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President's Comments to the Dedham Vale Society AGM, 30th September 2013

The last year has been full of surprises. Some have been welcome – others have not.

On the plus side, Colchester Borough Council Planning Committee rejected Bunting's application for the so-called Horkesley Park development last February, against the advice of their officers. This was a remarkable but hugely important result which showed the importance of the high quality submissions by the Stour Valley Action Group, the Nayland with Wissington Conservation Society, the Dedham Vale Society, Colne Stour Countryside Association, many individuals and crucially, the Dedham Vale AONB & Stour Valley Project.

We now face an intensive few days of the Inquiry at which the same organisations will make further representations. A further surprise is that Buntings will not be instructing its lawyers to appear as they have run out of cash to pay them.

The Appeal will be decided by the Secretary of State rather than a civil servant. Let us hope that he will realise the strength of our case and the opposition which has now had to fight these damaging proposals for a decade or more.

However, even if the Minister decides to throw out the Appeal, it is likely that Buntings will put forward other plans for the glasshouse site. The Society will remain vigilant.

Many were surprised when National Grid announced that it proposed to underground the new set of 400kV powerlines from Bramford to Twinstead through both the Northern section of the AONB and the Stour valley above Bures. Whilst this is less than we had campaigned for, it is significant in being the first time NG has agreed to underground lines in the countryside outside a National Park or AONB.

A further surprise was the announcement that the amount OFGEM, NG's regulator, would allow to be spent on undergrounding existing unsightly powerlines is to be increased

from £100m to £500m. At present this allowance is limited to AONBs and National Parks so the land through the Stour Valley does not qualify.

We have had a long battle to extend the Dedham Vale AONB and DVS has been in the forefront of this campaign. After so many years of no response, Katherine Potts had an e-mail from *Natural England* last June inviting the Project to put an initial case for extending the AONB, a welcome surprise for us all. She has submitted this, along with many letters of support from all the MPs, local authorities, amenity societies and many others, with no known objections. The process is still only in its early stages, but at least it is underway at last.

The less happy matters which may come as a surprise to some are headed by the reorganisation of the management of the Dedham Vale AONB & Stour Valley Project. Because of DEFRA and local authority funding cuts, the management of the Dedham Vale AONB will be merged with that of Suffolk Coasts & Heaths AONB. This will have inevitable implications for staffing and the jobs of our dedicated and highly skilled and experienced team. We do not yet know details but I fear the valuable work undertaken by our team may be severely damaged by these cuts.

A second nasty surprise is to find that there are numerous applications for large solar panel farms of 30 acres and more in the Stour Valley, not yet in the AONB but further upstream. These could be a real problem and have a serious visual impact. We have to be very watchful on this account especially in the Stour valley but outside the AONB.

The same is true of some farm buildings. It is frustrating that, just when we are applauding Essex & Suffolk Water for disguising their new pumping station near Bures very effectively as a boarded Essex barn, the neighbouring farmer has put up two large ugly utilitarian barns. He did not need planning permission but somehow we all failed to pick up when the application was put in and were not consulted.

A few hundred yards away, Anglian Water has erected a big, tall rectangular building used for filtering borehole water pumped from the aquifers below. Again, DVS and others failed to spot the application and so no objections were raised with Colchester Borough Council.

Last month, Paula Booth from the Project, Charles Aldous of CSCA and I met with directors of Anglian Water on site to discuss mitigation measures. Painting the structure black or dark green will help, as will planting, although the latter takes time to be effective.

An important event for our area was the Annual Conference of the Association of AONBs which took place last July on the campus of Suffolk University in what used to be Ipswich docks. The East Anglian AONBs were hosts and of course much of the work fell on Katherine Potts and her team who did a splendid job promoting this region.

Richard Benyon MP, Minister responsible for protected landscapes at DEFRA gave the keynote speech and amongst the other speakers was Peter Simpson, Managing Director of Anglian Water. I felt his address was of particular interest as it is clear Anglian Water and other Utilities now want to be involved with the community and appreciate their wider responsibilities to the environment in a way which did not exist in the past. I believe we need to work with these large organisations, who have the resources to do much good if only they are shown how. Their involvement, at a time when public sector funding will be squeezed ever more tightly, could be a key factor in the future of our countryside.

As always, a heartfelt THANK You to our committee, all of whom contribute a very great deal of time and effort. They make the Society a force which punches above its weight with planners and other decision makers. We are fortunate to have a wide age range with members full of ideas and the drive to implement them.

I should also like to thank Jonny and Miff Minter for allowing the Society to hold its Summer garden party in their lovely garden at Rivers Hall. We had a record attendance and a marvellous time there.

In 2014 we shall be at the home of John and Jenny Rix at Wissington and much look forward to being with them there.

Our annual lecture this year at the Dedham Assembly Room will take the form of the film on John Constable made by Ronnie Blythe who will introduce it himself. Although he is now 90, he is

in sparkling form and I suggest the evening is a must for all our members and their guests.

The Society has had a busy year full of achievement. It has never been needed more and I thank you, our members for your constant support. Please recruit your friends and neighbours. The more members we have the more effective we become to ensure our valley is preserved as we and future generations wish.

Robert Erith TD DL