

## Design Statement

Proposed ponds, landscaping and access gate at Holmehill, Dunblane

### Context

Holmehill is a 14 Acre (5.6 Hectare) park in the centre of Dunblane and formerly the site of a fort or 'Dun' and monastery. This was replaced by Holmehill House built in the 1820s with the land becoming a Victorian Residence that was later demolished in the 1980s following extensive fire damage. The house's former owner was the well-known philanthropist Grace Donaldson, who left the site as recreational land to 'the children of Dunblane' in the 1940s.



*Holmehill house – built c.1820, demolished in the 1980s*

The site is well wooded with mature trees and large areas of open grass with views over the town and cathedral. Numerous public footpaths run through the site linking the east of the town with the centre. The site is mentioned in the Dunblane conservation area character appraisal as a 'vital green space in the centre of town'.

To the east of the site the early 19<sup>th</sup> century gatehouse remains. It is C listed and is under separate ownership. To the south is the C-listed Braeport building a former school, now community centre, built in 1880.

Holmehill is now owned by the Carman Family Foundation (CFF) who acquired the site from Allan Water Developments. The Holmehill Community Buyout group campaigned to keep public access to the land and CFF have pledged to maintain the site for the community as the 'Green Heart of Dunblane'.

## Planning History

Allan Water Developments purchase of the site in 2005 led to a number of planning applications that sought to develop the land. Although the site is privately owned Stirling council had designated it as a 'green space' and a public right of way is maintained across Holmehill.

In 2012 an application for planning permission in principle was made for an office building on the site (12/00544/PPP) and refused on the grounds that the development would 'adversely affect the open space at Holmehill, which forms an important part of the existing network of formal and informal public and private open spaces in Dunblane'

In 2015 a large house on the former site of Holmehill house (15/00450) including a basement car park, new car access and swimming pool. This faced significant opposition from the community and the application was withdrawn by the developer.



*Proposed new house on the site of Holmehill house (15/000450)*

Following this application a further two applications were made in early 2016 on the site for the erection of a new office building (16/00036/FUL) and a house (16/00057/FUL) in a pastiche style mirroring the original massing of Holmehill house. These applications were again refused on the basis of the loss of open space, lack of visual integration in a parkland setting and that suitable access could not be achieved without demolition of the listed gate piers at Holmehill lodge.



*Proposed new office building on the site of Holmehill house (16/00036)*

Allan Water Developments concluded that the site was not able to be developed in a financially beneficial way and sold the site to the Carman Family Foundation in 2018. The charitable foundation took on Holmehill with the ambition to preserve and enhance the site's parkland nature, deliver on its potential for the local community and supplement the site as a natural habitat.

## Community consultation

The Carman Family Foundation held an open consultation with the residents of Dunblane on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September 2018 to discuss the future opportunities for Holmehill and realise its potential for the local community following their acquisition.

The event was well publicised and 270 local people attended leading to a number of key principles for the site:

- Holmehill should not be overdeveloped and keep its woodland feel, but there was a desire to make use of the site to collaborate with local organisations, facilities and small events to engage local residents
- That no hard paths or artificial lighting should be introduced to the site and paths kept away from local housing
- That any development should be natural and wildlife friendly with open viewpoints, a pond on the site was discussed
- To have a new permanent access to the site from the Braeport Centre

## Design Proposals and Agenda

Following the local consultation CFF worked with Konishi Gaffney Architects to look at the Braeport meadow site to the west of Holmehill with the ambition of making better use of the land for the community. This clearing is mostly of scrub grassland and is poorly utilised due to its difficult access. It is well screened by trees to the north, south and east.

The design would include two main proposals:

- A new gate to the Braeport Centre to provide pedestrian access to the Braeport Meadow
- Re landscaping of the Braeport Meadow to form two new ponds and disabled and dementia accessible paths to enjoy the ponds



*Location plan identifying Braeport Meadow site*

The Braeport Centre currently hosts groups of young children and older people, especially with dementia and an important agenda for the proposals is to improve the site for these users.

The new entry from Braeport will greatly extend the usable area of Holmehill for old and young alike. The site is not currently suitable for wheelchairs or those with difficulty walking as the slope is too steep from the other areas of Holmehill. Although there is a recently developed area outside for dementia sufferers, the land at the bottom of the Braeport meadow is ideal for the provision of a much larger area with visual stimulation (trees, ponds and plantings), with good access from the town centre.

