

# Gillyflower House, Polstead (new dwelling)

## Heritage Statement

June 2023



1: Gillyflower House, viewed from the south

### 1.0 Summary

1.1 This Heritage Statement has been requested by the local authority to accompany a planning application for a new detached house within the grounds of Gillyflower House; an unlisted building within the Polstead Conservation Area.

1.2 In response to a pre-application consultation, the local authority officers considered that although there was potential for the development to cause a low level of harm to the character of the conservation area and the setting of nearby listed buildings, this could be avoided by a suitable design and siting.

1.3 They recommended the provision of additional information on levels and the building height, a reduction of the latter and/or sinking the building lower into the ground, and that materials and landscaping should reflect the rural character of the location. They also suggested an alternative flat-roofed design to minimise the impact of the development, and re-siting further to the west.

1.4 The conclusions of this Heritage Statement are that the design and siting of the new house *as proposed* would have far less impact than the local authority fear, although they are quite right to raise concerns and ask for these to be assessed further. The small scale, minimalist design of the proposal, and its discreet siting would have a negligible impact on the undulating and wooded character of this part of the conservation area and on the setting of the adjacent listed buildings.

## 2.0 Guidance and policies affecting listed buildings generally

2.1 Conservation areas and listed buildings are referred to as “Heritage Assets”, or “Historic Places” in national guidance, which is broadly set out in the National Planning Policy Framework for Local Authorities to incorporate within their Local Plans and specific policies. Further guidance in the assessment of proposals is set out in detail by Historic England in various publications such as those on conservation areas, listed buildings and their settings, and heritage statements.

2.2 An overview of the essential message in these policies, guidance, and documents is that heritage assets are irreplaceable resources to be valued and conserved. Their significance needs to be understood by all those involved in the planning process; owners and applicants, their professional advisors, and those within local authorities who assess proposals and make decisions on them.

2.3 In determining applications, local planning authorities require an applicant to describe the significance of any heritage assets affected, including any contribution made by their setting, how this may be affected by proposals, and how any adverse effects might be mitigated. This is the purpose of a heritage statement, but it does not replace the requirement for the local authority to make their own assessment.

2.4 That assessment involves a balancing or “weighing up” of factors identified as beneficial or adverse in relation to official guidance and policies; hence the terminology in guidance of placing “weight” on them. Adverse effects are formally categorised as “harm” to various degrees: total loss, substantial harm, or less than substantial harm, all of which require clear and convincing justification, and may or may not be counterbalanced by public benefits in the proposals. This approach also applies when a decision to refuse consent is reviewed through the appeal process, which takes a case through a Planning Inquiry, or further; to the appeal Courts, and ultimately the House of Lords.

## 3.0 Conservation areas; their preservation and enhancement

3.1 There is a requirement that when considering any planning application that affects a conservation area, a local planning authority must pay special attention to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of that area<sup>1</sup>. A judgement in the House of Lords concluded that *“the statutorily desirable object of preserving the character of appearance of an area is achieved either by a positive contribution to preservation or by development which leaves character or appearance unharmed, that is to say preserved.”*<sup>2</sup>

3.2 Included in Historic England’s guidance on “preservation” is that *“a development that merely maintains the status quo, perhaps by replacing a building that detracts from the character and appearance of the conservation area with a similarly detrimental building, would satisfy the statutory consideration. This is notwithstanding that the existing detrimental building presents an opportunity, when it is being redeveloped, to improve the environment.”*<sup>3</sup>

3.3 It must be stressed that although enhancement is a desirable outcome, it is an *option* to preservation and not a requirement.

