



The River Stour Trust is planning to operate a second boat at Flatford from Easter onwards.

Picture: ANGELA GOODWIN

Trust hopes to boost visitor numbers with Constable Trail

The River Stour Trust wants people to enjoy the waterway as painter John Constable saw it 200 years ago. **Ross Bentley** reports.

Birdwatching trips by boat from Flatford is just one idea being floated by the charity that looks after much of the main waterway dividing Suffolk from Essex

The River Stour Trust is considering fresh ideas for its services from Flatford after being given permission to operate a second boat starting from Easter. Traditionally, the Trust has run a single boat from the location and only offered passengers a round-trip from Flatford to Dedham and back - but with an extra vessel it is looking at other options.

Vice president Emrhys Barrell said: "We are aiming to increase our boat trips at Flatford but it is very much dependent on volunteers. Possible ideas include bird watching trips and a water bus service from Flatford to Dedham.

"We hope that by giving people the option of a single journey it will reduce the number of people driving into Dedham, and reduce the traffic on the road, which gets very heavy in the summer."



Cllr Christopher Hudson and some of the River Stour Trust boat skippers, with the Trust's new trip boat Maria Constable in front of Willy Lott's House at Flatford, scene of many of John Constable's paintings, including The Haywain Picture: DENNIS WATTS

The arrival of the Trust's new electric boat was made possible by a generous donation of £6,000 from county councillor Christopher Hudson, who gave the money from his locality budget. The new vessel has been named the Marie Constable - after the wife of renowned Suffolk artist John Constable whose paintings of bucolic scenes along the River Stour have made this location known to people around the world.

And it is the artist who is central to the Trust's other main ambition for 2019.

This summer, the organisation is hopeful of launching what it is calling The Constable Trail - a guided trail along the River Stour that takes in the sites of 12 of Constable's works including The

Leaping Horse, The Young Waltonians and, of course, The Haywain.

Mr Barrell said many of the locations of these masterpieces remain almost untouched from the time two centuries ago when the young John Constable captured their enduring images on canvas.

He said: "The idea is that people can travel the trail by river, either in their own canoe or rowing boat, or on one of the Trust's trip boats. They can also walk it using public paths.

"At each stage you can stop and stand at exactly the same spot that Constable set up his easel to record the beautiful countryside of Suffolk and Essex and the people that lived and worked in

it."

The Trust is in the process of producing a leaflet that will show the locations linked by footpaths and hopes that it will encourage more tourists to visit the area for longer.

"At the moment visitors may just come to Flatford but we hope the Constable Trail will encourage them to stay in the area for the whole day and explore further."

Alongside these two exciting projects, the Trust will also continue with its on-going work of maintaining the River Stour and keeping this fine stretch of water navigable.

Mr Barrell said the charity works with the Environment Agency to carry out a wide range of tasks, including river dredging, cutting back reeds and overhanging trees and preserving the canoe launches and portage points.

He said: "All this is made possible by our volunteers who make a huge contribution to the charity and the maintenance of the river. Many of the volunteers are fully trained and licensed to operate boats and their efforts generate around £60,000 for the charity each year, which is a huge part of our operating cost.

"We are always looking for more volunteers who can get involved at any level they like from serving in the tea rooms in the Granary in Sudbury and sell tickets for boat rides to cutting grass on verges and driving the boats themselves."

www.riverstourtrust.org

field notes

Observations from East Anglia
by **Ross Bentley**



A brief respite from the office and the laptop.

Doing what I love best - cycling slowly through country lanes. It is bright and sunny, the sky a faded blue, the strong wind has an Arctic nip.

This is the hill up to Borley, one-time home to 'the most haunted house in England' but the rectory is now long gone.

On the tip of a dead branch of a denuded roadside oak, a waiting kestrel catches my eye. Undoubtedly, it has seen me coming from a mile off, labouring up the incline.

I cycle past and stop to look back and admire the bird, master of all he surveys. Disturbed, it drops off the branch, letting itself be taken by the wind, veering away and turning, its silhouette forming a crucifix.

Turning to face down, it literally stops in mid-air; halting to hover; its wings a blur, the wedge-shaped tail jolting up and down - a perfect rudder.

It is the most distinctive of bird behaviours, viewed often from car windows - a verge side act of control and elegance.

I'm in awe at the bird's ability to keep its position in such blustery conditions - it's akin to treading water in rapids. Is it possible to tread air? Maybe, wing air is more apt?

Whatever the best term, this wonder of nature has it perfected.

Later at Brunton Mill, the water birds are busy. Swans mingle with black headed gulls and mallards.

Some of the more juvenile mute swans with greyish beaks head my way in the hope of a titbit. The larger adults stay clear.

With the basal knob at the base of their beak, it always seems that mute swans are looking at me out of the corner of their eye, whatever angle I face them.

Or is it me looking out of the corner of my eye at them?



Kestrel hunting at Boyton Marshes
Picture: ALAN BALDRY