

THE ESSEX GALLERY

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to advise Members of a proposal to build a public art gallery in Essex and determine whether Member's would be prepared to support the project in principle.

2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 The District Council has been approached by Mr Vin Harrop who is currently National Co-ordinator of Dance Week, with a request that the Authority supports his proposal for an Essex Gallery. The proposal is a personal dream of his to raise the profile of the county, contribute to economic growth and place the county on the national and European map. Details of the scheme are attached as Appendix 1.
- 2.2 At this stage, Mr Harrop is only requesting support in principle for the project. He has yet to formally approach the County Council. To date, the Essex Councils that have responded positively to his request are Uttlesford, Chelmsford, Castle Point, Colchester, Harlow and Braintree.
- 2.3 If Members are minded to support the proposal at this stage it is on the understanding that the Council is making no financial commitment.

3 RECOMMENDATION

It is proposed that the Committee **Resolves**

Whether to support in principle, the proposal for The Essex Gallery.
CD(F&ES))

Mr R Crofts

Corporate Director (Finance & External Services)

Background Papers:

Letters from Mr Harrop.

For further information please contact Miss E McIlwaine on (01702) 546366

THE ESSEX GALLERY

(Centre for the Visual Arts in Essex)

Introduction

Up to the end of the nineteenth century it was the churches and other religious buildings that were in the main the guardians and the repositories of the arts in Essex. Since then a small number of public and private museums and galleries have begun to establish collections of Essex, British and mostly Western Art, but the County still has no single point of reference for either indigenous art or acquired art from outside the county.

Art in Essex can be traced back to Norman times. Then the vernacular art was architecture, itself a fundamental art and one which has since provided a convenient framework for other art forms. Here we can see rustic churches and cathedrals with their redbrick walls and splendid timbered belfries. We can also discover fine examples of medieval wall paintings, sumptuous monuments, oaken effigies, monumental brasses, elaborate silverware and stained glass.

Architecture, the most elemental of the visual arts, and its dependent arts were not the only art forms to rise from the land of Essex during Tudor, Stuart, Elizabethan and Georgian periods. Some portrait painting of outstanding merit was very much in evidence, mostly of ancestors of landowners and country gentlemen and their ladies.

Nevertheless, in a land that has remained predominantly agrarian for eight centuries, it has been in the vernacular rather than the grand building that Essex has excelled, where craftsmen were forced to use only readily available materials of timber and brick-earth.

Since Georgian times when the natural beauty of the Essex countryside began to be recorded by skilled artists, where business magnates began to employ architects to build their elegant mansions and create their carefully-planned gardens, the architect—the painter—and his comparatively poor relation, the engraver, has been recognised for his true worth. However, it was not until John Constable (a Suffolk man, just), crossed the Stour with his easel and canvas, that the supreme moment had arrived in the history of the visual arts in Essex.

Sadly, Essex has never had its own Constable. It has nevertheless produced many fine artists over the past two centuries, some of the most notable being: Eric Bawden, William Redmore Bigg, Frederick Brown, John Browne, Graham Crowley, John Doubleday, Anthony Fry, John Rogers Herbert, Ken Kiff, Edward Middleditch, William Morris, Frederick Caley Robinson, Sir Walter Westley Russell, John Skeaping, George Edmund Street and Mark Wallinger.

As you will see, this proposal shows how we can build on the past by creating a necessary icon for a socially and culturally regenerated Essex of the future.

Why an Essex Art Gallery?

1. The New Millennium presents us with a unique and golden opportunity to let the sun shine on our artistic heritage, past and present, and bring Essex to the forefront of art appreciation in Britain
2. Most people are aware of the cultural richness of this part of the country in terms of its artistic talent, yet despite such a high proportion of painters, sculptors and mixed media artists; the county lacks an appropriate shop window for 'Essex' art.
3. For a county the size of Essex there are remarkably few art galleries- and none capable of mounting a major showcase for significant national and regional exhibitions. The fact that Essex is within close proximity of London may have a bearing on this, but the same cannot be said about the other arts that are sufficiently well catered for.
4. Essex deserves its own art gallery, one that can put the county on the map of England, the UK, and Europe. It must be a 'masterpiece of modern architecture', and give the county a cultural landmark for the 21st Century.
5. A glance at the location of existing museums and galleries, both public and private, shows that they are scattered at random across the county leaving large demographic gaps where currently very little art exists. The main provider of 'local' art on public display seems to be the libraries. They of course lack adequate display area and so cannot do justice, for example, to the life's work of a prolific artist, no matter how careful the selection process may be. This is not in any way decrying the valuable work done by these libraries over the years, to bring art to the attention of a wider public. What has to be done now is to go one stage further and grab the attention of that section of the public that does not participate in art in any way.
6. A public museum/gallery without relevance or accessibility is worthless: art must be a personal experience or it is nothing. This is why we must create an art gallery that does not contribute to social exclusion, for art that seeks to be exclusive has little or no public appeal. If this is to be the truly 'Essex' Gallery then it has to be conceived with a mission. It has to reach out to the whole community while at the same time making no compromises to selection or display -and offer a contemporary art of relevance to the county, one which leaves tradition intact.
7. There is an abundance of art here in the UK that never sees the light of day, some of which may be the work of Essex artists. For example, when the Tate Gallery opens its new wing, 'Tate Modern' at Bankside, it will still only be showing 30 percent of its entire collection of 7,000 works of art. This leaves more than enough to keep any new regional galleries alive.
8. Society votes with its feet. So, if the concept of a Centre for the Visual Arts is not right and therefore does not have the ultimate appeal that this proposal envisages, then it will fail. This is why it will be essential to carry out a careful and detailed feasibility study.
9. The Essex Gallery should aspire to hold a place in the affections of the people of Essex. It must therefore be conceived as 'their' gallery, for all the people all of the time.
10. Major capital projects for provision of the arts are springing up all over the UK, as the result of Lottery funding. However, so far no major investment in the county's arts infrastructure is planned by any of the arts agencies.

