The Diana Ross Interview

KIM WILKIE
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT

'The most essential part of understanding place is learning how to listen and really being interested in what you hear' – an extract from Kim Wilkie's contribution to *Indignation! the Campaign for Conservation.*

When I walked into his office a little ahead of time for our appointment, Kim Wilkie was on the telephone listening intently to whatever whoever was on the other end of the line was saying, yet at the same time managing to convey to me, whom he had never met, his unalloyed pleasure at seeing me standing there, and that I should make myself at home.

Home is the appropriate word: Kim Wilkie lives with his partner and dog above the shop. In other words, the large open-plan office into which I had just stepped is situated on the raised ground floor of the end-of-terrace Victorian house in Richmond-upon-Thames that Kim bought for himself in the early 1980s, and decided to transform into a dual-purpose space when he started his own landscape design company in 1989. But I could not know this, and even as I looked around with interest at his working environment I was wondering what I was going to do about describing his own garden, if he had one, and whether to this end I could risk asking such a busy man for a second interview, *chez lui*.

In contrast to an ubiquitous and potentially worryingly noisy handsome blond Labrador padding about the place, the five members of the team who constitute Kim Wilkie Associates were all seated around one table in the centre of the room gazing thoughtfully at their individual computer screens. Kim was within touching distance to their left, a large hexagonal-sided table for meetings with each other and/or clients to their right. The floorboards were bare, the walls plain white emulsion, and a floor-to-ceiling, wall-to-wall plate-glass window has replaced the 1970s extension on the

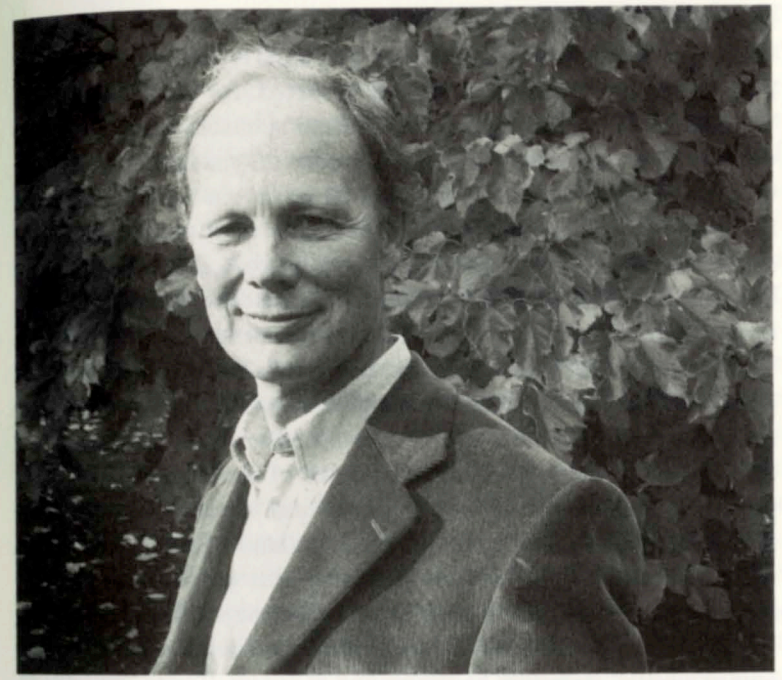
garden side of the house, which was all very state-of-the-art and minimalist, as befits the surroundings of a thoroughly modern landscape architect. However, the original marble fireplaces have been retained, and the floorboards are the old ones, stripped and polished. This retention of what he considers worth conserving about the old building demonstrates Kim Wilkie's whole approach to life generally, and to his work in particular: respect and conserve what's best of the old, yet do not be a slave to the past: reinvigorate it by incorporating with it the best of the new. On the walls hang framed photographs and *bas-relief* models of some of the many projects the company are – or have been – working on, and which all in their different ways reflect this ethos. They range from brand-new concepts for quite small and historic urban spaces, such as Winchester Cathedral Close and the courtyard at the heart of London's Victoria and Albert Museum, through to very large ones indeed for rural spaces and great estates. Among the latter was the implementation of an existing but never actually executed design by 'Capability' Brown for landscaping the valley on one side of Heveningham Hall, a Grade One listed Palladian mansion in Suffolk, as well as a completely new concept for a garden to replace the old and ultimately unsatisfactory Victorian solution to the space at the back of the house. In a pot on the floor by the window stood a fleshy, cut-leafed specimen of a plant that looked like a fancy variety of the cannabis weed, but turned out to be a fancy variety of begonia.

