

DEDHAM VALE SOCIETY

President: Robert Erith, TD, DL. Chairman: Charles Clover
Registered Charity No.: 246007
c/o The Well House, High Street,
Dedham, Colchester, CO7 6AB

Mr Robert Cook,
Case Officer,
The Planning Inspectorate,
Room 302, Temple Quay House,
2 The Square,
Temple Quay,
Bristol BS1 6PN

Dear Mr Cook,

APP/A1530/A/13/2195924 Appeal by Bunting and Sons, London Road, Great Horkesley CO6 4AJ

Presentation by the Dedham Vale Society for hearing on October 8 2013, Speaker: Charles Clover

Presentation no: TPS4/DVS 1.1

My name is Charles Clover and I am chairman of the Dedham Vale Society, a charity with around 900 members that was established 75 years ago to defend the countryside and villages of the Dedham Vale from inappropriate development, which in our opinion the proposed development unquestionably is.

My connection with the Vale comes from the fact that my family owned and ran Dedham mill from the mid 19th century until 1985. There was a short gap in ownership between the painter, John Constable's family and the Clover family of about 15 years. Before the Clovers came to Dedham, they owned flour mills in Suffolk going back to the 1400s. When I was born we owned mills at Dedham, Halstead and Sudbury.

My family therefore have some experience of living in the Vale and running businesses in it. We also have a record of campaigning against inappropriate development. I am just old enough to remember the greatest campaign that the Dedham Vale Society ever fought, in 1965, against

housing developments which would have doubled the populations of the villages of Dedham, Stratford St Mary and East Bergholt and seen the whole valley become suburbanised.

Though I was only 7 at the time, that battle shaped my future career as a writer and journalist, as well as shaping the future of the vale. You may be amused to see a picture of me from a newspaper cutting – attached as an appendix - sitting in Dedham vicarage surrounded by campaigners filling envelopes with petitions. Members of the Society in those days included our President, the architect Raymond Erith, who rebuilt No 10 Downing St in the Macmillan era; our distinguished vicar, Canon AR “Johnny” Johnston and my mother, Diana, the Society’s Treasurer, a pilot who flew 55 different types of aircraft, including Spitfires, with the Air Transport Auxiliary during the war.

We need to thank the people who fought to defend the Vale in 1965 for what remains special about it today. Every time some major development is planned, we remember how hard they fought and the words they used to defend this place. Raymond Erith, writing in the Spectator, said: “If Dedham Vale is not worth keeping, then nothing is worth keeping.” I think that is just as true today.

Why was it worth keeping? Erith said, “There is nowhere in England where the beauty of the countryside can be seen with more clarity than the Vale of Dedham.” I would add that it is what expatriates think of when they think of home, thanks to reproductions of Constable’s paintings. And what defines its character? As Erith also wrote, it is “a countryside where for centuries nature has been harnessed but not exploited.”

This development in Great Horkesley aims to exploit, to an unacceptable degree, and for profit what good people in the past fought to preserve for its own sake. If we let this development through, I believe we will be letting our forebears down as well as ourselves. Their good work will have been in vain.

There are parallels between the present development and the ones they were opposing in 1965. Both would overdevelop their villages. And the Vale would never be the same again if either of these developments were built.

Happily, thanks to those 1960s campaigners, planning law is now on our side. Their victory created the demand for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty to be included in the 1968 Countryside Act.

Thanks that victory by my parents’ generation, since 1970 national planning policy has protected the Dedham Vale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty - (AONB) - from inappropriate development. That is what we firmly believe the Stour Valley Visitor Centre at Great Horkesley would be for it is incompatible with the intrinsic character and qualities for which this very special area was granted AONB status.

The peace, tranquillity and rural views of the Dedham Vale are arguably more vulnerable to development pressure today than they were in 1965. The countryside of the Stour valley is, when you think about it, an amazing survival, sandwiched as it is between two major conurbations, near two major ports and within commuting distance of London. It remains one of the smallest AONBs.

The Dedham Vale Society would like to confirm its opposition to this application for the following planning reasons. It is contrary to:

- The National Planning Policy Framework
- The Colchester Borough Council Local Development Framework, and
- The adopted Management Plan for the AONB to which all interested parties signed up.

The proposals are essentially for a tourist “honeypot,” or theme park, on a considerable scale and on a hill within the AONB. The scale of what is proposed would inevitably increase noise, light pollution, traffic and visitor pressure to an unacceptable degree in a nationally protected landscape. The claimed economic benefits arising from the proposal have been shown to be unlikely and the business case unsustainable.

