

Show is realisation of MP's rural commitment

Gummer helped push for large contemporary homes

By Sarah Chambers

A PIECE of legislation which came about through Conservative MP John Gummer's observations on driving through the Suffolk countryside is celebrated in a new exhibition at the Royal Institute of British Architects in London taking place this month.

The exhibition, opened by Suffolk Coastal MP Mr Gummer earlier this month, features plans for new country houses, including Sara Low of Darsham's proposals to build a large, contemporary style home in the Suffolk countryside.

Her plans are currently being looked at by Suffolk Coastal District Council.

The Suffolk Coastal MP, then Secretary of State for the Environment, was the driving force behind Planning Policy Guidance Note 7, which allows for an isolated house to be built in the countryside "if it is clearly of the highest quality" and is "truly outstanding

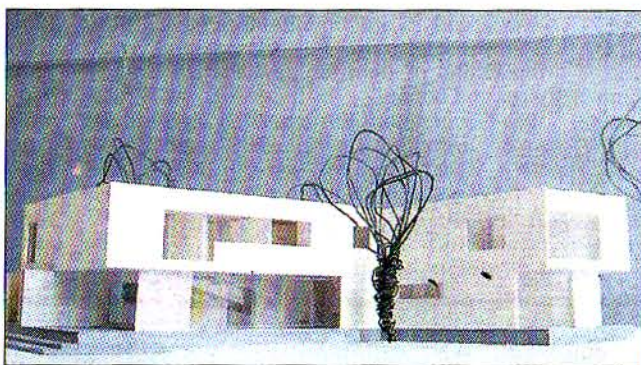
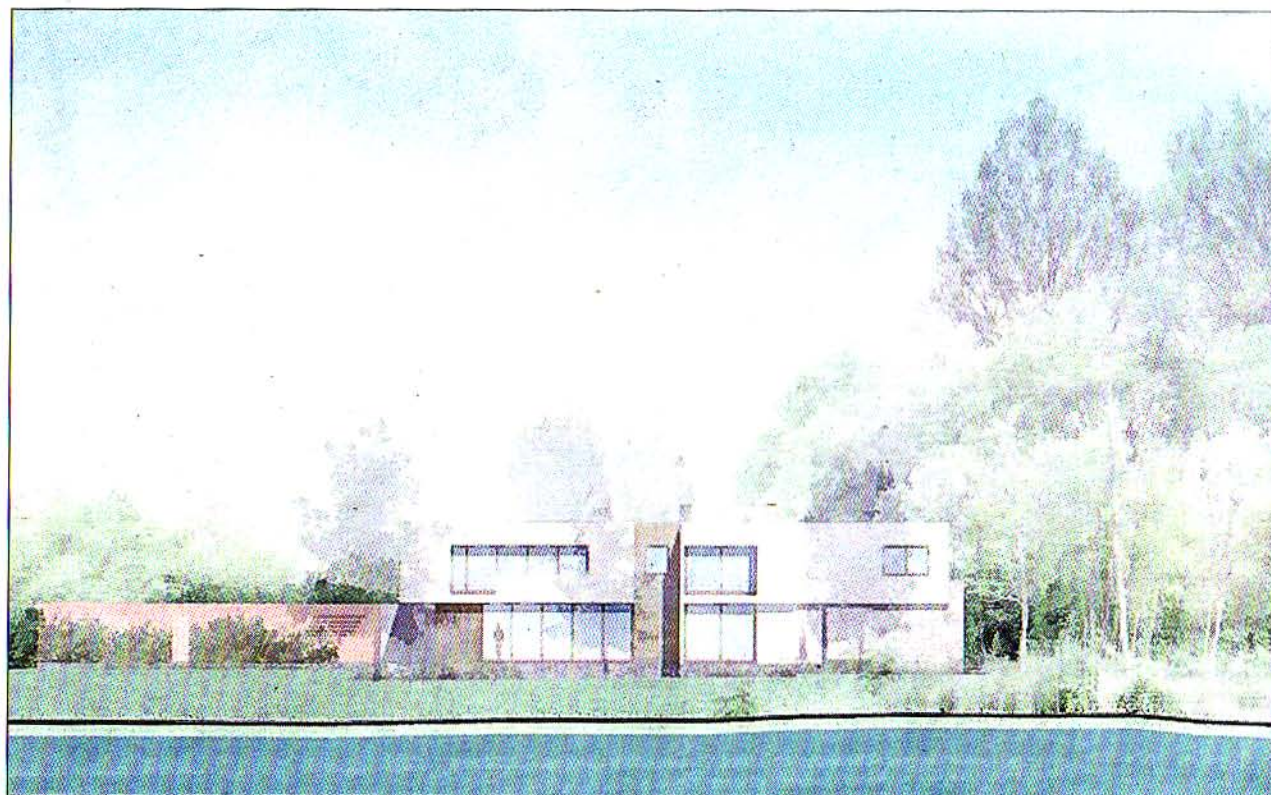
'Country house is a fundamental part of English heritage'

in terms of architecture and landscape design".

Mr Gummer has written in support of the plans for Mrs Low's house, which would be known as Wilderness House, and has been designed by Paul+O Architects of London.

Suffolk Coastal planners do not believe that Mrs Low's proposals should be "exceptionally justified". The council's development control sub-committee have carried out a site visit, and have yet to reach a decision.

At the opening of the exhibition, entitled The New English Country House, Mr Gummer said: "This legislation came about as a result of driving through the Suffolk countryside - it struck me how many country houses had been lost due to the iconoclasm of the 1960s and 1970s, when any excuse for mediocrity seemed acceptable and the built environment didn't seem to matter.



"The country house is a fundamental part of English heritage, and I wanted to ensure that this tradition was preserved. It has been called elitist, but it is only elitist in the sense that it is seeking for the very best."

Mr Gummer argued that we should be "celebrating our inheritance".

"We are talking about 22 houses being built when we have lost 1500. It cannot be true that this is some terrible attack on the countryside, nor it is true that PPG7 goes against government policy on Greenfield sites. Country houses have always been an exception, and the countryside is better for them having

FUTURISTIC: An artist's impression of Wilderness House, above, and a model, left

Photographs: EADT

been built."

There was "a wider battle" to be fought to ensure the legislation lasts "until we have replaced the houses we have lost", he said.

"Then we will be able to say to our children that we didn't stop the great tradition of country houses, and we are not always the most philistine of nations."

RIBA president George Ferguson warned there was "a real danger the one piece of Government policy that is to do with the rewarding of good architecture will disappear because of the politics of envy".

Entry to the exhibition is free. The RIBA Gallery is at 66 Portland Place, London, and is open 10am to 6pm weekdays, 10am to 5pm Saturdays.