

Constable country's brush with controversy

Plans for a £20m 'theme park' development celebrating the painter's life and times face vehement opposition, writes **Caroline McGhie**

The sound of water escaping from mill dams... Willows, old rotten banks, slimy posts, and brickwork. I love such things. As long as I do paint I shall never cease to paint such places." Thus John Constable described his tiny pocket of pastoral England in a letter to a friend. He knew the magic of water meadows woven with willows and revelled in the conjunction of mill, towpath and barge. For the rest of the world he captured on canvas some of the most famous landscapes of them all – "Flatford Mill", "The Cornfield", "The Hay Wain".

Two and a half centuries on, and this valley where Suffolk borders Essex, still so clearly the raw material of Constable's tranquil canvases, is throbbing with controversy. The residents are London commuters now rather than the carters and haymakers of Constable's paintings but they are engaged in an epic struggle to preserve the vanishing world that they also love. They are faced with plans to create a large £20m development aimed at attracting 760,000 people annually to the Constable honeypot.

An enterprising local firm,

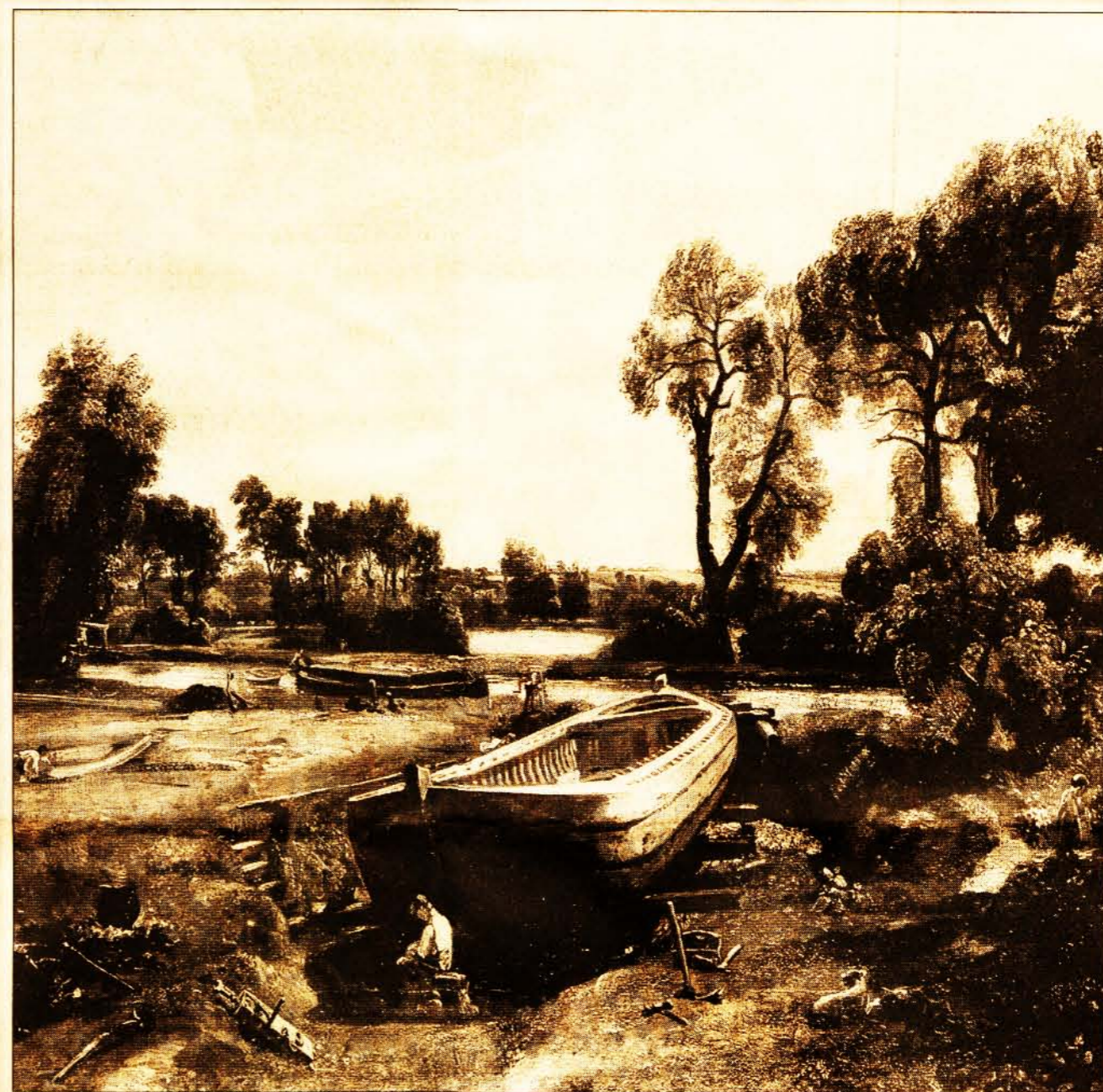
Bunting & Sons, has realised that the area is a greatly underperforming national asset, an old treasure kept for too long cobwebbed with British understatement. And who better to develop it than a family that already has acres of greenhouses, tree nurseries, a food company, a picturesque pub with Suffolk Punch horses and an old world vineyard, which raises large amounts of money locally for charity? Think of the potency of combining one of Britain's greatest artists with the twin national obsessions of food and gardening. Rumpelstiltskin couldn't do it better.

