



# *field of dreams*

KIM WILKIE'S APPROACH TO LANDSCAPE DESIGN AT HIS HAMPSHIRE FARM IS SCULPTURAL RATHER THAN PAINTERLY. LESLIE FORBES FINDS HOW HE HAS LITERALLY MOULDED THE LAND WITH SCALE, MASS AND LIGHT AS HIS PREDOMINANT THEMES. *Photographs by Kate Gadsby*





A VIEW OF THE ORCHARD AND THE  
OLD FARMHOUSE FROM THE WOODEN  
'SUNSET-VIEWING' PLATFORM.









ABOVE: THE ORCHARD WALL HAS BUILT-IN CANDLE NICHES. RIGHT, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: MEADOW GRASSES INCLUDE COCK'S FOOT, *DACTYLIS GLOMERATA*. ON A CLEAR DAY THE 3-METRE HIGH MOUND GIVES VIEWS TO THE ISLE OF WIGHT. THE RAISED PLATFORM. THE VIEW TOWARDS THE MEON VALLEY. SPIRAL MOUND. A SCULPTURE BY SIMON THOMAS IN THE SUNKEN ARCHIMEDES SPIRAL.

When landscape architect Kim Wilkie gets carried away with enthusiasm for the working Hampshire countryside that inspired his own garden at Franklin Farm, he makes you believe that the land has a soul. This is Jane Austen's and the 18th-century naturalist Gilbert White's part of the world. You can almost hear its antique song, humming over the curvaceous dry chalk valley, whispering with serpentine pleasure around Wilkie's sunken grass spiral, murmuring softly over his hand-picked flints and candle niches in a wall enclosing the apple orchard.

"It must sound very romantic," Kim says anxiously, "talking about the land as if it had feelings. But I feel passionately that gardens can reunite a deep current between people and the soil. Garden designers have rather lost their way recently, become too interested in style and the quick photo-fix, whereas we should be encouraging gardeners towards a sense of responsibility for the wider landscape beyond their own walls."

A golden labrador called Ranunculus leads us out of the farmhouse's more formal garden beyond the ha-ha. Ranunculus? "He was born in a patch of buttercups, but you really can't call any self-respecting lab Buttercup, can you?" We follow his dog along the edge of what seems a very typical English wild wood bristling with the flame pink and orange fruits of local spindleberry. Oak and crabapples flourish here, as do ash, beech and field maple, wild cherry and hazel. "They are native, but my friends and I

planted all of them," Wilkie points out, understandably proud. Since 1981 he has introduced about 4,000 trees, and carved through this 'natural' forest 2 miles of mown path that meanders round the sensuous contours of this valley's meadows as if they were made of water rather than earth.

Most of the hard landscaping was accomplished with the help of a local digger driver, Andrew Ruddle, whom Wilkie claims can operate a JCB arm as dexterously as if it were a pencil. Such expertise is crucial to the designer, for his approach is a sculptor's rather than a painter's, less to do with a superficial 'skin' of flower plantings and more with moulding what might be termed the land's bones and muscles.

Scale, mass and light are Wilkie's primary tools, although he is perfectly capable of producing a stunning mixed border, as he proves in the walled garden next to his house. Here a grapevine tangles over a courtyard planted with spires of foxgloves and starbursts of allium, and the rill and pond turn out to have surprising origins, their bricks once part of an archway at a Manchester brewery. "When I bought a few unusual bricks from a salvage yard, I didn't realise I was buying a whole archway." He grins, "Not until two articulated lorry-fulls turned up here!"

From the top of this courtyard's wall a silvery grey oak platform projects out over the apple orchard, an ideal viewing point for charting the changing play of light and shade across a spiralling grass mound that seems to have been there forever. I assume it to be part of England's long tradition of tumuli until Kim



explains that it was created only a few years ago, after he removed an old larch tree from the garden. About to level the area, he realised that if the ground was lowered, there would be enough spoil to create a three metre mound out in the field, from the top of which you can see straight through a break in the hills to the Isle of Wight. "On a clear day, that is," the designer smiles, as we watch spectral sheep appearing and disappearing in the thick mist.

Another sight-line connects Wilkie's modern tumulus with two more spirals, one of them a hollow of grassy coils that sinks into the ground as if a giant snake had curled up to sleep there and left its impression on the land. At its centre is a metal sculpture by Bristol-based artist, Simon Thomas, the man who inspired Kim Wilkie with an enthusiasm for the mathematics of spirals. "The mound and the sunken spiral have a beautiful logic to them," Wilkie stresses. "You feel it even if you understand nothing of the Golden Section and the Archimedes spiral on which they are based."

So subtle are some of the changes he has introduced that they can seem almost unnecessary, like altering right-angled fences to reflect the curve of dip and hollow around the farmhouse. Or taking an idea from Gilbert White and decreasing the size of gates as they approach the mound, thus both framing it and increasing the sense of perspective. Yet before Kim started moving fences and earth, the farm looked flat; his alterations bring us closer to the land. In Franklin Farm's interlocking curves and spirals lie clues to Wilkie's interlocking ideas

about the culture of cultivation, what he describes as the countryside's 'animated prospect'.

"While the government is happy enough to put a few subsidies into tree planting or more B&Bs," he complains, "it forgets how much the landscape we love was shaped and maintained by livestock and by growing food, sometimes even created by keeping animals on the land." A man of strong ideals, he argues that we must move away from ideas of Empire towards shared reserves. A common wealth. "When I hear politicians say that they have no truck with the English idea of countryside because there is no place in it for minorities, I know that we must stop there being two separate worlds in the UK: the urban versus the rural."

