating acres, close to villages and roads. Greater certainty that agreements will be honoured is essential; if necessary by placing sanctions on the applicant which clearly bind future owners of the project.

Proposals by the applicant included in the DCO can in themselves lead to future harm. Asking that powers of compulsory acquisition are written into the DCO but arguing that they are not expected to be exercised is not good enough if the intention is to sell on. Trust is weakened by the knowledge that owners of the land have considerable debts to meet that are not part of the Palace Charity and a sum is about the only thing of substance in the funding statement – even if there is no funding.

Assurances by planners for the applicant that there are safeguards for such occurrences are difficult to accept given that the DCO is a legal document which would allow CA, and given that the planners exhibited a lack of understanding of the guidance at the open hearings. (REP6-105 Misinterpretation of APFP 5(2)(h))

The track record to date gives no comfort that anything that is not detailed within the DCO with penalties for non-compliance will happen.

Finally, here is a constellation of villages that predate Blenheim by hundreds of years, and we have the historic Dornford Lane proposed for access, among other historic pathways. Dornford Lane was probably used as a direct connection between royal demesne farms around Steeple Barton (Barton means barley farm) to the royal hunting manor of Woodstock in Saxon times.* It is therefore 1100 years old. It would be a tragedy to wreck it now.

We are not talking about an unappreciated landscape. Hillaire Belloc put it well in his poem Evenlode, (contemporaries have iterated his views in Forever Fields):

I will not try to reach again,
I will not set my sail alone,
To moor a boat bereft of men
At Yarnton's tiny docks of stone.

But I will sit beside the fire,
And put my hand before my eyes,
And trace, to fill my heart's desire,
The last of all our Odysseys.

The quiet evening kept her tryst:
Beneath an open sky we rode,
And passed into a wandering mist
Along the perfect Evenlode.

The tender Evenlode that makes
Her meadows hush to hear the sound
Of waters mingling in the brakes,
And binds my heart to English ground.

A lovely river, all alone,
She lingers in the hills and holds
A hundred little towns of stone,
Forgotten in the western wolds.

*Professor WG Hoskins, the father of British Landscape History, lived for a time at Steeple Barton, while he taught at Oxford. The Making of the English Landscape (1955)