



CLARA MOLDEN VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM

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mind," he says, "but that would have been quite intrusive. I said: 'Why don't you go down, not up?' It was one of those reflexes. Thank God for the muse."

The result was Orpheus, a massive inverted pyramid, 50 metres square and giddingly deep, with a pool at the bottom, representing Hades. Even given Wilkie's reputation for out-of-the-box thinking, it caused a stir.

"All great gardens," he says, "are about someone with a vision doing something slightly mad."

Wilkie believes that you can only intervene in a landscape if you understand its history. The real satisfaction of living and working at his isolated farm is that he feels part of its continuum of 3,000 years of settlement. The Saxon hearth (there is a fire pit to prove it) became a chimney in 1620 "but we still gather around the same fire in the evening, tend the woods, graze the downs and harvest water and vegetables in a way that this thin chalk soil can support."

Trees are coppiced to feed a massive woodchip boiler and there are two 7,000-litre rainwater tanks under the front lawn. During the restoration of the house, he and his partner, Pip, dug chalk and grew hazel to make the wattle-and-daub walls. "It's really nice to grow and dig your own house."

Often, he takes his inspiration from earthworks like Maiden Castle in Dorset, or the shapes of ridge and furrow left by ploughing methods in the Middle Ages. In most lights the fields look flat, he observes, but "suddenly evening shadows or ground frost will pick out a comfortable corduroy stretched over the surface of the land."



Nature boy: Kim Wilkie, above, created the spectacular John Madejski garden at the V&amp;A Museum, top

### Reader offer



*Led by the Land* by Kim Wilkie (Frances Lincoln, £35, pub. May 17) is available to order from Telegraph Books at £31.50 + £1.25 p&sp. Call 0844 871 1515 or visit [books.telegraph.co.uk](http://books.telegraph.co.uk)

Wilkie was born in Kuala Lumpur 56 years ago. His grandfather was a rubber planter, his father a military attaché in Iraq. He grew up in a stilted house on the edge of the Malaysian jungle and later the Iraqi desert, where he carved miniature cities out of compacted sand. After so much heat and colour, it was a shock to be sent to boarding school in England in the big freeze of 1962. He returned home for only two holidays out of three. "It sounds barbaric now, but to us it was normal."

His parents saved Franklin Farm from demolition but it was some years

before they could live there. "It had been empty for nearly a quarter of a century and was derelict, which for a child was thrilling. It never occurred to me that we wouldn't live here for ever."

With his parentage and his linguistic skills (he speaks four languages) it was assumed Wilkie would go into the diplomatic service. But in his final vacation from Oxford, where he read history, he was sent by an English language newspaper in Tehran to cover a botanic garden opening.

"It came as a thunderbolt. I couldn't believe that everything I loved could be

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Kim Wilkie surveys 20 years of his work, from the restoration of the Villa La Pietra in Florence to the masterplan for the World Heritage Site at the Solovetski Archipelago, Russia. Friday 1 June, at 5.15pm, on the Wales Stage. See [hayfestival.com](http://hayfestival.com)

wrapped up in one profession: people, land, biology and drawing. I told them: "This isn't work, it's pure pleasure." He went back to university – this time to the College of Environmental Design at Berkeley, California – and started all over again. The rest, as he would say, is history.

Wilkie has now reached a point where he turns down 90 per cent of the work he's offered. In his new book, *Led by the Land*, he takes a lyrical stroll through the restoration and landscape projects that have consumed him for two decades. The title perfectly sums up his philosophy and his love of what he does. But to see him in Hampshire, so rooted, is to sense that the rhythms of the farm are exerting an irresistible pull. What next?

People who regard him as pivotal in the contest between urban planning and the countryside hope he won't give in to the reclusive side of his nature. "He has the power to influence things," says Christopher Woodward, director of the Garden Museum. "He shouldn't leave the battle. We don't want him to spend all the time with his cows."