



CONSTABLE COUNTRY

Stepping off the train into the tranquil surrounds of the Stour Valley on the Suffolk-Essex border, **Sue Watt** discovers the lowland landscapes immortalised by one of England's greatest Romantic painters

"I imagine this must be one of the most photographed scenes in England," said my guide Bob Finch as we approached Willy Lott's House. "Old Willy lived here all his life, died at 88, and apparently only ever spent four nights away from this place."

No wonder he never wanted to leave: his 16th-century home lies on the banks of a millpond in the serene surrounds of Dedham Vale. Its fame today has little to do with Willy himself, though. Rather, the house has been immortalised in *The Hay Wain*, perhaps the best-known painting by one of England's most famous artists, John Constable.

That morning I'd happily left central London behind, full of commuters rushing to work in their smart city suits and sombre moods. Kitted out in walking boots, with a small rucksack strapped to my back, I left Liverpool Street station to be transported to another world just an hour's train-ride away. I was heading for Constable country, a small patch of East Anglia that shall forever be associated with one of England's greatest Romantic painters.

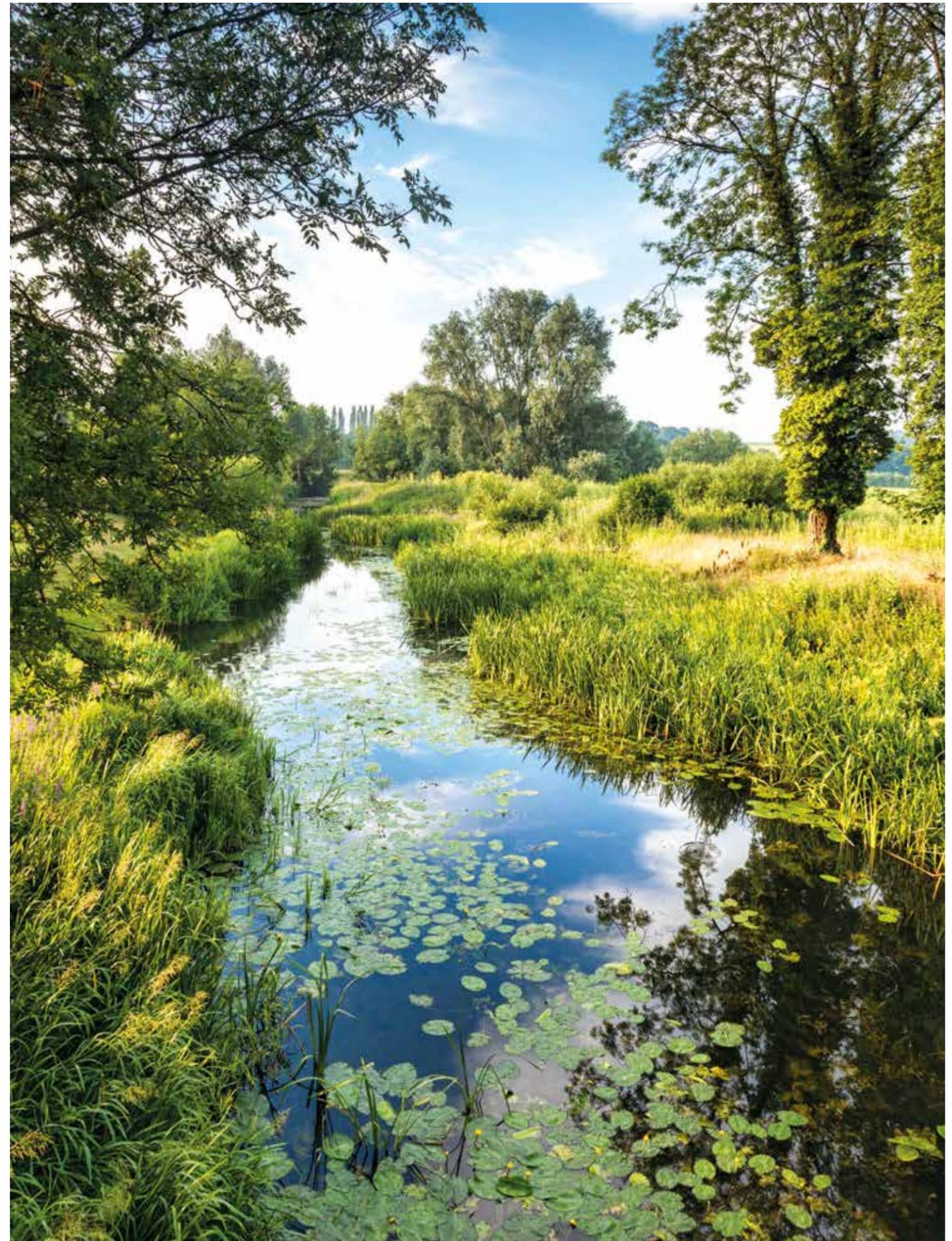
Lush meadows flank the River Stour along the route from Manningtree station to Dedham Vale, where the landscapes inspired John Constable's paintings

My guide met me at Manningtree station and, within minutes, we were sauntering along a country path bordered by thickets just holding on to the last of the season's blackberries. "In the spring, these hedgerows are bursting with birdsong," Bob told me. The River Stour then came into view, partially obscured by reeds as tall as me.