I put what happened next down to nervous excitement: Kim finished his conversation and I switched on the tape. The first words recorded are his: 'It's done! I was just up there on Monday. I'm really pleased! . . .' He is referring to a project he has been working on at Holker Hall in Cumbria for Lord and Lady Cavendish, but instead of waiting for him to tell me more, I leap in with a wildly generalised observation on the issue of conservation/preservation triggered by the memory of something Hugh Cavendish had observed in a light aside some years ago now, to the effect that he didn't keep any records or detailed plans of what he and his wife Grania have done to improve Holker's historic gardens, because

bodies such as the Garden History Society and English Heritage – with which Lord Cavendish was himself, and Kim Wilkie remains, actively involved – might then be able to oblige future generations of his family to abide by them. Once upon a time, I moot, people could sweep away without a second thought whatever didn't chime with their aesthetic, or the *zeitgeist*, and I cite 'Capability' Brown as my example. Kim has exquisite manners: he waited until I eventually ran out of steam before replying with exemplary tact: 'Well, there are some very interesting aspects of that, and to take Capability Brown first . . . are you finding it too noisy?' Double bless: dogs don't pad about on bare floorboards, they clack.

Upstairs too the walls are white, the plate-glass window is repeated, the old floorboards are exposed, and the original fireplaces remain *in situ*, although up here they evidently get used, and the floor is strewn with oriental rugs and loose-covered sofas. The window at this level opens onto a terrace that serves as both vegetable garden (contained in two huge, waist-high copper planters) and outdoor dining room, with a table made of a solid glass cube doubling in its turn as the light-well for the office space below. The most minimalist of kitchens is situated in an alcove no bigger than a cupboard, a comparably tiny glass vase containing sprigs of sweet box (sarcococca), snowdrops, stripy arum leaves, and the tiny narcissus 'Tête-à-Tête', sits on the dining table, and a bowl of overblown blue hyacinths on the coffee table.

Before settling down again I went onto the terrace to look down at the narrow strip of garden below. Like the house, the garden serves a dual purpose: a curiously curved, startlingly bright blue glass bench on the path running the length of the garden's left wall was specifically designed for Kim by Ben Barrell to accommodate, at a sitting, all five members of his design team – when it's warm enough to eat out. The same blue is repeated in the hard surface of the parking space situated beyond the ceanothus hedge that inspired this choice of colour in the first place. At the house end of the garden is a sloping bank of prostrate rosemary, and on wires and trellis fixed to the garden walls a *Vitis coignetiae* some patient soul – almost certainly Kim Wilkie himself, since he is famous for his



Kim Wilkie photographed by David Wheeler.
Harcourt Arboretum, 18 October 2005.

patience – has persuaded to work its way around the entire garden. A narrow rectangle of lawn runs the length of the garden and has been cut into shallow terraces (grass-covered amphitheatres on a vast scale, but similar in principle, are a feature of a number of Kim Wilkie projects). Here, the grass known as Yorkshire fog (*Holcus lanatus*) grows on the slopes, and ordinary lawn grass on the flat areas. To complete the picture, Kim has planted four specimens of *Arbutus andrachnoides*, whose flaky, cinnamon-coloured bark and crisp, matt evergreen leaves stand in nice contrast to the smooth, glistening brilliance of the bench. Sophisticated yet pure; simple yet complete: such balance soothes the spirit and satisfies the soul.

