

HELMINGHAM HALL

Suffolk

Proposed New Car Park Application

Appendix A: Pre-application
Submission to Historic England,
April 2021

Hoare,
Ridge &
Morris

Architects



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The Next 25 Years

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Introduction

Helmingham Hall needs little introduction in Suffolk; it is a handsome and imposing moated house, with fine gardens and a deer park. Privately owned and managed by the Tollemache family, it has an authenticity which has been lost by many substantial country houses in more corporate ownership (including those looked after by conservation charities).

The house, gardens and park are listed (Grade I), along with a number of monuments and statues. The stables are separately listed (Grade II).

This statement is prompted by an inter-generational handover of stewardship; Edward and Sophie Tollemache moved into Helmingham three years ago with their young family, taking up the reins from Edward's parents. Inevitably this changeover has prompted a re-thinking of what works well and what doesn't, and how life might be improved at Helmingham for those who live there, work there and visit. The intention is very much that Helmingham will remain as at present:

- a family home (three families live on site, including in 2 flats in the Hall)
- a workplace and business (there is a core team of 20 on the estate including 4 garden volunteers)
- a venue for events and visitors: garden visits are well established for 6 months of the year, and there is a regular succession of outdoor events, weddings and private functions over the whole year.

In all three areas above there is room for improvement, and each one impacts the others.

It is not anticipated that there will be major changes, and any projects will necessarily be phased for cashflow reasons. This statement identifies priorities, potential projects and timelines, and is intended to serve as introductory background information to assist a pre-application site meeting with Historic England, at which it is hoped that broad agreement on principles and approach can be agreed; following this it is expected that individual applications for Listed Building Consent and Planning Permission might come forward as required, but with the benefit of being seen in the context of an overall longer term masterplan.



Helmingham Hall - the South-West Elevation

Establishing a Masterplan

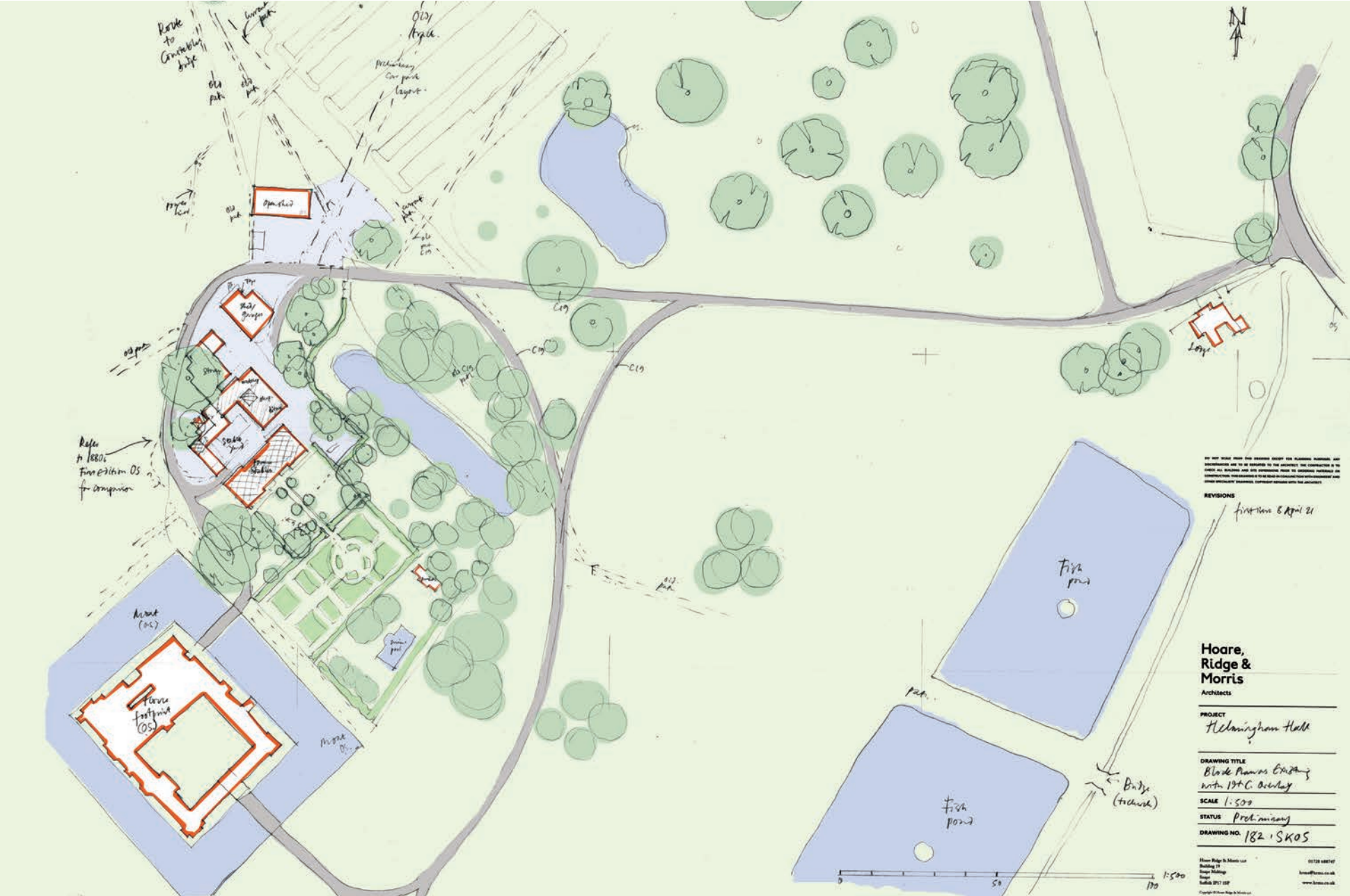
Establishing a spatial masterplan for complex historic sites is a useful means of maintaining an overall view of potential incremental change, particularly when phasing and ‘reshuffling’ of activity is needed. A good masterplan needs to be loose enough to evolve and respond to change, as design develops in more detail, and to allow for the organic development of priorities and needs. It needs to allow flexibility where inflexibility is foolish, but establish rigid parameters where these are needed. It is hoped that by establishing early discussion and involvement with Historic England and the local authority, it will assist and smooth subsequent decision-making for all parties over the coming years – with the ultimate objective that this new generation leaves Helmingham in even better shape than it finds it.