Hence the rather eclectic nature of the planning application for "Horkesley Park" – an interactive experience of "the life and times of John Constable", to include a Fine Art "outstation" of the National and other leading galleries, side by side with a Suffolk Punch breeding centre, a Farming Yesteryear exhibition, a Food Experience, gardens dedicated to the great plant collectors and an authentic Chinese garden.

The application is due for consideration next month. A copious environmental statement has been prepared that

says the tourism industry around Colchester has been "underpromoted", that it has a "lower visitor spend compared with other destinations" and it needs a "change of image". It lies, after all, within a two-hour-drive of 30m potential visitors. Though Colchester has strong connections with Emperor Claudius and Boudica, it is Constable who has iconic status around the world. He therefore is the best way to brand it.

In doughty English style, the recently formed Stour Valley Action Group has mounted a rearguard campaign to fight the giant from the valley. It asks why a centre that promises to celebrate the life and times of Constable should include a 100 sq ft garden centre, a restaurant and café with 1,125 covers, and expect 80 per cent of the turnover to come from retail sales. "If people are genuinely interested in the Stour Valley, they can access the real thing through the hundreds of miles of footpaths and bridleways that already exist. They don't need the countryside packaged up and served to them in a theme park," says the action group. The fear is that the development might



Constable's 'Boat Building near Flatford' – one of the famous landscapes he captured on canvas

Stapleton Collection/Corbis

destroy the very countryside it is supposed to celebrate.

Both local MPs, Bernard Jenkin and Tim Yeo (the FT Weekend golf columnist), have written to deputy prime minister John Prescott, asking him to "call in" the application to a public inquiry. Ronald Blythe, lay canon of St Edmundsbury Cathedral, patron of the Woodland Trust and well-known chronicler of English village life, has written to express his

"astonishment" at the application and the threat that it will disrupt "one of the most famed and beautiful of our riverscapes" and suck business away from existing gastro pubs. His gentle eyebrows shoot into his scalp at the idea of founding a Constable art gallery. "Where and how could they acquire the pictures to fill it? Who would curate it? Their plan is naive and catchpenny."

Georgina Harding, of the

Stour Valley Action Group, has turned art sleuth, tracking the whereabouts of Constable's paintings for sale or loan. So far she has not found a gallery of national standing that has been consulted by the developer.

The use of a famous name from the art world to brand a building is not new. Figures in the art world, too, are beginning to protest. William Feaver, who worked with Lucian Freud on the

recent Constable exhibition in Paris, says "the violation of Constable Country is something that strikes a chord far beyond East Anglia."

Also opposed is the National Trust, already custodian of the cradle of Constable's landscape near the proposed site of Horkesley Park. The valley is an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, the highest status of protection from development,

and the Trust's Flatford Mill already struggles to cope with 200,000 visitors a year, which is why the Trust in recent years has made efforts to promote understated green and educational tourism.

"This is completely out of scale with the area," writes Keith Turner, National Trust area manager for Essex, Suffolk and Hertfordshire, in his letter of protest to the council. "Far from diverting visitors away from the actual historic sites, this proposal could bring well over half a million new visitors a year, which would not only cause huge logistical problems but also destroy the rural tranquillity of the area."

John Davies, planning officer at Colchester, takes an impartial view: "How credible and genuine the heritage elements are is one of the issues. It is a difficult one... The economic director here would say the district will benefit from it but it remains a real hot potato, a conflict between growth and conservation, economics and protection of the countryside. The reaction of the tourism officer, which hasn't come in yet, will be key."

Stephen Bunting, whose plans these are, is not prepared to talk about his proposals for the art gallery, citing confidentiality, but he is sore at some of the reaction: "Constable is one of the most famous artists in the world of whom we should be proud. The suggestion that we shouldn't cater for people who want to see this is ridiculous. There has to be change. The Stour Valley is 117 sq miles and our site is just 117 acres. Think about it."

Constable painted a world that was already vanishing. Rural Britain has seen even more changes since – the loss of hundreds of thousands of agricultural jobs, and the closure of shops, pubs and post offices. Whether tourism is the tool that can save the countryside or cause it to vanish more quickly is at the heart of the great Constable debate that is just beginning.