



## Churchill Square



**Location**  
West Malling, Kent

**Client**  
Capital Enterprise Centres

**Value**  
£5m

**Status**  
Completed March 2008

A group of former MOD buildings that previously provided accommodation, social and catering facilities to World War II airmen, have been conserved and adapted to form a vibrant business centre, providing flexible accommodation for small businesses.

### Overview

The former Airmen's Institute at West Malling airfield, now known as 40 Churchill Square, forms part of a group of 7 buildings dating from 1939. This central building functioned as the headquarters of the former Airmen's Institute, while the 6 remaining H shaped buildings were used as barracks.

The buildings were designed by the Air Ministry architect J.H Binge in a consciously functional, modern style, with some restrained Art Deco detailing around the entrance doors. The buildings are arranged in a collegiate group that is characteristic of military aviation sites of the time, and reflect a trend towards more durable and better-planned accommodation for servicemen.

In 2002, Studio Partington were commissioned by the leaseholder Capital Enterprise Centres, to masterplan the redevelopment of this site, and to restore and update the

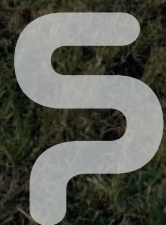
buildings and service infrastructure, to meet the demands of modern businesses.

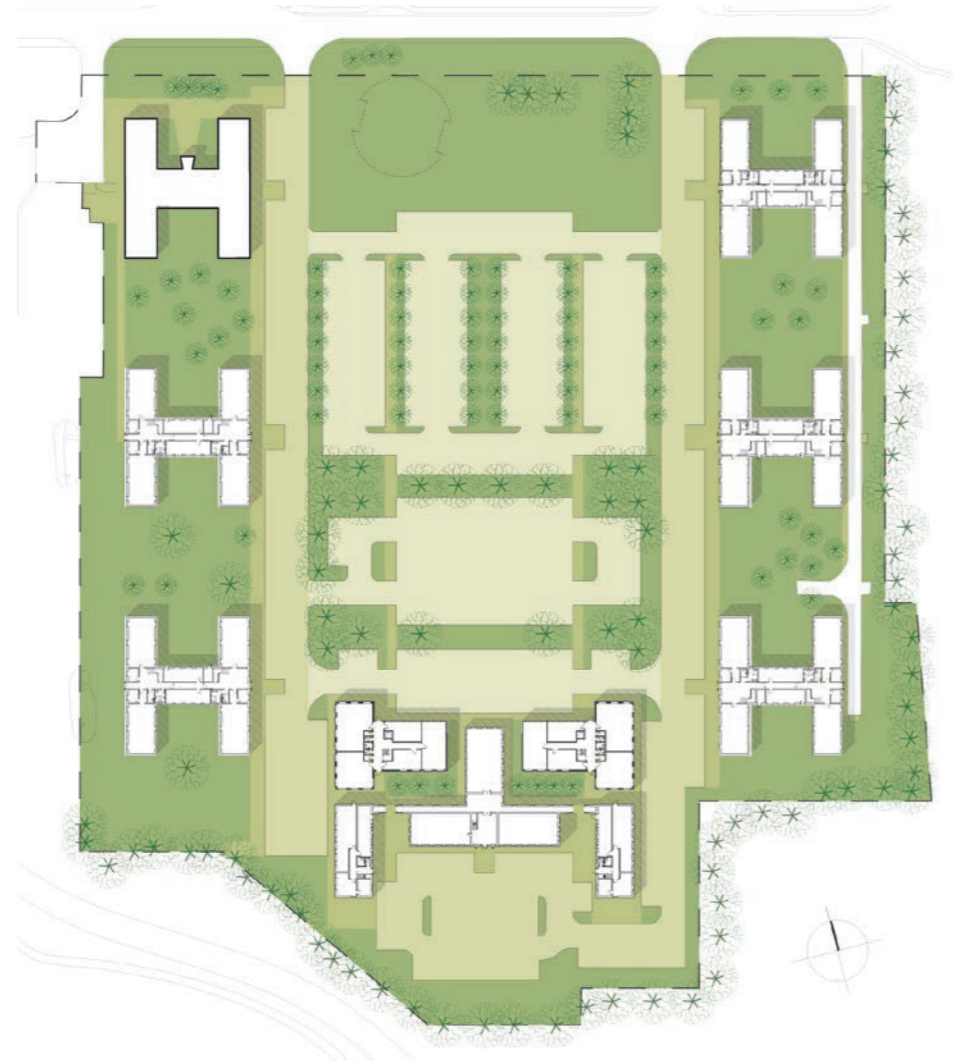
### Existing condition

All but the east wing of one of the buildings was unoccupied when CEC took possession of the site, and it is understood that it had been a number of years since it was fully operational. As a result of the buildings being left unoccupied, as well as a certain amount of neglect by previous owners, several had fallen into a dilapidated condition. This had left much of the non-structural building fabric in need of attention to prevent further decay. Enabling works were carried out initially, which included the stripping out of almost all non-loadbearing walls, services and single storey plant buildings.

