

# landscape

## Recognising the potential of the London riverside

Two proposals by Kim Wilkie Environmental Design would transform key sites beside the River Thames

BY ANDREW MEAD

Kim Wilkie Environmental Design won RTPi and Landscape Institute Awards in 1995 for its Thames Landscape Strategy from Hampton to Kew. Its sophisticated and highly detailed analysis, with a host of specific, localised proposals (about vistas, habitats, acceptable development, etc), has since been recommended as a prototype for the rest of the river in the DoE's Strategic Planning Guidance for the River Thames. In preparing the document Wilkie identified two sites with particular potential, and subsequently worked up pro-

posals for them. One was the obsolete Seething Wells Water Works at Surbiton; the other, at Twickenham, the grotto and former garden that Alexander Pope made as part of his famous but long-demolished villa.

Seething Wells, once the site of a spa, was developed in the mid-nineteenth century as an expanding London sought new supplies of water. Its abandoned buildings include an elaborate Neo-Norman Pumping Hall by James Simpson (1852), listed Grade II. The reservoir basins and filter beds form what



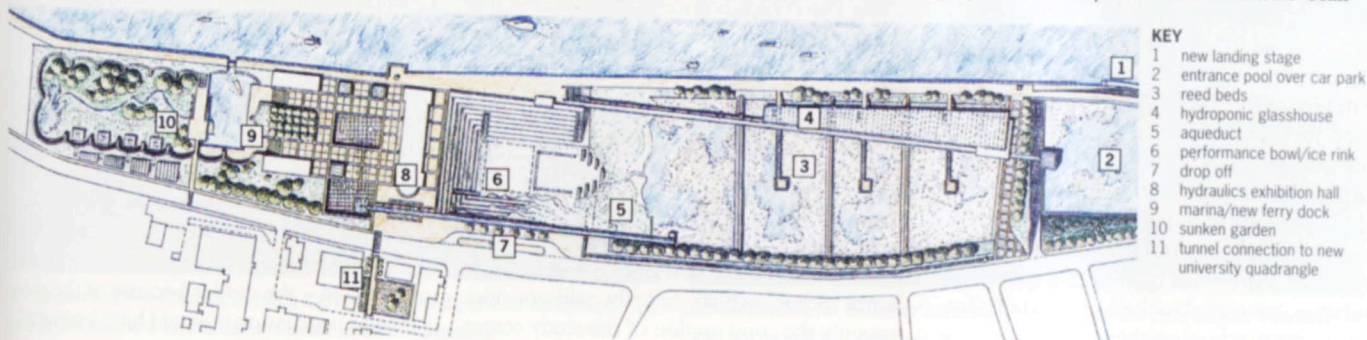
The Grade-II listed Pumping Hall, Seething Wells

Wilkie calls 'a sunken honeycomb'; on the river front, bright yellow broom is a seasonal counterpoint to dark purple brick walls. Some of the basins have been converted to a marina; others, pesticide-free areas where nature has been left to its own devices, have become rich repositories of variegated plant life. With 7ha beside the waterfront, and a further 19.5ha inland, Seething Wells is the largest area for potential redevelopment on the upstream Thames.

Wilkie's proposal for the 7ha site, made with the collaboration of Panter Hudspith and Alan Baxter & Associates, is for a new park in which water is explored in three dimensions: ecological, recreational, and hydraulic. A series of reed beds introduced into the northern reservoirs provides a sustainable system of natural water treatment; disturbance to the existing habitat – the 3m-deep brick walls with their mosses, lichens, toadflax, ivy and stonecrop – is minimal. Sources of food in the final pool should become more abundant in the process, attracting wildfowl to the area. The ecological dimension is further explored in hydroponic glasshouses between the reservoirs and the river. Visitors make their way through this part of the park on elevated walkways, with prospects of the green basins beneath them, before reaching an outdoor auditorium. The cleaned water from the filter beds passes over this performance area on an aqueduct and then cascades to activate displays in the Hydraulics Exhibition Hall –

