

Yorkshire Today 12th March 2005

"The estate agent now says it would knock £100,000 off the value of the property if the turbine gets built. My view is that we won't be able to sell it at all."

Peter Hart in the grounds of his home near Thorne, where there are plans for a huge windfarm.

It's an ill wind that threatens peatlands

One of the "seven wonders of Yorkshire" – Thorne Moors – is under threat from wind farm building, say protesters. Michael Hickling reports. Pictures by Chris Lawton.

Locals who say that the Humberhead Peatlands, flatlands east of Doncaster, will become a dumping ground for up to 300 giant wind turbines are to meet the Energy Minister, Mike O'Brien, in Westminster next Wednesday to express their anger.

They claim that proposed wind farms would put a "ring of steel" round the internationally known Thorne Moors and that the process of constructing them could damage the peatland irretrievably.

The protesters, orchestrated by Humberhead Against Turbines, an umbrella body with half-a-dozen local organisations attached, will tell Mike O'Brien that 7,000 residents living in 3,000 properties in the Thorne and Moorends area alone will be within a mile of a new turbine – and that the effect they will have on people living in the immediate neighbourhood has not been sufficiently studied.

The closest property will be Sunset Cottage belonging to Peter Hart, 560m away from the nearest turbine. At the top of the blades the turbine will be 125m high which is more than 10 metres taller than the cooling towers at Drax and Eggborough power stations.

Peter, a landscape gardener says: "It's ludicrous. Thorne Moors was described as one of the seven wonders of Yorkshire in a recent television documentary and now they want to surround it with wind farms. It's a very special place which should never be touched or threatened in any way."

He has lived at Sunset Cottage for five years. "It was a tumbledown place but we wanted somewhere that was close to nature and out of the way. We lived in a caravan for two years while we got it habitable.

"The estate agent now says it would knock £100,000 off the value of the property if the turbine gets built. My view is that we won't be able to sell it at all.

"These turbines will be the biggest in the country. They are designed to be built out at sea. But because the average windspeed is insufficient here, they have got to go higher to catch the wind that is available. We have our own water supply – a well 43 metres

down – and we are worried that this would be affected by the pilings for the footings for the turbine. No-one has been to see us to see if we have any fears. It's a big worry.

"I am a big believer in renewable energy. But these things should be sited offshore where they work twice as efficiently. Other countries might have large open places for wind farms. There are not a lot left in this country and siting one here is tantamount to criminal.

"They have done desktop studies into the effects on the wildlife. I live here 365 days of the year observing it. Green plovers and lapwings are renowned for not looking where they are flying – they look at their mates. Turbines will cut them to pieces."

A 125m turbine installation weighs about 300 tonnes. The protestors say that to anchor one and stop it wobbling around in ground which varies in consistency from custard to sponge cake will mean drilling down to bedrock – and no-one knows how far they will need to go. And once the bedrock is penetrated, the integrity of the wetlands will be at risk.

Should the peat start to drain and dry, large amounts of carbon dioxide would be released into the atmosphere. This would outweigh the notional gain that wind farms are supposed to deliver in reducing the need for fossil fuel power.

On the Tween Bridge site, they estimate that 96,000 tonnes of roadstone will be required to create the trackways for use by 2,500 readymix concrete lorries to deliver their loads.

Why Thorne Moors is so important

The Humberhead Peatlands comprise Hatfield Moors and Thorne Moors – with Goole Moors, Crowle Moors and Rawcliffe Moors.

Thorne and Hatfield Moors are Sites of Special Scientific Interest and are classed as Special Protection Areas under the European Birds Directive because they support approximately two per cent of Britain's breeding population of nightjar. Other notable birds include nightingale, merlin, hobby, long-eared owl, and whinchat.

The Moors are also Special Areas of Conservation under the European Habitats Directive and qualify as Wetlands of International Importance.

Thorne Moors is the richest peatland site in Britain for invertebrate fauna. There is also royal fern, bog rosemary, the round leaved sundew and bladderwort, and the greater yellow-rattle. Genetic isolation of several thousands of years has produced populations of the Large Heath Butterfly which differs from those elsewhere in Britain.

The acidic peat of the Moors means few bacteria survive here. This slows decay and has allowed a "Domesday" archive of four millennia to be preserved. Charred tree stumps yield rare clues to the activities of Bronze Age human communities. If the mire dries, this

record is lost.

Peat bogs also act as vast carbon stores. The bog vegetation removes carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, trapping it in the layers of peat. Total carbon stored in British soils is estimated at 22bn tonnes, equivalent to more than 100 years of carbon dioxide emissions from power stations and vehicles.

These bogs also help to maintain reliable supplies of clean water to rivers. A couple of months ago the Environment Minister, Elliot Morley, launched the Humberhead Levels and Moors Partnership, promoting green tourism.

The wind farms blueprint

At the moment three-quarters of Britain's electricity is generated from oil, gas and coal. But fossil fuels produce carbon dioxide, the main cause of climate change. They also run out. By next year we could become a net importer of energy.

The Government now requires electricity suppliers to source more of their power from renewables – wind, sunlight and the sea. In this region there are a number of wind farms operating, including Out Newton, near Spurn Point; on Ovenden Moor, above Halifax, and on Royd Moor, near Penistone,

The Government insists it is not pushing onshore wind at the expense of other renewables – but it says wind turbines are at the moment one of the most cost-effective and accessible technologies. For the next five years it sees the main growth in renewables as coming from onshore and offshore wind.

The Government claims three quarters of Britons believe we need windfarms to meet present and future energy needs. It accepts that wind farms should be refused if they are in the wrong place. About a third of all proposals are rejected by the planning process.

At least 21 windfarm developments are under discussion for the Humberhead Levels – administered by four planning authorities. There are seven full applications, two at Tween Bridge and Keadby and five others. There are further plans at Goole Fields, Twin Rivers, Rusholme, Elsham and Flixborough. A further 14 are at various stages of the planning process.

12 March 2005