



**Constable's county:** Willy Lott's House as seen in the Hay Wain (inset), his most famous picture

#### DETAILS: ESSEX

**Constable: The Making of a Master**  
(September 20 to January 11 2015), vam.ac.uk

**Milsoms and Maison Talbooth** have Constable in Dedham breaks from £100 and £165 respectively per night B&B with three-course dinner, Constable map and entry to the Munnings Collection, milsomhotels.com  
■ Visitessex.com

# PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST

**B**IRDS twitter and the layers of green – fields, hedgerows and ancient trees – are dewy in the early morning sun. This unspoilt patch of north Essex countryside, rubbing shoulders with neighbouring Suffolk, is the area known as Constable Country – after the Romantic painter John Constable, who was so inspired by the bucolic landscape of his childhood. It's an Essex far from the usual lairy cliché, but just an hour from London.

You could be in any century, as there is little of the modern world – bar the odd jutting pylon – to ruin the views of grassy meadows, chocolate-box villages and rolling farmland. Maison Talbooth, a pleasingly pink 12-bedroom Victorian country house in the heart of the Vale of Dedham, affords us pampered guests views across the very fields and rooftops that Constable featured in many of his paintings. Named after English poets, lavish suites include the spacious ground-floor Keats with a terrace (dogs are allowed) graced with a hot tub and children's room with Xbox and PlayStation.

The warmest of staff whisk guests by Range Rover to its sister restaurant, Le Talbooth, which appears in Constable's *The Vale of Dedham* (and in my tour of Constable sights later), which hangs in the Scottish National Gallery detailing the view from Gun Hill, where Le Talbooth is located, towards Dedham church near his father's watermill (now flats). This prompted Constable's election to the Royal Academy.

Nearby is the hamlet of Flatford, which features in much of Constable's work. Cutely thatched 16th-century

As a new exhibition re-examining the paintings of Constable starts at the V&A tomorrow, **Jo Fernández** explores the Essex idyll that inspired much of his work

Bridge Cottage, once owned by his father and then by the National Trust since 1943, houses a small exhibition (mind your head on the low beams) but is expanding this along with renovations to take the building back to how it would have been in his era.

Stand on the bridge here, across the River Stour that laps at the edges of much of this region, and survey all that inspired the artist, including Flatford Lock and the well-trodden footpath stretching across the meadow to Dedham (a 40-minute walk).

The adjoining teasop is now a well-designed glass box with a terrace opening onto the lock providing an almost Disneyish effect in the sunlight with the twitter of birdsong. Although I'm sure many of the tea-drinking retirees here were here as much for scone of the month – with delicious apples and blackberries plucked from the hedgerows – than for the view.

Further along the gently curving lane

flanked by fields lies Flatford Mill, a sprawling redbrick structure also owned by Constable's father. It lies adjacent to Willy Lott's House – this grade I listed thatched cottage, named after the tenant farmer who lived in it, is now used as accommodation for field studies students.

Several paintings immortalise this rural corner including *Flatford Mill from a lock on the Stour*, *Scene on a Navigable River (Flatford Mill)* and *The Hay Wain* – Constable's best-known work.

It is worth remembering that before Constable the countryside was not considered to be an acceptable subject for serious painters, with set rules on how nature should be depicted. Considered by some to be dull and garish, his work wasn't popular for a long time – except in France – he was only made a Royal Academician at the age of 53. Undeterred and inspired by fellow local

landscape artist Thomas Gainsborough, Constable liked to include real working people the land in his paintings.

And although you could hold up many of his works and see the view is pretty much the same as he painted, Constable liked to tinker with the truth, often removing or adding trees and figures. In the V&A exhibition you can spot the final version of the *Hay Wain* lacks the boy on a horse (which can be seen on the full-scale oil sketch) while *The Leaping Horse* sees the tree in the full-scale oil sketch move from the right to off-centre.

Dedham, a designated area of outstanding natural beauty, lies at the heart of the area where the artist grew up, walking to the town's grammar school each morning alongside the River Stour from his family home in East Bergholt.

Many of his paintings feature Ded-

ham. The parish church of St Mary is home to an original Constable, *The Ascension*, one of only three religious paintings to have been commissioned for churches in his native Stour Valley. You can walk in and view the painting hung modestly above a side door.

I stop for a long lunch at Le Talbooth. There is no need for guilt among all this gluttony as Constable, like Gainsborough, wasn't your classic impoverished artist. I'm sure he would have approved of the three-course feast I ate, sitting outside on a terrace by the river fringing the manicured grounds (the low rumble of cars on the A12 quietly audible, but not detracting from the experience) involving crisp tempura of soft shell crab with a tangy pickled ginger and sardine dressing and lemon meringue cheesecake.

I find myself rolling – like the surrounding countryside – to the car, ending my tour with a drive to Castle House. This lovely part Tudor/part Georgian pile was owned by artist Sir Alfred Munnings, also the son of an East Anglian miller, who referred to it as the "house of my dreams".

A lover of landscapes, inspired by childhood visits to Flatford and the work of Constable, he moved to Dedham in 1919. A prolific artist, after his death his wife opened the vast house and gardens to the public in 1961, revealing a body of some 650 pieces with subjects ranging from racehorses to war to Cornish coves.

But this corner of England will forever be associated with Constable, revealing landscapes that have changed little over 200 years. Nature has almost stood still.



**Fine art fare:** Le Talbooth restaurant appears in Constable's *The Vale of Dedham*