### **Braeport Gate**

Although the Braeport Meadow benefits from a south-westerly orientation and views across Dunblane it is poorly utilised because of limited access from the other areas of Holmehill. This is due to the steep slopes to the north and east of the site which are difficult to navigate and inaccessible to many users. One of the key areas for improvement that was identified during the consultation was to provide access from the Braeport Centre to provide a direct link between the meadow and the centre with its community function.

It is proposed to form a new gate within the rear wall of the Braeport centre to provide direct access for users of the community centre and its user groups to the Braeport Meadow and its new landscape. Many of whom who are elderly or have accessibility needs and would otherwise be unable to benefit from the area.

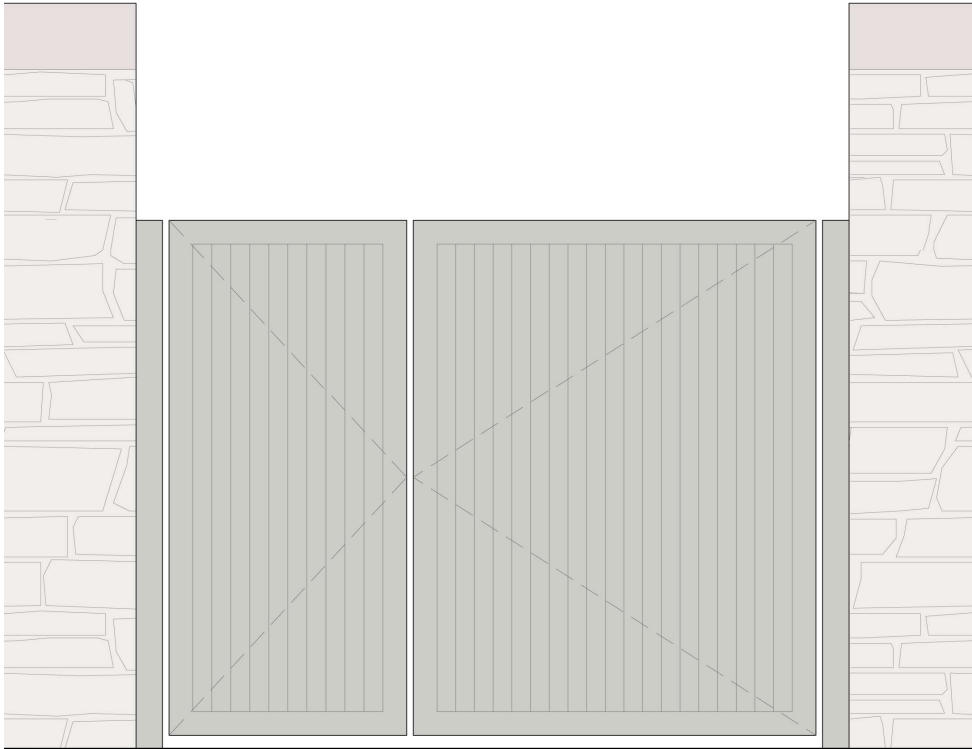
The gate would also provide the necessary access for the construction of the ponds and for ongoing maintenance. The Dunblane Development Trust (DDT) who run the Braeport Centre have written in support of these plans (see attached). This access is not possible elsewhere on the site due to the surrounding gradient that is unsuitable and unsafe for machinery access. Protected trees and their associated RPAs to the north and east of the site also preclude any vehicle access from elsewhere on Holmehill without significant impact to these wooded areas.

Based on feedback from a previous planning submission the gate has been reduced in width to 2.5m with a 1m wide pedestrian gate and a 1.5m wide vehicle gate, minimising the loss of fabric to the listed wall. This would allow access to a 2m wide, 6ton digger during construction and for deliveries and other small maintenance vehicles for ongoing use, for example provision of large amounts of mulch for planting. Due to the layout of the carpark no parking spaces would be lost to form access to this gate.

The pedestrian gate would be self-closing to prevent wildlife gaining access to the Braeport carpark. The vehicular gate would be locked under all normal conditions with the DDT managing occasional access for service and maintenance vehicles. The gate is not for the access of public vehicles to the site.

It is proposed to use traditionally styled, vertically boarded, painted timber framed gates that relate well to the age and style of the historic listed wall. The gate is proposed to the rear of the Braeport centre and would not be visible directly from the street.





