

# **Dedham Vale Society**

## **President's Comments to the AGM, 22nd September 2014**

My first priority is to thank all the Committee and particularly our Chairman, secretary, treasurer, planning secretaries and membership secretary for their hard work in what has been a momentous year. Charles Aldous, Chairman of the neighbouring Colne Stour Countryside Association and Rosemary Turner from CPRE add value in ensuring our concerns are known to a wider group and we are able as a result to work more effectively together.

I would also like to say Thank You to John and Jenny Rix for welcoming us to what was a simply wonderful garden party with our largest ever attendance. Their splendid herd of cattle added further glamour to a very happy occasion. We should remember that careful and responsible farming can really enhance the beauty of the vale.

Since the last AGM we have gained our first ever Patron in Dr Ronald Blythe, the distinguished local author who was also our 2013 lecturer, introducing his film about John Constable. He will give us a repeat performance by introducing a film he wrote and produced in 1969 about the painter John Nash at our 2014 winter lecture in the Dedham Assembly Rooms on Monday 24<sup>th</sup> November. Ronnie's eloquent and passionate support for our countryside has been of great value to us all.

We continue to work closely with the Dedham Vale AONB & Stour Valley Project Partnership of which I have the honour of being Chairman. I am particularly glad that Simon Amstutz, manager of the Suffolk Coasts & Heaths AONB as well as our own, will be talking to us tonight. The work he and his team do is invaluable.

The past year has seen the end of the long running Horkeley Park saga and I want to thank Will Pavry and Roger Drury in particular for their tremendous efforts towards the result that has been achieved. We will no doubt hear more about this site and will keep members posted with developments through our website.

Despite the loss of several older members, we are creeping ever nearer to our target of 1000. I would like to thank all our members for their support and encouragement and hope more will join in active participation.

Another of our campaigns, the battle to bury high voltage overhead wires has been put back a decade as the whole rewiring project has been delayed and we hope that by the early 2020s technology will have advanced enough to enable National Grid to put all their cables underground.

In July, the Project submitted an evaluation table at the request of *Natural England* for our campaign to extend the Dedham Vale AONB. We have had the following reply from John Butterfield, the officer in charge of this process:

Thank you for providing the evaluation table and map. A desk based assessment of the natural beauty of the area in question will be carried out using our own, and generally available, information sources and the evaluation table will help this process considerably.

We will also assess the suggested boundary variation area for its level of fit with our Designations Strategy principles and compare its resultant score with a “benchmark” derived from a representative sample of existing AONBs. This will help identify cases we’ll be interested in exploring the natural beauty credentials for earliest.

As you are probably aware we’re not going to be in a position to start any new formal designation projects until we’ve completed the Suffolk and Surrey boundary variations. Assuming that Variation Orders are made in both cases (there’s no guarantee) this should be somewhere around 2019/20.

It sounds disappointing but means that we are at least in the pipeline. It would be a simple matter for *Natural England* to speed up this process. All it needs is for the Minister in charge to direct that more resources should be diverted to AONB extension requests but in an age of continuing budget stringency this is unlikely, but not impossible.

What of the future?

We are vulnerable to Government policies and local planning. There are constant pressures from interests which seek, often unwittingly, to damage our fragile heritage. We shall continue to stand up to those interests we believe to be undesirable but work more closely with public and private sector organisations so that they have a better understanding of the unique properties of our lovely landscapes.

There is much goodwill from many in business and local government and we need to harness this and show that, provided no environmental harm is done, we welcome commerce in the valley. Showing that a beautiful countryside with AONB status can promote economic growth is the way we are most likely to get additional resources from both public and private sectors.

Robert Erith TD DL