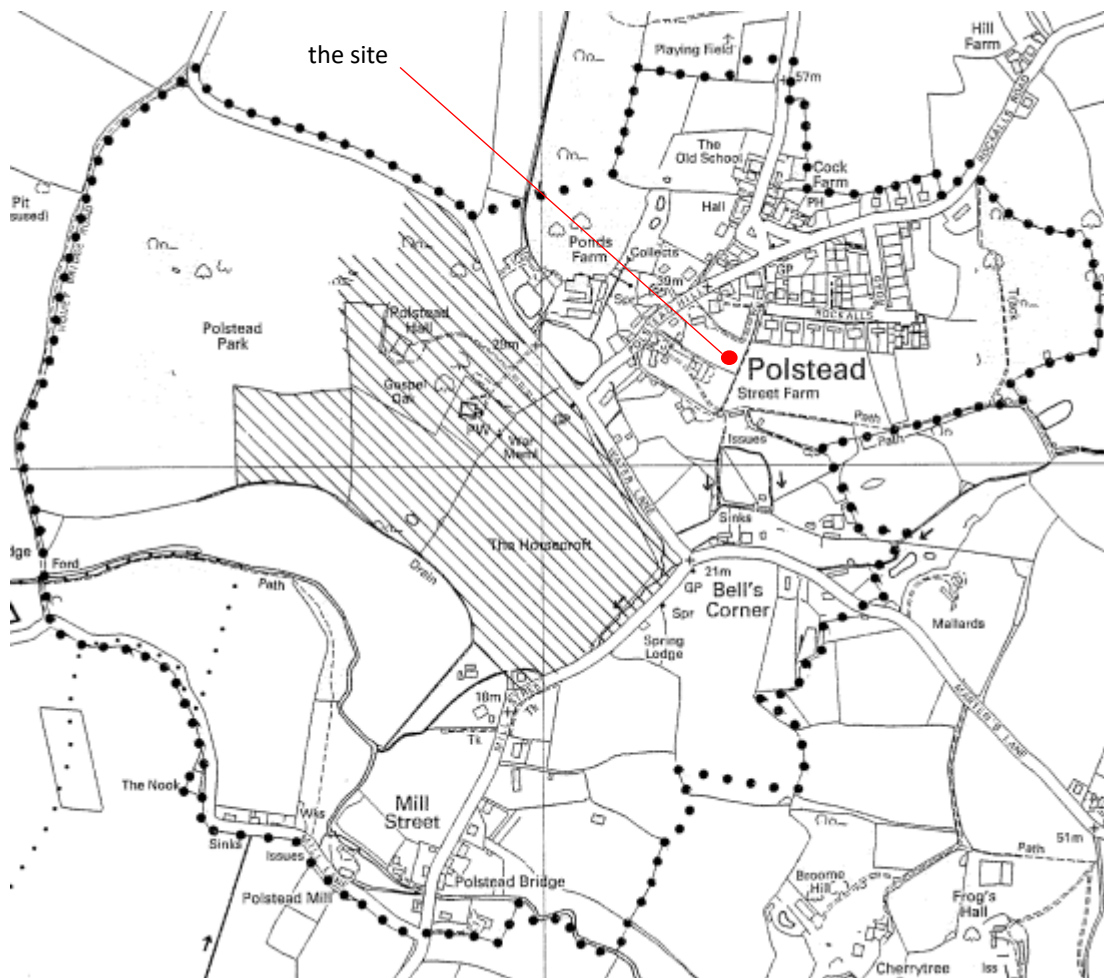
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<sup>1</sup> Section 72, Planning (Listed Buildings and Conversations Areas) Act 1990

<sup>2</sup> South Lakeland District Council v Secretary of State for the Environment and another [1992] 1 ALL ER 573

<sup>3</sup> *Decisions: Legal Requirements for Listed Building and Other Consents*, Historic England Website, 2021

#### 4.0 The context of the proposals: Polstead



2: Polstead Conservation Area (boundary shown dotted)

4.1 The Polstead conservation area was originally designated by West Suffolk County Council in 1973 and inherited by Babergh District Council at its inception in 1974. A Conservation Area Appraisal was produced by Babergh District Council in 2011 and contains valuable summaries of its character and historical background<sup>4</sup>, which are summarised below.

4.1.1 Polstead has a long history of settlement. The village was recorded in the Domesday Survey of 1086, meaning that it was an established Saxon Settlement, although dispersed evidence of pre-Saxon occupation has been found in the locality.