Historic Analysis and Context

A separate document prepared by Ben Pentreath Architects includes initial research and identifies key phases of development. Despite its apparently unified and timeless appearance, Helmingham is a much altered place and was heavily remodelled both by John Nash and Anthony Salvin. The evolution of the stables area is less clear and research is being commissioned to unpick the history and significance of this secondary building group, in order to inform consideration of potential changes there.

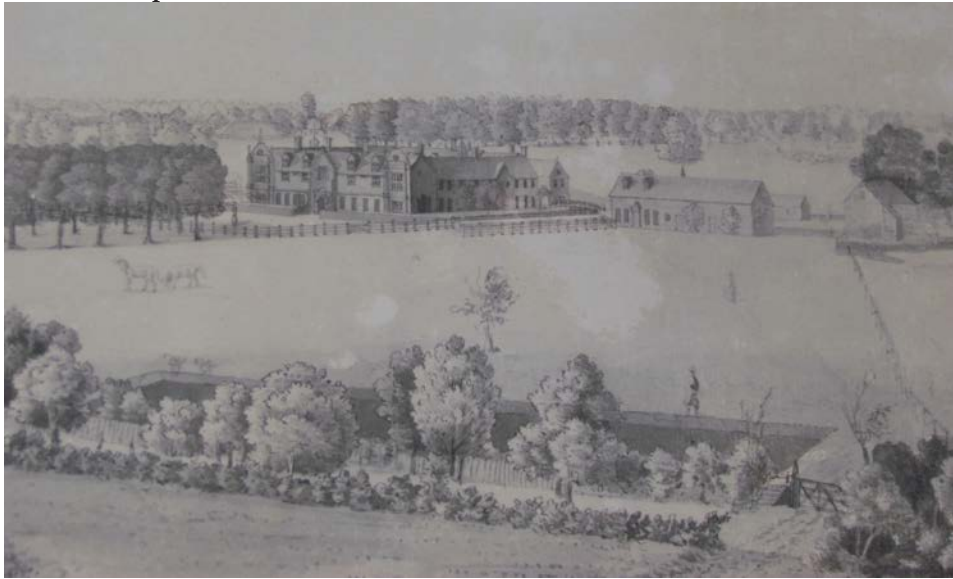


Helmingham: the Hall and Park

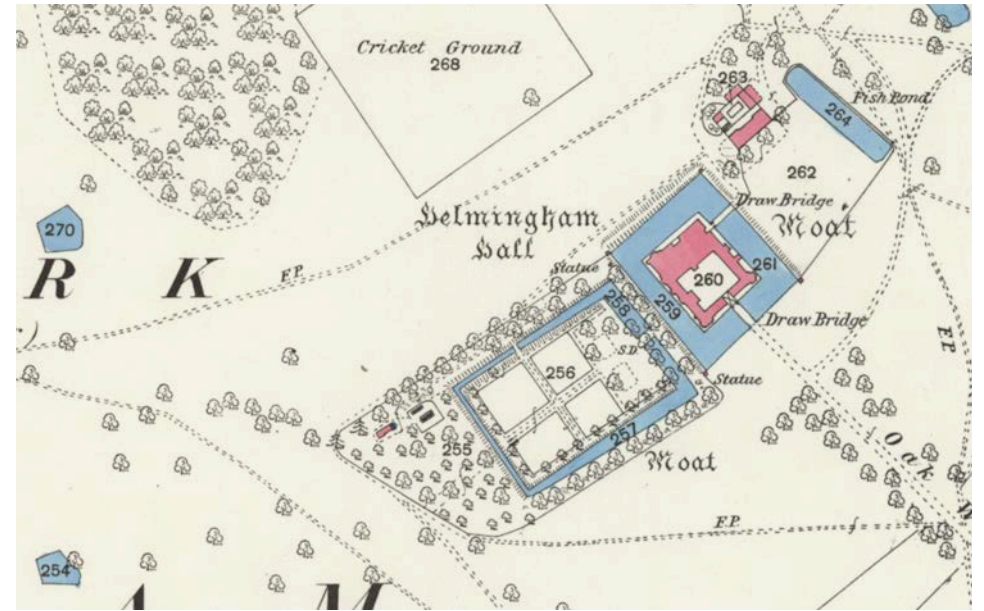


Helmingham Hall and Park - the main building group and back drive

Historic Maps and Views



Eighteenth Century view, showing earlier buildings to the South-East and East of the existing stables



Helmingham Hall and Park: excerpt of First Edition Ordnance Survey Map



Helmingham: Isaac Ware's map of 1803



Isaac Ware's map of 1803: detail

Economic and Social Context

The Helmingham Estate is a business combining property, land management, public visits and events. The residential cottage and farmhouse portfolio houses many estate workers. The land management has a focus on biodiversity and natural capital, alongside farming. The Hall is also a family home, with the house and two independent flats (both occupied by staff working on the estate).

Helmingham's gardens are much loved by the team of gardeners who care for them (paid staff and volunteers) and by the many visitors and tourists who come to see them. Helmingham is one of the few 'great houses' in Suffolk which welcomes visitors, and it is an area of the country where National Trust presence is limited compared to other parts of England. Helmingham is therefore particularly important as an inland 'heritage day out' for visitors to Suffolk to supplement English Heritage's properties, other less well known sites and the appeal of Ipswich, the market towns and the Suffolk coast. Along with the garden visits, the footpaths in the park are also much walked by visitors and locals.

A changing calendar of events draws more visitors to Helmingham, and these have in recent years increased to include an outdoor cinema and an illuminated garden trail; these have proved very popular, and play an important commercial role in providing income to sustain the gardens and events business. At present, approximately 34,000 visitors come to Helmingham each year.

It is hoped that over time the pattern of visitor events might shift so that the peaks and troughs can be better spread across the year; this will assist the operational side of the business and provide more stable employment and resourcing. It will not necessarily lead to more visitors (or traffic) over the course of the year, but would lead to visitors spending more time while at Helmingham, and mean that during the winter months it is still a place to visit even when there is not a specific event such as the illuminated garden trail.

