



West Yorkshire

## 'What do Saudi developers know of Heathcliff?' Brontë country up in arms over windfarm plan

Mooted project in West Yorkshire could cause 'heartbreaking' disruption for wildlife and harm local tourist industry, say critics



**Helen Pidd** *North of England editor*

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**"H**eathcliff! It's me, Cathy, I'm up by the wind turbines." It's not quite what [Kate Bush](#) had in mind, and probably not what Emily Brontë imagined when she wandered the bleak West Yorkshire moors and created *Wuthering Heights*.

But if one of Lancashire's wealthiest men gets his way, vast swathes of moorland in Brontë country could become home to England's biggest onshore windfarm.

[Richard Bannister](#) owns Boundary Outlet, a chain of discount shopping centres, as well as nine square miles of boggy moorland between Haworth and Hebden Bridge he uses for grouse shooting. He has joined forces with a Saudi-backed company to develop plans to turn the "wily, windy" moor into the [Calderdale windfarm](#).

It would include up to 65 turbines, each rising up to 200 metres (655ft), 40 metres taller than Blackpool Tower. The windfarm could, say its backers, generate enough renewable energy to power 286,491 homes for a year and save 426,246 tonnes of carbon annually.

Yet local opposition is building against the project, with particular concerns over the carbon-trapping peat bogs, which also soak up water that would otherwise flow down to the flood-prone valleys below.

Others worry about the loss of habitat for nesting birds, especially the curlews, lapwings and golden plover, with [the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds \(RSPB\)](#) calling the location "entirely inappropriate".

There are concerns, too, of the effect on the lucrative literary tourist industry, with the Brontë Society saying the development would have "a significant and detrimental impact on an iconic local viewpoint and world-renowned landscape".



📍 The ruins of Top Withens farmhouse, thought by many to be the inspiration for *Wuthering Heights*. The ruins are by the proposed site on Walshaw Moor Photograph: Jon Super/The Guardian

Lydia Macpherson and Nick MacKinnon, both poets, live in the final farmhouse on the Haworth side of the moor, right on the Pennine Way. Every day, scores of walkers pass by, some wearing red dresses on Bush's birthday.

Most head for the two lone sycamores marking the spot of Top Withens, a ruined farmhouse once owned by Macpherson's ancestors, which many believe provided the inspiration for [Wuthering Heights](#) (in setting, if not architecture).

"People come from all over the world to see where Cathy and Heathcliff lived. Since the [disgusting chainsawing](#) of the Hadrian's Wall tree, the two Top Withens sycamores are probably the best-loved in Britain," said MacKinnon. "The developers are Saudis, so what do they know of curlews and Heathcliff, and why should they care?"

Bannister is local and "should know better", said Mackinnon: "At best, this application is criminally negligent about wildlife, flooding and heritage. At worst, it shows contempt for the people in the Worth and Calder valleys, and the imaginations of millions elsewhere, by entitled and selfish owners."

Those campaigning against the windfarm insist they are not simply trying to protect their own privileged vistas but fighting for everyone: friend, foe or fowl.

"The nimbys are the birds who live here," said Clare Shaw, another poet who lives in Pecket Well, above Hebden Bridge, and is coordinating a response from Calderdale's artistic community. "We should not be destroying this really vital habitat that they are programmed to come back to."

Others feel more conflicted about the project.

Joseph Holden, a professor of geography and peatland expert from the University of Leeds, said that while carbon calculators showed the carbon benefits of the windfarm would outweigh the carbon losses from the peat land, wind turbines do cause "heartbreaking" damage.

Holden chairs the Shetland Windfarm Environmental Advisory Group, which is monitoring the construction of [103 turbines](#) that will create the [largest onshore windfarm](#) in the UK.



📍 Poet Lydia Macpherson, who lives in the farmhouse nearest the proposed site for a 65-turbine windfarm. Macpherson's ancestors used to farm the moors during Brontë's time. Photograph: Jon Super/The Guardian

The “footprint” of damage is bigger than just each turbine and its foundations, he said. An access road must be built to each one, and large cables buried underground to connect each one to the National Grid, which will involve large-scale peat disruption.

“As a peatland scientist, when you see the disturbance and damage to peatland on a windfarm site it’s devastating,” said Holden. “It’s heartbreaking because these systems have grown for thousands of years, slowly accumulating this carbon. We should be doing everything we can to keep that carbon in our land and put our windfarms elsewhere, where the carbon impact won’t be as great.”

There are plenty of windy spots high up on other hills with much thinner, non-peaty soils that could provide a better location for a windfarm, he suggested.

The plans are still in the early stages, with the developers submitting a 151-page [scoping document](#) in September [after the government dropped its moratorium](#) on large onshore windfarms.

The developers must carry out a formal environmental impact assessment before they can submit a full planning application.

A spokesperson for Calderdale windfarm and Worldwide Renewable [Energy](#) said: “We are committed to responsible development that respects the landscape, minimises disruption to wildlife habitats and mitigates potential impacts on the local environment.

“We recognise that concerns have been raised about heritage preservation and have appointed experts in cultural heritage, such as Wessex Archaeology, to guide us in preserving local heritage sites, including the Brontë heritage, and are committed to considering these concerns as part of our ongoing design process.”

The spokesperson said that although funding for the planning phase had come from Saudi investment, if given planning permission, most shares would be sold to UK-based investment funds.

Calderdale council’s corporate lead for planning, Richard Seaman, said: “On the submission of any planning application, a full public consultation would be carried out and all representations received taken into consideration.”

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