



KING'S REACH TOWER, STAMFORD STREET, LONDON SE1 9LS. APRIL 6, 2006

CONSTABLE CONTROVERSY

IN Constable country, the posters—'Say no to Buntings'—are up in every window. The *casus belli* is an imposing range of high-tech glasshouses which are now deemed a brownfield site by their owners and ripe for redevelopment as the Horkesley Park Heritage and Conservation Centre, aimed at attracting 750,000 people a year paying up to £8.50 each. On passing through the ticket gate, visitors will explore a groomed and themed world in a 66-acre country park offering a series of Constable country 'experiences', including encounters with Suffolk punches, farming of yesteryear, a virtual reality re-creation of deserted medieval settlements, an 'authentic Chinese Garden', an underground warren where children can observe nature (tame badgers, one wonders?) and, of course, the *raison d'être*, a host of places to eat and shop.

Never mind that two footpaths already cross the site of this proposed country park. They will either be closed, or if this cannot be done, they will be ingeniously underpassed so the punters do not realise they could be walking the same field for free. The kernel of it all is a much-trumpeted display of Constable pictures from the 'National and other galleries'. In reality, the idea of our esteemed National Gallery agreeing to lend some of its greatest and most popular British landscapes to an as yet unbuilt commercial gallery is absurd. Nor is the Victoria and Albert Museum likely to lend its substantial collection of Constables, which have recently been rehung to grand effect. The Tate does have Constables not currently on display, but says of the current proposal, 'We have neither endorsed it, nor entered into any negotiations about possible loans.'

The applicant is a long-standing local firm, Bunting & Sons, which has sold the bio-tech business it built up in the glasshouses. These are now empty as the operation has been moved elsewhere. The site is a convenient bite out of the Stour Valley Area of Natural Beauty (one of the smallest in the country), specially designated to protect this vulnerable stretch of country. Ironically, the application site was specifically

excluded because of the glasshouses, but clearly it should have been included to control this kind of redevelopment.

The enterprise is an attempt to commercially exploit the National Trust's brilliant success in neighbouring Dedham Vale. There, you can visit the spots where Constable painted two of his most famous canvases—*Flatford Mill* and *The Hay Wain*—and find a landscape miraculously unchanged. Suffolk punches are now being bred, after a great deal of effort, by the Suffolk Punch Trust near Woodbridge. It is a big assumption to think this success can be instantly repeated on a commercial basis. 'You won't get Suffolk Punches to breed in a peep show,' said one local caustically.

There is also an important element of local democracy. Farmers and businesses who see hard-earned livelihoods threatened by the new honeypot are solidly against it. Even the promoters accept that

the new jobs they will create must be offset by existing jobs that will be lost. This is cruel indeed for a small garden centre built up as a family business over the years, but suddenly put out of business by an incomer granted a giant bonanza in the form of lucrative planning permission to build in open countryside.

Important principles are at stake. First, should we build ersatz heritage when the real thing is on hand nearby? Secondly, should every stand of glasshouses become a brownfield site ripe for major development? Exceptions for glasshouses were usually granted on the grounds of agricultural need. They should not simply be transformed into development land, but, if appropriate, returned to agriculture. In May, the application comes

before Colchester Borough Council, which has wisely classed the application as a departure from the local plan. Constable country retains its beauty and tranquillity thanks to sustained earlier battles fought notably by the architect Raymond Erith, the Dedham Vale Society and the National Trust. The Stour Valley Action Group is fighting for an equally worthy cause. For more information, visit www.stourvalleyactiongroup.org.uk and www.horkesleypark.co.uk.

Left: Beach scene photograph by Alamy.

'Should we build ersatz heritage when the real thing is on hand nearby?'