Back inside, and again the first words are Kim's; again they appear to be out of context; and again they reveal his passionate

involvement with his work: 'We ripped the fence down! Bamber Gascoigne led the party and fifty of us pulled it down!' Fascinated, I egg him on: Gracious! So you resorted to vandalism? 'No! Volunteers! It's a Heritage Lottery Fund sponsored bid. And the view! It's just wonderful what a difference it's made. Let me know what you think.' The fence in question is, or was until 6 March, a brutal-looking chain-link and concrete affair that unceremoniously sliced off one corner of the area of ancient common land that lies between the brow of Richmond Hill and the timeless pastoral setting of cattle grazing the Petersham water meadows alongside the Thames far below. Kim Wilkie and his friends are only the latest in a long line of local residents dating back to the end of the nineteenth century who have taken it upon themselves to try to protect the celebrated view from the predations of developers or, in this particular instance, to restore the *status quo*: some greedy grandee in the past had decided to help himself to land to which he had no right. Months later I bumped into Kim plus dog and all his colleagues engaged in what I took to be a working stroll in the spring sunshine along the famous terrace, which must beat breakfast meetings in a hotel. Beaming, he threw out *en passant*: 'Enjoy the view!'

Kim's excitement is easy to understand: not only has getting rid of the fence made a big difference, it is fourteen years and counting since he first began trying to persuade people that his Arcadian dream was achievable. Eventually, in 1994, John Gummer, the then Secretary of State for the Environment, gave Government backing for an ambitious project to analyse, record and plan the future of the entire Thames landscape for the twenty-first century. And Kim's dream became known thereafter as The Thames Landscape Strategy, of which the successful lottery bid (known officially as Arcadia in the City) to remove the offending fence is a small though significant part.

Naturally, I was dying to know more, but I had been hoist on my own petard: first, Kim wanted to pursue further my observations about preserving the past, or not, as the case may be: 'I think that's a very interesting philosophical point you raised. I think there's probably an unfair perception of 'Capability' Brown that he just

swept away things without regard to what had been there before. [I say this] because in the projects of his that I've been involved in it strikes me that he did look extremely carefully at the place and the possibilities of it and responded very sensitively and brought out the innate 'capabilities' of the land. But yes, there were a lot of people immediately after who attacked his quite radical thinking and gave him the reputation of being a destructive vandal.' I persist: people, at least the rich, could and once did tear down what they perceived as old and out of date or in the way, couldn't and didn't they?

Kim is equally persistent: 'I actually believe that people have really strong passionate feelings about the landscape and their place in it and I think the conservation/preservation issue is an interesting one, but in many ways it muddies the water. I think what people have always done is to cherish the memory of places and those memories may not always be terribly factually accurate. It's a sense of the spirit of the place, which is to do with how people have lived in that place for a long time, the stories that go with it, the way that the land and the water and the air move. The strength of feeling about a place is I think very, very widespread – much stronger than we realise – and I think if the politicians were to acknowledge that, they would be mining quite a rich seam of strength of feeling and passion. Just the passion here [in Richmond] about anything you touch or change – sometimes it's to do with not wanting anything to change, but mostly it's because people care very much about the place that they live in. Where I agree with you is that blindly to keep things just because they are old, and to try to restore minutely to a plan that may never have been quite implemented [in the first place] is a big mistake, because it's looking at it without any engagement: it's looking at it too scientifically.'

Which would account for 'Capability' Brown's decision to 'sweep away' the arguably inappropriate Dutch- or French-style gardens and replace them with a form that reflects the rolling English landscape, and our low light levels? 'Absolutely, and the best kind of conservation and sensitive engagement with the landscape is based on understanding what's important in the place – what the real

beauties of it are, how it's used, how it works, and then allowing that to inspire the next move, so you don't keep everything, you don't say: This is what a named operatic designer did, you say: This has really worked, this is very important to the place, and use it as inspiration for the next stage. Hugh at Holker has kept a lot of things that are intrinsic to the place, but he hasn't been completely hide-bound by any single designer or any single phase, and what he and Grania have done is come up with a really imaginative long-term plan, which allows his children scope to do an awful lot without binding them to minute details that would stifle any creativity.'

