

# **Howes Place Conservation Area Appraisal**

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# **1 Introduction**

This particular part of Huntingdon Road was identified as an area for consideration of being designated as a Conservation Area following a request from City Councillors and members of the public as well as being identified in the Cambridge Suburbs and Approaches: Huntingdon Road (2009). This Appraisal provides information about its architectural merit and historical development and sets out why this area was designated as a Conservation Area.

## **1.1 Method**

Consultants Scott Wilson, working on behalf of the City Council's Historic Environment Team, analysed the character of the former National Institute of Agricultural Botany (NIAB) and Howes Place section of Huntingdon Road in 2009. The essential characteristics of the location and how it might be protected and improved have been set out below. That analysis has been used as the basis of this review along with information gleaned by the local residents.

## **1.2 Location**

The former NIAB Headquarters (1920's) building and Howes Place are located approximately one and a half miles north west of the City Centre on the edge of Cambridge on Huntingdon Road. The area was once surrounded by college sports grounds, NIAB operational land and open farmland further north. The area is now surrounded by residential development of different ages and sites approved for new development.

The area surrounding Howes Place and the former NIAB Headquarters building is defined as an 'Area of Major Change' in the Cambridge Local Plan 2018 and is covered by policy 20. Land in this area is therefore under increasing pressure for development as Cambridge continues to grow.

## 2 The Planning Policy Context

### 2.1 Legislation

Section 69 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 imposes a duty on Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) to designate as Conservation Areas any 'areas of special architectural or historic interest the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance'.

The special character of Conservation Areas means that the control of development is stricter than in other areas. Therefore: *New buildings and the spaces around them must preserve or improve the character of the area. The siting, scale, height, form, details and building materials will all need to be carefully chosen.*

### 2.2 National and Local Planning Policy

Local Planning Authorities are required by the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 to identify the parts of their area that should be designated as Conservation Areas and to formulate and publish proposals to preserve or enhance them. Local Authorities must submit proposals for the protection and enhancement of Conservation Areas for public consultation and they must also have regard to any views expressed by people responding to this consultation.

Broadly, the effects of designation are:

- Planning Approval must be obtained from the LPA or Secretary of State prior to the substantial or total demolition of any building or structure within a Conservation Area, with some exceptions;
- The LPA must consider the desirability of *preserving or enhancing* the character or appearance of the Conservation Area when assessing planning applications for change in those areas;
- Permitted development rights are slightly different in Conservation Areas; and
- Permission is required from the LPA to fell or lop a tree over a certain size.

Central government policy relating to Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas is set out in Section 16: 'Conserving and enhancing the historic environment' of the National Planning Policy Framework 2023 which advocates that Local Plans should 'set out a positive strategy for the conservation and enjoyment of the historic environment, including heritage assets'. Conservation Areas are designated heritage assets along with listed buildings. The former NIAB Headquarters building and Nos. 1 to 12, 14 and 15 Howes Place are Buildings of Local Interest which are non-designated heritage assets (NDHAs).

Local planning policy is contained within the Cambridge Local Plan 2018 which sets out policies and proposals for future development and land use in Cambridge. This is currently under review with a new local plan being drawn up with South Cambridgeshire District Council the boundary of which is close to Howes Place.

## **3 Summary of Special Interest**

### **3.1 Introduction**

The special character of the former NIAB Headquarters building and Howes Place area is defined not only by its layout but also its mock 18<sup>th</sup> century architectural style, both united in the landscape as designed by architect Percy Morley Horder (in 1921). The association with Sir Lawrence Weaver as well as the welfare of ex-servicemen also contributes to the special character of the area.

### **3.2 Archaeological development**

The area of Cambridge has been a focus for settlement since prehistoric times. Although finds from the Palaeolithic and Neolithic are known, especially from the area of the gravel river terraces, the earliest settlement cores lie on or around modern-day Castle Hill, with the establishment of an Iron Age centre in this location. Evidence for Bronze Age activity and possible settlement is however known from the outskirts of Cambridge, especially to the south and west. Iron Age and Roman settlement concentrated on Castle Hill, but in the Roman period extended down to what is now the historic core. Hence, Cambridge grew up around the central areas surrounding the market place and river frontage, with additional areas across the river by the castle. Outlying settlements arose around Cambridge, some of which are now absorbed into the urban expansion.

