

Parnham House

My thoughts, concerns & key questions

Julia Hailes, January 2026

Introduction

Parnham House is a place of deep local significance – historically, culturally and emotionally. Its future matters not just to its owners, but to Beaminster and the wider area.

I want to be clear from the outset that I do **not** object in principle to the restoration of Parnham House. On the contrary, I welcome the ambition to bring a remarkable historic building back into use and understand the logic of restoring the façade while creating viable living space within.

My concern lies elsewhere: with the **scale, location and cumulative impacts** of the proposed enabling development, and with the imbalance between who benefits and who bears the costs. This note sets out my current thinking and the questions I believe need clearer answers.

This is **not** a formal planning objection. It is shared in the interests of transparency and informed discussion.



Context

I have known Parnham over many years – initially through visits when John Makepeace ran his woodworking enterprise, and later through events, gatherings and community uses under more recent ownership. The fire was devastating, both for the damage it caused to a remarkable building and for the unresolved questions and mystery surrounding how and why it occurred.

My understanding is that the estate was sold for around £2.5 million under restrictive conditions, limiting the pool of potential buyers. About a year ago, I visited the restored rear of the house, saw the fire-damaged front, and have since eaten several times at the newly established restaurant in the walled garden, which I think is excellent.

While I was interested in what might happen next, it was only when I learned that the proposal involved **82 new houses**, including development within the deer park and on **Mill Ground Meadow across the river**, that I became seriously concerned. I wrote my first blog at that point – *All Pain and No Gain for Beaminster*. (<https://juliahailes.com/all-pain-no-gain-for-beaminster/>)

I then attended the public meeting at Beaminster Town Hall, where many residents voiced strong and legitimate objections. The strength of local feeling was unmistakable, and some councillors appeared under-prepared for the issues they were being asked to consider. I subsequently wrote a second piece – *The Battle for Beaminster*. (<https://juliahailes.com/beaminster-rebellion-over-parnham-planning-dec25/>)



There is a lot of local opposition to the Parnham development

On 6 January I met with Ed Grant, Parnham Development Project Manager, to better understand the rationale behind the proposal. I have produced a separate factual note of that meeting, shared with Ed for comment. This document builds on that context and reflects my own assessment of the issues raised.

Key issues and concerns

1. Overall principle – enabling development

The proposal rests on the assertion that a large enabling development is the only viable way to fund the restoration of Parnham House.

However, it is not clear that this conclusion has been convincingly demonstrated rather than assumed. I am not aware of any transparent options appraisal showing that alternatives – such as reduced development, phased restoration, different ownership or funding models, or partial restoration – have been properly explored and ruled out.

Given that enabling development is an exception to normal planning policy, the burden of proof should be high. At present, the justification appears to rely more on assertion than on clearly evidenced necessity.

2. Financial viability

Financial viability is repeatedly used to justify the scheme's most contentious elements, including:

- the absence of affordable housing
- the inability to pay Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL)
- the lack of meaningful contributions to local infrastructure

This raises two concerns. First, if margins are genuinely so tight, it calls into question the **robustness and resilience** of the scheme. Second, it creates a circular argument in which maximised development is treated as the baseline, and policy requirements are dismissed because they would undermine that baseline.

More broadly, there is a real risk that a project of this scale and complexity could start and then struggle financially, leaving Beaminster to live with the impacts without the promised outcomes being fully delivered.



3. Infrastructure and cumulative impacts on Beaminster

Beaminster is already facing significant pressure from other approved or emerging housing developments around the town, including along Tunnel Road and towards Broadwindsor. Even if only some of these schemes proceed, they will bring **hundreds of additional homes**, with associated increases in traffic, parking demand, pressure on sewage systems, health services, schools and everyday town life.

Residents have already raised concerns about congestion, parking, drainage and the town's limited capacity to absorb further growth without harming its character and functionality.

The Parnham proposal would sit **on top of these existing pressures**, yet it offers no meaningful mitigation. During both construction and occupation, its impacts would be felt acutely in Beaminster, while financial contributions to infrastructure are explicitly ruled out on viability grounds.

This creates a clear imbalance: **the impacts are socialised, while the benefits are largely private.**

4. Access and public benefit

Public benefit is a central justification for enabling development, yet in the proposed scheme access to Parnham Park and the wider estate appears to remain highly constrained.

At present, there is a single public right of way crossing the deer park to the main road, with no proposals to extend this. When I raised the issue with Ed Grant, limited access was partly justified on the grounds of protecting deer. I am not convinced that this is a robust or credible reason. Deer coexist with managed public access in many landscapes, and it is difficult to see why this could not be achieved here.

