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The National Trust in Saffron Walden and North-west Essex ©Ben Cowell

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Audley End today.

H.G. Wells, in his 1916 novel *Mr Britling Sees it Through*, vividly described the landscape he experienced upon his arrival at Easton Glebe near Dunmow a few years earlier. Looking through the eyes of an American visitor to Mr Britling's home at the fictional Matching's Easy, Wells declared Essex to be 'a characteristic and individualised county which wins the heart'. Separated from London's East End by the great woodlands of Epping Forest, it seemed to him that the countryside beyond still lived 'in the peace of the eighteenth century'. London itself, 'the modern Babylon', was so far distant as to be but 'a light in the nocturnal sky'.

Today, we are used to hearing how the bucolic rural landscape that Wells represented is now at risk of disappearing under brick, concrete and tarmac. Pressure for new house building in and around Dunmow, as in Saffron Walden, is giving many in the area cause for alarm. The National Trust in recent years has spoken out about the damage that could accompany ill-considered decisions to build on green-field sites as a result of the relaxation of current planning policies.

Had the georgical serenity of *Mr Britling's* setting ever been under threat, one wonders too whether Wells may have seen in the early National Trust a possible saviour. At around the time Wells was writing, the National Trust had only just reached its third decade (it was founded in 1895). But its influence was indeed soon to reach into north-west Essex.

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Among Well's circle in Essex would have been the MP and future Government minister Noel Buxton, who purchased Paycocke's House in Coggeshall in 1904 and presented it to the National Trust in 1924. Visitors to Paycocke's today learn of the part played by Buxton's cousin, Conrad Noel, in the restoration of the property. Noel lived in the house from 1904 to 1911, shortly before he took up his living in Thaxted, where Wells was one of the Red Vicar's regular callers.

Meanwhile, Buxton's uncle, Edward North Buxton, was a leading light in the campaign to save Epping Forest for the benefit of the public, and served as a verderer there. He purchased the ancient woodlands of Hatfield Forest on his deathbed in early 1924 with the intention of passing it to the Trust, of which he was also a Council member.

The Trust looks after hugely significant properties in other parts of the county. The Grange Barn at Coggeshall is an example, and happens to be one of the earliest surviving timber-framed buildings in Europe. In 1936 the Trust acquired Bourne Mill in Colchester, built as a Tudor fishing lodge. Important countryside properties include Danbury and Lingwood Commons, and Blakes Wood, all near Chelmsford. The Trust's interests in the Dedham vale meanwhile help to protect the landscapes that have been immortalised in the art of John Constable.

Nevertheless, the perception prevails that Essex is simply not a National Trust county. The Trust has fewer members per head of population in Essex than in many other parts of the country. According to a recent survey, fewer than half of a sample of people living in the county could name a single National Trust property in Essex. Given that the Trust was founded primarily to protect open spaces and countryside, and to be 'for ever, for everyone', we are working hard to understand better what might motivate Essex people to become more interested in what we do.

Admittedly this problem of under-representation of Essex residents among the Trust's membership prevails more in the south of the county than in its northern reaches. A simple reason for the discrepancy however possibly lies in the fact that the Trust does not have a mansion house property in Essex. We have lots of wonderful and unique countryside sites, but none of them are great estates that compare with the likes of Ickworth (in Suffolk), Blickling (in Norfolk) or Wimpole (in Cambridgeshire).

It could have been so very different. In Saffron Walden, Audley End is owned and managed today by English Heritage. As Simon Thurley's book *The Men from the Ministry* (2013) recounts, however, the house and its grounds very nearly came to the Trust.

In 1944 Lord Braybrooke, who had succeeded unexpectedly to the title after the death in succession of two of his cousins, approached James Lees-Milne, Secretary to the National Trust's Country Houses Committee. According to Lees-Milne's diaries, Braybrooke at the time was 'embarrassed by his

inheritance', and 'At his wits' end what to do with Audley End.' ('Who wouldn't be?,' Lees-Milne added.)

Lees-Milne met Lord Braybrooke at the house in June 1944 and found it to be 'a very secret place', dominated by its use at the time as a military college. Lees-Milne nevertheless recorded his delight at the various features he saw – the staircase by Vanbrugh, the 'Walpolian Gothick chapel', the impressive Great Hall. But he added that alongside these features there was 'a deal of indifferent stuff in the rooms, which makes Audley End a true English country house, and not a museum'. In sum, he characterised Audley End as being 'extremely important ... on a par with Blickling and Hatfield'. (Blickling had come to the Trust in 1940, one of the very first houses to be gifted in this way under the terms of the Trust's country houses scheme.)

Lees-Milne also recorded that Lord Braybrooke, who could 'barely find his way about' the estate he had just acquired, was 'very keen to preserve his inheritance by means of the National Trust'. In fact, various means of securing Audley End's future were explored. A prospective tenant, Mrs Van der Elst, was courted. The Pilgrim Trust was mooted as a prospective purchaser, in order to lease it out as a girls' school. The 7th Earl of Wilton considered buying it but was barred by his trustees.

