

# BUNTINGS IN CASH CRISIS

**Colchester's oldest business goes into administration after battle for visitor centre**

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By **WENDY BRADING**

£25million visitor centre for its demise.

London-based administrators Deloitte have now been appointed by the bank to handle its affairs.

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■ Concerned form the future – Kate, Hector and Stephen Bunting at the Horkesley Park visitor centre planning inquiry  
Picture: STEVE ARGENT

# Bank calls in Deloitte to troubled business

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ONE of Colchester's oldest businesses Bunting and Sons has gone into administration.

The firm, which dates back 1820, has blamed the protracted planning application for the controversial visitor centre at Horkesley Park, for its demise.

Administrators Deloitte have now been appointed by the bank to handle its affairs.

It said it would continue to trade "to secure the best outcome".

Aspects of the family's business concerns affected include Westwood Park, which hosts wedding and conferences, and its agricultural interests at Horkesley Park.

It does not include Carter's Vineyard, in Boxted.

In a statement, partner Stephen Bunting, part of the sixth generation of the family to run the business, said: "Bunting and Sons has been placed in administration by the bank."

"The partners of Bunting and Sons are deeply saddened by this turn of events, which has become unavoidable due to the protracted nature of the ongoing planning application for the creation of the Stour Valley Visitor Centre, at Horkesley Park.

"The partners are committed to working with the bank's administrators in dealing with this situation.

"All parties involved remain



## BUNTING AND SONS DATES TO 1820

**BUNTING and Sons** nurserymen was established in Lexden Road, Colchester, in 1820 by Isaac Bunting and ownership of the firm has

passed down through the generations ever since.

The business has now spanned seven generations. The firm is based at the Grade

II\* listed Tudor manor house, Westwood Park, which is set in 15 acres of gardens and grounds in Little Horkesley, north of Colchester.

■ Family business – Daniel, Stephen, Kate and Hector Bunting

confident of a positive outcome and swift resolution."

Bunting and Sons had hoped to create a £25million visitor centre on 113 acres of land in the Dedham Vale.

However, the project created a storm of opposition from protesters who said it would destroy the peace and tranquillity of an area of outstanding natural beauty.

Earlier this year, Colchester Council refused the planning application – the fifth by the business in 12 years – but the company appealed against the

decision. A planning inquiry was held in Langham earlier this month, but Bunting and Sons revealed just before the hearing started it could not afford barristers to represent itself.

The family said at the time funds were still available for the project if planning permission was given.

The Gazette has asked the Buntings family and Deloitte precisely what this means for the application if permission is given, but has not yet received a response.

## Community divided over the benefits of Stour visitor centre

THE Stour Valley Visitor Centre at Horkesley Park was heralded as a celebration of the countryside.

The scheme spanned more than 117 acres, including a 101-acre country park.

Features included sculpture trails, reinstated parkland grazed by Suffolk Punch horses,

gardens, an art gallery boasting Constable paintings and even a Chinese garden funded by a major Far Eastern company.

The Buntings claimed the scheme would attract more than 300,000 visitors a year and create 150 new jobs. It collected thousands signatures in support of its application.

However, opponents, led by the Stour Valley Action Group, were just as vociferous and thousands sent objections to Colchester Council.

They challenged Bunting and Sons' visitor numbers, the

scheme's commercial viability and said the project breached planning rules.

The planning inspector, who oversaw the inquiry, will still pass his recommendations to Communities Secretary Eric Pickles, who is due to make a decision in January.

Will Pavry, chairman of the Stour Valley Action Group, one of the main opponents to the scheme, said: "From the outset, we have been concerned about the appropriateness of the proposals and their impact on the area of outstanding natural beauty."



■ Will Pavry – visitor centre opponent