Kim Wilkie's words are backed up by the projects his Richmond-based company is carrying out. Their plans for a London walking map would open up London's parks through to the river, using old walking connections to reunite city-dwellers with the land, while in Moscow, where the firm has been restoring what Wilkie calls "a great Russian novel of a garden", their plant selection is devoted not to bedding plants, but to food and air purification. "As it should be for such an inner city public garden," Wilkie says. His aim is to invest gardens with philosophical as well as aesthetic beauty, to evoke wide horizons, even in the narrowest space. To give the land back its voice.

- The garden is not open to the public.
- Kim Wilkie is speaking at this year's GARDENS ILLUSTRATED Spring Lecture, see page 21 for information.



LEFT, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: EUPHORBIA DULCIS 'CHAMELEON'. SEATS UNDER THE GRAPEVINE IN A CORNER OF THE COURTYARD GARDEN. BRICKS FROM A DEMOLISHED MANCHESTER BREWERY WERE USED TO BUILD THE RILL AND POND. A MIXED BORDER WITH FOXGLOVES, ALLIUMS AND YELLOW TREE PEONY. 'SUNSET-VIEWING' PLATFORM. ABOVE: THE WINDOW LOOKING OUT OF THE ORCHARD.









KIM WILKIE'S COLLECTION OF FLINT GEODES ON  
DISPLAY IN THE ORCHARD, WITH HIS SEIRAL  
MOUND VISIBLE OUTSIDE THE WALL.



# REVELATIONS

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT, KIM WILKIE

## CONTACT DETAILS

**Kim Wilkie Associates**, 34 Friars' Stile Road, Richmond upon Thames TW10 6NE Tel 020 8332 0304. Fax 020 8948 3813. Email [tessa@kimwilkie.com](mailto:tessa@kimwilkie.com). Website [www.kimwilkie.com](http://www.kimwilkie.com)  
Kim Wilkie Associates are landscape architects, urban designers and environmental planners. Their work focuses on the relationship between land, culture and place.

**Sculptor Simon Thomas**, 29 Kensal Road, Bristol BS3 4QU. Tel 0117 9531734.

## PROJECTS

**2001** Hyde Park Corner, London

Plans for the redesign of Hyde Park Corner, creating a new focal space at the centre of the processional route.

**2001** Transylvania, Romania

Report on the conservation and regeneration of the 12th-century Saxon villages and mediaeval landscape of Transylvania.

**1999-2000** Garden of Forgiveness, Beirut, Lebanon

Competition entry for creating a Garden of Forgiveness in the archaeological ruins between L'Etoile and Place Martyr.

**1999** Solovetsky Archipelago, Archangel, Russia

Strategic masterplan for the World Heritage site on the edge of the Russian Arctic Circle. An initiative to restore one of the most remote, sacred and environmentally sensitive parts of the world, while sustaining the island population and economy.

**1997-1999** Moscow Botanic Gardens, Moscow

Creation of a new garden with plant selection based around food and air purification, combined with the restoration of the gardens of Peter the Great and Catherine the Great.

**1995** Heveningham Hall, Suffolk

Implementation of one of Capability Brown's last designs before he died. The plans cover 2,000 acres of parkland and 2km of lakes. To the south of the Grade 1 Hall is a new design for a garden of grass terraces.

**1991-1994** Thames Landscape Strategy, Hampton to Kew

A 100-year blueprint for the river Thames through London, based on the historic, natural and cultural landscape. Adopted as the prototype for the Thames by the Government Office for London's Strategic Planning Guidance. For further details visit [www.richmond.gov.uk/thameslandscape/](http://www.richmond.gov.uk/thameslandscape/)

## PHILOSOPHY

*'In evoking the memory of place, there is something special about physical contact with the past: touching the pages of Scott of the Antarctic's diary; smelling Newton's apple tree; hearing Wordsworth's water; watching the movement of Harrison's clock. Reliquaries somehow keep a humming potency. This is not nostalgia or sentimentality. It reaches some deeper hunger for continuity when the future may appear cavernously unpredictable.'*

*A sense of continuity does not have to stop new ideas – just the opposite. The deeper the root, the greater the range of nutrients. When it comes to regenerating cities, the history and character of a place can make a big difference to the long term appeal. Redevelopments which are inspired by the identity of an area can capture a uniqueness which draws people long after the fizz of new buildings has passed.'*

Kim Wilkie

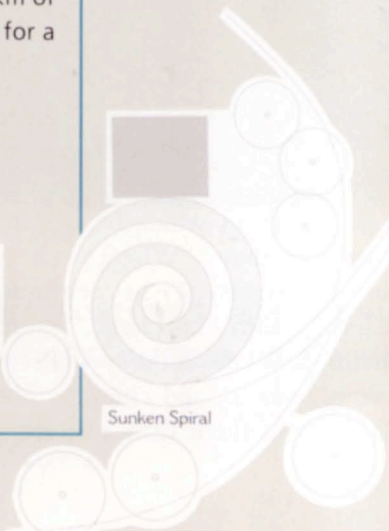
*'All must be adapted to the Genius and the Use of the Place, and the Beauties not forced into it, but resulting from it.'*

Alexander Pope to Burlington, Epistle IV, 1731

*'It was the fearful loneliness of the place that most affected her – the absence of ghosts. 'Till they arrived no other lives had been lived here. It made the air that much thinner, harder to breathe. She had not understood, 'till she came to a place where it was lacking, the extent of which her sense of the world had to do with the presence of those who had been there before, leaving sign of their passing and spaces still warm with breath – a threshold worn with the coming and going of feet, hedges between fields that went back a thousand years, and the names even further... They would be the first dead here. It made death that much lonelier, and life lonelier too.'*

David Malouf,

Remembering Babylon



PLAN OF KIM WILKIE'S  
OWN GARDEN, FRANKLIN  
FARM IN HAMPSHIRE.

Spiral Mound

Sunken Spiral