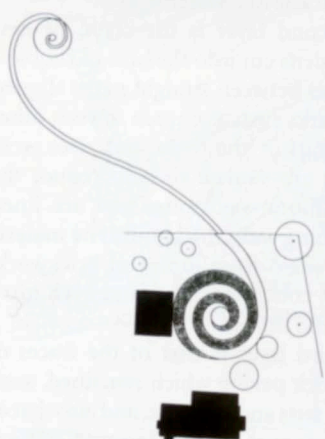


Seething Wells Water Works, Surbiton, with its reservoir basins and filter beds





RECENT PROJECTS BY KIM WILKIE



A sunken Archimedes spiral lawn uncoils from a Hampshire garden into the adjacent field, where it rises as a Golden Mean-section mound



Poised on the sunken lawn is Simon Thomas' geodesic spiral sculpture in patinated copper. From the mound there are views to the Isle of Wight



A modern design inserted into the restored gardens at Rhinefield House Hotel (by Romaine-Walker and Tanner, 1888), Hampshire



A dominant feature of the new design is a chequer-pattern of stone blocks and lavender. The blocks were salvaged from a nearby canal



New gardens at Great Fosters Hotel, Egham. Yew hedges and Kirkstone slate paths create a formal structure for luxuriant planting

21 November 1996

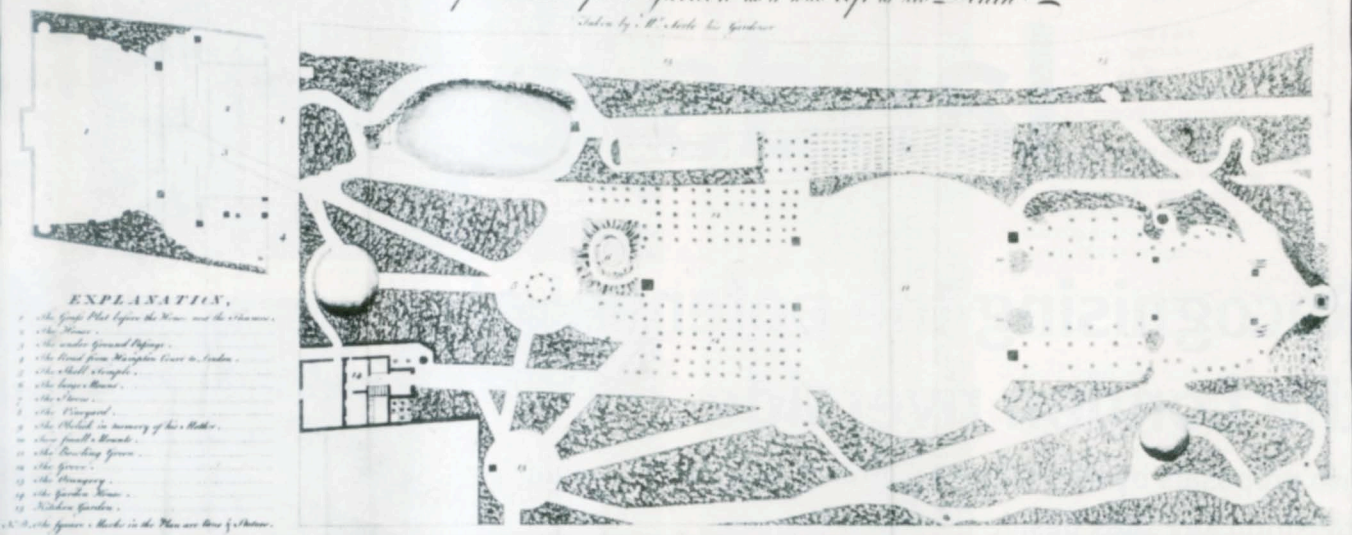


Amphitheatre for summer's evening concerts in the New Forest. The landfall and surrounding trees together create excellent acoustics



# A Plan of Mr. Pope's Garden as it was left at his Death.

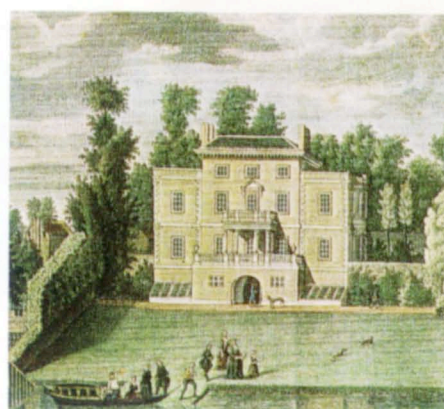
Taken by Mr. Serle his Gardener



where plumes of water perform. Beyond this, founded by the curved brick walls of further reservoirs at the south of the site, the water flows finally into a sunken garden.

