

## The Chantry Gallery: Expert Opinion

My name is Hugh Belsey and for twenty-three years I was Curator of Gainsborough's House in Sudbury. My achievements there included forming a collection of the artist's work and I was awarded an MBE in 2004. For ten years I served on the Council of the Association of Independent Museums and I was also closely associated with the Association of Suffolk Museums. Since I left Gainsborough's House I teach a Museum Course at the University of Buckingham and I am also writing the definitive catalogue of the portraits by Thomas Gainsborough for Yale University Press, a project that is supported by the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art. I also write reviews, exhibition catalogues, advise auction houses, dealers and private collections and lecture throughout the world. I was a founder member of the Constable Trust, and I presently serve as its Chairman.

Museums are founded, generally under the auspices of a charity, for the public good. They struggle financially and use many resources to identify funding to support their activities. Presently there is much evidence that the funding for museums in Suffolk and Essex is dwindling with the recent tightening of public funding. I know of no art museum in this country that is funded privately and that operates outside the long-term umbrella of charitable status. I do not understand why the project at Great Horkesley should be the exception.

The Great Horkesley project owns The Chantry and it has no other specialist equipment to support its use as a museum. It will require security, climatic controls, and some modifications to assist public access. All of these items are required for any venue to meet the requirements of Registration (the industry standard administered by the Arts Council). Furthermore despite the idea of making the house into an art gallery space some ten years ago, there has been no effort to form a collection. Without a collection — which requires expertise and resources to create — this 'private museum' will lack credibility in negotiating loans and accessing curatorial expertise. There are few alternatives. Lesser local artists are poorly represented in museum collections and displays of their work would have to rely on the co-operation of private collectors and of course lesser works would generate less public interest. This would make the proposed Life and Times of John Constable display pointless. Besides, this proposed display, comprising perhaps text panels video presentation would be placed in a house far from the sites generally associated with the artist, and would duplicate the one that is already available at Flatford Mill.

The gallery has been identified as a 'key driver' for the Horkesley Park visitor numbers, estimated by the Appellant at 315,000 a year, by BMA

at 150,000. In my view the gallery's contribution even to the lesser of these figures is hugely inflated. Gainsborough's House in Sudbury has about 25,000 visitors per annum and over six different venues operated by Colchester and Ipswich Museums, with collections ranging from archaeology to fine art, natural history to clocks, there are 200,000 visitors. The Horkesley figures do not appear to be based on any sound comparisons. In the past many feasibility reports for museums have given unrealistic visitor figures which have proved to be totally groundless.

Museums are under threat with falling visitor figures and shrinking resources. There is no evidence that Bunting and Sons are willing to provide the resources that such a project needs, no evidence that they have access to the exhibits that they hope to display and no evidence that this enterprise will achieve the visitor numbers that they hope to attract. This proposal appears to be a sugared pill to help planners accept the commercial enterprise that they are planning. Further more with the hideous problems that have surrounded the Firstsite for so many years, I am not surprised that the Colchester Borough Council rejected the flawed Horkesley scheme when it came before them in February 2013 and I cannot believe that the Inspector will give it any credibility at Appeal.

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