

# 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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Jeremy Paxton loves being out in the natural world

Oliver-trained chefs to open an organic restaurant at Lower Mill.

"It will happen," he says confidently. You can't help but feel it's his attitude that's got him where he is today.

Jeremy was born into a working class world in Hackney, east London, to a mother who was just 14 when she became pregnant. He was adopted by a couple in the New Forest and lived on a council estate.

His most powerful influence as a child was his adoptive mother's father, Percy Cook, a full-time New Forest poacher who lived in a cottage with gas lighting and an earth closet at the end of the garden.

"My childhood was like something out of the Famous Five," he says. "I used to spend so much time enjoying the natural world around me in the New Forest, it's little wonder I've grown up to have this love of nature. I love being outside. I still feel like a 12-year-old."

Jeremy's life changed when he got into the world of waterskiing, very nearly becoming British champion in the 1980s. It led to a career as a TV watersports commentator, before he built up a massive sports magazine empire and made his

considerable fortune.

His best friend and brother-in-law was Barry Sheene, the late motorcycling ace, who died in 2003. Jeremy was married to Sheene's wife's sister, Sue, a former Vogue model from whom he is now divorced.

It was Sheene who introduced him to a world of inspirational celebrities, such as the environmentally-minded Beatle George Harrison.

"George was an inspiration because of the way he saw the world," Jeremy says. "He was an intelligent guy. But he was one of many people who inspired me."

As a working class lad made good – an expression that instigates a groan and a mildly petulant "whatever that means ..." from Jeremy – and as a ground-breaking ecologist in his own right, these days surely Jeremy is conscious of being an inspiration to others?

"It's not something you think about," he says. "But I'd be pleased if the development acts as a benchmark to the industry. It'd be a big achievement if we could change the way things are done."

■ For details, visit [www.lowermillestate.com](http://www.lowermillestate.com)



Jeremy takes a dip at ArtSpa

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Jeremy Paxton



The Sundance Villa designed by Richard Reid

## My favourite things

Cheltenham author Zoe Barnes talks to **LUCY RUTHERFORD** about her favourite things



Zoe Barnes

**What's your favourite book?**

I don't have one favourite, but I love quirky humour such as Robert Rankin, British horror such as James Herbert and children's books, many of which are breathtakingly original especially Garth Nix's Mister Monday series, or *Mortal Engines* by Philip Reeve.

**Where's the best place in the world for you?**

Apart from Cheltenham? The Isle of Man, where my mum was born. And I'm very fond of France too.

**What's the CD you always reach for?**

Polichinelle by The Prayer Boat or Pink Floyd's *Wish You Were Here*.

**A must-see television programme?**

Anything with animals in it, although preferably not eating each other.

**Who is your best friend and why?**

I have several very close friends, and wouldn't want to single one out.

But in all honesty, I think my very best friend is my husband, Simon.

**What's your favourite or most-treasured possession?**

My wedding ring.

**Do you have a hobby?**

Several! But the most important one to me is music. I'm a trained singer and love performing.

**What's your favourite food?**

Anything with a lot of calories in it. I'm a sucker for sweet, gooey cakes and puddings – much to my family's horror, I've never met a dessert that was too rich or sickly for me to scoff!

**And drink?**

Bailey's.

**What's your favourite indulgence?**

Time off. When you're self-employed, you aren't take a day off because you always feel you ought to be working.

■ Zoe Barnes' new book *Special Delivery* is due to be published this summer