In addition, the Seething Wells park provides a continuous path on the west bank of the Thames, at present obstructed by the old water works. As the description above indicates, what Wilkie envisages is a place which functions on several levels simultaneously. There is the possibility of communal activity (the performance space) as well as secluded contemplation (the sunken garden); there is education as well as entertainment, with the ecological lessons of the reed beds on the one hand and hydraulic spectacles on the other. Above all, Wilkie works happily with the post-industrial nature of the site – the Victorian Pumping Hall and its ancillary structures are treated not as heritage monuments but as decisive elements in a layered, evolving dialogue between nature and man. Hampton Court Park, visible across the river, brings its own landscape history into the frame. 'Modern design isn't about denying what's gone before but giving it a fresh excitement,' says Wilkie. It comes as no surprise to learn that he admires Carlo Scarpa.

Pope's Villa stood just a few miles downstream from Seething Wells. Both eminent poet and influential theorist of *genius loci* and man's relationship to Nature, Pope leased an existing house by the Thames at Twickenham in 1718 and commissioned James Gibbs to remodel it. Eighteenth-century engravings show its restrained Palladian appearance – three bays wide (the central three a storey higher), with a first-floor portico above the entrance to a tunnel leading beneath the villa and the London-Hampton Court road) to the garden beyond. With chunks of volcanic lava, fragments of mirror, fossils and minerals, Pope made part of this subterranean passage into an elaborate grotto. Although his villa was demolished in 1807, the grotto still survives, concealed in the basement of a former convent school on the site.



Top: Joseph Serle's plan of Pope's garden, 1745

Centre: Pope's Villa depicted in 1742

Bottom: the former convent concealing the grotto

What Wilkie suggests is that the grotto be restored, and made accessible to the public, by demolishing the 1930s science laboratory in which it is hidden and constructing a new building there – a study centre for literature, landscape and architecture, designed by Allies and Morrison at the same scale, and with the same proportions, as Pope's demolished villa. Given Pope's significance to all three arts, it is hard to think of a more appropriate setting for such a centre. But his theories were not just formulated in the polished couplets of his poetry, the Moral Essays; they were worked out in practice in his garden, which became a crucial point of reference in the search for more naturalistic alternatives to the formality of the Dutch and French garden tradition. Part of the convent site has now been acquired by St James' School which, happily, will consider not only the construction of the study centre

but also the restoration of the garden – for Wilkie, the logical next step.

The vital document for any restoration is 'A Plan of Mr Pope's Garden as it was left at his Death', by Joseph Serle (Pope's gardener), published in 1745. This shows the tunnel beneath the villa emerging on a diagonal towards a 'shell temple', where it intercepted a broad central axis, framed by densely planted trees, that ran the length of the garden and terminated at an obelisk in memory of Pope's mother. Along with a vineyard, orangery, bowling green, and so forth, was a 'large mound', reached by a spiral path, which offered views of the Thames. Most indicative of a change in landscape taste, however, were the downriver margins of the garden, with a pool, irregular and serpentine paths, and the sense (or illusion) of what Pope called 'the amiable Simplicity of unadorned Nature'.

The study centre and reinstated garden could together be a means for increasing public understanding of landscape, culture and design, and, for professionals, a centre for the exploration of aesthetics and ideas – a spur to new creativity.

There is a possibility that Wilkie's proposal for Pope's grotto and garden may be realised. Twickenham Museum is seeking Heritage Lottery funding for a study into its feasibility, along with the restoration of Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill (only a few hundred metres away, and also unoccupied after ecclesiastical use). The prospects for Seething Wells, however, are poor. Kingston Borough Council made a bid to the Millennium Commission for funds for the park, but was unable to finance the feasibility study which the commission demanded. Meanwhile Thames Water, owner of the site, is keen to maximise returns from its disposal, which is likely to result in a housing-dominated scheme. As has been said *ad infinitum* in the last few years, London has seldom made much of its river. Here, it seems, is yet another opportunity missed – the sadder because of the pleasure and instruction it would have brought. □