

Western Morning News

WIND TURBINES HAVE EATEN INTO MY VERY SOUL

09:00 - 09 January 2004

Mark Taplin has lived in the shadow of wind turbines for more than a decade. As part of our on-going debate on the issue, he describes how the experience has affected his life

Opposed: Mark Taplin says turbines have ruined his way of life MY world has been overshadowed by the spectre of wind turbines for 12 years, and I have lived with the reality for the past eight years of generating machines spinning their blades 75 metres above my house, the closest a mere 440 metres away. They have imposed themselves on my life and eaten into my soul - small wonder that I feel compelled to contribute to the deluge of column inches that this latest debate has generated. I live in a modest cottage which nestles in a small secluded Cornish valley, surrounded by a few acres that I can call my own.

I came here to pursue my ambition of an Arcadian existence, growing my own fruit and vegetables and indulging in a bit of self taught husbandry.

I was eager to leave behind the smug and affluent rural neighbourhood where I had grown up, and endured the tiresome label of leading "the good life".

I was accustomed to a degree of hardship and was prepared for the vicissitudes of the Westcountry climate. I was not expecting a rural idyll "preserved in aspic". I had a grasp of the commercial imperatives that exerted control over the countryside as the end of the century approached. However, what I was not prepared for was the impact on my life of my nearest neighbours - the wind turbines at Four Burrows.

I am not the first, nor will I be the last, to find the terms "windmill" and "windfarm" misplaced. Wind turbines do not mill grain, nor do they harvest the product of their own endeavours.

Arguably they save some forms of pollution, but are responsible in turn for some negative by-products, from the concrete in their foundations to the tips of their blades, offending many by their very sight and sound. I have always considered myself as one who was aware of environmental issues, and I try to live in harmony with the countryside. But, sadly, the intrusive neighbours on my doorstep

have introduced a massive note of discord into my peaceful existence.

Why? Because whatever the individual thinks of them aesthetically, I cannot avoid the noise. I hear them nearly all the time. It is not easy to equate it to other noise sources, and I find the attempts at comparisons trite. The dilemma for one such as me is that the industry has always argued that as the wind picks up speed and the power output and noise level produced increases, the natural background noise created by the wind will mask any turbine noise.

Where this argument falls down, however, is when you find yourself in a comparatively sheltered position on lower ground than the turbines and not buffeted by the wind. Then you hear a great deal more than if you stand up close with the wind rushing past your ears. When small but violent changes in wind direction shear past the turbines, the chomp and swoosh of the blades passing the towers creates a noise, albeit mercifully brief, that beggars belief. It is as if a ghostly steam engine were pumping an abandoned mine working.

But this surprising and unacknowledged phenomenon does thankfully pass as the wind abates, whereas the bane of my life - the "tonal" (mechanical whine or resonance) noise - does not. It is ever present when a turbine is generating at more than mere tick-over, despite the manufacturer's claims.

So, how can I hear tonal noise? It has been so distinct at times that I foolishly assumed everyone would own up and do something about it. Sadly, that is where the technicalities come in, and it boils down to mathematics. The wind industry is better supported than local council environmental health departments, and they were well ahead of the game when they formulated the criteria for establishing tones. It is a loaded issue and not what you might call a level playing field. Whatever I hear, they will claim that it does not qualify as a tone - which means that I am stuck with it. Once you hear tonal noise it follows you around, not in your imagination but because the human ear has a natural habit of homing in on an annoying sound.

But, going back to the beginning, what turned me into an "anti" soon after I found myself thrown on to the learning curve in 1992? Was it the way that the whole thrust of renewable energy development was being hijacked by the wind lobby, the cavalier attitude of a new breed of opportunistic developers, the obscenely generous price support structure offered at that time under the Non Fossil Fuel Obligation and the greedy scramble for another subsidy?

Was it the arrogance of politicians who jumped on the green bandwagon, the pressure group zealots who adopted the moral high ground in the name of saving the planet and the naive level of argument from the "better than nuclear, nicer than pylons" brigade? Was it the exasperating lesson of having to teach myself all about parliamentary statements, planning procedures and the technicalities of noise attenuation, which only served to disenchant me, when all the while I would much rather have been getting on quietly with my life? Or was it just a selfish determination to defend my precious green and pleasant Shangri La from industrial machines which threatened to invade my privacy?

I resent the same old stale public relations lecture from the vested interest lobby who do not appear to know how or when to apologise. I do not warm to those who disregard for the sensibilities of others who can be passionate about preserving a particular landscape that is special to them. I cannot accept that wind turbine generators are benign.

I have contributed to the debate with this account not to seek sympathy, but as a reminder to those of a different persuasion that the route down which wind power development has been driven in recent years can cause very real harm. Noise apart, it has turned me, a potential supporter, against my turbine neighbours and what they stand for.