Huntingdon Road follows the line of a Roman Road, although the actual road surface lies to the south of the present road, which extends from the vicinity of the Castle Mound in a north westerly direction. This was the main access to Godmanchester, where it joined the major route of Ermine Street. Roman Roads attracted much roadside settlement, such as villas, farms and cemeteries, and excavations alongside the road have demonstrated the presence of these. Work on the former NIAB site in 2007/08 located remains of outlying settlements and activity from Bronze Age to Roman periods, but the closest remains to Howe Close were mediaeval pits (probably rubbish or quarry pits) alongside Huntingdon Road. 19<sup>th</sup> century maps identify an ancient site of "Roman Coffins" on the southern side of the road, between the former NIAB site and St Giles and St Peter's Church.

### **3.3 Historical Development**

NIAB was located at the junction of a number of historic manors, and lies within Chesterton, held by the Crown until c.1200. Land transfers were via the Earl of Winchester to Barnwell Priory and then to Thomas Brakyn in 1540, who was Mayor three times and MP for Cambridge four times.

The land appears to be known as Arbury Meadow and was variously used for sheep and cattle grazing and later in part as a 'sheep walk' prior to the general enclosure of Chesterton in 1838. During the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, land that was not set aside for housing was used for horticulture. Close Farm (subsequently known as The White House) was developed during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, with its farm buildings located to the east of the farmhouse. Its

agricultural/horticultural association continued with the modern scientific testing of plants following the building of NIAB in 1921.

The name of Howes has an historic association with adjacent land to the west. Howe House, the Felix Hotel and Traveller's Rest public house lie on ancient fields (or closes) of the medieval hamlet of Howes, which straddles a number of parishes. The hamlet disappears by c.1600 but the name remains in the rebuilt house and 'Howes Place'.

### **3.4 General Character**

This area is a 1921 architect designed development of 14 houses and a boiler laundry house (which was later converted to two residential flats – Nos. 6A and 6B Howes Place) and a 3-storey institutional building. Later additions to Howes Place, Nos. 16 to 18, have been sympathetically integrated into this original plan using the original formal landscaping. In addition to the formal landscaping of rows of pleached lime trees and beech and other neatly trimmed hedges, the number of mature trees and hedges, which lie to the rear of the Howes Place properties, in the grounds of the former NIAB Headquarters building and on the field and property boundaries in the area, are significant. They reinforce the ties between the previous function of NIAB and the landscape in general.

### **3.5 Landscape Setting**

Originally built in an isolated location, ideally located for the growing of plants for testing, the former NIAB Headquarters building and Howes Place have become surrounded by the suburbs of Girton and Cambridge on the Huntingdon Road front. The significant relationship with horticulture still remains with the formal landscaping of the street of Howes Place and gardens of the former NIAB Headquarters building.

The most important views of the area are from Huntingdon Road where its straightness allows some distant views of the area and its trees, whilst in closer view the buildings and the formal landscape come to the fore. The rows of pleached lime trees and interspersed hedges are distinctive. Tree framed views along Howes Place are also important.

## 4 Social History

NIAB was founded in 1919 by charitable subscription, through an initiative of Sir Lawrence Weaver, the Commercial Secretary of the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries:

- to improve the existing seeds, plants and crops, aiding the introduction or distribution of new varieties;
- to improve methods of husbandry; and
- to encourage the discovery, investigation of inventions and processes of benefit.

In 1921, the former NIAB Headquarters building was constructed along with Nos. 1 to 12, 14 and 15 Howes Place for the Housing Association for Officers' Families (HAOF).

The HAOF charity was founded in 1917 by Evelyn Elizabeth Brinton, Ernest Ridley Debenham and Lawrence Weaver. Evelyn Elizabeth Brinton (née Forbes) (1868-1929), daughter of Sir Charles John Forbes 4th Baronet, wife of William Dodge James, and later wife of John Chaytor Brinton, is commemorated in a plaque on No. 5 Howes Place (now overgrown), which states: "Founder of the Housing Association for Officers' Families. Chairman 1916-1929. She went about doing good". The HAOF is now known as the Haig Housing Trust.

