

NEWSFLASH

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WHO OWNS CONSTABLE'S COUNTRY?



Professor Michael Rosenthal of Warwick University delivered a hard-hitting lecture in aid of the Stour Valley Action Group on Thursday evening to a packed Nayland Village Hall. Well over 200 people attended, including members of the Bunting family and some of their expert advisors from the recent exhibitions in Colchester, which Professor Rosenthal had made a point of attending last week in preparation for his lecture.

There was no doubt as to the purpose of the lecture. The event organiser, Kate Charlton-Jones, made a brief introduction re-stating, for any who did not know, the threat to the Stour Valley from Bunting and Sons' proposed development, the 'Horkesley Park Heritage and Conservation Centre'. She said that though Buntings appear to have listened to the public and have made some modifications to elements of their previous plans, these do not begin to address the overwhelming problems, which are the commercial exploitation and transformation of a living rural landscape, and the impact of what is still expected to be more than half a million visitors on an already overstretched and dangerous road network.

Professor Rosenthal's lecture moved from the specifics of Constable's painting to the broader issue of so-called 'heritage', with examples from Stratford on Avon and even as far afield as Australia. He pointed out first how Constable has nothing to do with Great Horkesley and how narrowly 'Constable Country' is focused on the Dedham area. He also reminded any who had been unaware or forgotten it, of the special beauty of the Stour Valley as recorded by Constable: the beauty that lies in the artist's observation of the working agricultural landscape, and the harmony that has till now existed here between human structures such as churches, cottages and gardens, and the land about them. He reminded us also how Constable's art has defined Englishness, giving this landscape a special national significance.



He continued with a survey of cultural tourism, comparing the sensitive way in which, up till now, Constable's Dedham Vale has been cared for, with some horrifying and absurd examples of brazen commercialisation in Shakespeare's Stratford on Avon, close to which he lives. Stratford, he said, represented the 'quintessentially Blairite heritage experience'. The word 'heritage' in this day had come to mean something that was fake, dishonest, vacuous, and to do with retail, moneymaking and 'a world that never was.'

He then drew attention to the careful work of the Dedham Vale and Stour Valley Project to preserve the fragile ecology of the valley and yet to make it possible for it to be enjoyed by the 250,000 visitors who already come to it each year.

Finally he answered the question posed by the lecture title, *Who Owns Constable's Country?* His answer was 'Nobody, of course. But we are all its custodians, and with custodianship goes a duty to reserve and to maintain, not to initiate terminal change.'

His listeners were left to draw their own conclusions about the Horkesley Park heritage experience.