

Why this Constable theme park may destroy the very countryside he loved



GLORIOUS VIEW: Danaë and her husband Robin at home

Danaë Brook offers a personal view on plans for a 'conservation' centre in the stunning valley that inspired The Hay Wain

Under the guise of a 'heritage' scheme, a vast commercial retail project now looms like a black cloud over the pastoral landscape immortalised by the painter John Constable. Can 'heritage' commercialism really be about

to destroy the real heritage we should be protecting? Not if I – and many of my neighbours – can help it. I have lived in the Stour Valley, on the Essex-Suffolk border of East Anglia, for more than a decade. My husband Robin Duthy was born here and our home, designed by local archi-

ects Quinlan Terry and Raymond Erith, then president of the Dedham Vale Society, has glorious, uninterrupted views of this beautiful valley. Overlooking a tributary of the Stour, which winds lazily through a bat willow grove below the 13th Century hill church where we were married, the landscape is so elementally beautiful it reminds me there is a God, and the countryside my church.

Constable painted Dedham Vale – now inevitably 'Constable Country' – many times, and Thomas Gainsborough, born in nearby Sudbury, was also inspired by a landscape that has barely changed in 200 years.

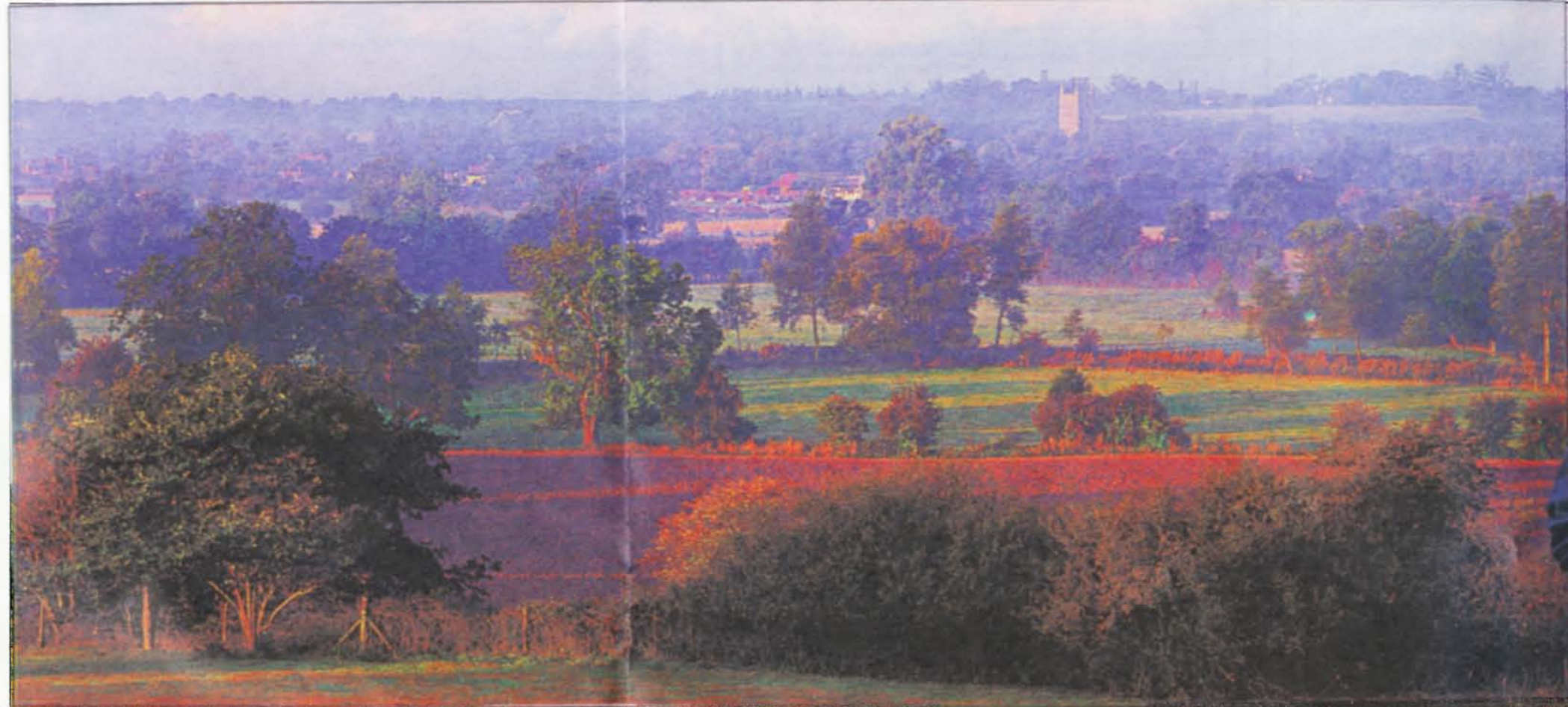
Sometimes I see the clouds transforming into shapes so like those behind The Hay Wain I could be standing in the painting. I wonder how anyone could imagine they could improve on this natural masterpiece.

But someone has. Next month, a 600-page planning application goes before Colchester Borough Council for the £20million Horkesley Park Heritage and Conservation Centre. The scheme's promoters are local businessmen Bunting & Sons, whose discontinued tomato-growing venture left a large area of dilapidated glass-houses to be converted.

