

Why we need a Horkesley heritage centre

Stephen Bunting, a partner of Bunting and Sons, of Westwood Park, Little Horkesley, puts forward his case for the Horkesley Park Heritage and Conservation Centre

THE Horkesley Park Heritage and Conservation Centre scheme is regarded by many as one of the most important of its type ever to be submitted to the Colchester Borough Council for planning approval.

In essence it represents a £20 million-plus investment proposal to create (in an excellent location within Colchester borough, next to the A134 just a few miles north of the proposed A12 junction to which it will link directly) a unique and vibrant all-weather heritage and conservation centre, providing for all ages and interests, from education to recreation.

If planning permission is granted without too much delay, Horkesley Park will be created for opening to the general public in early 2009. The existing glasshouses and other buildings amounting to just over 5.3 acres on our nursery site will all be demolished to make way for the new heritage and conservation centre buildings, amounting to

just over 2.7 acres (a reduction of 47 per cent of the existing area) including the Suffolk Punch Breeding Centre and the Farm Barn.

None of these buildings are in the AONB and the only building in the country park, which is in the AONB, will be "underground". The total footprint area of the new buildings above ground will be just over 2.3 per cent of the 117 acres of Horkesley Park which, put in perspective, is just over 0.15 per cent of the 117 square miles of the Stour Valley. Coincidentally, one acre for each square mile.

When operational, Horkesley Park will provide, on a sustainable basis, substantial benefits for local people and businesses, as well as visitors to the region, including the equivalent of about 460 new full-time jobs.

In respect of the council's request, extensive environmental impact assessments and other studies were undertaken during the last two years by national specialists to cover a wide range of topics and the scheme was vigorously tested in terms of its potential environmental and other impacts, its sustainability and its compatibility with planning policy. The results of the assessments show a raft of potential benefits with no significant adverse affects.

A technical summary of the assessments is available from the planning department of Colchester Council, and a fact sheet providing a summarised overview of the scheme is available from Bunting & Sons.

Two points frequently raised by opponents of the planning application are that Horkesley Park will give rise to more traffic

than the road network can cope with and the countryside will be ruined. Neither will be the case, and anyone who does not accept that, or is unsure of what to believe, should study the environmental impact assessments.

We are saddened to learn of a petition calling for the Essex countryside to be saved from the threat of a "theme park" which we understand was signed by "15 farms", although we note that about half of the signatories are not active farmers, and some have only recently purchased land holdings in the area.

Horkesley Park will be a celebration of the English countryside, and everything comprised in its 117 acres will be on that theme - but anyone thinking there will be Alton Towers type rides and amusements is completely wrong.

Certainly the vast majority of farmers shape and care for the countryside. However, bearing in mind official reports published this month that farm profits have plummeted by nearly two-thirds over the past year, and that a large proportion of farms are failing to make any profit at all, one needs to consider seriously how that will impact upon the countryside in future.

We are a family business which has continued from generation to generation for 185 years with roots never further than five miles from the centre of Colchester. We are looking to the future determined to protect and promote our heritage and conservation in a sustainable way, which will at the same time provide substantial benefits for many people in the area, and contribute to the local economy.