4.1.2 Apart from the Church of St Mary [listed grade I], Polstead Hall [II\*], Polstead Mill [II], and a dovecote [II], Polstead's other listed buildings consist mainly of grade II houses and cottages, mostly timber-framed and rendered with roofs of thatch or plain tiles. A number of timber-framed buildings have been re-fronted in brick, both the local soft 'Suffolk Red' and the harder 'Suffolk White'. Red brick is also used in a number of boundary walls around the area, to a common design 9" thick with half round copings. Other wall materials include weatherboarding, which can be found in both the white and black varieties. Virtually the full palette of Suffolk's vernacular building materials can be found around the village, displayed in a variety of combinations.

<sup>4</sup> *Polstead Conservation Area Appraisal*, adopted as Supplementary Planning Guidance by Babergh District Council Strategy Committee, 14 June 2012.

4.1.3 Polstead and its adjoining valley of the River Box form the northern edge of the Dedham Vale and Stour Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The countryside is immediately to hand at the rear of most properties, and away from the built-up village core, the countryside dominates with fields and parkland containing a scattering of buildings, mostly set within the valleys.



*3a and 3b: contrasts in the character of the conservation area*

4.1.4 The appraisal states that Polstead suffers from some intrusive modern development, which includes the use of non-traditional forms and materials such as uPVC windows, concrete roof tiles or brown stained timber, which are all inappropriate in a conservation area.



*4a and 4b: examples of new development and materials in the conservation area*

4.2 Some qualifying comments are needed on the content of this appraisal of 2011:

4.2.1 The woodland and tree screening will have matured further since then. The overriding impression of the conservation area now is that there are two distinctive elements in its character; the open areas of mainly historic buildings, and the adjoining areas of undulating and densely wooded landscape with views to open countryside beyond.

4.2.2 Since 2011, there have been numerous successful architectural projects in conservation areas which *do* incorporate non-traditional built forms and materials, as evidenced by those in the RIBA Regional Design Awards and the House of The Year competition. Simple modern forms and materials of non-assertive colours and textures can create new buildings that blend with rather than dominate their surroundings, while representing a positive contribution to the evolution of historic settlements.

## 5.0 The context of the proposals: the site

5.1 Gillyflower House is a medium-sized modern building of tradition character set in a large garden and located behind a high bank on the south-east side of Polstead Hill; one of the public roads through the village [5a].



5a: pedestrian access to Gillyflower House from Polstead Hill 5b: the development site, seen from Gillyflower House

5.2 The site of the proposed new house is at the south-east end of the garden, set within a wooded dell, and currently largely screened from Gillyflower House and the public footpath on the other side of the south-east boundary by mature trees, natural vegetation and planting [5b, 6a].

5.3 Because of the topography, trees and vegetation, both Gillyflower House and the development site are also largely screened in the public viewpoints within the conservation area [6b, 7a], although seasonal changes could reduce this. Present gaps in the screening allow some views of the existing house and a timber shed in the south corner of the garden [7b].



6a: closer view of the site, from the north

6b: vehicle entrance to Gillyflower House and the site



7a: view of the site and screening from the south

7b: gap in the south boundary and view of the existing shed

5.4 It is noted that published official conservation guidance and assessment criteria are clear that the contribution of the setting to the significance of a heritage asset does not depend on public rights or the

ability to access it<sup>5</sup>, and that seasonal changes and impermanence in vegetation should be taken into account when considering its effect on views, and by implication, on screening. Tree disease and climate change, especially extremes of high temperatures, are now additional contributory factors to the impermanence of vegetation. Put simple, this means that although there may be some continuity and regeneration of woodland, vegetation, and planting, these cannot be relied on to ameliorate the effect of development. Its design must be judged on its own merits.

## 7.0 The context of the proposals: the setting of adjacent listed buildings

7.1 In their pre-application comments, the local authority noted that there were a number of listed buildings in the vicinity, but the most relevant to the impact of this scheme were the curtilage listed barns to the north and east of the Grade II listed Corder’s House. This Heritage Statement endorses that assessment. The development would not be perceived in relation to any other listed buildings, including Corder’s House, which is itself screened on the north-east side by the curtilage listed barns, and is not visible from the development site.

