

## Big blades, hidden costs

Northamptonshire villagers have welcomed wind farms. But have they studied the small print, asks Clive Aslet.

By Clive Aslet The Telegraph 22 Feb 2011

If names were anything to go by, Burton Latimer in Northamptonshire would be as pretty as Chew Magna or Cerne Abbas, a place of wood-smoky quaintness and thatch. It isn't. "We're just an ordinary little East Midlands town," says John Meads, who had a dairy business until Tesco started to sell milk more cheaply than he could buy it from the farm. "We've no pretensions to be anything more."

The home of Weetabix, Burton Latimer may produce three billion breakfast biscuits a year, but it has no quarrel with an industry that sprang up six years ago: a wind farm on a shoulder of poor agricultural land known as the Wold. Jan Shawe, a town councillor who lives three minutes from the Wold and often goes running there, might even be described as a "reverse Nimby". "We've got to find an alternative energy source for our children and grandchildren," she tells me, in the unlovely car park of the library. "I like surfing in Cornwall. I'd go ballistic if they put a wind farm down there."

Try as one might, it is difficult to coax a negative opinion about wind farms out of residents. Ian Woods, a local estate agent, has no stories of residents fearful of tumbling property prices. "When we go and value houses, people point out the view of the turbines. They count how many are moving." Surely it will be possible to extract a disgruntled comment from Michael Culverhouse: his cottage, with its neat vegetable plot, is practically underneath one of the turbines. Yes, he says, on a really windy day, there's a bit of a "whooshing noise". But he has no problem with it. "They reduce the need for nuclear power, which I don't like, but is probably necessary." I can hear birdsong, I can hear the by-pass, but I cannot hear a squeak, rattle or growl from the turbine – or from an anti-wind farm lobby.

No wonder Renewables-UK, the wind- power trade body, is pointing to this area as a success. It would like to replicate the Burton Latimer effect across the country. In fact, it has to. Now that the Government wants local communities to decide what development is built in their area, promoters will have to win people to their side. Argument alone may not be enough: last week it was announced that money would also change hands. At Burton Latimer, it already has, in the form of help given to make the local Girl Guides' hut and some old people's accommodation more energy-efficient. If that is what has won hearts and minds, developers elsewhere will be only too keen to follow suit. Now all neighbourhoods that agree to

host wind farms will receive about £2,000 per turbine for community causes; and at a time when other sources of funding are drying up, this *douceur* could be indeed sweet.

At Burton Latimer, though, it wasn't just about money: many of the people I met had only a hazy notion of the grants that were available. More important was their telly. One man, walking gruffly down a country lane, seemed cross – "I get flicker," he barked. This did not, as I thought at first, refer to a medical condition, but to the state of his television signal. He must be about the only individual for whom this is still a problem. As soon as Your Energy, which built the wind farm, realised that reception was suffering, it distributed free digiboxes. It was a shrewd move: now the picture is clearer than it was before. The turbines have brought a benefit to the living rooms of almost every local home.

Developers should take note, however, that the view from Burton Latimer is not the only one in the area. Only three miles away is Cranford – not the one in the costume drama, but just as pretty: a place of deep thatched eaves and snowdrops, where the Norman church stands next to Duck Lane. Cranford, a conservation area, objected to the building of seven more turbines near the village but was overruled by Kettering borough council, which, in the words of Peter Quincey, the parish clerk, refused to "throw out these hopeless, inefficient pieces of kit". Planning permission has been given. To him, the visual intrusion – the turbines will be seen from every part of the village – will be compounded by irritation at wind's apparent inefficiency as a source of energy. "We're in one of the least windy parts of the country. They may be efficient out in the North Sea, but here there just isn't a constant breeze."

Anyetta Wigley, out with her two-and-a-half year old daughter Lyla, liked to see the turbines, which, she says, are keeping energy costs down. Anyetta, you couldn't be more wrong. Whatever their environmental benefits, wind farms are pushing energy bills up. Their profitability depends on a hidden subsidy that is paid for entirely by you and me in our electricity bills. By 2020, this subsidy could amount to as much as a third of the whole bill. Big industry is beginning to wake up to the fact, and complain. Individual consumers haven't generally noticed.

In 2007, Tony Blair, making a grand European gesture in the knowledge that he would not be

around to pick up the tab, committed Britain to producing 15 per cent of its energy consumption from renewable sources by 2020. This meant building wind farms, the only green technology ready in time (broad smiles on the faces of our German and Danish fellow Europeans who are supplying much of the hardware). How would this be funded? Step forward the then chancellor, Gordon Brown, who produced a system to which the word “byzantine” hardly does justice. Every supplier of electricity to consumers was set a green energy target. Those that failed to meet the target were to be fined. But they could avoid the fine by buying renewable obligations certificates (ROCs) from green generators such as wind companies. This initiated a trade in ROCs that makes wind energy much more valuable than it would otherwise be in the marketplace. While a megawatt-hour of electricity may only be worth £40, an ROC for the equivalent amount of green energy might be £50: total price £90 – the whole of which can be charged directly back to the bill paid (perhaps unknowingly) by us, the consumers. Today’s cost of £1.4 billion is expected to rise to £5 billion by 2020.

Since Britain struggles to produce two per cent of its energy from renewables, we are only at the beginning of the great wind farm boom. Lord Spencer has been lambasted for his plans to build 13 turbines, each higher than the dome of St Paul’s, in the gloriously unspoilt Vale of Avon Dassett, where residents are already fighting the line of the high-speed rail link between London  
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and Birmingham. Off-shore, plans are being made to build around 250 mega-turbines off Dorset’s Jurassic coast: this would eclipse the 100-turbine wind farm off Kent to become the world’s biggest. At Burton Wold, permission for another 10 turbines, in addition to the 17 already built or planned, is being sought. To meet the European target, we would have to set up three or four times the number already built.

The Renewable Energy Foundation, a British charity, calculates that about half of Burton Wold’s £14 million income earned since 2005 is subsidy. John Constable, a descendant of the artist and the foundation’s director of policy and research, says: “Many local people who may feel resigned to a wind farm will be less keen when they realise how expensive it is.”

Constable’s case receives support from an unlikely quarter. A car pulls up in the lane where Katie Sterling is walking her horse. “I’m very sceptical,” the driver says. “I can’t see how they’re going to recover their costs.” Forgive me for not naming the driver: he was the engineer on his way to mend one of the machines.

I arrived at Burton Wold in heavy fog, barely able to see the tops of the blades of the turbines turning languorously over my head. “How annoying,” I thought, “for the photographer.” There was, however, a symbolic rightness. Harvesting the wind is a murkier business than it may seem.

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*Explain the following:*

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