Visitor Infrastructure

Helmingham's visitor infrastructure needs the following improvements:

Parking

At present visitors park on the grass in the park in the area east of the Hall. In summer visitors are naturally drawn to park in the shade of the veteran oaks, which is likely to damage the rootplates. In winter cars become stuck and so winter events rely on staff and machinery to push or tow stuck cars – and then to repair damage to rutted grass afterwards. There is no accessible car parking and the visitor entrance is some distance from the current parking area for visitors. Providing a year round accessible car parking solution is essential for the smooth running of events and visits, and if the right location can be agreed it will also offer landscape enhancements in terms of better protecting trees and reducing the impact of cars in important views.

A preferred location has been identified to the east of the current stable and outbuilding group; this would be easily reached via the existing back drive, conveniently placed for visitor arrivals, and more discreet in terms of views of the park from the Hall and gardens. With new planting to reinforce the screening effect of existing parkland trees the impact on views from the north side of the park could be mitigated.

Arrival

At present visitors are directed up to the stable and outbuilding area from the informal parking in the front park. Having negotiated a cattle grid (and side gate) a visitor is presented with shabby farm buildings, a mess of hardcore, concrete and concrete block paving, and a sharp left hand turn then presents an uninviting arrival at a shop converted from an outbuilding. The route in is awkward, unintuitive and heavily reliant on intrusive signage. This does not reflect the family's aspiration which is that all visitors should feel welcome as they arrive, and that the arrival experience should be one of pleasure and indeed excitement.



The back drive showing the scars of winter parking problems and potential damage to rootplates.



The current visitor entrance.

Shop and Visitor Reception

The shop combines ticketing and a visitor reception. It is a tight space converted from a workshop/stable – uninviting to enter and awkward to negotiate, especially for those reliant on wheelchairs or coping with pushchairs. It all feels very tired and needs refreshing. The shop is possibly not in the best location and so the use of this whole building group is being reconsidered holistically along with parking and visitor flow – of which more is said later in this statement.

Lavatories

These are grotty and need refreshing. As with the other visitor facilities these have developed incrementally over time and their location needs to be reviewed before investment is made in upgrading them. Ideally these facilities need to be well placed for those arriving to Helmingham (who may have had longish journeys) and for those visitors already on site.

Catering

Catering is currently provided via a tearoom converted from the stables (listed Grade 2) which also houses the estate office. There is also some outdoor spill-over seating in the stable yard, which is served by a secondary ice cream counter in the converted north-east range next to the shop.



The shop - exterior



The shop - interior

The Stables and Stable yard

This is the first architectural space experienced by a visitor. One enters either through the shop (awkward as mentioned above) or via the passage at the eastern corner. When entering tight to the stables a visitor doesn't see the best of it; it is a handsome classical building which was later bypassed in the nineteenth century 'Tudor' remodelling of the Hall. The stable yard is a rather unsatisfactory space of trellis (screening the toilets), lean-to shed roofs, concrete block paving and with low walls subdividing the space. The other ranges are all of very ordinary quality except for a 'buried' pavilion now incorporated in part of the shop – this appears to relate to a pavilion scaled structure shown on Isaac Ware's map of 1803 and may predate the stables. More research is needed on the evolution of this building group but there is definite scope for improvement in presentation and use of this area, and for improvements to the interior and external setting of the stables.



The Stable Yard



The 'enveloped' pavilion in the Stable Yard

Services Generally

Electricity was only brought to Helmingham in the 1950s, principally to support a milking parlour in the stables area. Heating is provided through a combination of electric heating and oil boilers. Most of the house relies on a pair of electric radiators i.e. has no central heating.

The estate has been considering renewable heating but has not yet found the right solution; both biomass and photovoltaics are complicated by the space requirements and visual impacts. Ground source heating could be possible but requires a large area to heat a house of Helmingham's size, and lower flow temperatures are not ideally suited to large poorly insulated rooms.

We are at the outset of planning for the medium to longer term and a review of the existing services across the site is an important element of this work. ENG design have been commissioned to review the site and to advise on options and their report is in progress.

Services: points to report at present

Electrical test reports are up to date and there are no major concerns. The house was largely re-wired in the 1990s.

A centralised fire detection system is in place. Some renewal of smoke detector heads is planned in the near future.

A plumbed radiator system provides heating to most of the rooms in regular use by the family but not all the daily-used rooms; there is an ambition to extend pipework to achieve this, and to reduce reliance on electric heaters (which are a more significant fire hazard than a plumbed system). Rooms which are not in regular use may still be heated with electric radiators but regular PAT testing of these is needed.

