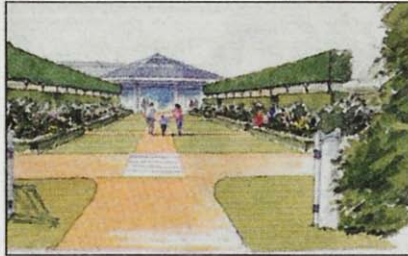


# Renewed plan for heritage centre

by Pat Bray



**Artist's view ... Horkesley Park Heritage and Conservation Centre proposals. Above is part of the southern garden and adjoining pathway leading to the entrance rotunda.**

UPDATED plans for an ambitious £20 million heritage and conservation centre have failed to convince objectors concerned about the impact on the character of the Stour Valley and surrounding villages.

Long-established family partnership Bunting and Sons says Horkesley Park, based on a 117-acre site off the A134, at Great Horkesley, will be “a celebration of the English countryside” with themes of agriculture, food, art and culture, the countryside and conservation.

Its previous application in 2005 was withdrawn for further adjustments and was followed in 2007 by a series of consultations and roadshows. New plans were submitted to Colchester Borough Council last week.

The project, just within the Dedham Vale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, will include a Suffolk Punch horse breeding centre, fine art gallery, specialist garden centre, restoration and conservation projects, exhibitions, trails around parklands and woods, fishing lakes, an adventure play area, an underground warren with wildlife displays and a farm barn.

The main building, replacing redundant glasshouses in one corner of the site, will contain elements that interconnect with the rest of Horkesley Park. It will house a Stour Valley walkway, a 250-seat lecture theatre, a food experience, a restoration workshop employing traditional skills and an inter-

pretation of the life and times of John Constable. Buntings says 226 full and part-time jobs will be created and estimated visitor numbers have been reduced to about 485,000 annually.

It points out a petition with more than 22,000 signatories shows overwhelming support for the proposals which will create a “sustainable tourism attraction dedicated to East Anglia’s agricultural and cultural heritage”.

Main objector, the Great Horkesley-based Stour Valley Action Group, said in a statement: “There is no doubt that this proposal, if it were to get through, would change this landscape forever.

“SVAG’s fundamental concern is with protecting the very special character of the Stour Valley, a landscape of national importance. We need to consider the potential impact of this new Horkesley Park proposal on the valley

and surrounding villages, the impact of visitor numbers and traffic, particularly the effect of the introduction of a large-scale out-of-town retail enterprise on a rural site, contrary to existing planning guidelines.

“It will take our team of experts and consultants some time to examine several thousand pages of detailed documents in detail before we can make a full and considered response.”

John Alexander, chairman of Nayland-with-Wissington Conservation Society, commented: “The society will give thorough consideration to the latest planning application and pay particular regard to the changes.

“However, we still question the need for such a major development within an AONB when many of the exhibits, features and concepts can already be seen nearby in their natural, historic location and environment.

“While new jobs may be created, we are concerned about any adverse impact on local businesses. Increased traffic on surrounding roads is a particular concern. The A134 close by is notoriously dangerous and the surrounding lanes are barely adequate in places for present traffic levels.”

A partner in the family firm, Kate Bunting said: “We think it’s a great scheme. Horkesley Park will be an asset for the community and an amenity for local people.

“It will draw visitors to the area who will have open access to the countryside. Any change creates concern but this is a huge country park which doesn’t ruin any part of the countryside.”