

# PARK'S FATE PUT TO THE VOTE



■ Surveying the plans – Ben, Hector, Tom, Stephen, Daniel and Kate Bunting, on their estate **Picture: STEVE ARGENT** CO43634\_01

● **Verdict on £25m plans coming soon**  
 ● **10-year battle over site continues**

TEN years after the idea was first conceived, a battle royal is brewing over the proposed £25million Horkesley Park.

Buntings and Sons, a 191-year-old Colchester firm, said it would be a picturesque tourist attraction which would create more than 200 much-needed jobs.

Detractors, led by the Stour Valley Action Group, see it as little more than a shopping centre on the edge of the Dedham Vale Area of Natural Beauty and the Stour Valley.

On May 26, a little over ten years since the first of three planning applications for the park was submitted, Colchester Council's planning committee will finally decide which argument is stronger.

Since the council announced the date, there has been a flurry of activity by Bunting and Sons to convince people of the scheme's merits, and detractors to persuade Colchester Council's planners and councillors of their fears.

The application is to replace the existing and largely unused greenhouses with the main centre, car and coach parks.

The main centre would include a "food experience", described as a cross between a farmers' market and a food show, specialist garden centre exhibitions about

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countryside life and history, and a lecture theatre.

Behind it would lie a breeding centre for the famous Suffolk Punch horses and gardens replicated by award-winning gardeners.

In the middle of the 117-acre site lies the Church of All Saints and the 19th century home Broad-acres.

Under the plans, those buildings would be turned into a fine art gallery showcasing work of artists inspired by the views of the region, such as John Constable.

Stephen Bunting, a partner at Bunting and Sons said Horkesley Park would be a "celebration of the English countryside", which would appeal to Colchester's residents.

He said: "We've designed Horkesley Park so there's something for just about everybody."

"Colchester is reported to be the fastest growing town in England."

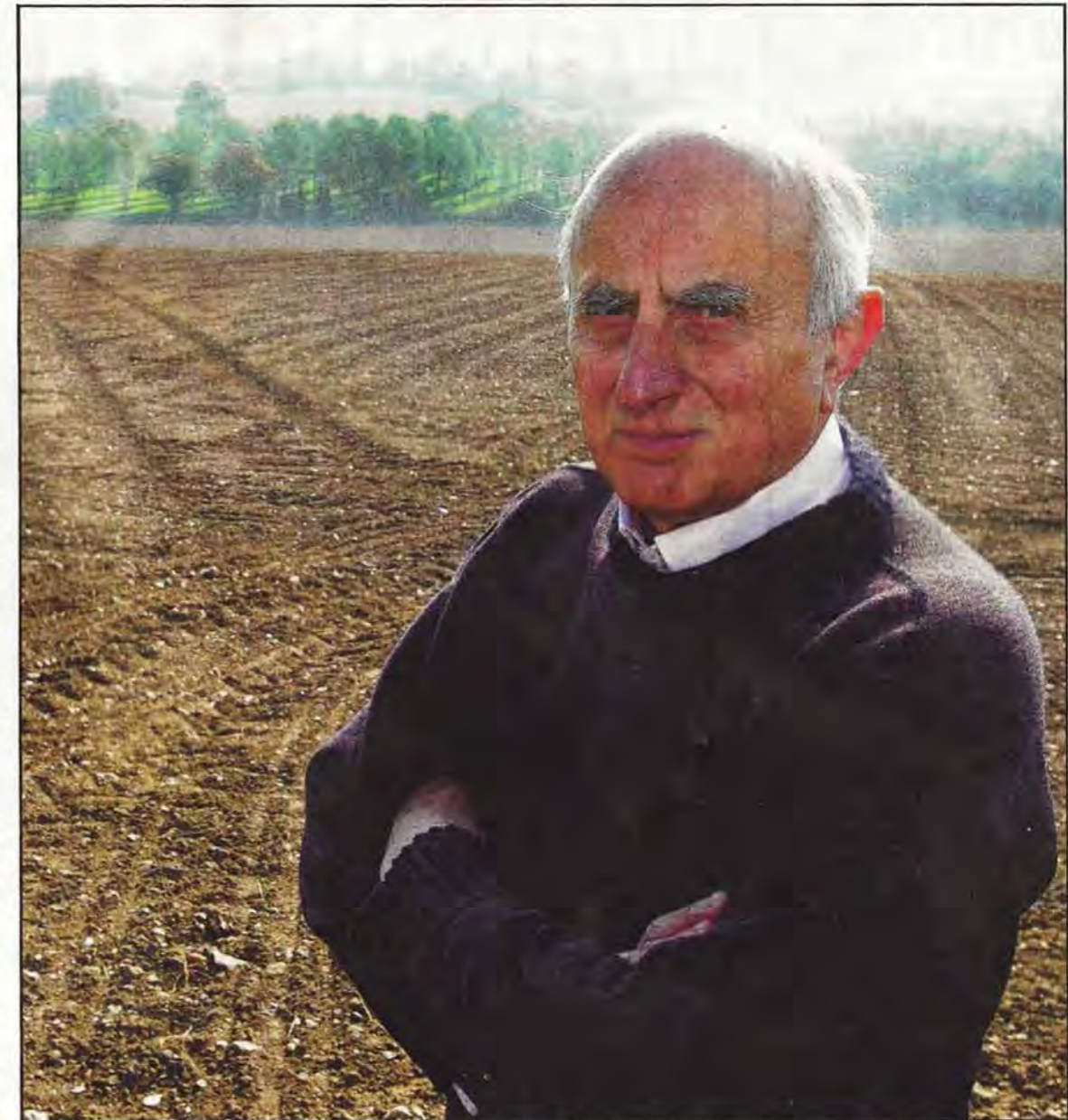
"They're building a huge amount of houses, and many of them have very little by way of gardens."