I have come here today to explain, in particular, why the Stour Valley Visitor Centre development would be damaging to the whole of the AONB and why any major development on this site would be unacceptable. There are three main reasons:

1. Traffic

Some 82% of the visitors that it is claimed would travel to the development each year would arrive by car. This is a huge number, far too many for the area to cope with. The traffic analysis provided by Essex and Suffolk County Councils was deeply flawed in that it appears to have only examined traffic flows on the main highways and assumed all visitors would arrive via the marked tourist routes. In 2013, the SAT NAV system, not a road atlas, determines the roads that people select and the Highway Authority admitted at the Planning Committee hearing that they did not consider the impact of SAT NAV systems. The majority of motorists today rely on their SAT NAV to take them the most direct route to their destination, e.g. across the AONB, where many of the roads are single track lanes widely used by people of the area for recreation – walking, cycling, riding etc. This increase in traffic would cause serious harm to the tranquillity of the AONB as well as making the lanes more dangerous for cars, cyclists, riders and walkers.

Stour Valley Visitor Centre is planned to contain an exhibition of “The Life and Times of John Constable” and to back this up the Developer is planning a Hopper Bus service to take visitors across the AONB to see the iconic places that Constable painted at Dedham and Flatford Mill.

The Hopper Bus is a fig leaf, for want of a better expression. Everyone knows that it is highly unlikely that a family who has arrived by car would leave their car behind. For convenience they will drive across the AONB and then proceed home from there. The National Trust, which manages the Flatford Mill complex, already seeks to limit visitor numbers – as it does at Sissinghurst in Kent. The Trust tells us that it deliberately puts up no advertising. There are no big brown heritage signs telling you how to get to the famous Flatford Mill off the A12. There are only ordinary signposts saying Flatford. Why? Because the Trust regards the site as already overloaded and says any additional numbers would not be welcome.

What the developers of Stour Valley Visitor Centre would inevitably do is add to that overloading.

We, the Dedham Vale Society, believe that these proposals are in an unsustainable location and would have an adverse impact on the AONB's primary purpose of protecting the area's rural character and tranquillity.

2. Light Pollution

A serious issue in the countryside and particularly in an AONB is the question of light pollution. There is a new and growing trend across the UK to reduce lighting levels to preserve the view of the night sky and, at the same time, save considerable funds for local councils. The Dedham Vale Society agrees with the British Astronomical Association that the night sky is genuinely inspiring and something we must seek to protect for future generations. Both DVS and local District and Borough Councils are increasingly active in attempting to reduce light levels in the AONB.

We actually want to reduce light levels in the Vale below what they are today and to influence surrounding towns and ports to reduce the glow of surrounding areas. We are actively examining ways in which the AONB could meet the criteria for designation as a "dark sky community" by the International Dark Skies Association. We arranged for the British Astronomical Association to speak at our AGM. Exmoor and Northumbria national park authorities have led in seeking dark sky designations. We understand these are now actively being sought by other AONBs.

The site of the proposed Stour Valley Visitor Centre is on top of a hill overlooking the AONB and, however well designed the lighting system might be, it would inevitably cause light pollution in the surrounding area, both from its buildings and the lights of parking cars.

We believe that a large bright development on a hill would be wholly inappropriate for the area.

3. Noise Pollution

The concept of an AONB denotes a peaceful, tranquil, rural environment where the intrusions of the noise of the 21st century are kept at a minimum.

Some 75% of the Stour Valley Visitor Centre is within the AONB with a major car park sited within it. On a summer afternoon this will result in perhaps hundreds of family members initially parking their cars and participating in outdoor tourist activities. The noise of excited crowds of all ages carries a long way and is not, we believe, compatible with the concept of tranquillity.

The Horkesley Park venue will be used for social events and in this context it is important to look at the record of the applicant's activities at Westwood Park some 2-3 miles away – there have been in the past complaints about the level of noise generated.

There can be no doubt that the Dedham Vale, which as an AONB is specifically protected in the National Planning Policy Framework, would be harmed by:

- Increased traffic levels,
- Light pollution,
- Noise pollution.

Currently I understand Colchester Borough Council is reviewing its Local Plan Policies to ensure they interrelate with the NPPF. The review appears to give priority to siting major developments within their defined Settlement Hierarchy and thus protecting the rural communities from developments in the countryside.

This approach would exclude any development such as Horkesley Park in its current location.

So in conclusion, the Dedham Vale Society is a forward-thinking society, dedicated to preserving what is lovely about the countryside for future generations. We have a proud history of having done so in the past. We know exactly how vulnerable the Vale's special qualities are to creeping development, because we fight it every day. This proposal is on a much larger scale than most and is, we believe, a very obvious case of over-development which would alter the character of the whole Vale adversely and permanently. Do please help us by turning it down, as wise heads did to that other potentially Vale-altering development in 1965.

Charles Clover
Chairman, Dedham Vale Society

Please find attached:
Appendix No: **P4/DVS 1.2**