### Heritage

The buildings were listed during the course of the refurbishment works, which required on-going negotiation with English Heritage. They cited





the buildings as “the best preserved Art Deco influenced barracks in the country” and mentioned many details of key value. These included the steel 10-pane vertical casement windows, original joinery and paneled doors, the solid string concrete staircases with terrazzo finish, and the hardwood swept handrails on steel Art Deco balustrades.

**Renovation**

The barrack blocks for airmen’s accommodation were arranged in H shaped buildings, with dormitories situated in the wings and circulation and services in the central link; where the bombers aimed. The spinal corridors to the wings created narrow spaces either side, and prevent cross ventilation through dual aspect rooms.

long time and the elevation facing the square had acquired a series of unsightly extensions, in addition to the original single storey kitchen and storage areas, that undermined the simplicity and symmetry of the building forms. The front door position, on the reverse of the square, reduced the legibility and accessibility of the building and made the entrance remote from the parking areas at the centre of the open space between the buildings.

Working with the guidance established in a design brief (prepared by English Heritage and a conservation officer), the proposals rejuvenate both building and landscaping in a scheme that makes new, stronger connections to the square without reversing the



However, these buildings lent themselves to efficient conversion to use as small business units. The individual entrances to the buildings meant that fewer tenants have to share a front door, which gives a stronger identity to the businesses. The internal circulation was simplified and made more straightforward, and the proportion of the wings made for suitable naturally ventilated spaces. The uses of thick walled masonry and in-situ concrete floors and roofs in the original construction provided high “thermal mass” that helps to contribute to internal temperature stability.

The refurbishment of Building 40 was more problematic. Parts of the building had been left derelict for a

historical front/back emphasis of the building. Consent was given for the low rise buildings to be demolished and entirely new facades were built to the north and east of the refectory space, reflecting the intention if not the execution of the original scheme.

The external corridor links were retained, but were opened up by removing windows and creating new large openings to form a short external colonnade, connecting each of the projecting wings. This bold intervention, creates new pedestrian links to connect the entrance court with the main square, drawing people and activity to the front of the building, and connecting it with the parking and landscaped areas.



The proposed interventions greatly improve the usability of the building and were accepted by English Heritage after some discussion, because the main elements of the building that visually, and formally, link the components together were retained. These are the flat concrete roofs, the continuous stringcourse and the consistent brickwork detailing. The existing concrete roof was fully retained (with new single ply covering, thermal insulation and some repair where necessary) in its current form. The continuous pre-cast concrete stringcourse was also retained where possible and any new sections were made to match the existing profile and colour. The retention of these features will maintain the sense of the original grouping of the three connected elements forming one building.

Internally, the corridor space became part of a larger office space, by replacing the dividing wall with a beam and pair of columns. This makes a better office in terms of natural light and ventilation. Originally, at just over 7.5m deep, achieving sufficient natural lighting and ventilation to all parts of the space would have been difficult. The introduction of windows along the north elevation will allow for good cross ventilation, to help extract the heat built up caused by the large south facing windows.

**Details**

In a number of the buildings the existing metal frame windows were

well beyond their useful economical life. Many of the frames were either painted or corroded shut and in some places the corrosion had eaten right through to form holes. Refurbishment or replacement with windows of a similar type was not a practical solution for a number of reasons; including build quality, thermal performance, and continuity of supply and cost. Therefore the existing windows were replaced with thermally broken, double glazed, white powder coated aluminium casements. Much effort was taken to reproduce the pattern of the existing fenestration using a deep frame to replicate the timber sub frame and mid-pane window bars to break down the opening lights into modules similar in scale to the original windows.

The original art deco style porches make a major contribution to the form of the buildings, however the existing timber doors (and side lights in the main entrance) were in a poor state of repair and were eventually found not to be original. Therefore the design proposed to retain the porches whilst replacing the doors with frameless glass doors in a solid hardwood frame. The glass doors help to bring more light into the lobby spaces, especially in the wings where they provide the only direct natural light. They create an intentionally contemporary insertion to the building, but have no detrimental effect on the listed fabric.