More importantly, **improved public access represents one of the clearest and most meaningful concessions the scheme could make.** Opening up the deer park, creating well-designed circular walking routes would transform Parnham Park into a genuine local asset, linked into existing walks and the wider landscape around Beaminster.

Access to the parkland and riverside feels like a **small but powerful price to pay** in return for a development of this scale. It would demonstrate a genuine commitment to public benefit and help counter the perception that the scheme creates a private or gated enclave while excluding the wider community.

Without such concessions, restricting access significantly weakens the case that the scheme delivers benefits commensurate with its impacts.

5. Wildlife and ecology

There are broad references to ecology and environmental enhancement, particularly in relation to the river, but these remain largely unsubstantiated.

Statements about “improving the river” do not appear to be accompanied by clear ecological objectives, delivery mechanisms, partnerships or long-term governance. The emphasis seems to be more on improving the experience for walkers than on demonstrable benefits for wildlife or river health.

Given the sensitivity of the river catchment, this lack of clarity is concerning. A more credible approach would involve engagement with established local conservation bodies such as the **Brit Valley Project**, and the adoption of evidence-based ecological objectives supported by long-term stewardship arrangements.

6. Mill Ground Meadow and the river crossing

The extension of development onto Mill Ground Meadow is presented as critical to the scheme’s financial viability.

This element is particularly problematic. It encroaches on what many local people regard as one of Beaminster’s most valued and scenic rural walking routes, transforming open countryside into a residential enclave.

It also necessitates a substantial new road crossing over the river capable of accommodating service and emergency vehicles. This is not a minor intervention – it would have permanent landscape and ecological consequences.

The only compensating benefit suggested is an “improved” riverside walk. Many local walkers would question whether a more manicured route genuinely improves on the existing sense of openness and wildness that they value.

7. Sewage treatment and river impact

Although sewage treatment was not discussed in my meeting with Ed Grant, it is an issue that warrants careful consideration.

I understand that the proposal relies on three on-site sewage treatment plants discharging into the river system. While such systems may function well under normal conditions, questions should arise around long-term resilience, maintenance, monitoring and cumulative impact – particularly in the context of increasing climate volatility.

I am not asserting failure or pollution. However, given the sensitivity of the river environment, it seems reasonable to ask how risk, contingency and long-term accountability will be managed over the lifetime of the development.

Key questions

Drawing these points together, my key questions are:

- **Alternatives:** Has it been convincingly demonstrated that this scale and configuration of development is the only viable solution, and what alternatives have been properly explored and ruled out?
- **Financial Robustness:** Is there sufficient evidence that the scheme is financially robust, given that it cannot support CIL, affordable housing or meaningful infrastructure contributions?
- **Guarantees:** What guarantees exist to ensure that, once started, the scheme would be fully completed?
- **Mitigation:** How will cumulative impacts on traffic, parking, health services, sewage and everyday life in Beaminster be mitigated, particularly in light of other planned developments?
- **Public Benefit:** What genuine public benefits are being offered to offset these impacts, beyond limited and controlled access?
- **Integration:** How will the development integrate with Beaminster rather than functioning as a private or exclusive enclave?
- **Wildlife & Ecology:** What concrete, measurable proposals exist to enhance wildlife and river ecology, beyond mitigation?
- **Urbanisation:** How does the riverside walk improve ecological outcomes rather than simply urbanising a rural route?
- **River-crossing:** How is the substantial river crossing justified in terms of public benefit relative to its impacts?
- **Sewage:** How are long-term sewage risks being managed in a changing climate?

Closing

These are my current thoughts and questions, shared openly to inform discussion. If anything here is inaccurate, I would welcome correction.

I am not opposing the restoration of Parnham House itself. My concern is that the **scale and impacts of the enabling development fall disproportionately on Beaminster**, while the benefits accrue primarily to a private enterprise, with no affordable housing, no infrastructure contributions, and limited public access in return.

That imbalance is, in my view, at the heart of the problem.



This document has been written by Julia Hailes (www.juliahailes.com). Please let me know if you think there are any factual inaccuracies, so that I can make amendments. These are my views as they stand at the moment and may, of course, change in light of further information or if circumstances evolve.

While I welcome constructive dialogue in principle, I do not wish to be drawn into prolonged debate via this document. If you would like to understand the developer's position in more detail, I would encourage you to contact Ed Grant directly at Parnham (ed@parnhampark.co.uk). Alternatively, Dorset Natural Heritage (<https://dorsetnaturalheritage.com/>), who are coordinating opposition to these proposals, may be contacted at action@dorsetnaturalheritage.com.

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