

DESIGN



GREAT EXPECTATIONS



ABOVE: THE TURF AMPHI-
THEATRE PROTECTS THE GARDEN
FROM THE M25. THIS PICTURE:
THE NORTHWEST PARTERRE.



FOR MORE THAN A DECADE, LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT KIM WILKIE HAS BEEN RESTORING THE GARDENS OF GREAT FOSTERS IN SURREY. ANNA PAVORD VISITS. PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREA JONES





Creeping along the M25 on the wildly busy section between the M3 and M4 motorways, you are given no clue that, just over the boundary, lies a superb Arts and Crafts garden. This is Great Fosters, at Egham, Surrey, which over the last 14 years or so has been gently nursed back to life by the brilliant landscape architect, Kim Wilkie (see *Who's Who* on page 50). The motorway cut straight through the long avenue of limes that led away from the Elizabethan house, and for a while it seemed that the garden might never recover from this savage intrusion of

sodium lights and traffic noise. But it has – triumphantly.

The secret is the new turf amphitheatre that Kim Wilkie designed to fill the void at the end of the fore-shortened avenue. It's a vast piece of land sculpture, with ramps gently rising up either side to enclose a series of seven grass terraces with steep grass banks between. When you stand on the top terrace, Continental lorries whizz by under your nose. But down on the floor of the amphitheatre, you can hear bees buzzing in the clover.

It's a very clever trick and one that Kim Wilkie wanted to bring off as soon as he got involved in the





Great Fosters project. But it took time to persuade the Highways Agency to build the bund that made the amphitheatre possible. The agency staff called him 'Persistency Wilkie' because once a month for six years he phoned them up, trying to push the project forward. His persistence paid off and at the grand opening in 2003, a string quartet played Mozart in the amphitheatre while candles marked out the smooth, curving lines of Great Fosters' newest garden feature.

The oldest thing there is the moat, which stretches out in two arms from the wings of the house and then

closes in a U-shape in front of it. That is said to have been made around 500AD. But the last time the garden got major attention was in 1918, when Gerald Samuel-Montagu commissioned William Romaine-Walker and his assistant Gilbert Jenkins to 'design such a garden as would re-create the old-world charm of the place and be interesting the year round', as the journal *Landscape and Garden* put it in 1934.

ABOVE: THE 1920 ROSE GARDEN BY WILLIAM ROMAINE-WALKER. BELOW, FROM LEFT: ARTS AND CRAFTS PARTERRE. THE HOTEL AT GREAT FOSTERS.





Working inside the rectangle enclosed by the moat, Romaine-Walker laid out a Tudoresque parterre, with yew hedges enclosing beds centred on an old sundial. On the far side of one of the arms of the moat, he made a sunken rose garden and designed a thatched pavilion for archery on the lawn. A hump-backed oak bridge, now swathed in wisteria, connected the parterre with the new area beyond. Montagu then turned the place into a hotel: in the twenties it was a wildly popular venue for debutante dances; in the thirties, film stars 'resting' in-between takes at the nearby

Shepperton film studios dabbled their toes in the swimming pool and posed for pictures in Persil-white tennis kit. Charlie Chaplin reserved a whole suite of rooms for his permanent use.

After this glittering start, the hotel went into decline, exacerbated not only by plans for the M25 but also by the storms of 1987, which felled many of the old, protecting trees. Once, this had been part of the Windsor Old Forest and King Henry VIII used the house as a hunting lodge. But the storm was a catalyst as well as a disaster because it prompted the Sutcliffe family, who have





owned Great Fosters since 1930, to call in Kim Wilkie and plan a new future for this important garden.

Part of his job was to bring Romaine-Walker's garden back to life, but the plan is more ambitious than that. He's made new gardens to the south of the old layout, where crinkle-crankle yew hedges enclose areas of wild flowers. He's put in a peony garden, the plants arranged in symmetrical beds between paths of Cumbrian slate. He's removed the ugly concrete Wellingtons that the oak bridge wore in the moat. And, gently, he persuaded the Sutcliffes to acquire 46 acres of

derelict land adjoining the garden to remake a remnant of the old forest, interspersed with lakes and ponds. Then, of course, there's the amphitheatre.