Kim yields to no one in his appreciation of the importance of the work of the Garden History Society in the field of academic research pioneered by Mavis Batey, and it was she too who taught him to look beyond pure academic research into ways in which that history is applicable in the future. Only recently, Kim addressed the Society on this very subject: 'I was showing the way that Ham Lands and this area have been managed for centuries. Not only was it a beautiful and historic landscape, but it was immensely practical, in that the water meadows absorbed all of the water [so] that the flooding downstream during the critical two hours of a storm was alleviated, and the avenues were perfect as dry routes through the wet meadows; and [showing them] that, rather than leap into greater and greater technological solutions with concrete and steel, sometimes just to go back and look at how people understood the way that land and water work gives you a solution which is beautiful, which is very practical, which is not expensive, and where nature conservation and human enjoyment and an aesthetic continuity all come together.'

Kim is also pleased with the way he perceives English Heritage has evolved in recent years. 'I think that . . .', he hesitates, searching for the right words, '. . . imagination and flexibility is what Hugh was wanting in English Heritage and I'm sure he really helped, along with Gilly Drummond [Chairman of The Association of Gardens Trusts] who has been very good at leading them along a braver route. It's much riskier if you start to make judgements as to whether it's relevant, or good, or not. But in the end you have a

flexibility that keeps it alive.' He cites two projects of his own to prove his point: 'At Heveningham, they allowed the demolition of Grade II listed walls and garden right beside a Grade I listed house. They said this particular Victorian garden beside this fantastic Georgian building never really worked, and in a pretty landmark decision they said, yes, it can be cleared away and a new design can go in its place.' I didn't think to ask if the Victorian Society had fought the old garden's corner, but when it came to the implementation of 'Capability' Brown's design for the wider landscape, every local ecology group and every naturalist society and all the surrounding parish councils and every municipal body in the county of Suffolk had a point of view to express. Eventually, the design was executed exactly as Brown had envisaged it two hundred and fifty years earlier because Kim was able to satisfy them all that ultimately it was the ideal solution for the topography of the land.

At Brocklesby Park in north-east Lincolnshire, English Heritage went a step further: they permitted a Grade I listed garden designed by Sir Reginald Blomfield to be razed because, unlike Brown's vision, it was not any longer relevant to its situation, the grandiose Edwardian wing it had been designed to complement having been knocked down after the Second World War. English Heritage then gave the go-ahead for Kim Wilkie Associates to design a contemporary garden in keeping with the old house and its existing 'Capability' Brown landscape. English Heritage has evolved into one of the most imaginative conservation bodies in the world, Kim believes.

But not everybody appears to share his view. I came across this comment in the Garden History Society's spring *Newsletter*: 'We consider that the scheme [for a golf resort hotel] proposed for Tottenham Park raises issues of fundamental importance for the future of major historic designed landscapes in the context of "regeneration" and "enabling" development. We are concerned that English Heritage, in a desire to be seen as "developer-friendly", is prepared to compromise too much.' So I asked the Society's chairman, Dominic Cole, for his opinion. Dominic explained that it is the Society's prime purpose to be vigilant, and that, yes, some

might call it bossy and interfering. He also pointed out that not all planning applications to develop a listed landscape can be relied upon to be quite as sensitive to the spirit of the place as those submitted by Kim Wilkie Associates – or his own company, Land Use Consultants, come to that.

Land Use Consultants is the company Kim himself joined after he qualified as a landscape architect in 1984, but then left in 1989 to form his own business because he needed to be free to take on whatever interested him, even loss-making enterprises if he felt like it. Not only that, he has elected to sit on many time-consuming committees over the years, including currently the English Heritage Urban Panel, the National Trust Gardens Panel, the London Mayor's Public Realm Group and, until recently, the Royal Parks Advisory Board, to list only the most prestigious. Such selfless dedication is impressive, but that's to misunderstand why someone like Kim is prepared to give so much of himself: 'The whole idea of duty and obligation seems terribly heavy and worthy, but it's almost as though life presents you with some extraordinary opportunities and you need to pursue them for your own satisfaction, and sense of fulfilment: you gain as much as you give . . .'. He hesitates, remembering there is a downside: 'Though there have been times . . . just getting the view cleared here has been a nightmare in terms of one or two people just not wanting any change whatsoever and there are endless public meetings and you listen and you compromise and you try as much as possible to respond to the common mind – the common opinion – but there comes a point when you have to say No! I know this is right and I trust that I can help lead this in the right direction. You just can't simply be a sponge for . . . for . . .' 'For every negative attitude?' I suggest. 'Yes. It gets to you in the end.' So how do you guard your sanity? 'I've got a smallholding out in Hampshire, and at weekends I'm farming and chopping wood and I think that contact with the soil and doing it yourself and also having a dog makes a huge difference.'

