

es' blue-eyed boy will give opponents a run for their money

Zac Goldsmith - Frank Zacharias Robin Goldsmith to be exact - talks so fast it is impossible to take verbatim notes. Even the finest shorthand writer in the land could not record his outpourings.

I have never used a tape recorder in the whole of my journalistic career, but when interviewing Richmond Park's prospective Parliamentary Conservative Party candidate I almost wished I had one.

But perhaps it would not have been a good idea. Recording conversations is a bit inhibiting and I had no difficulty in following his glib as his laudic charm and environmental passions are spellbinding.

The thoughts speed out like a runaway train - on taxing polluting aircraft, supermarkets, David Cameron, referenda and grass root politics.

The intelligent blue eyes flash with fervour and every 15 minutes or so he rolls a cigarette by hand. We talked for just over an hour over an al fresco coffee outside Austins the wholefood cafe overlooking Richmond Green before he had to dash off to face an ITV interview.

There is no doubt Richmond Park Conservative Association made a wise choice in selecting a local boy - the son of billionaire Sir James Goldsmith - as its heir apparent.

He will unquestionably give the Lib Dem incumbent Susan Kramer a run for her money - and although his green views are dramatically radical for a party of the right, his aristocratic charm should win over the Tory blue noses.

The 32-year-old editor of *The Ecologist* turned down the chance of bidding for a super safe seat to take on the challenge of Richmond where a hefty 4,000 majority stands between him and Westminster.

"The night before I was due to go before the East Hampshire selection I chickened out," he recalls. "I would be representing an area I did not really know. It would have been a betrayal of everything I stand for. I am basically a campaigner and a safe seat in an area I did not know was not for me. I could not live with myself if I was parachuted in."

Richmond is a completely different kettle of fish he feels and suits his temperament exactly. He has spent the majority of his childhood in Ham and knows every inch of the town and its environs.

So the day after he told East Hampshire of his decision, he got in touch with the Richmond Park Conservative Association and was told he was in time to put his name forward.

He did, went through the formal selection process and was chosen at a meeting chaired by Michael

Portillo. That was last March and he has thrown himself into the fight with gusto.

"I just hope it will be a clean fight", he says. "I think it will. Susan Kramer is a decent person and I don't anticipate any dirty tricks there."

He has been knocking on doors, trying to get to know and talk to as many residents as possible. Sometimes he is recognised, sometimes not. But he finds it all very stimulating. "I really enjoy it. I get involved in many intelligent discussions and campaigning is what I like and what I am good at."

Zac joined the Conservative Party in 2005 and was immediately put on the A list. The father of three is at present living in Chelsea but has just put an offer on a house in Richmond as he believes it is essential to live in the constituency.

His mother of course still occupies the magnificent family home on Ham Common and many other members of his family live nearby.

He hit the headlines recently by joining the fight against the controversial decision to allow Sainsbury's to open a supermarket in Barnes - and has secured a lot of national publicity with his plan to hold a referendum to try and shame Sainsbury's into pulling out by showing them the force of local opinion.

They have refused to co operate in the exercise but

he feels that letting big business know when they are doing things that are not acceptable can be very effective.

He is a member of the right-strong team on his party's Quality of Life thinktank and is trying to persuade his colleagues to look at how the planning laws can be adapted to make sure that local views are not overruled in the future.

He admits that politics was never in his sights when he was at Eton or when he embarked on a career with environmental lobbyists. He thought he could be more effective on the outside.

"In the past the environment has belonged to the left - yet it should not", he contends. "It is a 'conservative' issue with a small 'c' and when I saw that the Tories were at last taking that on board I was persuaded that Parliament might be the best place to bring about change."

He sees David Cameron as brave and farsighted and feels his green background means he can play a useful part in the modernised party, "that is getting more popular all the time."

"But I cannot rely on party fortunes here. The Lib Dems have built a very sound stronghold. I am going to have to campaign vigorously and fight hard to win this seat."