7.2 Corder’s House appears in the Statutory List of Buildings of Special Architectural and historical interest as entry number 1182333 with the following description:

*Corder’s House (formerly listed as Street Farmhouse) ....A C16-C17 timber-framed and plastered building with a cross wing at the south end and a gabled wing at the north end on the west front. Roof tiled. Restored and renovated with most of the timber-framing exposed. Two storeys and attics. Four window range on the west front of C18 leaded casements. There is an 8-panel door with moulded architrave and cornice. A modern lean-to addition projects on the east side. There is a large internal chimney stack with attached shafts on the east side.*

7.3 The barns are not mentioned in the listing, but are nevertheless of architectural and historical significance as they represent the surviving buildings of the original farmstead. They are mainly a collection of weatherboarded and brick buildings with plain tiled and natural slate roofs. All are now all converted to residential accommodation [8b]. Street Farmhouse was known as Polstead Farm in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and Gillyflower House was built on part of its former farmland [8a].



8a: The farmhouse, barns, and development site on the 25" OS Map of 1884 (NLS Maps)      8b: view of the barns from Polstead Hill      Barn "A"

<sup>5</sup> *The Setting of Heritage Assets*, Historic Environment Good Practice Advice in Planning Note 3 (Second Edition), Historic England, 2017 - Part 1: Settings and Views, pp 2, 4, and 9.

7.4 The significance of the barns is noted in the Suffolk Historic Environment Record, in Farmstead record PLS 084, which reads:

**Farmstead: Street Farm (Polstead Farm)**

*Street Farm (Polstead Farm), Polstead. 19th century farmstead and 16th century farmhouse, with converted buildings. Regular courtyard U-shaped plan formed by working agricultural buildings, with additional detached elements. The farmhouse is set away from the yard. Partial loss (less than 50%) of the traditional farm buildings. Located within a village.*

7.5 Only one of the barns can currently be seen at ground level from Gillyflower House and its garden. With the present tree screening and the level of the development site, little if any of the new house would be seen in relation to the barns, and barn "A" in particular. The relationship would increase if the screening were reduced for any reason, but would be in the nature of one functional and non-assertive building to another, with the new building being subservient due to its smaller scale, and both blending into the colouring, vegetation, and topography of the landscape.



9: panoramic view including the proposed development site, looking south from Gill flower House



10: enlargement of the central area in view 9 with the upper levels of the south-easternmost barn in view, marked "A" in 8a and 8b..

7.6 Because of the tree and vegetation cover, the curtilage barns are not prominent in the landscape when viewed from the south, and neither would be the new house [7a]. It would also be screened from the public footpath by the existing shed [7b].

7.7 It is recognised that the local authority would have no control over the retention of this shed, or of vegetation and trees that were not the subject of a preservation order<sup>6</sup>. Nor could there be any control over the effects of disease or extreme temperatures. These factors, and seasonal changes, could reduce the screening, but it is the intention of the owners, and is in their interest, to maintain natural screening to

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<sup>6</sup> Or automatically protected by conservation area legislation.

preserve their own privacy and that of the future occupants of Gillyflower House. It would also maintain the attraction and value of the latter for future new owners.

## **8.0 The new house**

8.1 The functional intention in the design is to create an energy efficient, low-maintenance and sustainable home for the present occupants of Gillyflower House in their mature years. This is reflected in the modest size of the house and the single storey arrangement of the accommodation. A development of this kind is a model for independent living in later life. It releases the existing house back on to the market at a time when more houses are needed, and is an effective use of land; the latter being a factor addressed in the National Planning Policy Framework, which states that one of the three overarching objectives of the planning system should be...

