

Underworld: 'Orpheus',
a ground sculpture by
Kim Wilkie at Boughton
House, Northants

BOUGHTON HALL

GROUND FORCE

Well known in the world of landscape design, Kim Wilkie is set to make his name with a new book on the all-powerful muse that he finds in our ancient countryside. By **Liz Grice**



A small herd of Longhorn cattle grazes placidly beyond the ha-ha of Kim Wilkie's Hampshire farm, mothers in calf and their watchful bull. The woodland around their field is budding, primroses smear the boundary. Hens are laying noisily in the farmyard. All, you would say, is very right with the world.

But Wilkie is about to discover that his ruminative friends have been on a delinquent jaunt. While he was away, looking after a garden restoration project in Italy, the herd decided to investigate a strange, man-made spiral mound in a field closer to the house. They broke through the electric fence and ambled up to the top, which gives a smudgy view of Tennyson Down on the Isle of Wight. Divots flew. It must, he says, have been "quite a party".

Wilkie tries to imagine what his future burial mound must have looked like with several massive beasts jostling for position on its small summit.

"I would love to have seen it," he says. As a professional sculptor of the land, he is constantly imagining how things might be different and I think the idea that his animals have made their own amendments to his design amuses him.

Wilkie recently gave up his landscape architecture studio in Richmond, so now all his projects are conceived here, at Franklin Farm. If he is not in his barn designing, he is coppicing woodland, laying flint paths, and restoring the 15th-century house.

"When you are designing or writing," he says, "if you stare at a blank page for too long, your mind goes into screensaver. What is nice about being here is that you get up at 5.30am,

feed the animals and do the farm chores while your head is working away on designs. Then you sit down at the draughting table or the computer and when you reach a pause you go and do a bit more outside. Somehow, it keeps the thoughts flowing."

Wilkie is a tall, gentle figure with no obvious desire to impress, but he is the landscape architect most likely to become a household name. He's behind the colossal redevelopment of Chelsea Barracks, with a plan that gives landscape precedence over buildings. The Prince of Wales has taken him to his environmental heart. The John Madejski courtyard at the V&A is his design.

At Heveningham Hall in Suffolk, he persuaded English Heritage to let him create a majestic sweep of grass terracing along the lines of a scheme that Capability Brown designed 200 years ago but died before he could implement.

Based on three years of daily observation of the river landscape, he devised a strategy for the famous reach of the Thames between Kew and Hampton that protected, and respected, its extraordinary sequence of vistas. "It was absolutely pioneering," says Mavis Batey, the garden historian who worked with him. "All over the world, people want to know how he does it."

Perhaps his most sensational design was for the Duke of Buccleuch at Boughton House, Northamptonshire. There was already a restored pyramid mound in the classical gardens but the duke was not happy. He took Wilkie to the top and asked: "So, what would you do with this?"

Wilkie's response was immediate, intuitive and risky. "I knew he had a second mound in

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