

# Cotswold developer has an eye on the future It's not easy being green

As he joins the ranks of the Royal Society for the Arts' fellows, avant garde housing developer and ecologist Jeremy Paxton talks to **DAVID CLENSY** about how the Lower Mill Estate is changing the world



The ArtSpa building

IT'S a remarkable list of icons Jeremy Paxton can now count himself amongst – Nelson Mandela, Karl Marx, Benjamin Franklin, Guglielmo Marconi – he recites them down the phone line like a roll of honour, giving a dramatic pause between each name. He's understandably proud, but the Cotswold property developer is taking his induction to the fellowship of the Royal Society for the Arts in his stride.

The 46-year-old, who has been creating a modernist utopia at the Lower Mill Estate near Cirencester for the past 12 years, has been offered the fellowship in recognition for his work in ethically responsible and ecologically sustainable housing.

"I don't see it so much as a personal accolade as a great boost for the estate," he says. "The estate is there as a benchmark for others, so this kind of recognition is important in that sense."

Paxton's vision for Lower Mill is a village of more than 500 second homes on the former gravel pits. His achievements at the site are difficult to compress, though he does a fairly good job himself. "It's the largest collection of modernist designs in the country and the only housing development to be constructed in the middle of a nature reserve," he says.

"You can't underestimate the ecological aspect," he adds. "Lots of developers tag on an ecological element to sites. We're different."

"I spent the first three years studying the ecology. The health of the environment is central – I employ five guys full time just to monitor it."

"I'm trying to demonstrate you can be forward-looking while working in harmony with nature. We'd even like to get to zero-carbon homes, which are balanced with the carbon that's created in making them."

Still, Paxton's something of an enigma. He's not your usual environmentalist – not many green types fly around the country in a bright red Hughes combat helicopter and around the world in their own twin-engine Beechcraft passenger plane. But aviation, he says, is a big part of his life.

"You'll find that most pilots are environmentally-minded," Jeremy argues. "When you're up there you have to be aware of the natural world all the time. You get to understand the weather in particular."

He has dedicated a large slice of his cashflow to nature conservation. The old gravel pit complex has even been named a Site of Special Scientific Interest twice over.

He controversially used the site to reintroduce beavers to the country for the first time in 500 years, offered everyone who



A typical luxury villa at the estate

bought a property a rare-breed Gloucester Old Spot pig as an unusual incentive, and in his latest venture has started encouraging ospreys back into the Cotswolds.

But Jeremy doesn't believe being ecologically aware means you have to be backward-looking. The 550-acre development is so forward looking, it almost makes him come across as a man of child-like excitement.

Jeremy persuaded 22 of the world's leading avant garde architects to design a series of Cotswold houses for the 21st century.

One of the houses is by arguably the trendiest architect of our era, Frank Gehry – creator of the armadillo-shaped Guggenheim in Bilbao.

Other architects on board include Will Alsop, who once came up with a plan to turn Barnsley into a Tuscan hilltop town and Eva Jiricna, designer of Faith Zone at the Millennium Dome.

His main partnership has been with Richard Rex whom he has worked with on the bulk of the off-plan modernist homes at Lower Mill, which sell from £295,000.

It's a mark of the quality of the designs that many were scheduled for listing before they formally received planning permission.

"It's not one project we have here at Lower Mill, there are dozens," Jeremy beams. "It's not a job, it's my life."

The £6 million ArtSpa was opened by Kevin McCloud, presenter of Channel 4's Grand Designs, last June. Celebrities such as Kate Moss and Liz Hurley were rumoured to have been snubbed when requesting membership of the spa, as it's only open to Lower Mill residents.

Hollywood stars rumoured to have considered buying a property on the site include John Travolta, Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie.

Trying to tie down the conversation to each project is a challenge and you find yourself surrounded by a jumble of resident artists, yoga retreats, organic farms, spas and trendy wildlife hides as well as ultra-futuristic living spaces.

He's even in negotiations with a group of Jamie

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