

# Art historian gives heritage site warning

PLANS for a 117-acre heritage and conservation centre could cause environmental damage, an expert on artist John Constable has warned.

Professor Michael Rosenthal of Warwick University's art history department was speaking after his lecture on *Who Owns Constable's Country?* on Thursday.

Nayland village hall was packed for the first fund-raising event organised by the Stour Valley Action Group (SVAG) in association with Nayland and Wissington Conservation Society.

They are firmly opposed to plans by Bunting & Sons to create the Horkesley Park centre on the site of its redundant glasshouses at Great Horkesley.

One of the main features will be a fine art gallery "showing works of Constable and other great artists from the region". Others include a Suffolk Punch breeding centre, exhibitions, craft workshops, play areas, a country park and specialist garden centre.

Born and brought up in Great Horkesley, Professor Rosenthal said he could see no point in the

by Pat Bray

project. "I can't imagine the people of north Essex and south Suffolk saying 'what we need is a Constable theme park'," he said. "Having studied the plans, I think the centre has got the potential to create a lot of environmental damage."

In his lecture he pointed out Constable country was quite a small area centred on Dedham, East Bergholt and Flatford. Any connection between John Constable and Great Horkesley was "totally spurious", he said.

He said the special beauty of the Stour Valley as recorded by Constable lay in his observation of the working agricultural landscape. His art defined Englishness, giving that countryside a special national significance.

Comparing the sensitive way the Dedham Vale had been cared for with the brazen commercialisation of Stratford-upon-Avon, close to where he lives, he declared Stratford represented the "quintessentially Blairite heritage experience". In other words he said it was fake, vacuous, to do with retail, moneymaking and "a world that never was".

"Who owns Constable's country? The answer is nobody. All we can be is custodians and that means we have to treat it with the utmost care," he said.

SVAG's Kate Charlton-Jones who arranged the lecture, said: "Buntings appear to have listened to comments and have scaled down their plans with more sympathetic buildings, a reduced retail element and an increased educational facility.

"But there are still colossal problems. Traffic numbers would still be huge with the anticipated 500,000 visitors a year."

Senior partner Stephen Bunting, who attended the lecture, said: "I'm sure Professor Rosenthal will want to accept the invitation he has had to visit us and study our proposals at first hand.

"There's really no value in offering opinions with no basis in evidence.

"If he does, he will discover much to reassure him about the non-commercialisation of our unique heritage and the sustainable good management of the Stour Valley as a precious landscape resource."

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