The idea for that was in his mind from the very beginning. "You have to trust that first inspiration," Kim Wilkie explains. "You have to have the faith to return to it, search into it, refine it." But in a project as big as this, you also have to have priorities.

ABOVE: DAWN BREAKS OVER THE MOATED PARTERRE. BELOW, FROM LEFT: THE APPLE WALK. TITHE BARN TERRACE. CRINKLE-CRANKLE YEW HEDGES.





First on the list was the old parterre, where the yew hedges had grown 1.5 metres thick, almost closing off the paths between them. Gradually, over a period of years, these were clipped back to their trunks and the hedges are now crisp and ruler straight. Salvia and alchemilla, purple sage and cranesbill, 'Hidcote' lavender and catmint billow out of the box-edged beds.

The main walk originally led down the middle of the parterre across the moat on a bridge and up through the centre of the lime avenue. This linear approach did not encourage visitors to explore the rest of the garden, so Kim Wilkie persuaded the Sutcliffes to do away with the bridge. Now you wander through an old pergola to the side of the moat, and are brought naturally into the tunnel of double limes leading to the

end of the vista. Even at the amphitheatre, you are discouraged from a direct approach. The banks are too steep to tackle head-on. Instead, you walk up the gentle ramp either side to discover that there's a surprise sunken level incorporated in the design that you don't see until you are right upon it.

The "ghosts of occupation" are an important part of the garden for Kim Wilkie. "All those rituals, all those parties that used to happen here, they are important landmarks in the history of the place." Now, after 14 years of painstaking work, Great Fosters is ready to party again.

ABOVE, FROM LEFT: AN OAK BRIDGE CONNECTS THE ROSE GARDEN WITH THE PARTERRES. GREATER KNAPWEED. THE PEONY GARDEN. BELOW: GREAT FOSTERS' ROOFTOPS.



FACT FILE

KIM WILKIE ASSOCIATES



RIGHT: PLAN OF GREAT
FOSTERS HOTEL AND GARDEN

CURRENT PROJECTS

Richmond Hill and Ham Lands As part of London's Arcadia strategy the team is advising on the restoration of the miles of historic lime avenues surrounding Ham House, giving attention to environmental, conservation and public access concerns.

London's Arcadia This ongoing project aims to open up and bring together the public spaces of Richmond Hill, Teddington and Kew for local residents, Londoners and tourists. This involves regenerating pathways, gardens, avenues and meadowlands throughout the area as well as supporting the river environment.

Hyde Park Corner Detailed plans for the redesign of Hyde Park Corner that uses landform and water to create a new focal point.

Dom Perignon Abbey, Champagne A radical new design of landscape art for the abbey where Dom Perignon invented champagne in the 1600s.

Heveningham Hall, Suffolk Design for a new garden of fanned grass terraces enclosed by a pleached holm-oak walk behind the 18th-century hall.

Villa La Pietra, Florence Restoration and management plan for Sir Harold Acton's gardens and estate at Villa La Pietra, in Florence, Italy. This 57-acre estate and its five villas now form the Italian campus for New York University. Plan for the estate include replanting the olive grove and bio-purification of the estate's water.

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GREAT FOSTERS

Great Fosters is open to non-residents for lunch or dinner and a walk in the garden. Visitors can also have a drink in the cocktail bar overlooking the Japanese bridge, or have afternoon tea on the terrace during summer.

For further details call 01784 433822 or visit www.greatfosters.co.uk

SPECIAL OFFER

GARDENS ILLUSTRATED readers will receive a 10 per cent discount on rooms at Great Fosters until December 2004. Call 01784 480404 or email reservations@greatfosters.co.uk and quote GARDENS ILLUSTRATED when booking a room to receive this reader discount. ■