

Storm gathers over Constable 'theme park'

Villagers fear tourists will destroy rural tranquillity, reports **Caroline Davies**

THINK of Dedham Vale and bucolic images of the sinuous Stour river, lush meadows, slowly sailing barges and straining Suffolk Punch horses float languidly through the mind.

Immortalised by John Constable two centuries ago, the enduring beauty and tranquillity of this rural haven on the Essex-Suffolk border attracts many thousands of visitors each year.

But that's not enough – at least according to one local firm. What if you could bottle "essence of Constable's countryside", slickly repackage it and sell it to the punters? Now, that would really bring them in.

Which is what Buntings & Sons would like to do by opening a £20 million "heritage and conservation" centre, Horkesley Park, as a "celebration of the English countryside".

It would be a kind of Constable theme park, with an interactive "life and times" of the artist exhibition, an art gallery, a garden centre, a restaurant and cafe, a children's farm, country park, a Suffolk Punch breeding centre, Stour lighter barge workshop and much more. And it aims to attract three quarters of a million visitors every year.

With this news, the tranquillity has suddenly shattered in countless colour-washed cottages in small hamlets and villages nearby. Residents are mobilising under the umbrella of the Stour Valley Action Group, determined to thwart Buntings' planning application to Colchester council.

They don't want an "Alton Towers type" development, they say. They don't want the traffic on their narrow lanes and they don't want late-night parties at the centre's restaurants.

What's more, they claim, it's got no right to be linking itself to Constable in the first place, as he has no connection with the proposed

site – at present a redundant tomato nursery – at Great Horkesley near Colchester.

William Pavry, chairman of the "antis" action group, says that if Horkesley Park gets planning permission "it would totally destroy the very thing they are seeking to celebrate".

It is, he argues, "nothing more than a very large retail development masquerading as a heritage centre."

"There is no actual link of this site to Constable. The nearest place he painted is at least three miles away at Stoke by Nayland."

Besides, he adds, there is already a very good Constable centre at Flatford Mill, where the painter spent many years.

"True countrylovers don't want the countryside packaged up and delivered to them on a plate," he insists.

Fifteen farmers have formally objected, citing worries about congestion, especially during harvest time. The local MPs, Bernard Jenkin and Tim Yeo, have lent their support to the "antis".

"What on earth will this do to a beautiful and tranquil area?" wailed Mr Yeo in his local paper. "Even as a business this could kill the goose that lays the golden eggs."

More than 1,000 residents have written to the council in opposition and the National Trust is also opposed.

Buntings & Sons are no interlopers. Isaac Bunting, a renowned botanist, was born just a couple of miles from, and just seven years after, the acclaimed painter.

Mr Bunting set up an extremely profitable "nurserymen" business in Colchester – the embryo for the business still run by his descendants six generations on.

Today Buntings & Sons have nurseries, a food company, an olde-worlde pub and vineyard and a Suffolk Punch breeding centre.



Six of the best together at last

SIX of Constable's greatest landscapes – the "Stour series" of giant canvases by which he made his name – are to be hung together for the first time in almost two centuries, at Tate Britain this summer. The gallery said yesterday: "This may be a once-in-a-lifetime chance to see them together."

It has been so difficult to organise that it may never happen again, anywhere, ever." It took curators eight years to persuade owners in America, Britain and Spain to loan them. To add to the sense of occasion, the paintings will each be shown alongside their full-size sketches.

Stephen Bunting dismissed the arguments of the "antis" as "absurd" and pointed to the 600 people who had written in support, and the 462 new jobs his scheme would create in the area. "It's

ridiculous to say it has no connection with Constable," he said. "The lovely Stour valley is 50 miles long. No doubt Constable percolated out. We are not where he was born, but we are only a few

miles downriver." He pointed out that the buildings on the site would take up half the space of the glass-houses presently there. "We can't be ruining it, we're putting up less," he said. Although

he doesn't voice it, you get the impression he believes some of those opposed to his plans are commuters, who don't have to earn money locally. "At least half the 'Say no to the

heritage' signs I have seen are at properties where the occupants have been there less than three years," he said. **Editorial Comment: Page 25**