

Theme park proposal makes waves in Constable country

Backers say heritage centre will bring jobs

Opponents warn of crowds and gridlock

James Meikle

Plans for a £20m tourist attraction in the valley that inspired John Constable have provoked accusations that a quiet slice of English countryside is about to fall victim to theme-park tourism.

Opponents fear the development will ruin a small scale rural corner used to looking after itself, while supporters argue it will bring the jobs and money needed to save it.

The controversy over the future of a redundant tomato nursery raises important questions about how to protect rural life if agriculture and horticulture really have had their day, meaning the debate is about to leap from the gentle Stour Valley on the Essex-Suffolk border on to a national canvas.

The Buntings, a local business family, want to transform the nursery, along with more recently acquired property, into a "heritage and conservation centre" between the villages of Great and Little Horkesley to the north of Colchester.

Horkesley Park promises "an interactive interpretation experience" of the life and times of Constable, a fine art "outstation" in an existing Regency villa, including works of Constable and other local painters, historic gardens to reflect the period of the great plant collectors from 1750-1850, an authentic Chinese garden, a breeding centre for the threatened Suffolk Punch heavy horses, and exhibitions about historic farming methods and foods

of the region. Boat building, rustic play areas, a restaurant and other catering points with 1,125 covers, a garden centre and "informal recreation" are planned, as well as river journeys on old Stour lighters, or barges, nearby.

The scheme will be considered by Colchester council's planning committee later this month. Whatever the verdict, the office of the deputy prime minister, John Prescott, seems certain soon to be involved

While the hay wains of Constable's era have long gone, the pretty, half-timbered, white, pink, yellow or ochre buildings remain, many bordering narrow roads that opponents say will be swamped by visitors leaving the attraction to travel on to the Constable honeypots of Dedham and Flatford, which already attract 200,000 visitors a year.

Protesters argue that rural experiences should not be packaged when the valley already offers the real thing. "People don't like being told what is good for them in management of the countryside," said Will Pavry, chairman of the Stour Valley Action Group. He suggested that Stephen Bunting, senior partner in the business,



The river Stour at Dedham, scene of Constable's painting *The Hay Wain*

"is effectively saying, because he has deep roots in Colchester he is the one to show us the way".

Mr Pavry said opposition was not just from incomers, citing a letter from local farmers raising fears about threats to small local businesses. "It is effectively a retail development masquerading as a heritage centre," he said, contesting claims that the development would provide 182 full-time jobs and help to create a further 280. As for the art centre: "Mr Bunting may have sources of paintings we don't know about, but our understanding is he has no access to Constables from major galleries."

Ronald Blythe, the writer and chronicler of rural life, who lives up the valley, also questioned the Constable plan. "Where and how could they acquire the pictures to fill it? Their plan is naive and catchpenny," he said in a letter to Colchester council.

Keith Turner, area manager of the National Trust, said: "What sets Dedham Vale apart from other river valleys is the assemblage of all aspects of the lowland English countryside which are considered quintessentially important. It is not just that these elements exist in close juxtaposition, it is that they still exist in a recognisable form 150 years after Constable painted them."

The proposal also has supporters. Ewan Dodds, past president of the local chamber of commerce, calls it "hugely attractive". Others do not want to go public.

Stephen Bunting said his centre might relieve pressure on the valley's existing honeypots. "If you have an all weather centre, available at all times of the year, it is a bonus, isn't it?" On the Constables: "I am not going to make it public as to who we are dealing with. We are subject to confidentiality ... we can't fill the place up with Constables, but we shall be able to give an overview of artists of the area."

