

APPENDIX TP/SVAG1.3

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Countryside Surveys

THE DEDHAM VALE LANDSCAPE

An Area of
Outstanding Natural Beauty

COUNTRYSIDE
COMMISSION

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If asked to describe the English countryside to someone who has never visited these shores many people's thoughts might first turn to green pastures, with grazing cows and sheep, and a river meandering lazily amid stout but graceful willows. They might elude to leafy lanes, fine oaks and magnificent elms and to a cornfield at harvest. Such pictures were immortalised for us by John Constable painting in the Dedham Vale 200 years ago, and fascinatingly persist in our nation's mind's eye as archetypal English lowland landscape — familiar, idyllic images we feel comfortable with and which can be bought from many a gift shop.


Constable painted what he saw, and he was in fact depicting a working, even an industrial landscape as barges plied the canalised River Stour and farming required the toil of intensive labour. As an artist he observed and captured the subtle qualities and inherent beauty of these everyday scenes of his home.

We still seek those peaceful scenes today, by the coachload. Whilst once they were common such familiar 'rural charm' is now scarce, although astonishingly parts of Dedham Vale have changed little since Constable's time. This has been aided by constructive planning policies that followed designation of the Vale as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in 1970, and by effective countryside management and, not least, by local commitment. At the time of designation, housing development threatened to destroy the area's much loved character and new agricultural requirements equally posed a

threat to the valley pastures, marshes, hedges and trees. Now the great numbers of visitors attracted to the Vale could spoil the very thing they come to see.

The Dedham Vale landscape celebrates a landscape of national significance whose cultural associations contributed to its approval as an AONB. The landscape continues to inspire artists and writers and it is these enduring links that heighten our understanding of its special qualities and its integrity. Together with identifying today's pressures for change this study will, we hope, guide the policies needed to safeguard an area that holds such a valued place in our heritage.

The Countryside Commission very much hopes this publication will be read and enjoyed by residents, visitors, decision makers, and anyone with an interest in landscape and art giving us all a better appreciation of the Vale's distinctive if undramatic countryside. This awareness is vital if we wish to see the right decisions taken to ensure that the Dedham Vale remains beautiful and continues not only to be admired but to be worked in and lived in, and enjoyed by many.



RICHARD SIMMONDS
Chairman
Countryside Commission

beauty'. There are often a combination of factors that give an area its distinctive character and beauty, and thus make it outstanding. Section 52(3) of the Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981 states that: "the natural beauty of any land shall be construed as including references to the conservation of its flora, fauna and geological and physiographical features". The Countryside Commission acknowledges that natural beauty cannot simply be defined as the visual appearance of the countryside alone, but needs to include factors such as landform, vegetation, man-made features, aesthetics and historic and cultural associations. The rarity and representativeness of a landscape relative to those in other areas of the country is also of importance, as is its unique 'sense of place', its accessibility and the public perception of it.



Farm cart, sketch by John Nash.

An unspoilt English lowland landscape

The AONB is important because of its unspoilt rural character. It has remained remarkably free from the intrusion of modern development and, to date, from the pressures of tourist activity away from the honeypot sites. Rich agricultural landscapes and woods are complemented by the consistent use of local building materials and colours in the villages and isolated cottages.

This visual harmony gives the AONB its strong sense of unity, which is vital to its aesthetic appeal and sense of place. Within this overall character, the landscape is greatly enhanced by rich contrasts in scenery and characteristic details.

Although the Dedham and Flatford Mill area is most popular with visitors, other parts of the AONB are of equally good landscape quality, their apparent lack of popularity owing more to low public awareness than to any inherent shortcomings. Ironically, it is the absence of public awareness and pressure that has preserved much of the charm of the Vale, contributing to its timeless, quiet and undiscovered character.

Historic connection and public consensus

There is a strong consensus that traditional landscapes tend to retain their appeal with the public — as well as nature conservationists — in preference to modern, intensively farmed agricultural landscapes. Lush hedgerows, small fields, flower-rich meadows, pollarded willows, tangles of riverside vegetation, water-filled ditches, reed beds and similar features are preferred to vast sweeps of featureless arable fields. The existence of many such traditional landscape features within the

AONB, and the designation of the ESA, ensures a strong connection remains with history and traditional land management.

Old, and largely unspoilt villages, ancient lanes, mills, colourful isolated cottages and the relative absence of intrusive modern development reinforces the character and quality of Dedham Vale. In the landscape can be discovered many layers of history, from the medieval to the present, each adding visual richness and a link with the past.

It seems likely that people will continue to visit Dedham Vale in increasing numbers. Improved communications and the public's concern for, and interest in, the natural environment and heritage will draw people in search of Constable's landscape and surrounding areas of peaceful, pastoral countryside. Their interest is further confirmed by the number of Constable's tranquil scenes which outnumber all other popular reproductions from paintings to chocolate boxes, trays and puzzles.

A vision for the future

In a world where natural and cultural landscapes are being lost at an unprecedented rate, remaining areas where the rural idyll and people's pastoral roots can still be discovered are profoundly important. The connection of one of Britain's best loved painters with Dedham Vale serves to focus attention on such a vision for the future, and gives the area added interest and value.

The human race is characterised by its unquenching thirst for new ideas, change and development, but people equally value, to an increasing extent, the continuity and integrity to be found in their landscape heritage, which connects them to nature and their