This is their alternative plan: approximately 13,007 sq m of retail space for the built development, intended to be five restaurants with 1,125 covers, and a garden centre. Beside this will be an art gallery, Chinese garden, Constable-themed park (fee £8.50) plus parking for a 400 cars (an estimated one car every six seconds at peak times) and 760,000 visitors a year.

The stated objective of the developers is 'a celebration of the English countryside including a deeper understanding of the life and times of John Constable'. When the proposal was first mooted in April 2001, it was for a John Constable Heritage Centre but it was withdrawn after protests.

Now it's back under a different name, in spite of the opposition from English Heritage, The National Trust, the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England, ten village councils,



UNDER A CLOUD: Dedham Vale today, above, and as Constable painted it, right. Far left: The scene in 2006 where Constable painted his Hay Wain, left

the Countryside Agency and all the local East Anglian conservation and preservation societies.

It is difficult to believe we may be the last to enjoy the peace and tranquillity of Dedham Vale. It is a privileged corner of the land, and house prices have soared in the past 20 years – doubling in the past five.

Estate agents are waiting to see if the scheme goes through before pronouncing their verdict on the likely

consequences for property prices. They will not be great as there is huge demand. Permission has just been given for 170 new homes at Great Cornard, despite local protest, though 50 homes were rejected at Ardleigh.

Tarquin Lewellyn, head of country homes at Bidwells Estate Agents, thinks it is 'the not knowing which brings down prices. Once people know what they have to deal with, they deal

with it. But a retail centre bang in the middle of an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty is not good news at all.'

Mark Oliver, from Savills in Ipswich, says: 'I know many owners have had evaluations done because of the proposal. If the development changes the skyline and affects your view or increased traffic goes past your door, it will have a derogatory effect.'

Jan Dawson, 58, has lived in Lamarsh, near Sudbury, in the Gainsborough end of the valley for 11 years. She is selling her thatched, three-bedroom, 17th Century farmhouse Hewitts for £860,000 through Fenn Wright (01206 216550) because her children have moved away and the house, with its stables and covered swimming pool, is too much for her.

Like many people who live here, she wants to remain in the village. 'I can't stress enough how picturesque the valley is. To change it would be the beginning of the end,' she says. 'In the bigger scheme of things, I am concerned about the impact on the region.' Curiously, in Dedham itself, a building associated with Constable is for

sale: the old grammar school where he studied. Now owned by actor Michael Ivan, it is for sale for £1.25 million through Savills (01473 234000).

Nearby, Graham Langdon, 47, and his wife Shirley, 55, are selling Muniment House, dating from 1650 and Grade II listed, for £695,000. It has four bedrooms, an artist's studio and views towards Flatford Mill.

There is an archery meadow dating back to Henry VIII and the footpath by the back door is the one taken by Constable on his way between school and his home in East Bergholt, where his father owned Flatford Mill. The 15-room house, for sale through John D. Wood (01245 344222) is actually in Constable's painting View On The Stour Near Dedham.

In neighbouring Ardleigh, Wendy Cooper, 41, a teacher and mother of three, is selling her four 16th Century thatched labourers' cottages – built in 1598 and now a house with interconnecting living rooms – for £525,000

through Essex Country & Village Homes (01206 252168). The house has original beams and is one of the oldest in the area. 'I've lived here ten years and I wouldn't be moving if I hadn't got divorced,' she says. 'I will stay in the village because I love it and my children go to school here. I am strongly against anything which disrupts the balance of the countryside.'

The new owners of these homes will almost certainly feel the same way. The 55-minute commute to Liverpool Street will be part of the draw, but they will also love the treasure of England that is on their doorstep; the fact that they own a part of our common landscape, our living history.

What a tragedy it would be if lovers of Constable and the countryside buy these history-laden houses to live out their rural idyll, only to find a retail centre has mushroomed into view. And that nothing much of Constable is left but a 'heritage' chutney label.

Once they move in, they can be sure of a visit from the Stour Valley action group. www.stourvalleyactiongroup.org.uk



VILLAGE IDYLL: Wendy Cooper, above, with daughter Katy



SELLING UP: Graham and Shirley Langdon and Muniment House



VALE OF TEARS: Jan Dawson, who is moving on from her home, above and left, says the development could be 'the beginning of the end'



OLD SCHOOL: Constable's former grammar school in Dedham is for sale

TOMATO NURSERY RIPE FOR DEVELOPING ...

The proposed site for the Horkesley Park Heritage and Conservation Centre covers 117 acres in the Essex village of Great Horkesley. The land was a former tomato nursery owned by Colchester family business Bunting & Sons, who have operated in the area since 1820.

Buntings wants to transform redundant greenhouses into a centre offering an 'interactive interpretation' of the life of John Constable, an art

gallery, a 'farming of yesteryear' exhibition, landscaped gardens and a breeding centre for Suffolk Punch shire horses. If approved, the scheme would cost £20 million and the Buntings claim it would provide 460 jobs.

They originally unveiled their scheme in 2001 but withdrew the first two planning applications. They submitted a third planning application to Colchester Council in September,

2005, hoping to open in three years' time. The council decision is expected in March.

Stephen Bunting, a partner at Bunting & Sons, claims buildings will only cover 2.7 acres, with the rest of the land devoted to park and gardens.

The Buntings' own environmental impact assessment found 'a raft of potential benefits with no significant adverse effects'.