The potential to improve thermal performance is being considered and it is likely that as and when any re-roofing is required in the coming decades, this will present an opportunity to insulate without impacting internal finishes or plasterwork.

The scope for internal wall insulation is limited due to the impact that this has on historic finishes, cornices, panelling etc. However, there are areas where this can be considered providing that breathable solutions are adopted, and it would make most economic sense to improve energy efficiency in the regularly used and most heated family rooms such as the kitchen.

There is an aspiration to relocate incoming overhead wires below ground at some point and an improvement to the UKPN substation (north of the stable yard) is also being considered (along with potential relocation of it).

Water – some incoming water supplies to the house are still in lead pipework. These need further investigation. Any replacement of lead pipework will involve lifting of floors and below ground disturbance.

Sewage – the house is served by a treatment plant. Arrangements for other buildings are not yet clear.

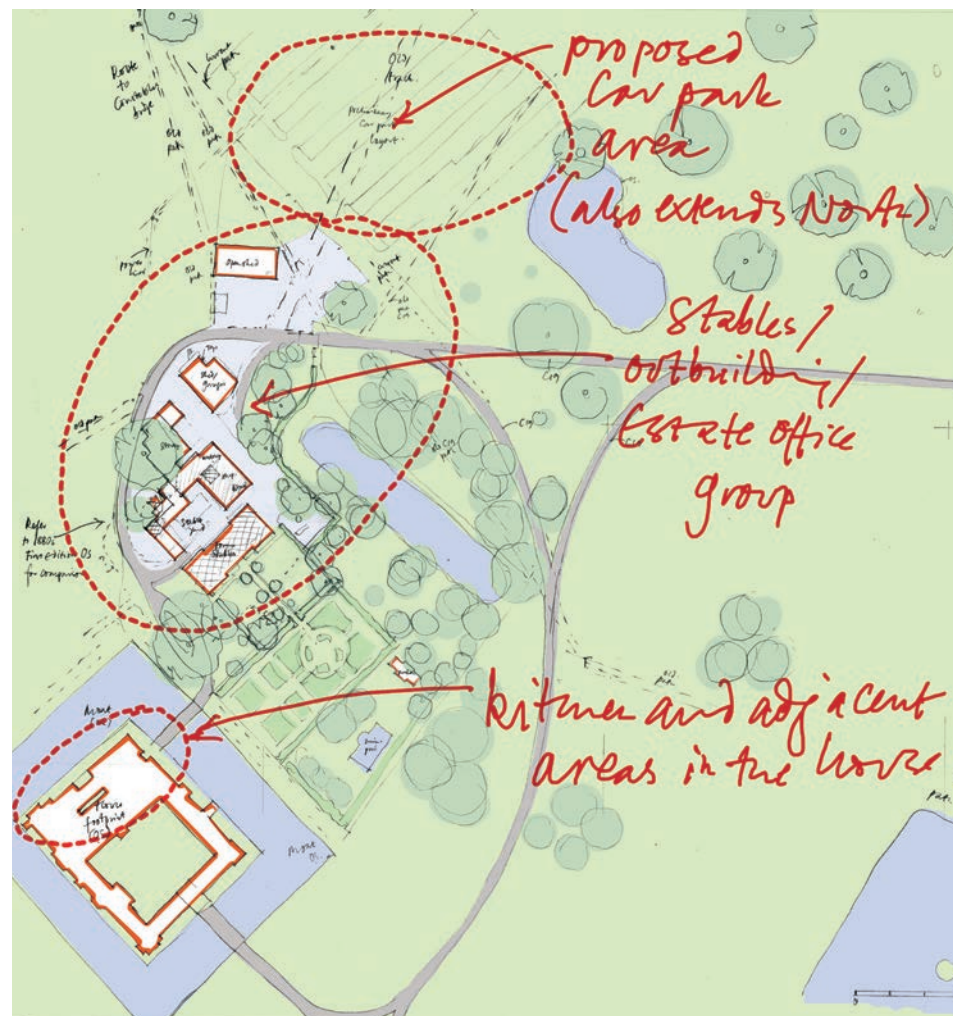
The House – potential alterations

Day to day family life is concentrated away from the formal rooms which were last redecorated in the 1990s. As with most families, the kitchen is the epicentre of domestic life, and the days of this being an unimportant merely functional space are long gone.

