

STOUR VALLEY ACTION GROUP PRESS RELEASE

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A SNEAK PREVIEW OF HORKESLEY PARK

A new planning application for the 'Horkesley Park Heritage and Conservation Centre' is expected within the next month, a year after the previous one's withdrawal. Bunting and Sons kicked off their 2007 promotional campaign in the early weeks of February, offering a sneak preview of the Centre, which provoked nationwide controversy last year.

Buntings now say that Horkesley Park will open in 2010, subject to planning permission being granted in 2007. Details of the revised plan have yet to be revealed but their current publicity indicates a project little changed from the previous one. Only its presentation has noticeably been altered: where the marketing of the 2005 proposal claimed as the main purpose of the development the 'celebration' of the painter John Constable – and was widely criticised for this – the new purpose is apparently claimed to be the 'conservation' of the Suffolk Punch.

The Stour Valley Action Group (SVAG), the group which was formed to campaign against Buntings' first application in 2001, believes that the Suffolk Punch is being exploited just as John Constable was previously, as the friendly face on an unacceptable development. A study of the available facts suggests that now, as before, the 'heritage' and 'conservation' aspects of the plan are merely window-dressing, limited in intention and financially unworkable except as part of a major commercial retail operation.

See attached pictures of Buntings' roadshow in the car park of the ASDA supermarket. Could this be the real future of Horkesley Park: Suffolk Punches as the centrepiece of an urban retail complex?

We wonder if Buntings' latest promotional campaign may give us a more accurate hint of the future?

The idea was to bring the notion of 'Horkesley Park' to the masses, so the Bunting travelling circus set up in the car park of ASDA in Colchester. Buntings' stand, which has also been seen at shows, fairs and car boot sales since last summer, came with trailer and Suffolk Punch mare and tannoy announcements extolling the wonders of the scheme, inviting passers-by to let their children pat the horse, to receive a 10% discount voucher for a meal at a Buntings'-owned pub, and to sign a vaguely worded "petition" in favour of a project for which no application had yet been submitted and no precise specifications were yet available.

The style and location of the promotion made clear the size and ambition of the commercial operation behind the Horkesley Park proposal. This is no charity for the preservation of Suffolk Punches, whatever the Buntings claimed on their stand.

A concerned Nayland resident reported to SVAG that at least one check-out assistant in the ASDA store personally encouraged a shopper to sign Buntings' petition "to save the Suffolk Punch, otherwise it could have nowhere to live!" The resident himself had been refused permission by ASDA to set up a stand for charity in the same car park. He questioned the reasons for the ASDA management's support of the Buntings' promotion.

Alarmed by these developments, SVAG is preparing to study the details of the new planning application as soon as it is submitted, and if necessary to fight to save the Stour Valley from what may be irreparable exploitation. A public meeting held in September 2006 and attended by well over a hundred members and sympathisers re-elected the committee. A new website has been designed and campaign organisation set up, with coordinators in seven villages along the valley, and expertise and funds have been made available and action planned for what may have to be a long battle.

For more information see the new SVAG website: www.stourvalleyactiongroup.org.uk.