*to protect and enhance our natural, built and historic environment; including making effective use of land, improving biodiversity, using natural resources prudently, minimising waste and pollution, and mitigating and adapting to climate change, including moving to a low carbon economy.*<sup>7</sup>

8.2 There are numerous other national and local planning policies that are relevant to this proposal, but it is significant that in the pre-application assessment, the local authority have advised that the principle of one, contemporary, small-scale dwelling on the site is not opposed<sup>8</sup>.

8.3 The design sets out to respond sympathetically to, and not to dominate the local topography or the character of the conservation area. The main slope of the asymmetrical roof reflects the slope of the land, and its standing seam metal covering is in a dark grey colour to make the design more recessive. The choice of colour should achieve this effect, and it would be tonally similar to the slate roof of barn "A" on the adjacent site to the west. Modern materials have been accepted in principle by the local authority subject to their colour, which would be negotiable if the dark grey were not satisfactory. A flue for a woodburning stove is shown on the main roof slope. I have recommended that this be of a dark colour, matching that of the roof, to avoid it being too prominent.

8.4 The walls are timber-clad. The finish is to be confirmed, but the intention is that this element will relate to the natural materials and colours of the landscape. The plain windows with their dark grey aluminium frames will also contribute to the functional and non-assertive character of the design, which will have more in common with traditional agricultural buildings, such as the adjacent barns, rather than the obvious domesticity of other modern houses in the conservation area [4a, 4b,].

8.5 The main living area of the house extends southwards on to an open patio level with the proposed internal finished floor. The patio (and the building generally have been sunk further down into the ground compared to the first version of the design submitted with the pre-application enquiry. This reflects the preference of the client, but also accords with a design modification suggested by the local authority. The proposed balustrade to the patio would be metal, in a dark colour-coated finish. This choice of material and colour will make the balustrade visually "recessive", like the windows and roof, whereas a timber balustrade would have to be of heavier construction and more prominent.

8.6 Another local authority suggestion was to move the house further to west to make it less isolated and relate it more to the built-up area of the village as represented by the barns. The building has been moved slightly westwards, but any further relocation poses problems:

- i) This would move the new house nearer to Gillyflower House and necessitate moving the north east boundary of the development nearer too. This is not desired, as it would reduce the size of

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<sup>7</sup> *National Planning Policy Framework*, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2021 Section 2. Achieving sustainable development, 8c, p.5

<sup>8</sup> "subject to a modified position and to other final details". [Babergh District Council Planning Department, Pre-application enquiry DC/23/01371, 20 April 2023.]



the garden for Gillyflower House and thus its value and potential attraction to a potential purchaser. The privacy of both properties could also be diminished.

ii) The new house would be nearer to the barns, particularly barn "A", whereas the greater the space between the two, the easier the relationship would be, if or when that were seen. Proximity also creates greater potential for the occupants of each property to be affected by the domestic activities of the other, including noise, or just awareness of an adjacent presence. According to official guidance<sup>9</sup>, tranquility can be part of the setting of a listed building, and where it exists, as it must do here at present, it should be preserved as far as possible.

8.7 An alternative flat-roofed design was also suggested by the local authority to lower the finished height of the building, reduce its scale and massing, and in the use of a "green" sedum roof, "*help to reinforce the 'greenness' and undeveloped nature of this part of the conservation area*".<sup>10</sup>

(i) This could certainly be the basis of a good design, but, it is felt, not necessarily a better one than that proposed, which is the preference of the clients and their project architects. Part of the rationale behind the proposed design is that maintenance should be minimal, whereas sedum roofs do require maintenance, which could be greater in this location due to leaf fall accumulating on the surface. By comparison, a sloping roof is relatively self-cleaning, apart from any accumulation in the gutters. This can be minimised with mesh overlays, and guttering is more easily accessible than the deck of a flat roof.

(ii) Arguably, too, the hard outlines of a monolithic flat-roofed design might be no less conspicuous in the landscape than a sloping roof that responded to its contours.