A number of ex-servicemen were employed by NIAB.

Further information is contained in "Crop and Seed Improvement – A history of the National Institute of Agricultural Botany 1919 to 1996" by Dr P. S. Wellington and Valerie Silvey, 1996.



## 5 NIAB – Area of Major Change

The Conservation Area lies within an area of major change as designated by the Cambridge Local Plan 2018. The former NIAB site itself is allocated for residential development through the Plan. Subsequently applications were submitted in 2007 for residential development on the former NIAB site (07/0003/OUT) and a redevelopment of the NIAB Headquarters site (07/0005/FUL).

The residential development on the former NIAB site (07/0003/OUT) has altered the character of Huntingdon Road and resulted in changes to the landscaping, and the road itself, through the addition of further lanes of traffic, cycle lanes and a signal controlled junction. This saw the pleached lime trees in front of the former NIAB Headquarters building removed and relocated, supplemented with additional planting along the new road alignment and new access road. A Black Mulberry tree planted by King George VI in 1921 in the grounds in front of the former NIAB Headquarters building was also removed for these works.

Residential development across the Huntingdon Road frontage up to Whitehouse Lane, adjacent to the NIAB Headquarters site has also changed the setting of the Conservation Area.

The application for the redevelopment of the NIAB Headquarters site (07/0005/FUL) assessed the impact of the development on Howes Place, as well as the NIAB Headquarters (1920's) building and associated landscaping. While Nos. 14 and 15 Howes Place were to be demolished as part of the planning permission granted, the development proposed would have presented a more comprehensive development that on balance would have enhanced this area. These properties are therefore not included within the Conservation Area boundary.

The redevelopment of the NIAB Headquarters site (07/0005/FUL) was not progressed and NIAB subsequently relocated its operations to a new Headquarters site on the north west side of Lawrence Weaver Road.

Applications were submitted in 2020 for the conversion of the former NIAB Headquarters (1920's) building to provide 68 residential dwellings (20/01501/PRI030) and in 2021 for the redevelopment of the remainder of the NIAB Headquarters site to provide 291 Build to Rent units and a 202 bed Apart-Hotel (21/03609/FUL).

These developments have undoubtedly altered characteristics of the Howes Place Conservation Area that are described within this Appraisal. However, the area encompassing the former NIAB Headquarters building and Howes Place is considered to be of 'special' interest and consequently it is designated as a Conservation Area.

## 6 Spatial Analysis

Howes Place and the former NIAB Headquarters building are located directly off Huntingdon Road, which is a major arterial road for commuters to Cambridge from the northwest. Despite this being a busy road, the set back of the buildings and landscaping of the area means that it retains a tranquil air.

Howes Place is a linear cul-de-sac with a small central green located to the southern side of the street. This green is the only public open space within the area of study. The area is laid to lawn and edged with a medium height evergreen hedge on the eastern, southern and western sides and pleached lime trees on the northern side. It is visible from the street through the trunks of the lime trees. The green is separated from the houses by an access road and narrow gardens or car parking.

It is probable that an additional green area was planned for the opposite side of the street, where the plan form of Nos. 14 and 15 Howes Place reflect that of Nos. 9 and 10 Howes Place, forming a strong visual corner to the green. However, Nos. 14 and 15 are not included in the Conservation Area.

The linear nature of Howes Place is enhanced by the linear form of the landscaping, which directs views along the street and allows only glimpses of the houses.

The former NIAB Headquarters building was built as a pavilion building set within its own landscaped gardens, continuing the formal style of Howes Place with avenues of pleached lime trees and formal hedges. It is set back significantly from Huntingdon Road behind a gravel courtyard and was originally accessed by foot through the roadside hedge and picket gate. A large arch on the southern elevation allowed vehicular access to the courtyard from Howes Place increasing visual integration between the street and the former NIAB Headquarters building.

## **7 Architectural Overview**

### **7.1 Percy Morley Horder**

Morley Horder was a noted Edwardian architect whose passion was the Arts and Crafts Movement. He used the principles of historical vernacular architecture to create structures for modern purposes and married these with landscape gardens, occasionally working with landscape architect Gertrude Jekyll. He built a number of institutional buildings, including the Chapel Court at Jesus College as well as private homes for example Pinfold Manor in Surrey for David Lloyd George (1913).

