

## Democratising Constable Country

Tom discusses the challenges of creating a harmonious balance at such a popular destination with the National Trust's Site Manager at Flatford, Simon Peachy.

**Tom Crowley:** Did you always live around here?

**Simon Peachey:** I have actually Yeah. So yeah, I'm fairly local. I live in Felixstowe. So and, you know, I've always been in this area. So yes, I've known. I've known Flatford and Constable Country for quite a few years. So yeah, I've had an interest in Constable for quite a few years.

**Tom Crowley:** Oh, really? Oh, well, so it's, yeah, it's a kind of perfect job.

**Simon Peachey:** It's very good job. Yeah, it's lovely being the site manager at Flatford. Because, you know, you get the opportunity to help people engage with Constable's landscape. But also, you know, the National Trust now is very much focused on making sure the landscape is, let's say, reflects Constable's paintings, not the same, everything's changed. Of course it has. And the landscape use is very different to what it was 200 years ago, but at the same time, if visitors come to Flatford, they can almost see the views, and they can make that connection if they look at copies of the paintings. So you know we like to think that if John Constable came back, he too would walk into the landscape and say, "Oh, it's changed, but do you know what, that's where I painted the Hay Wain or that's the view that inspired boatbuilding". So I think, you know, hopefully, he'd make a connection as well.

**Tom Crowley:** Well, that's very interesting. How would you kind of go about doing that, in practical terms, in trying to keep that continuity in the landscape?

**Simon Peachey:** So what we did a few years back, was we did something called the view management plan project. So what we did was we looked at the key views under the National Trust ownership at Flatford. And we gathered together lots of historical data. So paintings, maps, written sources, lots and lots of data about each view. And then we basically use that to develop a management plan for each view. So looking at what was there looking at what wasn't there looking at what Constable omitted or included in his paintings, because as we know, he did change things. And by doing that, we've now developed a management plan for each painting view. And then the Ranger Team, they actually look at the view, and they try and manage the views reflecting the management plan. So that's how it actually works. So yeah, it was a volunteer process. We included a lot of our volunteers. And then I was involved as a member of staff as well, and a few others. So it's a really interesting, you know, thing to do, and we're still using it today.

**Tom Crowley:** Are there any tensions between local people who just sort of live here and don't, you know, think Constable matters that much, versus that kind of national prerogative? Or you know, the prerogative for some people in the community from whom you know this is absolutely so important and sacred, that these views should not change?

**Simon Peachey:** I don't think it's relevance or importance of Constable, which is, in any way contested. I think what the tension lies in is the number of people who come to Flatford. Ironically the majority of people don't come because of the Constable connection. The majority of people come... well, actually, if you reel back the years, it is because of the Constable connection, because of course, Flatford, became a famous tourist destination many, many years ago, was basically saved for the nation by Mr. Parkington. In 1929, I think, presented to the National Trust. And so Flatford almost became a very early tourist destination. And actually, because of that, it's got a legacy of now being a very famous spot for local people to come from Ipswich and Colchester, Clacton, Felixstowe, Berry. So anywhere, within about an hour's drive.

**Tom Crowley:** And that's independent of Constable? It has now just become like a, kind of...

**Simon Peachey:** Yeah, in a way, they don't know, I'm not being funny, a lot of people don't know why they're coming here. They just come because it's a famous destination. And because it's a safe part of countryside to come. And I think that's really key. You know, they love to have a country day out. So whereas I might go somewhere like Stoke-by-Nayland with a map, that's because I like walking, but actually, if you're not comfortable with maps, what you do, you'll come somewhere safe, like Flatford. Yeah, you're somewhere where you've got a car park where you've got a tearoom. Absolutely, it's great. And you'll come there. And so that creates huge visitor numbers and really big spikes on weekends, such as bank holidays, Sundays in August, that sort of thing. And that's the thing that could cause some tension with visitors. Lock down has exacerbated it because you get lots of people coming out to enjoy this lovely landscape, which is fantastic. It's a great opportunity to engage with people. But at the same time, it does mean that villages like Dedham. Particularly on the other side of the river over there, it literally can get like a seaside resort. On busy days, you know, literally you've got the whole field covered with tents covered with people sunbathing by the river, you know, and it's a farmer's field. And so you've got this big conflict going on between the numbers of people who have discovered this area. And, you know... but ironically, as I said, going back many, many years, the reason this area is a tourist destination, if you like, is because of Constable, because he painted it. And so by doing so he raised its status and made sure you know, later on it was preserved as an Area of Natural Beauty. And it's become a significant part of, you know, the cultural history in this area. but as I said people don't necessarily come for that reason.

**Tom Crowley:** And he was partly engaged in this area because he was looking for an escape from industrialised landscapes?

**Simon Peachey:** Absolutely. Yeah. And so you can then go back to the whole question of, you know, his painting, almost his vision, his version of the landscape. And I think in doing that, what he did, he almost set a blueprint for what he thought landscape should look like, which has been taken up. So we do guided tours of Flatford. And the guides take round with them pictures of the Hay Wain, and when they hold up pictures of the Hay Wain, you know, people see that as an idealised landscape. You know, many people do and that's perhaps because Constable, almost defined it as what landscape should look like. And you're right. He was reacting against industrialization at the time in this area, there was various, you know, protests and vandalism against mechanisation. And his brother was a mill owner, so

he knew first-hand what was going on. So it was, you know, it was a reaction against the changes at the time. So yeah, he was he was almost painting a slightly nostalgic version of the landscape.

**Tom Crowley:** Yeah. Yeah. Interesting. I'm just thinking back on your comment about the tension being the popularity, the visitor numbers. There must be a real issue with the Trust with its kind of mission to democratise the countryside. I mean my background's working in museums. And yeah, it's a constant struggle to, you know, make a service accessible. And that's the, you know, for me and lots of people and for you as well, that's sort of the big motivator. And here, you have a kind of more complicated problem. You are very successful in that, but that comes with its own ramifications.

**Simon Peachey:** And also is not only the impact it has on local community, it's the impact it has on the landscape. Because of course, we're on clay soil here. So huge numbers of feet, basically compress it, wear it away. So you've then got this conflict between, you know, conserving, but enhancing. So I think what the National Trust is trying to do is actually use the opportunity of lots of people coming to visit its beautiful places like Flatford, to actually, - well certainly in Flatford's case- in a way, not seeing it as a negative, but seeing it as a positive, seeing how we can engage with those people more effectively. So very much our projects that we're working on at the moment, are about engaging with those who already come more effectively, and not encouraging more people. Because if we can engage more effectively with those who come, then actually we can get them to understand and respect the landscape, which is going to have a long term good. But if we just try and encourage more and more and more and more people to come, that's detrimental to everyone. So it's about deeper and more effective engagement with those who are already coming.