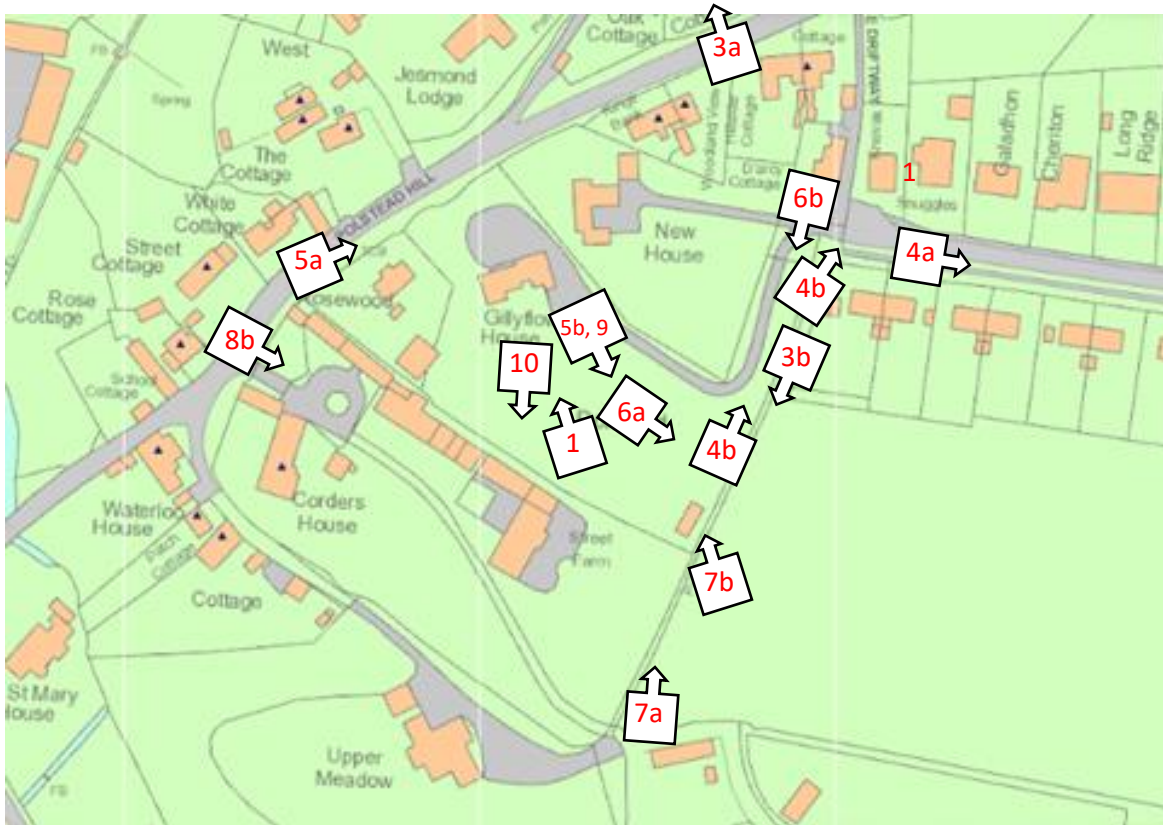
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<sup>9</sup> *The Setting of Heritage Assets*, Historic Environment Good Practice Advice in Planning Note 3 (Second Edition), Historic England, 2017, Page 4: *Access and setting* refers to the importance of quiet and tranquillity as an attribute of setting.

<sup>10</sup> Babergh District Council Planning Department response to pre-application enquiry DC/23/01371, 20 April 2023.

## 9.0 Locations of the views in this document

(the base map shows listed buildings marked with a triangle)



*This heritage statement has been prepared by Malcolm Starr, Dip Arch, Dip Cons, AA Grad Dip, AABC, RIBA; a conservation-accredited architect now practising privately and formerly an historic buildings architect with English Heritage/Historic England, a local authority conservation officer, a county conservation advisor, an employee in architectural practices specialising in conservation including Caroe & Partners and Michell & Partners, and lecturer/tutor in architectural conservation at academic institutions including Cambridge University Department of External Studies, the Architectural Association, and West Dean College (Conservation Masterclass programme).*

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