*Drawing showing proposed gate to Braeport Meadow (wall height is approx. 2.8m, gate 2m tall)*

The gate is 2m tall to provide adequate screening but remain practical to construct in a traditional manner. This also keeps gate weight to a minimum to allow ease of opening for users with varying accessibility requirements.

The Braeport Centre is category C listed (ref:LB26407) and dates from the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Although the boundary walls are noted within the listing only the front walls is explicitly mentioned: ‘low, coped, rubble wall with imbedded cast-iron, spearhead railings’.

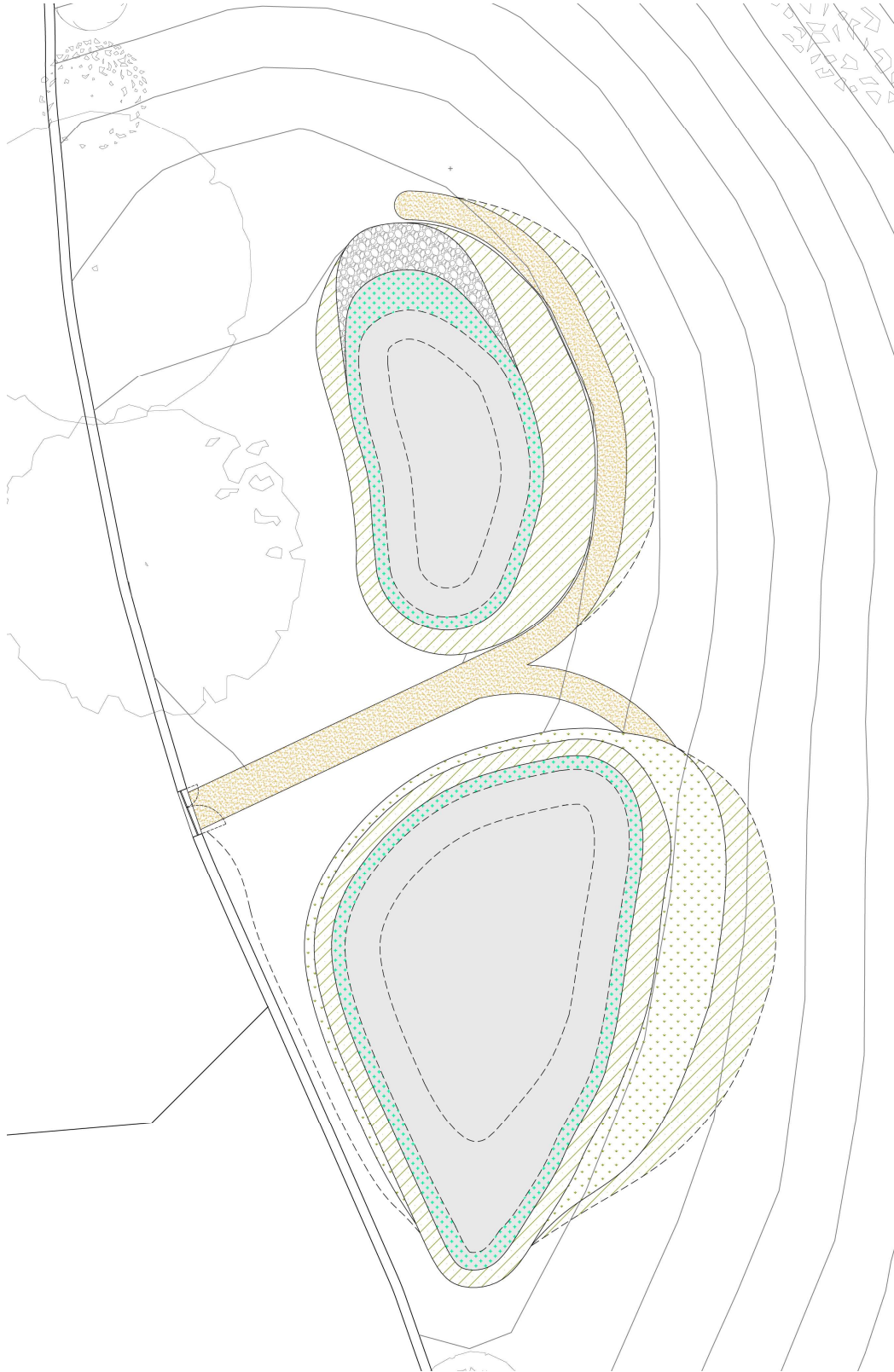
The new gate will be formed in an area of apparent infill to the wall, identified by the change in stone characteristics to larger stones and different cope stones. This was also the location of a toilet block within the car park that has since been removed but remnants of which remain within the area to be removed. Planners indicated that this would be the preferred location for a new gate during an onsite meeting. Any removals would be carefully undertaken and the wall ends made good with lime pointing.



