

WHO'D LIVE IN AN ECO-HOUSE LIKE THIS?



A film star? A rock musician? One thing's for sure, it must be someone with a green conscience and £7.2m to spare. **Mark Hughes** reports from the Cotswolds

A very exclusive estate

Earlier this week, as the rest of Britain digested the latest falls in house prices, one property deal caught the eye. A revolutionary eco-house had just been sold for £7.2m, which at £3,000 per square foot, makes it a world record. It hasn't been built yet but when it is, it will occupy a prime spot in the Lower Mill Estate, a nature reserve and private spa deep in the Cotswolds.

To the outside world that might seem an extravagant amount of money for a modest-sized country pad. But life is different in the Lower Mill Estate. Kylie Minogue once sang an in-

promptu set here in one of the private spa's swimming pools. Then there was the morning when residents bumped into Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie in the village shop. And there was the time when Royal Ballet star Darcey Bussell handed out the prizes for the sack race at the summer fête.

Any one of those incidents would have been retold in gossipy whispers in any other village. Not at the Lower Mill Estate - eco-estate extraordinaire and Britain's most exclusive community. And no, "it's not the type of place for poor people on the breadline", declares Jeremy Paxton, a former professional water-skiier turned publisher who bought the 550-acre estate 12 years ago.

Mr Paxton, 48, originally bought Lower Mill to live there himself, but after spotting the potential for an exclusive private community where the environment would play as big a part as the residents, he applied for planning permission to build 577

homes. Since permission was granted in 1998, 214 homes have been built on the idyllic estate. Amazingly, the village has remained a relatively well-kept secret until earlier this week when the record price of The Orchid, designed by east London architect Sarah Featherstone, who has also designed part of the Olympic village, was revealed.

The identity of the buyer, however, is a closely guarded secret. Neither will Mr Paxton reveal the names of any of the other celebrities who own large chunks of the estate's 214 homes, though he says he has turned a lot of footballers and their wives down. "The reason we get so many celebrities and well-known people coming here is because of the privacy," he explains. "Some of the names do get out, but they don't come from me. If I start telling the press who I have living here then I'm going to lose business."

Lower Mill's residents are not all famous. They include lawyers, bankers, writers and photographers from across Europe and

the USA. "The community is really thriving and everyone seems to get along well together," says Mr Paxton.

Each home is built to order, meaning it takes at least 18 months between purchase and moving in. The Orchid, which it is hoped will produce more energy than it uses, with an underground heat pump, geothermal heating and cooling, rainwater and solar and wind power, will take three years to build. It is designed to resemble the shape of the bee orchids (*Ophrys apifera*) that grow wild at Lower Mill.

Such an idyllic lifestyle comes at a price. No gossiping is not the only rule here. If you want to live in Britain's most exclusive resort, you have follow an extensive list of dos and don'ts. Forget about holding a stag or hen party, because they aren't allowed (cocktail parties are OK).

Residents are not allowed to hang their washing in their garden - they can either use a tumble drier or take their clothes to the on-site launderette. "For

Sale" signs are banned, as are television aerials and unsightly satellite dishes. Residents must not engage in activity that will be a nuisance to neighbours.

But the main rule in this rural idyll is that you can't live here all year round - and not at all in January. The reason: residents must adhere to their environmental responsibilities. Houses can only be built if they respect the wildlife. Certain areas are off-limits at certain times of the year, and in particular in January, to allow birds to nest and other wildlife to breed. Any home bought on the Lower Mill Estate must be your second home.

"We have had to turn some pretty famous people away because we didn't like the type of house they were planning to build," says Paxton. "And we will walk away from the transaction if we are not happy. It doesn't matter how rich or famous people are, we don't need money because this place is completely debt free. We aren't under any financial pressure to bow to people's demands.