



ABOVE A view of the stunning entrance to Great Fosters, with mature sugar loaf yews (*Taxus baccata*) lining the driveway.

Landscape designer **Kim Wilkie** is excelling in his task of restoring and improving the Arts and Crafts gardens at Great Fosters hotel in Surrey, creating a masterpiece to be enjoyed for generations to come **PHOTOGRAPHS** MARIANNE MAJERUS **WORDS** KATHERINE SWIFT



Great Fosters is one of the great gardens of the early 20th century: charming, theatrical, nostalgic. In its grand plan but intimate scale, its formal design but romantic planting, its use of separate, hedged enclosures, each self-sufficient but linked into a whole, it belongs in its own smaller way to the same tradition as Hidcote and Sissinghurst. Now Great Fosters is also poised on the brink of becoming one of the great gardens of the early 21st century with additional designs and replanting by Kim Wilkie, one of Britain's foremost landscape designers.

The house dates from the mid-16th century, a long, low redbrick confection of twisting chimneys and

mullioned windows, like a diminutive Knole. The garden was originally laid out in 1918 by the landscape architect W H Romaine-Walker and his partner Gilbert Jenkins.

Romaine-Walker's design takes as its point of departure the U-shaped moat, which encloses the garden on the east front of the house. Here, he laid out his sunken Jacobean-style parterre of yew topiary, enclosed on three sides by water, with a grand double avenue of lime trees beyond it. On the other side of the moat, and balancing it almost exactly in size, he laid out a circular sunken rose garden with echoes of Humphry Repton, screened from the parterre by a long Arts and Crafts pergola of roses and clematis. The two are connected by a little Japanese bridge over the moat, draped with purple wisteria, which

ABOVE, TOP LEFT View across the moat to the topiary garden. **ABOVE, BOTTOM LEFT** In the topiary garden a statue of four putti (representing the seasons) is surrounded by yew hedges and box parterres filled with block plantings of sage, catmint, lavender and *Alchemilla mollis*. **ABOVE** A bridge leads over the canal, with stunning orange daylilies flourishing in the foreground.



is reflected in the dark waters beneath. It's a master stroke.

Kim Wilkie was brought in 13 years ago in the aftermath of the great storms of 1987 and 1990. By then, much of the garden was in a poor state. Topiary and hedges were all massively oversized, much of the original planting had been lost and, in 1971, the great lime avenue had been truncated by the building of the M25. 'I think there was a sort of despair at that point,' says Kim.

He is famous for the depth of the socio-historical research he carries out before embarking upon any project, and he and his team spent a year collating information about Great Fosters from a wide variety of sources, oral as well as written, including scrapbooks made by the Sutcliffe family, who still own the house.

Great Fosters has been run as a hotel since the 1920s, and, in the glory days, film stars such as Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh used to drive over from nearby Shepperton Studios, and Charlie Chaplin maintained a suite here, with a private staircase linking his bedroom with his children's nursery upstairs.

Kim's first task was to restore the existing gardens, rejuvenating the hedges and topiary, and replanting the parterres, the rose garden and the pergola. In Romaine-Walker's design, the pergola had been the principal thoroughfare through the garden, but in the 1930s a bridge had been built over the moat, leading hotel guests straight from the Jacobean parterre to the archery ground, bypassing the pergola and stripping it of its function. ►

ABOVE TOP View across the moat, planted with *Iris pseudacorus*, to the topiary garden, with the archery pavilion behind. **ABOVE** A new apple tunnel crosses the walled former Kitchen Garden. Varieties of Egremont Russet, Bramley's Seedling and Cox's Orange Pippin grow as single cordons.