The Educational Role of the Centre

Of primary importance is the educational role of the Centre, both to complement the work of the Gallery and to support the core national curriculum with workshops and lectures. During the 1970s only a handful of professional artists were exploring ways of working in schools. Today every major museum and art gallery has an education programme and a network of artists now work 'in residence' in schools to provide support to teachers through mutually rewarding and enriching working relationships.

1. The contribution to education of these partnerships between professional artists and teachers includes:
 - engendering enthusiasm and confidence in the use of art materials by young learners
 - reinforcing and enhancing curriculum art work
 - providing exemplars of professional standards in attitude, commitment and application
 - technical skills
 - a diversity of approaches
 - professional in-service support for teachers
 - developing a multicultural dimension
 - developing ways of working appropriate to the needs of particular groups, for example young people with disabilities
 - knowledge and experience of the gallery, museum and art world in general
 - knowledge and experience of the art market and employment opportunities
 - providing ideas for GCSE, 'A' and 'AS' level courses; including printed resource material, videos, workshops, lectures, programmes of work
 - providing a focus for links across the curriculum
 - providing a focus for links between schools and with the local community

2. Art is both a product and a process of culture. The nation's art reflects its values, concerns and aspirations. Through participation in the creating and appreciation of art young people learn about themselves, about others and the world around them in a cultural context. It is towards the continuing development of a vibrant national art culture that an art gallery's work in education should be directed.

3. The Essex Gallery will therefore need to have a policy and programmes to respond to the needs of the education establishments in the county. This interaction will depend very much on the skills and interests of the gallery's education staff and the schoolteachers at the time. It should involve visits to exhibitions; use of dedicated space for education, and gallery staff taking part in the schools timetable.

- The gallery itself will be responsible for arranging talks, performances and workshops both as an aid to the school curriculum and for extra mural learning.
- The gallery's information and library services should be freely available for the schools to use.

In conclusion

There is a strong case to be made for the County of Essex requiring something really quite impressive, something, which distinguishes it from other regions, and for its residents to aspire to.

1. The county has an ancient Roman city giving it historical perspective, a thriving county town, many fine historic houses and country parks. It has popular seaside resorts and historic maritime harbours,

1. acres of agricultural land and wide open spaces for recreation, numerous theatres, arts centres, museums and small art galleries, and at the same time it is an important region for commerce and manufacturing, within close proximity of the capital. Essex now offers a natural gateway to Europe. But the county has no symbol that embodies its spirit of the future.
 - That spirit could and should be reflected in an outstanding building of its type and one which holds the key to the artistic genius of the county- its artisans.
 - To build an art gallery of international proportions, to provide a permanent home for an 'Essex collection' and a temporary home for a myriad of art exhibitions touring the world as well as exhibitions of indigenous art, would bring added prestige to the county. This should be something for Essex people to be very proud of.
2. Essex already enjoys the patronage of many visitors from abroad- such an icon for the county can only lead to further interest, whether recreational, educational, commercial, or cultural or a mixture of all four.
 - Such a manifestation of the 'Essex spirit' would bring new economic prosperity to the county making it easier for Essex as a whole to maintain the upkeep of the most prestigious county gallery in the UK.
 - It will have to be a physically striking building, one to show that Essex has a sound commercial and cultural future, and to put the county quite firmly on the national and European map.
 - It should be a building that would grab the visitor by the throat, demanding to be loved or loathed; a building that would create striking images when photographed, serve as a calling card for the county and one which demands instant recognition. Eventually the gallery should be designated as an Essex landmark
- It should push back the boundaries of architecture to show that Essex is of the future and not bound up in the past. It should combine universality by serving a broad cross section of the people of Essex, with the innovation needed to make it unique in the world- a place to be talked about as well as to attract the best in contemporary and 20th Century art.
- The search for the right architect to design such a significant building for Essex will not be easy and is bound to be controversial. It has to be a groundbreaking design of the 21st Century, and where to place it within the boundaries of the county could prove controversial, too. Chelmsford, the county town, is central and well served by road and rail, but there may be another town, which can put up an equally sound case to have it.

Location: Essex

Building: Centre for the Visual Arts

Proposer: VIN HARROP

Description: Art galleries for painting, sculpture, ceramics and mixed media arts.

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