The family would like to make some modest improvements to the kitchen arrangements; these are set out in a separate document prepared by Ben Pentreath Architects, who have been commissioned to work on proposals for this area.

The Stable Yard, Estate Office and Parking – potential alterations

Hoare Ridge & Morris architects have been engaged to consider options for improvements to the stable yard area with a focus on improving facilities for visitors and events, and providing an improved office and facilities for the estate team and volunteers. Proposals for improved car parking as was mentioned earlier are tied in with this. Preliminary thoughts on both aspects are described later in this document.



Existing Site Plan showing potential areas of intervention

Estate and Events facilities

The estate office currently occupies cramped offices backing on to the kitchen in the stables, and overflowing to upstairs accommodation in the attic flat. It is hoped to relocate this office to another building (new or converted) and also to provide better meeting space and welfare facilities for non-office based staff (maintenance, gardens, housekeeping, catering, farming staff and garden volunteers). As mentioned previously there is a team of 20 regularly on site.

Additionally it would be useful to have rooms which might be used for public and private events (e.g. courses, workshops, meetings or educational visits) to supplement the facilities in the stables and to supplement or potentially replace marquee use (marquee activity currently happens at the southern end of the gardens).

The brief for what might be needed is being developed through discussion – but long-term flexibility in response to changing needs will be an important consideration.



Ecology

An ecological appraisal has been carried out with a particular focus on potential LBC/Planning applications which may soon be forthcoming. None of the areas where immediate change is anticipated are thought likely to impact on bats due to the lack of suitability of fabric which might be altered. However, there is a possibility of Great Crested Newt presence on site and so surveys have been commissioned in relation to these.



Photographs of Existing Office and Staff Kitchen facilities (in Stables)

Potential Forthcoming Applications

It is hoped that following pre-application discussions the following individual applications will be progressed over the course of 2021. In terms of order these are anticipated as follows:

- 1). Proposals for car parking – with a view to have a parking area started in September and complete by the late autumn so as to avoid another winter of parking on the park
- 2). Proposals for alterations to the kitchen and adjacent areas – with a hope to start that work in February 2022
- 3). Proposals for improvements to the estate office and stable/outbuilding area – timing not yet clearly established

It is quite possible that further projects will emerge over time.

Car Parking Proposals

Given the size of the park and gardens, off-site parking would not be practical for most visitors.

We have considered whether an alternative arrival point and orientation hub might work, but the area of the current stables/outbuildings seems the least sensitive area and indeed the area most capable of being improved. If the current arrangements were improved, this building group works well as a stepping stone to the house, park and gardens.

There is no perfect (i.e. completely invisible) location for a car park, but the proposed site seems practical, can be well screened by additional planting, has no impact on important or veteran oaks, and is in an area recently used as paddock (i.e. already partly taken out of the historic parkland use). The location will be far less intrusive and allow for a much better organised approach to parking than the current arrangements in the front park.



