

Dedham Vale Society

Article: The Society's New President, Robert Erith

a profile by Maureen Cleave

Robert Erith farms 270 acres near Bures and from this farm, on a clear day, he can see 18 churches: he can see Great Horkesley, Little Horkesley, Wormingford, Mount Bures, Lamarsh, Alhamstone, Great Henny, Great Cornard, Little Cornard, Sudbury St Gregory's. Sudbury St Peter's, Chilton, Stanstead, Long Melford, Glemsford, Alpheton, Lavenham (9 miles as the crow flies) and Bures, though of this – in spite of being well over 6ft 4 inches tall – he can see only the flagpole. Now, because of very enthusiastic woodland planting, he is rather in danger of losing sight of two, but what better man to be President of the Dedham Vale Society when he can see so much of it without stirring a step from home? "The founder-president," he said, "was Alfred Munnings and my Uncle, Raymond Erith followed him so I'm pretty chuffed to be in that company!"

He took up the job officially in September but had already – with Wilf Tolhurst, the Chairman, and our 3 MP's – sorted out the problem of the flight path to Luton and Stansted airports which went straight over the Vale. From next March this is to be moved, at a cost of nine million pounds to National Air Traffic Services, to north of Ipswich and will be much higher. "So everybody will gain," he said. "It just goes to show the Society can make a difference, that we are listened to if we present a good case in a reasoned way. The Dedham Vale was created an AONB for its peaceful tranquil countryside and its association with Constable and that's how it must stay."

He is 65 with farming in his blood though it took him some time to realise this. His ancestors were yeoman farmers in East Anglia from the sixteenth century. His father Felix, (brother of Raymond Erith, the architect) farmed Vinces farm in Ardleigh. "It was during the agricultural depression of the thirties and nobody had a bean. I think my parents found it tough but we three children knew nothing else – we had the whole countryside to play in. We would be ordered out of the house after breakfast and we would make houses and forts and dens out of the potato trays. We had 150 acres, an old International tractor, threshing tackle we shared with two other farmers, six farm hands and four Suffolk punches. Everybody had working horses then. The horseman would be up at 4.30 in the morning to get them ready to start work at 7. They had to be groomed, fed, and the tackle put on them, and he would talk to them the whole time in a private language.



“The harvest was wonderful for a boy. When I was six, I had my first paid job which was leading the horses between the traves (stooks) and holding their heads while the men pitched the sheaves up. At threshing, I was chaff-boy packing the chaff into sacks - a very dirty job.

“When we got to the bottom of the corn stack all the rats and mice would run out and dogs and men with sticks of chestnut palings would chase after them. The men tied string round their trouser bottoms to stop the rats and mice running up their legs. Harvest, thrashing, haymaking – it was such fun. The horses were all mares or geldings and the stallion would come once a year to service them, which was quite an event – these are very big animals.

“Suddenly all that came to an end. In 1950 every farm in Essex and Suffolk had working horses and by 1960 there were practically none.” He said there are now fewer Suffolk punches in the world than there are giant pandas.

He had been to Littlegarth in Dedham and Ipswich School as a boarder, and his father intended he should go to Writtle and eventually take over the farm. However, on his eighteenth birthday he went into the army to do his national service for two years in the Tenth Hussars and by the time he arrived at Writtle everything had changed.

“I’d had my own personal soldier servant and my own driver. I’d done serious soldiering in the Middle East. There were the friends I’d made and the smart parties and deb dances in London and I loved all that. Going to Writtle was like going back to school and I rather kicked over the traces and flunked my exams. I was interested in politics and, whilst I didn’t want to make lots of money, I didn’t want to be poor.”

He went to London and worked on the shop floor of a builders’ merchant in the East End, selling nuts and bolts to dockers. He still managed – and this was to be the habit of lifetime – to enjoy himself, more deb dances and meetings of the Bow Group of young Conservative political hopefuls, where friends included Geoffrey Howe, Patrick Jenkin and Tony Newton. He decided to emigrate to America, working for a firm called Hechinger, a sort of American Homebase in Washington. Here he somehow contrived to get pally with President Kennedy’s secretary, a Mrs Lincoln. How he ended up doing six week’s service with the Royal Scots Greys in Hong Kong and being regularly mistaken for the second in command of the squadron (who happened to be the Duke of Kent) is another story, but generals would salute him and gravely he would salute back.