But he admits he has reached a limit: 'I mean you are right, we've been handling a huge number of projects and it's been really, really exciting and I wanted to be learning as much as contributing on

all these different committees, but [now] I want to breathe and so slowly, slowly I've been doing less and less committee work and gradually choosing just to go for very few projects where I really like the people, the clients. I was actually saying to Grania on the train down from Holker on Monday that you go through about thirty years of seizing every moment that you can, but there just comes a time when suddenly you think, I want to savour the moment rather than seize it, and she said, "You're getting old!"' Kim Wilkie was born in 1955.

And it's time to make way for the next generation, and he has other plans: 'One of the reasons I want to come off committees is to make more time to look at farming in the rural community. It's not a priority for this government [although] it's one of the biggest things that's happening in Europe at the moment – how we manage our land, how we grow our food – and it's not really being talked about very much, yet the changes now are as great as happened in the Agricultural Revolution, or after the War.' There is also a job he has his eye on: 'What I'd love to be is on the board of the South Downs National Park, if it ever happens – or something like that.' And leave London? 'Ultimately, yes. I'm a country boy at heart. I'm not a good urban dweller.'

Maybe not, although he is very good at designing spaces that make dwelling in cities as pleasant as possible, because he listens to the people who have to live there, and finds ways to balance sensitive conservation of what is perceived to be worth keeping with state-of-the-art creative innovation. In London, for example, his company was involved in the regeneration of the inner city around Southwark Cathedral and Borough Market. I listened to him lecture on the subject some years ago, and heard for the first time about Farmers' Markets. He also mentioned a project initiated by Hampshire County Council, called Learning Through Landscapes, which concerns itself with ways to get people – the younger the better – in closer touch with the food they eat, and with the land it's grown on. One idea in particular caught my imagination: to persuade city schools to turn parts of their playgrounds into allotments, and let the children grow their own.

Again, politics enters the frame: I wondered if the problem farmers face has to do with the electorate's expectation that food ought to be, to coin a phrase, cheap as chips? (As it happens, our conversation took place before Jamie Oliver's heroic campaign to get the Government to put more money on the school dinner tables hit the media. Now I realise Oliver and Wilkie would make a formidable partnership.) But cheap food is only part of the problem, Kim thinks; there's the deliberate decision by Government to keep the price of aviation fuel low to add into the equation: 'I don't know *how* we begin to change that, but I think the European Union, if it took it seriously, really could . . .' I suggest it might be our nomadic ancestry that's behind it all: suppose we are genetically programmed to keep moving restlessly about? If so, there's scant hope. 'There's partly that, but . . .' again he hesitates, not wanting to be rude but obviously reluctant to let such a despairing thought go unchallenged: '. . . I'm not sure how nomadic we really are still, and I suspect that a lot of people would rather stay at home, or rather not go that far if the aspiration were not constantly thrown at us. I suspect that many people kind of dread going on holiday, but feel that they have to because everyone else does and how can you resist a five-pound flight to Bangkok? We think we want to travel all over the place but actually the process of travelling is pretty miserable and when we get there it's not usually all that nice. Probably people would be a lot happier not travelling as much.' Kim believes it is only (only!) a question of people being more aware of their connection to where they live, to the land itself, and that in England (though not the United States, worryingly) that sense of belonging to a place remains strong.