He designed and, in 1921, built the former NIAB Headquarters building in addition to the buildings of Nos. 1 to 12, 14 and 15 Howes Place as well as laying out the landscaped gardens.

### **7.2 Howes Place**

Nos. 1 to 12, 14 and 15 Howes Place were constructed to wrap around a central green, set back from the street, with Nos. 3 and 4 Howes Place and Nos. 9 and 10 Howes Place each forming an 'H' plan to negotiate the corners. Nos. 14 and 15 Howes Place form a further 'H'-shape but are not included within the Conservation Area. It may have been originally planned to repeat the same pattern of development on the opposite side of the street.

The Royal Visit, on 18<sup>th</sup> October 1921, included a tour of Howes Place which had a Laundry House in the middle which originally supplied the houses with heating and hot water from a central boiler. It appears that Nos. 6A and 6B were the Laundry House, as the building has a central location and is of a different design and plan form from the other properties. At the time of the visit, three houses were occupied by officers' widows and one house was of a special plan intended for seriously disabled officers.

The houses are built as two-storey semi-detached properties joined by linking 2 metre high gated, brick walls. They were constructed in the pseudo 18<sup>th</sup> century polite architectural style with vertical sliding sashes, and symmetrically similar to the former NIAB Headquarters building, however, these buildings have tiled hipped roofs with sprocket eaves.

Nos. 16 to 18 Howes Place were constructed between 1939 and 1948 and reflect the design of the Morley Horder buildings with regard to being set back, of similar materials and roof pitches as well as the vertical emphasis of the windows. The level of architectural detail is much simpler, but they sit comfortably with the former NIAB Headquarters building and the remainder of Howes Place.

### **7.3 Former NIAB Headquarters (1920's) building**

The 'E'-shaped plan of the building is enclosed on the south western side with walls and gate piers forming a gravelled courtyard. The building is of pseudo 18<sup>th</sup> century polite architectural style with vertical sliding sashes in a symmetrical form. Constructed of white brick under a hipped mansard plain

tilled roof of two and a half-storey, with a three-storey entrance, Pevsner had in 1970 already recognised the architectural importance of NIAB: “1921 by *Morley Horder*. An extension by *JBF Cowper & Poole* (1955) is of no architectural interest, though the red-brick stores and boiler house of 1963 are. Aluminium curtain-walling on a brick ground floor.” This building has recently been converted to provide 68 residential dwellings.

The extensions and additions to the rear of the building are only visible where they are close to the property boundary on Howes Place or Lawrence Weaver Road. The 1955 extension is not of particular architectural interest and is thought to negatively affect the character as well as the visual link between Nos. 14 and 15 Howes Place on the western side of the street, though these properties are not included within the Conservation Area boundary. The harm to Nos. 1 to 12 Howes Place is considered to be to a lesser extent.

## **8 Trees, Landscape and Open Spaces**

### **8.1 Introduction**

Set on the gravel ridge to the north west of the City Centre, the area is relatively flat. However, the many trees that give character to the area, intermingled with suburban housing estates, interrupt the expected long views.

The landscape within and around the area is the structure within which individual buildings are set. Much of the treescape is protected by Tree Preservation Orders (TPOs).

The former NIAB Headquarters (1920's) building is set within a formal landscaped garden to the Huntingdon Road elevation, consisting of formal avenues of pleached lime trees and evergreen/semi evergreen hedges. The lime trees and hedges also form the property boundary to Huntingdon Road.

A Mulberry tree planted by King George V provided a natural element to the manicured landscape. This tree was important for its historic association and is mirrored by a Mountain Ash on the opposite side of the garden. However, consent was secured for the removal of the Black Mulberry tree as part of development to the former NIAB site.

Street trees along both sides of Huntingdon Road enhance and soften the nature of the busy road.