*Photographs showing (left) – apparent infill to existing wall, note change in stone and coping types, and (right) – location of previous toilet block in area of wall to be removed*

## Ponds

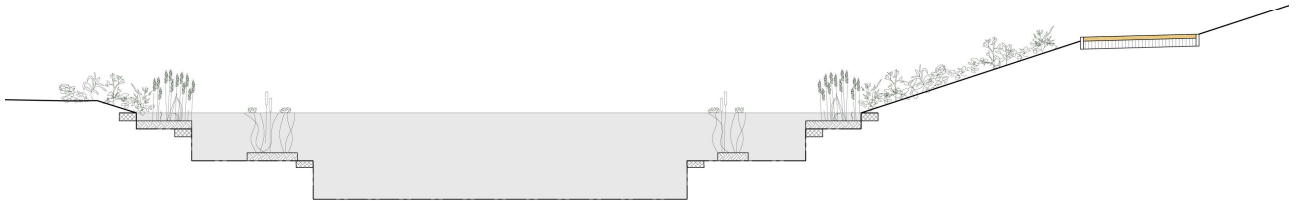
Part of these proposals include the relandscaping of the Braeport Meadow site including the formation of two ponds adjacent to the Braeport. These ponds follow the natural topography of the site with an upper and lower pond sitting to the west of the meadow.



*Site plan identifying main proposals*

The two ponds have been designed with an EPDM Firestone Pondgard pond liner with 240gsm underlay, a highly durable, low maintenance and flexible material. The product has been certified safe for humans, animals and fish with test reports published by the UK Water Research Centre.

The ponds have been stepped in depth at 200, 600 and 1100mm deep to create marginal planting and lily shelves that integrate the ponds into the landscape. Carefully selected vegetation will help to maintain good water quality and oxygenation. The margins of the pond have been kept shallow, at 200mm deep for safety and wildlife access.



*Section through northern pond showing planting shelves*

Banks to the lower, eastern side of the ponds will act as a diffuse outflow to the ponds to prevent ground saturation and prevent the need for any overflow soakaway.

The ponds will be filled initially using mains water from the adjacent 2 Braeport which is under the same ownership – with heavy planting to absorb any phosphorous present in the water. Water levels should be maintained relatively stable through rainfall.

A previous pond constructed for the CFF in Dunblane for trustee William Carman has been successful with water levels maintaining stable levels for three years since construction by rainfall only. The pond was initially filled using tapwater and has healthy vegetation and around 70 fish which have bred in the pond. The ponds for Holmehill will be built by the same contractor, Water Gems, who have extensive experience in this area.

### **Landscaping**

New paths will be formed to allow access to the ponds from the proposed gate to the Braeport centre. These will be formed in compacted whindust with a geotextile underlay over a type 1 subbase. This material offers a robust, permeable, attractive and low maintenance path surfacing that is suitable for wheelchair traffic and can be seen elsewhere on the site.

These paths will lead to a levelled grassy area to the west of the southern pond that will provide amenity space for users with views across the ponds. Another path leads to a beach to the northern shore of the ponds that provides an attractive focal point with a southern aspect.

### **Maintenance**

Maintenance will be lead by the Carman Family Foundation who will use contractors to manage any leaf or silt build-up (silt build-up is unlikely as the ponds are in a self-contained system). Banks will be cut back once a year and all invasive plants removed. Marginal planting will be trimmed back every 2-3 years or as required and grassy areas will be maintained to preserve access.

Ongoing pond maintenance for plants will be carried out by employees or contractors of the Foundation and with assistance from volunteer organisations such as Dunblane in Bloom, as is currently the arrangement across all of Holmehill. The CFF will commit to maintaining the ponds for at least 5 years from their completion.

## **Planting**

Along with the landscaping works a comprehensive strategy for the planting of the area is proposed with a diverse range of species to provide an attractive environment and enhance the local ecosystem.