William Morris's utopian novel *News From Nowhere* sprang to mind when I was on my way home through lovely unspoiled Richmond Park. As I recall the story, Morris's hero lived and worked in a great city at some point in the future. When he felt the need for fresh air and exercise he would simply set off for the countryside on foot and when he arrived would offer to work in the fields for the local farmer, who would then pay him back in kind. Morris's dream of a return to the barter system may not be a feasible proposition for

the twenty-first century, but listening to Kim Wilkie it seems clear that if you believe enough in something, and have the will and the patience to see it through, your vision can be realised. In fact, he was scheduled to address a public meeting that very evening on the conclusions he and his team have reached about how the flood plains in the Richmond area can best be managed in the future. Would I like to come along? 'St Mary's Church Hall, Twickenham, 7.30 p.m.' (I would have, but allowed myself to be defeated by the rush-hour traffic *en route*, and felt curiously ashamed.)

A suspicious thought: is Kim paid for all the time he puts in on the Strategy? 'Not all of it, but right at the moment, yes, I am being paid. We found people to pay for it, bit by bit. I mean, in the end it was never really paid for, but gradually we put it together and more and more people joined forces with it and now there's a co-ordinator who keeps it going and brings it all together. The partners are up to fourteen now, I think. It's got a complete life of its own.'

Having so much paid or unpaid work on the go at once implies good delegation, but delegation is not the name of Kim's game: 'I am not sure it's a question of delegating, I think it's a question of sharing. When it's a good idea it's not your idea, *ever*. I think probably the biggest step was to realise we are part of a common mind and a common heritage and a common culture and sometimes you have the opportunity to promote an idea or crystallise it, but nothing is ever a single possession. The trouble is, if you try to grasp it too tightly you'll suffocate the idea, and I think that's why it's a question of sharing rather than delegating.'

Such wisdom would explain the atmosphere in the office: the sense that here was an ensemble cast at work. Kim explained the company's *modus operandi*: everyone takes an initial collective look at a new commission before one assumes the role of team leader, although every project continues to be discussed by the whole group at informal weekly sessions. The layout of the office is crucial in this respect, 'because we are all in one room round one table it means everything is discussed all the time.'

As well as going on collective walks, and eating together, they go

on site together whenever feasible. For example, along with half a dozen other leading landscape design companies, the company was asked to dream up a new layout for the courtyard at the heart of the Victoria and Albert Museum. The competition was awesome: the iconoclastic, highly controversial New Yorker, Martha Schwartz, the super-cool Kathryn Gustafson from Paris (best known in England for creating the Princess Diana Memorial Garden in Hyde Park), Anna Olins from Canada, Adrian Geuze from Holland, and the many-times Chelsea Gold Medallist, Christopher Bradley-Hole.

So was the brief: to create a tranquil garden that was also 'really hopping', with space for exhibitions as well as for nightlife – which, Kim hardly needed to point out, is 'an impossible combination!' Where, or how, do you start? 'You go and sit in the space, walk around, watch how people use it. We spent quite a lot of time just sitting there . . . and ate in the space and watched people and gradually . . . very often the first ideas jump out at you immediately, and then you just need to work with them and work with them, which isn't usually the way that design is taught.' Not, anyhow, at Berkeley University Environmental Design School in California, where Kim studied landscape architecture, and where students were taught to dismiss their first idea, or go for its opposite, or at least come up with some options, which Kim reckons may work for some, but not for him: 'nearly always – within the first minute or the first hour – it comes to me. Almost as if a place has its agenda and you just have to understand that and the freshness of that first impact you can never recapture, so you just have to go out with all your tentacles.' And in the case of the V&A: 'When you've got architecture that is that insistent and so many different functions [to cater for] you have to come up with something quite simple, so first we just looked at how the building had evolved – that big Italianate façade in the courtyard used to be the front entrance before the Aston Webb wing was built. It's a wonderfully ramshackle museum. I just love the treasure trove that's there and the fact that you can get so lost. It's like getting lost in Tutankhamen's tomb.'

In *Indignation!* Kim gives a marvellous definition of place: 'One of

the key things about place is time. The layers of lives lived and remembered turn location into place. It took time to create; it takes time to understand . . . the memories and associations – good and bad – between the person and the place need to be understood before going on to discuss what should happen next.' In our conversation, Kim identifies landscape architects as being 'responsible for how people and land come together to make place', and explains the symbolism of the terracotta-coloured thumbprint that is the company's logo: it represents man's interaction with the land (as well as the ripples on water, the contour lines on an Ordnance Survey map, and the texture of wood). Kim modestly suggests that the reason his company won the V&A competition was quite likely because their solution was the simplest – that is, the easiest (so by extension probably cheapest) to implement – but my money says they won because they had really heard what the place had to say.