We next see him hitching a lift with the RAF from Hong Kong to Perth and later travelling all over Africa in a Land Rover. Home again after two years, instead of showing signs of settling down, he’s showing rich Americans round London in his mother’s car. At this point he met his Sara, his wife and later the mother of his three sons. Sara didn’t seem to mind that he wasn’t fully employed. They bought the house (with one cold tap which she didn’t mind either) near Bures, and in 1966 he went into the City, becoming a stockbroking analyst with Savory Milln, advising investors about companies in the building industry like Wimpey, Taylor Woodrow, McAlpine, Laing and so on. It was the building boom and all that experience with nuts and bolts came in useful. He wasn’t doing badly for a man who failed maths O-level twice.

He was selected as Conservative candidate for Ipswich in 1976, as a result getting pally with Margaret Thatcher and John Major, in the election of 1979 getting the highest recorded Conservative vote but not big enough to win. “I liked politics, the cut and thrust, the feeling you might be able to get things done, be of service – a Trollopian idea which probably sounds a bit pompous.” In 1997 he loved being High Sheriff of Essex, the 817th high sheriff since the time of the Saxon kings when Essex was a separate kingdom. “I thought to be part of this historical cavalcade was just a wonderful thing, I like the continuity of English life, the fact our history is evolutionary rather than revolutionary – we’ve only had one revolution and that was reversed. Charles the Second came back as king and executed only the twelve regicides.”

In 1985, the City changed and the days of traditional stockbroking were over. Everybody sold out to everybody else and made lots of money and his firm were taken over by Swiss Bank Corporation, he becoming chairman of their equities group. He was very busy, holding down eleven non-executive jobs at one time, but not too busy to keep an eye on other things.

Here’s an example of how he gets things done. “When Swiss Bank took over, we had this smart office in Blackfriars. Across the river was a long yellow hoarding by Bankside power station and on top of this was a cardboard cut-out of what looked like Snoopy but which turned out to be Shakespeare in a hard hat. I wandered over and behind the hoarding was a hole in the ground of about an acre and a sign saying Site of Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre. Then it said, Inquiries to Bear Gardens – after the bear pit in Shakespeare’s time. I went round to this little office and there I met Sam Wanamaker and he told me about his plans for the Globe.”

Erith went back across the river and said to his bank, “We’re a foreign bank in London and we want to be good citizens. If we give some money to the Globe we will get a lot of bang for our buck i.e. credit.” There’s a photograph of him handing a cheque for £50,000 over to Sam Wanamaker, enough to get the project on its feet again. He is now a Trustee and Deputy Chairman of the Globe Board.

He was to become a model farmer. “I’d watched the destruction of the landscape: there were no tree preservation orders, hedges had been grubbed out, farmers ploughed up to the tarmac but what incensed me was the stubble burning. I would get off the train at Colchester and from the top of Wormingford Hill the whole of the Stour Valley looked like a film set for the battle of Stalingrad and the smell...it made me so angry.”

In twenty years he has planted five miles of mixed hedgrows and 7,000 trees. He has made seven ponds and planted two wildflower meadows and re-established two metre field margins. The whole place is a wonder and a delight “I did all this with the help of the Dedham Vale and Stour Valley Project, Braintree District Council and Essex FWAG, who have all been super. Twenty years ago I was considered loopy but I was determined to farm on my own terms.” Sixteen years ago he put all his wiring underground and is rather shocked that in all that time only one person has noticed.

He’s passionate about the Vale. “We can’t keep the area in aspic but we have to make sure we resist inappropriate change. A lot of people wanted the Constable Centre in Little Horsham and that’s gone away for the moment. Then there was the power station at Ardleigh – not physically in the Vale but its presence would have dominated the skyline. And there are always mobile phone masts and noise and light pollution. There are people who want to allow motor boats on the river Stour, and others who want a theme park in Dedham. Then there’s the problem of the A12: the noise is not so much the cars as the friction of the tyres on the road surface. We must insist the authorities use surface materials that make least noise.

“There will always be a need for the Society because as one horror recedes, another looms. Farming will inevitably change. There will be less subsidy for arable production and more for environmental features accessible to the public which is often ignorant about farming and the countryside. We must get children interested, encourage schools on tight budgets to bring them to look at places like wild flower meadows.”

There is a limit to his ambition: he wants to take the Vale right up to the true end of the valley above Clare at the source of the river Stour.

“The most important thing is that there is now a draft management plan for the whole valley right up to 2030, and we shall do our best to ensure this reflects the Society’s views. We won’t win every battle but we must be resolute.”

What he wants more than anything is new members, particularly amongst the younger generation. “We don’t need lots of money, we need lots of members. We have 750 as it is, but if we represented a thousand we’d have that much more clout.”