### **8.2 Howes Place**

Howes Place is based around a central green laid to lawn and enclosed with neatly trimmed evergreen hedges. The narrow quiet cul-de-sac is formally planted with two parallel rows of pleached lime trees in the road verge, to either side of an informal tarmac path. Part of the original double avenue is missing to the western side of Howes Place, where the NIAB Headquarters has been extended northwards. This linear form is further enhanced with the beech and other hedges, which are grown as a medium height boundary treatment to many properties.

A Black Mulberry tree in the central green planted by Queen Mary provides an alien asymmetrical natural element to the manicured landscape, important for its historic association.

## 9 Key Characteristics of the Area

### 9.1 Uses

The area is characterised by the former horticultural institutional use of the NIAB complex and the residential use of the remaining properties.

### 9.2 Buildings

The buildings are of two to three storeys in height.

Set back from the street behind formal landscape, views of the buildings are limited.

The consistent use of light Gault bricks under pitched tile roofs with vertically emphasised windows and symmetrical or near symmetrical treatment of facades provides homogeneity to the group of buildings.

### 9.3 Streets and Spaces

The central green laid to lawn that Howes Place is based upon, is integral to the character of the area and is enclosed by well-presented evergreen hedges. The linear nature is enhanced with the rows of pleached lime trees, which generate a strong rhythm, with their canopy creating a high level, horizontal emphasis to the street, and this is enhanced by beech hedges.

Parking is close to the residential buildings, accessed via gaps between the trunks of the lime trees.

The gardens of the former NIAB Headquarters are private but provide an attractive formal setting to the building and strong edge to Huntingdon Road.

The key individual tree of importance is the Black Mulberry planted on the 18<sup>th</sup> October 1921 by Queen Mary in the lawn of Howes Place. A similar tree was planted by King George V on the same day to the front of the former NIAB Headquarters (1920's) building however this was removed with consent to enable development of Huntingdon Road and the access into the Darwin Green site.

The key groups of trees of importance are:

- Hedges and pleached lime trees which line Howes Place on the either side of the road and the end of the road;
- Hedges and pleached lime trees which form a landscaped garden around the former NIAB Headquarters (1920's) building; and
- Street trees planted in the verge of Huntingdon Road in front of NIAB and Howes Place.

Important trees abutting the proposed Conservation Area are:

- Trees and hedges growing parallel to Huntingdon Road

- Trees and hedges forming field boundaries; and
- Trees to the southern side of the former Christ's College and Sidney Sussex College sports grounds in the rear of properties fronting Huntingdon Road.

## **10 Issues**

### **10.1 Introduction**

The special interest of the area is the inter-relationship of the formal and informal landscape with the buildings. Where the pleached lime tree avenues have been interrupted, the character of the area is less well defined.

Over the years, since the building of former NIAB Headquarters building and Nos. 1 to 12, 14 and 15 Howes Place, the original horticultural landscape setting has been significantly reduced with the building of suburban housing. Whilst much of this is well landscaped behind trees and hedges, the built form is still visible in numerous places, and where garages and ancillary buildings have been built close to the front property boundaries, the impact is higher.

### **10.2 Works to existing Buildings**

Works to alter residential buildings within the area has been minimal, however, works to extend the former NIAB Headquarters building and to build within the grounds have been extensive.

The existing extensions to the former NIAB Headquarters (1920's) building have a harmful effect on the character of this building through the removal in part of its relationship with its formal landscape. These negative features will be removed as part of the recently submitted planning applications.

In between the trunks of the lime trees on Howes Place, driveways have been formed to provide access to parking on what was the front garden of many properties. Where the driveways have been laid to tarmac, the informality of the hard landscaping has been lost and trees could potentially be damaged.

### **10.3 Conservation Area Boundary**

The importance of the area for its homogeneous architecture designed by an eminent architect as well as its strong formal landscape scheme, coupled with mature informal landscape, is at risk of losing its special character through the cumulative impact of minor changes. Nos. 14 and 15 Howes Place are not included within the Conservation Area.

The buildings and landscape designed by Morley Horder in 1921 and the original farm and nursery trial beds, where there is a strong association between the land and the function of the buildings, are potentially at risk of unsympathetic change, despite the pleached lime trees being protected by TPOs.

Where possible, the original architectural details, which the residential buildings currently retain, need to be protected as it is detailing such as the original windows, doors and chimneys that form the character of the area.