"This will provide a place for people to go to in the countryside and have a much better understanding of it."

Mr Bunting insisted many who opposed the park would not be swayed by reasoned argument for it.

He said: "There is a core element of people who just don't want Horkesley Park."

"Regardless of any of the professional bodies who have made it



■ No camp – Will Pavry, chairman of the Stour Valley Action Group, is opposed to the Horkesley Park development **Picture: NIGEL BROWN** CO44053\_49

## Lots of paperwork

### SUPPORT

WHEN Colchester Council's planning committee makes its decision, councillors will have to read through thousands of pages of research and opinions commissioned by Bunting and Sons, their supporters and opposition.

With the application, came a petition in support, generated at roadshows, with a total of 22,839 signatures.

The Stour Valley Action Group said people were signing a petition which gave few details about Horkesley Park, a claim hotly con-

tested by Bunting and Sons.

There were also thousands of letters both in support and objecting to the bid.

The action group's Will Pavry said: "We consider the support stated by the Buntings is considerably overstated."

"We believe the true measure of the opposition is from the fact that all the local parish councils are against it and there's a huge volume of letters from residents objecting to it for very valid reasons."

"We believe the opposition to it is overwhelming."

## 485,000 visitors on the road

### TRAFFIC

WITH up to 485,000 visitors a year, many fear the burden on the A134 and the surrounding roads could be intolerable.

Will Pavry said: "On the traffic side, we think the application is seriously flawed."

"People will come cross country from Stoke by Nayland or Eight Ash Green and West Bergholt in that direction."

Stephen Bunting believes with buses travelling to and from Colchester every 15 minutes and with changes to the

entrance junction, such fears are unfounded.

He said: "The traffic isn't going to be a problem – it's just nonsense for anybody to say it will be."

"We're on an A road. That road is designed to take traffic and Horkesley Park will be a small percentage of the traffic that will go on that road."

Mr Bunting also said highways authorities in Government and at Essex and Suffolk county councils had raised no concerns about increased traffic on minor roads.

## HABITATS FOR ANIMALS

### WILDLIFE

IN recent months, it has been claimed that Great Crested Newts, a protected species, could choose to make Horkesley Park their home.

An environmental impact assessment, carried out when the application was submitted in 2009, is now out of date because the bid has taken so long to determine.

Conservation groups, including Natural England,

have called for a fresh survey to be undertaken before the application is considered, but Bunting and Sons said it will do it after the application is determined.

Stephen Bunting said: "We want to have as many species in our site as we can possibly have."

"The buildings on Horkesley Park are only 2 per cent of the whole site, so we will make sure we enhance and create more habitats for protected species."

## Jobs boost to the area

### JOBS AND RETAIL

BUNTING and Sons say the park will create 226 jobs, including 155 full-time ones, and attract about 485,000 visitors a year.

If the estimates are realistic, the park would be competing with Colchester Zoo for the title of the top tourist attraction in the borough.

However, the Stour Valley Action Group and its supporters are sceptical of this promise, and have raised fears of what will happen if the tourist attraction becomes a white elephant.

Will Pavry said: "We don't think the proposed project is viable, and we

don't think their claims of job creation is deliverable." The action group and others have also criticised the applicants for focusing on shops in attempts to make a profit.

Stephen Bunting is unapologetic. He said: "Bunting and Sons is the oldest family-owned and run business in Colchester. We're experienced in most of the elements that would be involved in Horkesley Park."

"In order to have a lot of heritage and wildlife, things which don't make any money, they have to be supported with some elements which make money."

"It'll make a reasonable percent age return sufficient to be viable."

“This will provide a place for people to go to in the countryside and have a better understanding of it

### BERNARD JENKIN, MP FOR HARWICH & NORTH ESSEX

"I appreciate the Buntings have tried to address all the objections to previous versions of this planning application, but they are still proposing to attract the same number of visitors as Colchester Zoo."

"This will have a huge impact on the specially-designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. It will generate increased traffic on the surrounding roads and through local villages – there is no other way to get to Great Horkesley."

"And it will only be viable if three quarters of the income generated is from retail sales."

### BOB RUSSELL, MP FOR COLCHESTER

"It's not in my constituency, but in my opinion it'll have economic benefits for my constituents, some of whom will obtain jobs there. I think it'll be an additional tourist attraction for the Colchester area."

"I believe it will be an economic generator and provide jobs. This is a family firm which has existed in the Colchester area for nearly 200 years, and I think that this project shows vision."

**CHARLES ALDOUS, CHAIRMAN OF THE COLNE STOUR COUNTRYSIDE ASSOCIATION**  
 "The Dedham Vale must be

preserved for future generations as a truly working agricultural valley. It must be protected as such from all unnecessary development, and not transposed into a charged for theme park and retail centre."

### NATURAL ENGLAND

"We have been consistent in our message. It may be possible for enough avoidance and mitigation measures to be included within the application, such that it doesn't have a detrimental effect on Dedham Vale, but that we have not yet seen the evidence of this and will maintain an objection to the proposals until we do."

quite clear there's not a problem, they're going to say the same thing."

The Stour Valley Action Group has staunchly opposed the park for a decade.

Its members are certain their fears are well grounded, and believe they have the backing of thousands of residents living in the surrounding villages.

Chairman Will Pavry said: "As far as we're concerned, the situation hasn't changed."

"The Buntings have done everything they can to persuade us that black is white."

"Essentially, it's a retail development, with 75 per cent of revenue coming from retail, stuck on the edge of the Dedham Vale area of natural beauty."

The latest application, submitted in February 2009, follows two previous bids, in 2001 and 2005, which were both withdrawn by the applicant.

**HAVE YOUR SAY**  
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