

# A SOLAR PANEL TOO FAR?

Local villagers have objected strongly to the proposal to erect a solar farm on the rising ground immediately to the north of the Medway River, close by Teston Bridge, a scheduled ancient monument and Grade 1 listed building. This area of the Medway Valley is one of outstanding beauty, and encompasses the popular Teston Park immediately below the proposed site.



Objectors say that the solar farm, which would comprise parallel rows of 2.5m high photovoltaic panels spread over an area of some 4 hectares (just under 10 acres, more than five full-sized football pitches) would intrude on the natural beauty of the area, and could at certain times of the day cause dazzle and glare which would be dangerous to drivers both on the road and rail track.

Visitors to Teston Park enjoy the sweeping views of the valley, the river and the bridge itself, which would, objectors say, be scarred permanently by this development.

**Farleigh Events** has conducted an investigation into the progress of this proposal.

On 1 June 2015, an application under the Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations for what is known as a Screening Opinion was made to Maidstone Borough Council by an organisation called Mulbrick Clean Energy LLP (Limited Liability Partnership). This application stated that a full planning application would be made "in summer 2015". (To date this application has not been made.) As the name implies, a screening opinion considers how a development is to be hidden from outside view.

Mulbrick and its subsidiaries are part of Think Energy Partners LLC, which according to its website is a developer of energy assets in the United States, Europe and India. Mulbrick shares its address, and a common directorship, with 21 associated energy and solar power LLP's, in Caterham, Surrey.

The Mulbrick application describes the proposed development as a medium-sized facility capable of producing 2Mw of electricity, linked to the local grid via a transformer station situated near the centre of the site. It was proposed that a 2m high stock fence would be erected around the site, with existing hedgerows being reinforced to provide a dense vegetation screen.

Maidstone Borough Council (MBC) in turn consulted with local parish councils, and other bodies including Natural England, Highways, Kent Wildlife Trust and many more, and received several objections: one being from West Farleigh PC on aesthetic grounds.

Teston Parish Council objected on several grounds: aesthetic; the impossibility of screening this sloping site; the glint and glare of light reflected from the panels; the intrusion of a grid connection; the restricted access during construction; the potential problems of flooding by rainwater; and the fact that albeit that solar sites are supposed to be temporary, this proposal states a lifespan of 30 years – hardly temporary.

The Kent County Council (KCC) Heritage, Environment, Planning & Enforcement department found that there seemed to be no intention to consider cultural heritage further and that this approach was not acceptable. KCC Heritage went on to say that particular issues would be the impact on the setting of designated heritage assets, especially Teston Bridge; and that given the extent of known Roman remains in the area, archaeological and historic landscape assessment would also be needed.

Neighbours in particular are very vocal in their opposition, and many letters and emails of protest have been sent to MBC.

Despite these objections and protests, MBC has, surprisingly, concluded that an Environmental Impact Assessment is not required.

As it was raining at the time of writing this article, **Farleigh Events** sent one of its weatherproof minions to the site and viewed it from several aspects including the riverside, the bridge and the Tonbridge road. The Mulbrick application describes the surrounding landform as “mostly flat”, which is patently incorrect. The proposed site occupies an area between the river and its adjacent local railway, and the Tonbridge road; it forms a rising section of the valley side. The differential in height from the railway line to the north boundary of the site is some 15 to 20 metres. To the south, the land rises quite steeply across the river to Lower Road and beyond.

From the point of view of Teston Park, while there are groups of mature trees in the way, it is obvious that most of the site would be clearly visible due to its slope and elevation, and furthermore that a 2m stock fence and hedgerows would not conceal much. The solar panels and transformer station would be clearly evident; not just from the park but from the road and the bridge.

The application made so far is still active, albeit that the public consultation period is now closed. **Farleigh Events** will keep its readers closely informed on developments.



Teaton Bridge from south



From north of site, looking south-east



From north of site, looking south



From north of site, looking south-west



Looking southwards over site



Looking westwards across site



Looking westwards over site



Looking westwards over site