

SWEET & STOUR

ANGER in Essex over plans for the Horkesley Park “heritage centre” – a 100,000 sq ft garden centre with 1,125-seat café in Constable country which claims as its prime objectives the celebration of the English countryside and the work of the Nation’s Favourite Painter.

There won’t be any original Constables for the projected 750,000 annual visitors to peruse, but there will be plenty of interactive screens, ye olde farming exhibits and plenty of, er, traditional retail opportunities.

Objections to the planning application, which goes before Colchester Borough Council next month, have concentrated on the increase in traffic and the packaging and commercialisation of Essex’s only area of outstanding natural beauty. Many are puzzled why, in this “celebration” of Englishness, it was necessary to include a classical Chinese garden in the style of the Qing dynasty. Shurely not necessary to an appreciation of the landscape that inspired “Flatford Mill” and “The Haywain”?

All is revealed in a letter from Lord Hanningfield, Tory leader of Essex County Council, to the chairman of the Stour Valley Action Group, which opposes the scheme. The Chinese garden, he writes, was included at the request of the county council, which wishes to strengthen trading relations with China in general and Jiangsu Province in particular, with which ECC has signed a “memorandum of agreement”.

Perhaps if “The Cornfield” was renamed “The Rice Paddy” everyone would be happy.