Eventually, and somewhat surprisingly, Government stepped forward with a solution. The Ministry of Works made the suggestion that the house might come to them 'rather than be given to the National Trust', in return for sufficient financial inducement from the Treasury. The rationale was that the Ministry needed an example of a country house 'of this supreme quality', to sit alongside the collection of royal palaces already in the control of the state. This was a bold move, indicative of the growing confidence of the Ministry in those early years after the war, at a time when civilian Government was growing in size and influence in public life like never before.

Negotiations continued, with the Trust putting forward an alternative scheme of a partnership with Cambridge University for Audley End to be used as a residential college. This solution, which was the Treasury's preferred option, fell through. But at the eleventh hour the Ministry of Education proposed that they could make use of the house as an educational facility.

Hugh Dalton, Chancellor of the Exchequer, gave his consent 'with great satisfaction'. The intervention of the Permanent Secretary of the Treasury, Sir Edward Bridges, rescued the scheme when it started to flounder over questions of cost. For Bridges, the question of financial value was a 'rather unreal' one in an era of post-war austerity. More important by far was Audley End's value as one of the 'great country houses of the land'. It was, he added, 'no doubt... a very unorthodox' position for a Treasury Permanent Secretary to adopt, 'but it happens to be what I feel about the subject' (Thurley, p.186).

By these means, Audley End was conveyed to the Ministry of Works in February 1949. It was the last such major house to be acquired by the

Government in this way. Following the Gowers Report of 1950 and the Conservatives' election victory in 1951, the Treasury never again sanctioned such wholesale largesse in the direction of the owners of stately homes.

As it turned out, the plans for using Audley End as an educational resource fell through entirely, leaving it as a show house for the Ministry, a role it continues to function to this day through the Ministry's modern incarnation as English Heritage. Lees-Milne was waspish in his response, recording in his diary that 'I am sorry that the NT has not got it because I am convinced that they will present houses better than the tasteless Ministry of Works'.

In this way, the National Trust missed a significant opportunity to have a visible presence in the Saffron Walden area, indeed in Essex as a whole. Even so, it is not quite true to say that the Trust has no other interests in the town. Several smaller, but no less important buildings have a direct or indirect connection to the National Trust.



An old photograph of the Sun Inn, Church Street, Saffron Walden.

It is not always widely known or recognised that the Sun Inn on Church Street is a National Trust-owned property, albeit one that is let on a very long lease. The house was acquired in 1933 through the Ancient Buildings Trust (the former property-holding arm of the Society for the Protection of Ancient National Trust NW Essex – *Saffron Walden Historical Journal* No 26 (Autumn 2013)

Buildings), and the generosity of Miss Gibson and other local benefactors. Douglas Kent, SPAB research director and the current leaseholder of 25-27 Church Street, has recently won a prestigious Museums and Heritage Award for the excellent conservation work he is undertaking there.

As well as owning freeholds, the Trust is also empowered to hold covenants over properties in order to secure their long-term future. For example, restrictive covenants are held by the Trust over the Old House and 1-5 Church Row in Clavering – now known as The Guldhall.

In Saffron Walden, the covenants we hold over the old Sun Inn are typical of the kinds of controls that were being exercised from the 1930s onwards. They limit the drying or airing of washing outside the property, require that all inside wood and iron work is to be painted with two coats of oil and white lead paint every seven years, and ensure that access is made possible for those interested in the building's antiquarian or historical features.



No 1 Myddylton Place as a Youth Hostel, pictured in the 1950s.

The Trust has similar covenants over 1 Myddylton Place, also an early interest of the SPAB. The Trust's written consent is required before any attempt is made to alter the front or rear elevations, alter 'the roofs or any other antiquarian features', or even to varnish the woodwork or limewash the exterior, let alone alter the internal walls and fireplaces. Myddylton Place is another of Saffron Walden's grade-I listed buildings that has enjoyed a facelift in recent times. Having been used as a Youth Hostel for 70 years, the building is now a private residence but nonetheless one that the current owners, Tony and Julia Chapman, have been very willing to open to the public.

The absence of the National Trust's distinctive oak leaf logo from view in Saffron Walden and the surrounding area should not therefore be read as evidence of a lack of any interest or influence in the area. In fact the Trust continues to exercise a deal of responsibility over some of the town's most historic properties, even if we failed at the last hurdle to scoop the great prize of Audley End. The Trust exists to look after special places of beauty and historic character, now and in the future. Few such places are as deserving of the Trust's attention as Saffron Walden and the landscapes of North West Essex. Long may it be so.

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NOTE: Ben Cowell is author of *Sir Robert Hunter: co-founder and 'inventor' of the National Trust* (2013).