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To: Sue.jackson@colchester.gov.uk, adrian.pritchard@colchester.gov.uk

Dear Ms Jackson and Mr Pritchard

Over the last few weeks I have done extensive research into the possibility of the Buntings having genuine Constables to show in the Chantry Gallery. I thought it might be helpful to give you my summary. You will already have received many of these opinions independently.

It does appear that in the very early days Stephen Bunting spoke to at least two local people with knowledge of Constable and galleries: Hugh Belsey (then curator at Gainsborough's House) and Penelope Hughes-Stanton, the two of whom now run the Constable Trust in Dedham which finances the display of the Constable Ascension at Dedham church and puts on annual lectures. He also at some time around then had some form of communication with Tate Britain. Nothing came of it. Tate Director Stephen Deuchar wrote to me in 2005 confirming Tate was not involved in HP project in any way, did not endorse it and had never entered into any negotiations about possible loans. The new Tate director, Penelope Curtis has recently written to me to reiterate that *'Tate has no connection with the project'*.

Anne Lyles, now an independent curator and a leading Constable art expert, had knowledge of the early stages. She tells me *'I do of course remember the Bunting/Horkesley Park proposal well, and I have to say I'm very surprised that a further proposal is being put to the council.'* She further says, *'I myself have never understood how the gallery side of the operation would sit or function alongside the rest of the commercial venture, especially if it's unable to secure the loans that might make it viable.'* Anne Lyles also states that she recalls that the V&A (the one other possible national source of Constables) were reluctant to lend, as they told me when I spoke to them years ago, saying that what works they did not have on display were too fragile for transportation.

So we must assume that **national collections** are out. Interestingly, whereas earlier HP proposal documents spoke of works at The Chantry coming from 'national' collections, the 2012 one uses only the word 'leading' collections.

As for leading **local collections**, Philip Wise, collections and curatorial manager at Ipswich and Colchester museums, tells us that *'no approach, either formally or informally, has been made by the developer of the Stour Valley Visitor Centre, or their agents, to Colchester and Ipswich Museum Service regarding the possible loan of Constable paintings.'*

So, private collections. Harder to get absolute answers on this, but as for 'leading collections' I have these comments:

'To the best of my knowledge, no private owner would be willing to support the scheme on a meaningful scale, if at all.' From Conal Shields, advisor to Lord Thomson, owner of the world's largest collection of Constables; and he is supported by Lord Thomson in this statement.

'Having looked at Buntings Horkesley Park website there is no way that any of the institutions with Constable holdings would lend works and can't imagine any private collections lending either.' Peter Bower, authenticator of Constable works on paper for both Sotheby's and Christie's, co-curator (with Conal Shields) of 2015 RA Constable exhibition

'I have enquired extensively amongst friends and acquaintances in the art trade and museum world and no-one has been able to identify where these putative Constable paintings may originate.' Professor Michael Rosenthal, author of various works on Constable

'I can state with absolute certainty that there is no realistic possibility of any national institution lending works by Constable to the proposed gallery. Nor is there any likelihood of private owners -most of them known to me- lending either.' William Feaver, writer and art critic, co-curator (with Lucian Freud) of 2002 Constable show at the Louvre

There remains the possibility of **Buntings having their own collection**. Robin Duthy and others have supplied you with figures concerning the costs of genuine Constables of quality worthy of display (giving us potential sums which might more than double the cost of the whole Horkesley Park development). Hugh Belsey has consulted with Anne Lyles and Peter Bower and says *'it seems certain that [the Buntings] own no significant works that would be worthy of a stand alone exhibition.'*

And if the Buntings did possess any works, why wouldn't they tell us? What better advertisement could they have for their project?

A number of the experts I have spoken to have pointed out that there are a vast number of Not-Constables in circulation - not necessarily deliberate fakes but misattributed, often contemporary, paintings. It is of course entirely possible that the innocent Bunting family have been deceived by some wicked dealer or puffed-up collector somewhere. Failing that, William Feaver, having read the Buntings' puff for the Chantry gallery, says to me that 'the weasel safety clause for them is 'and his contemporaries' plus local artists' - in other words, that they might try to get by with contemporary works *after* Constable rather than *by* Constable which might be much more readily obtained.

A few circumstantial points

The summary of the proposal on 2012 HP application form makes mention of 'Art and Craft Studios (The "Chantry")' but no gallery. Of course this summary has to be very brief to fit in the box, but wouldn't they make more of something that was so potentially important and that represented such a large investment?

The proposal document says the following about the gallery, little more:

"The creation of an art gallery within the Dedham Vale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, to display original paintings by John Constable and other artists of the region in or near to the area in which they were painted, will represent a major coup for the area. When The Chantry has been adapted and is in use for hanging fine art, it will qualify as an outstation for leading galleries and private collections to enable great works to be exhibited."

In the proposal document and on the HP website, the gallery comes low in the list of Key Features: 39th out of 46 on the website.

The Chantry building was for sale until shortly before the 2012 application was submitted - so was it included only because Buntings had failed to sell it?

Buntings have had ample opportunity to destroy all this damaging doubt and tell us about their pictures. The past 2 weeks have seen articles in both ECS and EADT with the following headlines, '*We will show Constables...but art critic says there is no realistic possibility*' and '*Constable paintings pledge for centre, Company insists it will display original artworks*' yet it would appear that Bunting partners did not make themselves available to journalists for direct comment and only resubmitted to them general statements by email.

Conclusion

It would appear that the Constable gallery only really came into play in consideration of the current application following the crucial meeting between the Buntings and their agent and yourselves and Britton McGrath. The BMA report had failed to take notice of the proposed gallery (that was so low in the list of features) and likewise of the Chinese Garden. A verbal presentation was made on this subject, and BMA were asked to write their Supplementary Report on the new but ill-defined criteria of 'regional significance'. It is important to note how carefully BMA qualify their comments here, emphasising the necessity for the gallery to display at least a few genuine Constable paintings and delivering to a high quality.

Hugh Belsey further states '*Successful new gallery developments that exhibit historic art, for instance the Towner at Eastbourne and the Hepworth at Wakefield, have been built to rehouse significant collections that already exist. Gallery spaces with no collections such as Firstsite in Colchester are initiatives of the Arts Council but the planned gallery in Horkesley is too indistinct to achieve any success. Its ambition is far removed from its ability to deliver.*'

I would suggest that the Constables in The Chantry Gallery have been a vague idea since the beginning of the project, but never fully developed. They have taken on a particular significance only as a result of the BMA report - becoming a figleaf or rather a fake figleaf (as one of the experts suggested) not just for the Horkesley Park proposal but to cover up what to me is an inexplicable and undemocratic political intention to approve the application.

Yours sincerely

Georgina Harding