The ground conditions across the meadow site are fertile with little ground preparation required other than the removal of weeds that is ongoing. No imported topsoil is required to the site.

Marginal planting in shallow waters will include native herbs and rushes, marginal flowering plants and taller plants to provide a rich habitat including to aquatic insects.

Adjacent to the ponds it is proposed to seed the banks with perennial native species wildflowers that will provide a habitat for amphibians and aquatic insects along with other suitable vegetation. This will also provide a natural barrier to discourage members of the public entering the ponds. Planting will be seeded using native seed mixes from Scotia Seeds suitable for woodland edges and meadows, a list of suitable species can be identified in the ecology report included with this submission.

The plants have been selected to minimise management and promote natural diversity, however the Carman Family Foundation will ensure that any dominating species such as Bullrush or Yellow Flag are maintained and any taller plants are cut back as required to maintain variety.

Planting will be protected from local fauna with a deer fence on the perimeter of the meadow, planted with flowering plants such as rhododendrons and other shrubs to conceal it in the long term. This will protect plants from deer which don't like to jump over 1-metre-high fences. Rabbit fencing will be installed facing outwards and buried under the ground as per usual best practice.

## **Ecology**

An ecological appraisal report was carried out in 2023 to assess the proposals impact on the site.

This assessed that the Braeport meadow site itself was of limited ecological value with the exception of the mature trees surrounding the site which are not affected by the work. It concludes that the proposals for ponds on the site would have a positive impact on its biodiversity.

During the pre-construction and construction phase best practice guidelines will be followed as set out in the ecological report to minimise the impact on the local wildlife.

Prior to construction a detailed endoscope inspection for bats will be carried out to the area of the wall proposed to be removed to form the new gate to the Braeport.

Any site clearance will be done outside of the bird nesting season (April to September) and timber piles identified as potential habitats for herpetofauna will be retained where possible. Any temporarily exposed pipe systems will be capped when contractors are off site and temporary mammal ramps will be provided at deep excavations.

The landscape plan seeks to maximise the ecological value of Holmehill with ponds providing habitats for a wide variety of organisms including invertebrates, amphibians, mammals and birds. Native species will be



used with the selection of new native marginal and peripheral planting of the pond that encourage insects and other wildlife . Bird boxes will be installed to retained trees on the site and bat boxes installed within 100m of the site.

## **Traffic**

During the consultation period of a previous application a number of concerns were raised from local residents of the impact of the proposals on traffic and parking in the local area.

An access review for an extension to the Braeport Centre carried out in 2020 by WYG Transport Planning concluded that the existing car parking facilities and its access junction had no operational or safety issues and that there was spare capacity within the existing car park.

The proposed landscaping of the site is modest in its scale and it is not intended that it will encourage large numbers of increased traffic to the area. The building and its surroundings are principally purposed for the local community who are likely to access the site on foot and existing user groups of the Braeport Centre who would already be using their car parking facilities. These would be principally in use during the day time when the traffic survey found that the car park was at lower levels and below capacity with higher traffic times in the evening.

The Dunblane Development Trust are working with Stirling Council to control parking duration restrictions (see attached letter) on the car park in the form of maximum stay times and parking permits issued to local residents. They are also encouraging users to use alternative transport options where possible.

## **Trees**

There are a number of trees on the site and adjacent to the proposed works that are protected under tree preservation order LD/TRE/2/78. An arboricultural impact assessment has been prepared by Awen Tree Consultancy in association with this application including an arboricultural method statement and tree survey.

The survey identified trees in the area with fungal infections. This includes a multi stemmed sycamore (tag no. 0086) and the stumps of a sycamore (tag no. 0043) and a Beech (tag no. 0047) that have now been removed in line with the procedures described in the report. The removal of these trees has been previously approved by Stirling Council under TREENQ-2022-068.

To the west of the site a lime tree (tag no. 0083) is located near the boundary of the site with a Root Protection Area with a radius of 14m. Some excavation works are proposed within the RPA of this tree to accommodate the northern pond. These excavations account for just 2% of the protected area and the remaining area will be protected during the works as set out in the method statement, with no large machinery to be sited within the RPA. Investigatory hand digs are proposed to be carried out in advance of the works to locate any large roots and any trimming of these roots would be done with a hand saw to minimise wounds. Lime trees are amongst the most resilient of tree species and any impact to this tree would be negligible.