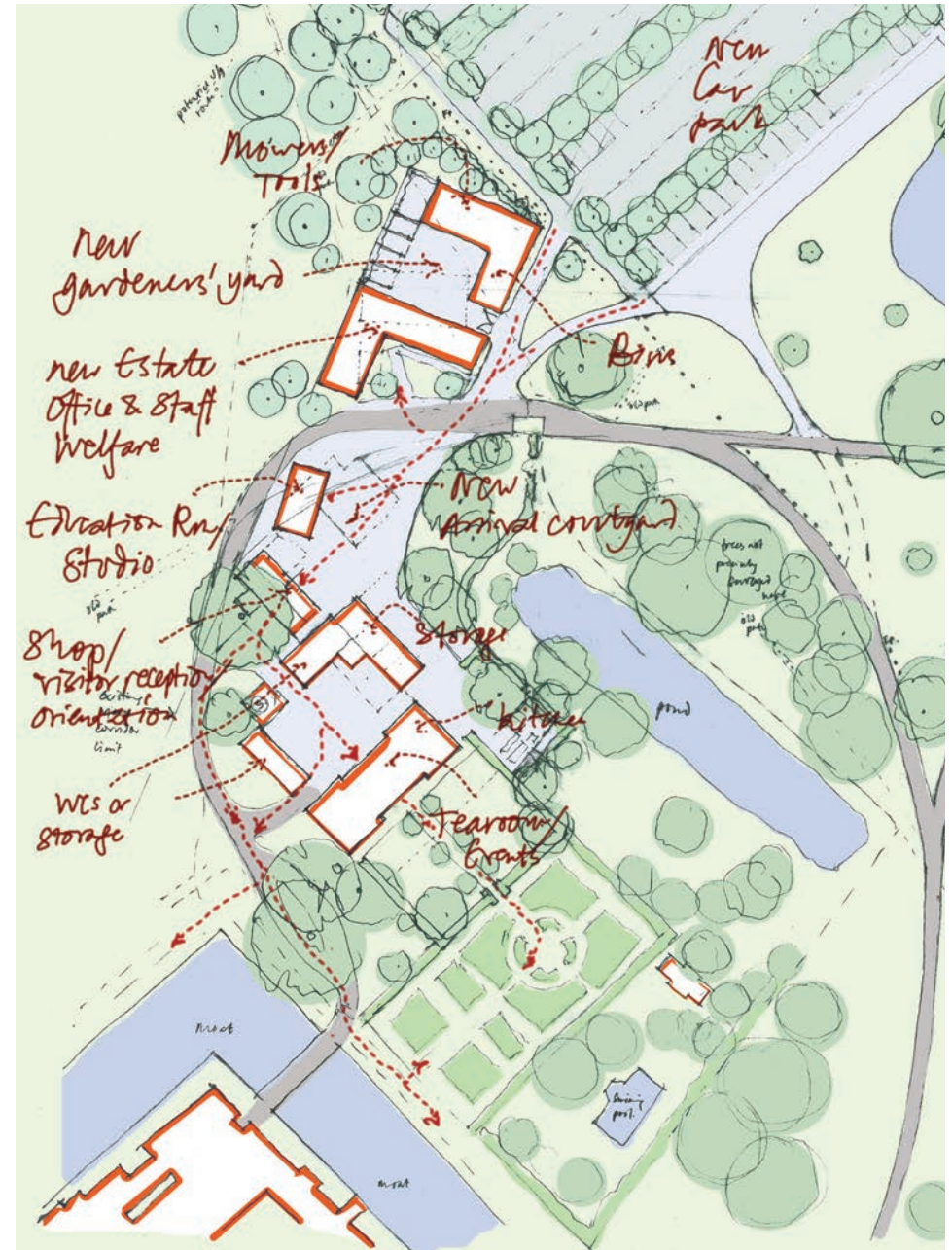
Preliminary Proposal for Parking and Stable Yard area as 182.SK06A

Stables, Estate Office and Visitor facilities

The most appropriate area for estate and visitor facilities seems to be in the area where these uses and activities are currently grouped; however, within this area there is room for improvement in the quality, location and relationship of facilities.

Key objectives are:

- 1). Remove storage of bulky items which could reasonably be stored off site, but allow storage of smaller items and machinery/tools which need more regular use
- 2). Take down unsightly and tatty buildings – to improve the general appearance of what is presently very much a back door but also the principal arrival point for visitors
- 3). Make the arrival experience for visitors attractive, intuitive and painless – and aim to inject a bit of the magic which the house and garden have, but the shop/stables area lacks
- 4). Provide appropriate, well located visitor facilities: orientation and arrival, toilets, shop, tearoom - with obvious connections on to house, gardens or park
- 5). Improve the setting of the park and listed buildings – with a particular focus on improving the stables inside and out, improving the stable yard and perhaps better connecting its lost relationship with the wider landscape
- 6). Provide staff and volunteer facilities which improve the experience of working at Helmingham
- 7). Allow flexibility so that the estate and events business can adjust to changing circumstances and new opportunities
- 8). Plan or at least allow for growth so as to avoid piecemeal incremental growth as has happened in the past



Excerpt of Preliminary Proposal for Parking and Stable Yard area as 182.SK06A

The preliminary proposals submitted are a first attempt to explore ideas on paper for discussion in response to these objectives.