## 11 Guidance

The formal and informal landscape is very important to this area. Further TPOs should be investigated to the rear of properties in Howes Place.

New buildings and additions within the Conservation Area should be designed to a high quality and set within structured landscaping, maintaining the existing mature trees and hedges.

Placing landscape screens in front of set-back buildings and their additions, along with landscaping the long side and rear property boundaries plus areas such as car parking, is also important. These foils can help to conceal neutral or negative aspects of the area.

Future development abutting the Conservation Area should be designed to a high standard and be set within structured landscaping. In order not to detract from the 'special' character of the Conservation Area, the landscaping should not copy the use of pleached lime trees, as these are indicative of Morley Horder's work. However, the use of themed strong lines combined with some informality would integrate any new area with the existing.

A strategy for the retention, protection and replacement of trees, which includes regular inspection and maintenance of all trees within the Howes Place Conservation Area, would maintain the character of the area.

The open space on Howes Place is essential to the layout of the street. The space should continue to be maintained as grassed open area.

The materials and construction of the existing street currently retains an informal nature, with un-kerbed grass verges. It is important to maintain this informality and where possible to remove the hard edged driveways and concrete access roads replacing them with gravel, bound gravel or tarmac surfaces with high levels of aggregates in the wearing course.

## 12 Summary

This Appraisal has sought to identify what is special and unique about the NIAB and Howes Place area warranting its designation as a Conservation Area.

The area comprises the former NIAB Headquarters (1920's) building and Howes Place. The buildings were designed and set out within a defined landscape in 1921 by noted architect Percy Morley Horder.

The buildings and landscape retain their essential characteristics and are little altered externally, with the exception of a large extension to the rear of the former NIAB Headquarters (1920's) building. The relationship of the former NIAB Headquarters building with Howes Place is still maintained despite the private sale of properties in Howes Place and the conversion of the former NIAB Headquarters building to provide 68 residential dwellings.

The designation of the Howes Place Conservation Area will preserve and enhance its special character.

## 13 Appendices

### 13.1 Appendix I: Listed Buildings and Buildings of Local Interest

#### (i) Listed Buildings

There are no Listed Buildings within the Howes Place Conservation Area.

#### (ii) Buildings of Local Interest

National Institute of Agricultural Botany: designed by architect Percy Morley Horder in 1921 in a vernacular style of white bricks and pitched tiles roof is set within its original landscaped garden of gravelled courtyard and avenues of hedges and pleached lime trees.

Nos. 1 to 12, 14 and 15 Howes Place: designed by architect Percy Morley Horder in 1921 in a vernacular style of light Gault bricks and pitched tile roof is set within its original landscaped street with avenues of hedges and pleached lime trees.

### 13.2 Appendix II: Trees of Note

Address	Trees of Note
Howes Place	<p>Established <i>Morus nigra</i> (Black Mulberry), central green in front of Nos. 5 and 6 Howes Place.</p> <p>31 pleached lime trees, northern and western side of Howes Place.</p> <p>41 pleached lime trees, western side of Howes Place.</p> <p>48 pleached lime trees, eastern side of Howes Place.</p> <p>49 pleached lime trees, eastern side of Howes Place.</p> <p>Beech and other hedges</p>
Former NIAB Headquarters Building Landscape Gardens	<p><i>Sorbus acuparia</i> (Mountain Ash), south western corner of former NIAB Headquarters (1920's) building, fronting Huntingdon Road.</p> <p><i>Magnolia grandiflora</i>, on eastern side of former NIAB Headquarters (1920's) building courtyard.</p> <p>40 pleached lime trees, western side of former NIAB Headquarters (1920's) building.</p>

	40 pleached lime trees, on southern side of former NIAB Headquarters (1920's) building, fronting Huntingdon Road.
Huntingdon Road	The street trees on Huntingdon Road form an avenue, reducing the impact of the busy road.

### 13.3 Appendix III: Further reading

<https://niab.com/sites/default/files/content/pages/NIAB%20Centenary%20Book%20FINAL.pdf> – an interesting link to the history of the former NIAB site and its evolution.

### 13.4 Appendix IV: Maps – Protected trees and Buildings and Landscape Features

[See separate map]