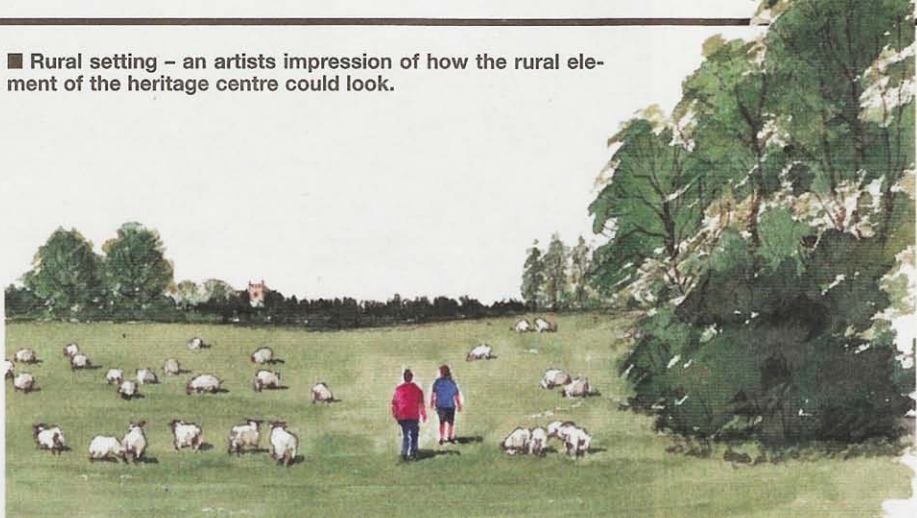




■ Lots to consider – Bill Watson, chairman of Little Horkesley Parish Council, ploughing through the Horkesley Park documents.

Picture: STEVE ARGENT (PLKRY-2)

■ Rural setting – an artists impression of how the rural element of the heritage centre could look.



Battle over £20m heritage scheme

BATTLE lines are being drawn up over plans for a £20 million heritage and conservation centre in the Dedham Vale.

Bunting and Sons has submitted a new application for a major tourism centre in Great Horkesley.

But the plans for Horkesley Park have evoked major concerns among villages and groups dedicated to protecting the Dedham Vale and Stour Valley.

Groups and parish councils were this week still looking through the application which runs to more than 1,000 pages.

But Charles Clover, chairman of the Dedham Vale Society, described the plans as a "massive threat to the Dedham Vale".

He said: "This is a massive scheme which we are in the process of studying."

"However, our initial reaction is that it is wholly disproportionate to the site, it is simply too big."

"It will have a major impact on the Dedham Vale, which is the smallest area of outstanding natural beauty in the country."

Mr Clover, who is an award-winning environmental journalist, said the proposed tourist figures of 485,000 a year were on a par with the number of visitors to Colchester Zoo, which was far closer to main roads.

He added: "This is in an area of outstanding natural beauty on a hill above Nayland which is a

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unique medieval settlement.

"The volume of traffic which would be generated by this development is too great."

"Total sales from the scheme have been put at £13.4 million a year – that is a retail development."

Mr Clover also disputes the suggestion of 155 jobs being created by the scheme.

He said: "I would imagine an equal number of jobs would be lost in garden centres and food outlets in the area because of this development."

A statement from the Stour Valley Action Group said it was also examining the application.

It added: "It appears Buntings have had a least 12 firms of consultants working on these plans during the past year, producing several thousand pages of detailed documents."

"It will take our team of experts and consultants some time before we can make a full and considered response."

"Stour Valley Action Group's fundamental concern is with protecting the very special character of the Stour valley."

"There is no doubt that this proposal, if it were to get through, would change this landscape for ever."

Bill Watson, chairman of Little Horkesley Parish Council, said: "There seems to be a number of

areas of great concern.

"The retail element seems to be completely dominant in the scheme which is supposed to be about countryside and nature."

However, the proposal has also generated support including from Sir Philip Dowson, past president of the Royal Academy of Art, and from Colchester MP Bob Russell.

Mr Russell acknowledged Horkesley Park was not in his constituency, but said a major tourist attraction would help the town's economy.

He said: "This is a £20 million investment at no cost to the public purse."

"At a time of a big downturn in the national economy and the loss of jobs, I believe the need for this project is now even greater than when it was first mooted."

North Essex MP Bernard Jenkin said: "This is a fresh application and the council will need to decide how different it is from the previous one and whether it complies with the strategic plan."

The centre, if agreed by Colchester Council, has been described as a "celebration of the English countryside" and would include an exhibition area chronicling farming through the ages, Colchester engineering history and interpretations of the landscape as well as a 250 seat lecture theatre, fine art gallery, gardens and wildlife observation area.

■ WHAT do you think? Write to us at Standard Letters, 43-44 North Hill, Colchester, CO1 1TZ or e-mail ecs.letters@nqe.com Alternatively, you can log on to our website essexcountystandards.co.uk to leave your views.

'There is no doubt that this proposal, if it were to get through, would change this landscape forever'