The tree protection zones for all other trees on the site fall outwith the proposed works and the arboricultural impact assessment concludes that the impact to trees on the site will be negligible with the stipulated tree protection.

## Previous Planning Comments

This application follows a previous withdrawn application for the same site which included more extensive works, the below points directly address some of the previously raised concerns:

1. Concerns were raised regarding underground water courses and springs in the local area including limiting water saturation to grassed areas in the local area.

*Observations of the site at the bottom of the meadow over the last 5 years by the CFF trustees has shown that no water has accumulated on the site. Preliminary test holes that were dug did not exhibit any water accumulation and showed that the soil had a well draining sand/gravel makeup. All slopes will be maintained with the ponds cut into the slope.*

2. Concerns were raised that the proposals would exacerbate problems with traffic volumes on the Braeport Road, limited parking and the associated safety of the road which is also used by pedestrians.

*The ponds are not intended as a tourist draw but the ambition is that more local residents will use Holmehill. It is anticipated that most users will not visit by car, but by foot from the local area or users already using the Braeport Centre. The ponds are likely to be used during the day when studies showed that car traffic was at lower levels and car parking below its capacity. The Dunblane Development Trust are working with Stirling Council to introduce parking duration restrictions in the form of maximum stay times and parking permits issued to local residents to help alleviate any current issues.*

3. Concerns were raised over the alteration to the wall to form an access gate to Holmehill from the Braeport within the boundaries of a listed building.

*The area of wall where the gate is proposed has previously had buildings against it and is in poor condition (with remaining concrete still attached to the wall). The CFF have the consent of the DDT to form an opening in this wall in an area that has different sizes and colour of stones, different copes and what appears to be the remains of a pillar to one side that indicate that there is likely to have been a gate in this location previously. Any opening would not be visible from the street and the new gate will be narrow and constructed in a traditional manner appropriate for the conservation area.*

4. Concerns were raised by the Dunblane Wildlife Group over the loss of habitat with the removal of scrub vegetation to form the ponds including the removal of a number of trees on the site.

*The CFF is committed to improving the ecological value of the land. An ecology survey of the site showed that the land was of limited value in its current state and that the proposed ponds and associated planting of native species and pollinators would enhance the habitats on the site for a wide range of organisms. Areas on the periphery of the meadow will be allowed to grow naturally. The CFF welcome direct input from the Dunblane Wildlife Group and others to help manage the entire site including means to improve the ecology of Holmehill whilst keeping its amenity value.*

*Trees removed from the site had been identified as requiring removal through an arboriculture survey as they were had significant fungal infections including brittle cinder and honey fungus which could pose a threat to other trees on the site. This was done with permission from Stirling Council.*

## **Pre-Planning**

In November 2022 a pre-planning application for the site was submitted that included more extensive works than this application (REF: PREAPP-2022-0257), a response was received in February 2023.

The response noted that the proposed siting, layout and design of the two ponds would integrate with the woodland and parkland setting of Holmehill and back from the adjacent listed Braeport Centre. The assessment was that the proposals would preserve the setting of the listed building and that the proposed gate would provide an enhancement to the listed building and conservation area.

The conservation officer commented that the proposed gate was in an appropriate location and that its design was in keeping with the conservation area. The Transport Development Team were supportive of the proposals.

## **Conclusion**

The Carman Family Foundation purchased Holmehill in 2018 to re-establish it as the 'Green heart of Dunblane'. Their ambition is not to develop the site commercially but enhancing the site for use by the local community.

A new gate to the Braeport Centre is proposed to improve access to a poorly utilised area of the site due to its sloping nature and allow direct community engagement including the dementia group based at the centre who are unable to use the site at present due to its difficult access. The gate is in an area of the wall in poor condition and of apparent previous infill and is not visible from the street. Hand painted, close boarded timber ledged gates are proposed that are in-keeping with the conservation area and listed building setting. The gate is for pedestrian access only and occasional maintenance vehicle access, locking of the vehicle gate will be managed by the DDT to prevent unwanted vehicle access.

Two ponds and associated landscape will provide amenity for local residents and user groups and will enhance the local ecology in an area of Holmehill that is currently underused. Appropriate tree protection will be employed during construction and impact to protected trees will be minimal.

## **Konishi Gaffney Architects**

*Konishi Gaffney are an award-winning, design led practice based in Edinburgh. They have won awards for their high quality and sensitive design approach and been hailed as a design exemplar by the Scottish Government.*

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