**An Alternative Essex Way Part 4, Saturday 11th September 2021**

11 walkers, 19 miles – leader Ron Williamson

The final leg of a trip across Essex and what a great finale it proved to be.

Leaving Bures, a village straddling the river Stour and with a foot in both Essex and Suffolk, we soon reached the 13th century chapel dedicated to St Stephen open for all to view. Its grounds provided a wide vista across the rolling countryside and a chance to see the Bures Dragon a creature surrounded by mystery and intrigue.

Onward beside an infant river, crossing a boot cleaning ford before climbing to traverse the nature reserves of Auger Fen and Spoose’s Vale and then passing through vast orchards with trees laden with ripe apples ready for picking. Now along ancient byways connecting richly timbered farmhouses we soon reached Stoke by Nayland with its impressive and welcoming “wool” church and the equally inviting Crown Inn and its amazing open-air seating area.

Continuing along more sunken tracks which had endured the footsteps of centuries of travellers and, despite breaks to allow foraging in the hedgerows for blackberries, Langham Church appeared in its hilltop setting. It was the views from the top of the tower that Constable reproduced in many of his paintings depicting the Suffolk Landscape. Through the parkland of the Langham estate and only a few miles to tea and cream scones in the tourist honeypot of Dedham.

The final five miles in the early evening sunlight were a delight as we ambled through the riverside meadows of the River Stour, cattle grazed contently, couples strolled, families frolicked, whilst punts, canoes and rowing boats glided by on the calm river. An opportunity to visit Flatford Mill could not be missed and it was here that Suzanne enlightened us with more details of the significance that our surroundings have in the history of landscape painting.

All too soon we were back into reality as the we reached journey’s end at Manningtree station with its huge commuter car park, just in time for the hourly express service to London. However, eight walkers opted to delay departure for some 30 minutes so that they could savour the delights of the station bar on platform one, so we celebrated Joelle’s completion of the 108-mile route which started it seems many months ago at Liverpool Street station and also Richard’s who joined us for the four Saturday stages.

Photographs by Stephen Lannon