

Western Morning News

SHATTERED DREAM OF QUIET LIFE

09:00 - 06 January 2004

All they wanted was the good life in Cornwall, and they needed it for the sake of their health - but no sooner had Colin and Kathy Bird fled the city for a modest rural home than their dream was shattered by the noise from wind turbines.

Last year at Christmas the couple booked into B &Bs in Newquay rather than endure sleepless nights in their caravan home at St Eval.

This year they have saved up £1,000 to live in Malta for a month because they cannot bear another winter at home when high winds turn the turbines.

When that noise from the Bears Down wind farm begins, says Kathy, it's like a "a deep throbbing, or a train that never gets there".

For Colin it's worse. "You never rest your brain, you never get away from them," he says.

What makes it worse for the couple is that they moved to Cornwall to escape the noise of the city.

Colin, 48, had suffered a nervous breakdown when he worked as a car factory worker in Coventry. But he was stirred by warm memories of boyhood holidays in Cornwall. And the couple spent six months each year for three years until 2000 in a rented caravan there, and found it blissfully peaceful.

So they plunged what little money they had into their new life. They bought the neighbouring caravan and moved in one year before the 16-turbine wind farm opened in October 2001.

Their caravan is made mostly of aluminium, which exacerbates the tin can effect.

But they point out that they were there before the wind farm, and they don't have the money to move anywhere else.

Kathy, 43, says: "I did put in a letter of complaint about the plans. I was very concerned about the wildlife - buzzards and peregrine falcons. Then, of course, noise was one of my concerns, but I never realised how bad it would be. At first I thought it was something in

the home, but it was the turbines.

"They get to a critical speed, which I believe is 40 knots, and then it disturbs us all the time. It's just as if we're in a box and it's reverberating all the time.

"It's almost like a motion sickness, and it always seems to be worst at Christmas.

"It's the constancy of them that gets to you, it can be for anything like three or four days, it's this deep throbbing."

The couple calculate that they booked into B &Bs four times last year to escape the turbines. But sometimes they just drive around until the wind dies down.

National Wind Power, which owns the Bears Down site, has paid for double-glazing of the caravan to try to curb the noise effect, but this has had little impact.

Kathy and Colin, like their neighbours, complain of headaches, anxiety, sleeplessness and nausea - 97 per cent questioned by Plymouth GP Amanda Harry complained of one symptom or another.

One neighbour, who asked not to be named, describes the effect of the noise as being like "Chinese water torture".

His home is further back from the wind farm, and better insulated against external noise, but he said: "We get a beating sound, it's like a bus engine sitting parked, and we do get headaches. I understand the need for renewable energy, but the problem is that they do not contribute much. To get the things going they have to use electricity anyway."

To add to his sense of injury, he estimates that the wind farm has devalued his property by 25 per cent. Colin's health has got worse since moving to what he dreamed would be the perfect home for the rest of his days. At first he had no opinion of the turbines' appearance, but now he describes them as being "like ogres looking at you".

So what do the couple want, and how do they see a way out of their nightmare?

Kathy wants the turbines stopped at night so that they can sleep, and "some form of compensation" for their misery and troubles.

Colin explains: "We can't afford anywhere else, so what's it going to be like for the rest of our lives? We came here thinking we'd get peace and quiet for the rest of our lives. And it's beautiful - Cornwall has everything.

"But then this happens - you'd need to be in a Chieftain tank with earphones not to hear those things."

Kathy adds: "We came here to live simply, and we both had to retire early because of ill-health. Colin just needed a very quiet environment, and we'd been here before and had three years of peace and quiet and it was gorgeous.

"But this is systematically ruining our lives - and I just feel that people are not aware of the damage these things are doing to health."

The issue is set to come to the fore with a legal test case in Cumbria where people living between 600-800 metres from the 60-metre turbines in the village of Askham complained of headaches and nausea. Barrister John Campbell is representing three couples at Kendal Magistrates Court in a fight to get wind turbines near their homes declared a statutory nuisance under the Environmental Health Act.

He said: "There are a number of complaints of sleep disturbance, headaches, and migraines that are driving people mad. They say it's a pervasive thump, thump noise from the blades."

He said that if they won the test case, which is expected to take several days, the turbines would either have to be stopped or removed.

Meanwhile, one couple living in a residential caravan near the Bears Down site have saved up £1,000 to go to Malta for a month because they say they cannot cope with life next to the turbines in winter when the winds are high.

In desperation last year, they booked into B &Bs in Newquay at Christmas.

Kathy and Colin Bird took early retirement through ill health from their jobs in Coventry as they sought a quiet life in Cornwall. Then they moved into their caravan in 2000, before the wind farm was built. But Mrs Bird now says: "It's just a throb when the wind is up - it's like the sound of a car going by with the stereo blaring, but it

doesn't pass."

Matthew Spencer, chief executive of the South West Renewable Energy Agency (Regen) yesterday disputed whether the noise from turbines was the cause of their health complaints.

He said: "People may perceive that is their problem, but the turbines are not very noisy. Nothing has been proved about the health effects, but I would take these initial findings with a pinch of salt. These are arguments that people who are opposed to wind farms use."

He pointed out that travelling at 40mph would create a noise of 55 decibels at 100 metres while a wind turbine produced a noise of 35 decibels at 350 metres.

He said there was no evidence that the new generation of larger turbines planned for the South West would be a problem. "They are becoming less noisy as they are being developed," he said.

He added that the guidelines for the turbines were that they should not be within 400 metres of people's homes, and that noise had not proved a problem in the eyes of planners.

National Wind Power, which owns and operates the Bears Down wind farm, yesterday failed to respond to a series of questions put by the Western Morning News.