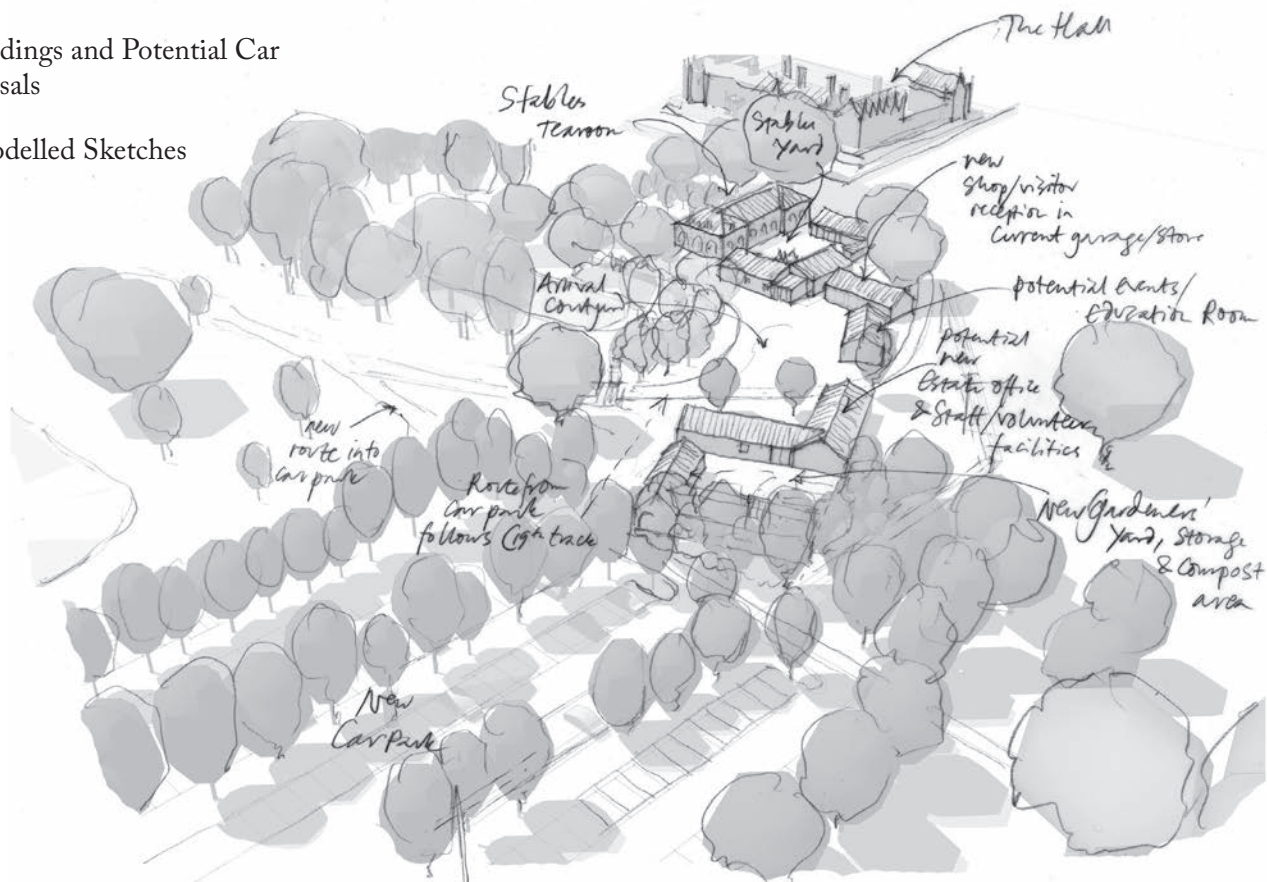
Rather than provide full commentary on what are very conceptual proposals, we have provided annotated thoughts on the drawings and as commentary in photographic captions. Our hope is that this approach will be sufficient for a fruitful first meeting and review.

Appendices:

Appendix 1 – Helmingham Hall - Principal Designations and Listing Descriptions

Appendix 2 – Helmingham Hall - Stable Yard, Outbuildings and Potential Car Park: Photographic Commentary for preliminary proposals

Appendix 3 – Preliminary Drawings and Computer Modelled Sketches



Preliminary massing model view – for further views see Appendix 3