This gift for listening could well be the reason why Kim Wilkie Associates was chosen by the Prince of Wales – or to be accurate, the Prince of Wales's Charitable Foundation, in conjunction with the Mihai Eminescu Trust, under the chairmanship of Jessica Douglas-Home – as the best people to report on the special character and value of the medieval Saxon villages situated in the Transylvanian region of Romania, and the pristine landscape that still surrounds them. (See John Akeroyd's article in HORTUS 64 on the unique quality of the region's wild flower meadows.) Kim speaks German, which meant he could communicate with the largely German-speaking population, and he enjoys 'rudimentary living' – the type of quite basic accommodation provided by a local guesthouse where he and one colleague lodged for a fortnight.

The company later produced an illustrated brochure which Kim describes in the introduction as being 'a general strategic overview taking landscape at its fullest sense and looking at ways the relationship between man and land can go forward in this day and age.' In other words, how to conserve the best of the old ways and traditions without stifling the region to death by over-zealous preservation: 'You can't stop the clock, but there is something extremely special that still is important to the people there and it's

a kind of essence of what's important to all of us, so it's to try to find a way that the most critical elements can be kept and yet bring in washing machines, the internet, find ways just to get to the city, and yet still keep that very precious relationship between man, the land and the nature conservation element. I don't know the answer, but it's just contributing to the dialogue and just helping to see what is so special it needs to be treated as sacred, and where there is total latitude for change.' The Trust aims to use local Romanians wherever possible, which means helping the people understand what's important to them about their heritage, and teaching them the necessary skills to restore and conserve it. 'It seems to be working. Again, heaven knows how it will all turn out but at least each village is getting a pride in its architecture and its landscape.' It is said that it only takes a good man to do nothing for evil to triumph, and evil in this magically unspoiled region stalks in the guise of tacky tourism: Draculaland theme parks and cheap motels at every crossroads are a very real possibility.

Kim Wilkie can listen to what people have to say in a number of languages besides German, which is a gift that would have served him well if he had joined the Diplomatic Service after leaving university, as was expected of him. Throughout his years at Winchester and, later, Oxford he had gone along cheerfully enough with everyone else's notion of his destiny, and would probably have been in Washington by now if he hadn't at the eleventh hour found the courage to give it all up and follow his heart. The stark fact is that in 1977, at the age of twenty-one, he fell off a mountain in Guatemala and managed almost miraculously to survive. He had only recently left Oxford at the time, and wanted to look about a bit before settling down to the rest of his life: 'I'd spent all my life in the Far East and I wanted to go to South America and work in the Andes (for UNICEF). But on my way down, on the border between Mexico and Guatemala, I managed to fall eighty feet or so off a mountain.'

The near-death experience that gave him the courage to change direction may have been his Eureka! moment, but it was only the catalyst: that he was on the wrong path had been revealed to him

the previous year, when he was still up at Oxford and had taken a summer job as an environmental correspondent in Iran: 'It was the year before the Ayatollahs. Quite an exciting time. But the young people I spoke to in the British Embassy who'd just joined were a bit disillusioned by the diplomatic life, and I realised that actually as a civil servant you don't have very much latitude to be yourself, or to follow what you believe is right, but the landscape architects I met were just completely enthralled by the possibilities there, and I remember saying to them, "What you're doing isn't even work! It's just fantastic!"' Whereupon one of them called his bluff: if he imagined it was all such fun, why not become one? Easy: because it would mean throwing away an expensive education. 'So,' he concludes, 'I think falling off the mountain and realising that life could stop at any moment gave me the courage to say I'll start all over again. And of course, it's much harder work than anything else! In some ways it was very liberating because I stopped thinking "God, I've got this whole life to be sensible about." It gives you the sense that it may not be very long: you need at some stage in your youth to become aware that life isn't infinite.'

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