Our route meandered gently around Dedham Vale and Stour Valley, an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty on the Suffolk-Essex borders, with quintessentially English lowlands of lush green meadows and barely a hill in sight.

Constable was born in nearby East Bergholt in 1776 and grew up here, attending school at Dedham and then working in his father's mill business, before heading to London and the Royal Academy to pursue his dreams of becoming a professional artist. But it was the rural backdrop of his agricultural homeland that inspired his art, with scenes of everyday farming life and landscapes dominating his work.

Some 30 minutes into our walk, Bob showed me a photo of Constable's



GETTY

station walk

‘Our route meandered gently around Dedham Vale and Stour Valley, an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty with lush green meadows’

painting *The White Horse* and, looking across the water, I saw the same scene. Of course, there was no trusty white steed standing patiently on the bow of a barge but little else had changed.

Ten minutes later, we reached the National Trust site of Flatford. Today, this tiny hamlet is a field study centre but it dates back to 1087, with the mill recorded in the Domesday Book. Flatford Mill was later owned by Constable’s father, Golding, a prosperous corn merchant, and its surrounds became the subject of some of the artist’s most famous paintings.

Bob showed me various viewpoints where Constable might have stood when he conceived and sketched some of his best-known works, including *The Hay Wain*, *Flatford Mill* and *A Boat Passing a Lock*. Nearly 200 years on, it’s easy to see the beauty that beguiled him.

A new exhibition, John Constable – Flatford: His Life, Work and Inspiration, opened here in May and is well worth a visit, with reproductions and explanations of his local artwork. “He liked to include touches of red and a dog whenever he could,” said Bob, as I began scouring each painting to find them.

Continuing to Dedham, we ambled alongside the canal, passing Friesian cows grazing on the pastures and willow trees swaying gently by the water’s edge, with Dedham’s church tower peeping above oak and horse chestnut trees in the distance.

As part of his research into the artist’s character, Bob has read all seven volumes of *John Constable’s Correspondence*, which contain the artist’s prolific letters to his wife, family and friends, and dignitaries. As we walked, he talked about Constable as if he’d known him, like an old friend with whom he might have whiled away the hours.

The Hay Wain, 1821, is Constable’s most famous painting and it’s still possible to admire the same view of Willy Lott’s House at Flatford. Once owned by Constable’s father, it’s now managed by the National Trust



“A lot of people said he was arrogant,” explained Bob. “I would say he was focused – focused on his art and family.”

Along with art, Maria Bicknell was the love of Constable’s life. Despite threats of disinheritance and her family’s bitter opposition to their marriage, they had seven children together and Maria’s death from tuberculosis left Constable inconsolable.

As for his art, Constable’s work gained him more fortune in France than England but he steadfastly refused to travel there, even when he won a Gold Medal at the Paris Salon of 1824 for *The Hay Wain*.

Passing the setting of Constable’s *The Leaping Horse*, where the Stour meets the canal, we arrived in the thriving village of Dedham, where we stopped for lunch at the friendly 16th-century Essex Rose tea house, owned by Wilkin & Sons (well-known for its Tiptree preserves). I managed to resist the temptation to try the highly recommended ‘Little Scarlet’ gin and tonic.

Dedham is full of Constable history. As a boy, he would walk here to his grammar school in the Royal Square, a handsome grey building now a private home. His father owned Dedham Mill, since burned down and reincarnated as apartments. And the 15th-century church with its striking flint tower is home to an original Constable painting, *The Ascension*, which was one of only three religious pieces he produced. Both the mill and church were often subjects of his paintings.

After strolling back to Manningtree station, I left Dedham Vale promising myself I’d return to discover more about its most famous son and the picture-perfect landscapes that inspired his art.

TRY IT YOURSELF

Plan your tour of Constable country

To download a map of the walk Sue took, go to bit.ly/2e5qzVb. A guide can be booked through Visit Essex at visitessex.com. For details of Flatford, go to nationaltrust.org.uk/flatford.

Travel

The closest train station is Manningtree. It’s a 30 minute walk from Manningtree to Flatford and another 30 minutes from Flatford to Dedham. Book your train travel through Greater Anglia’s website to get the lowest price, guaranteed, at greateranglia.co.uk.



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