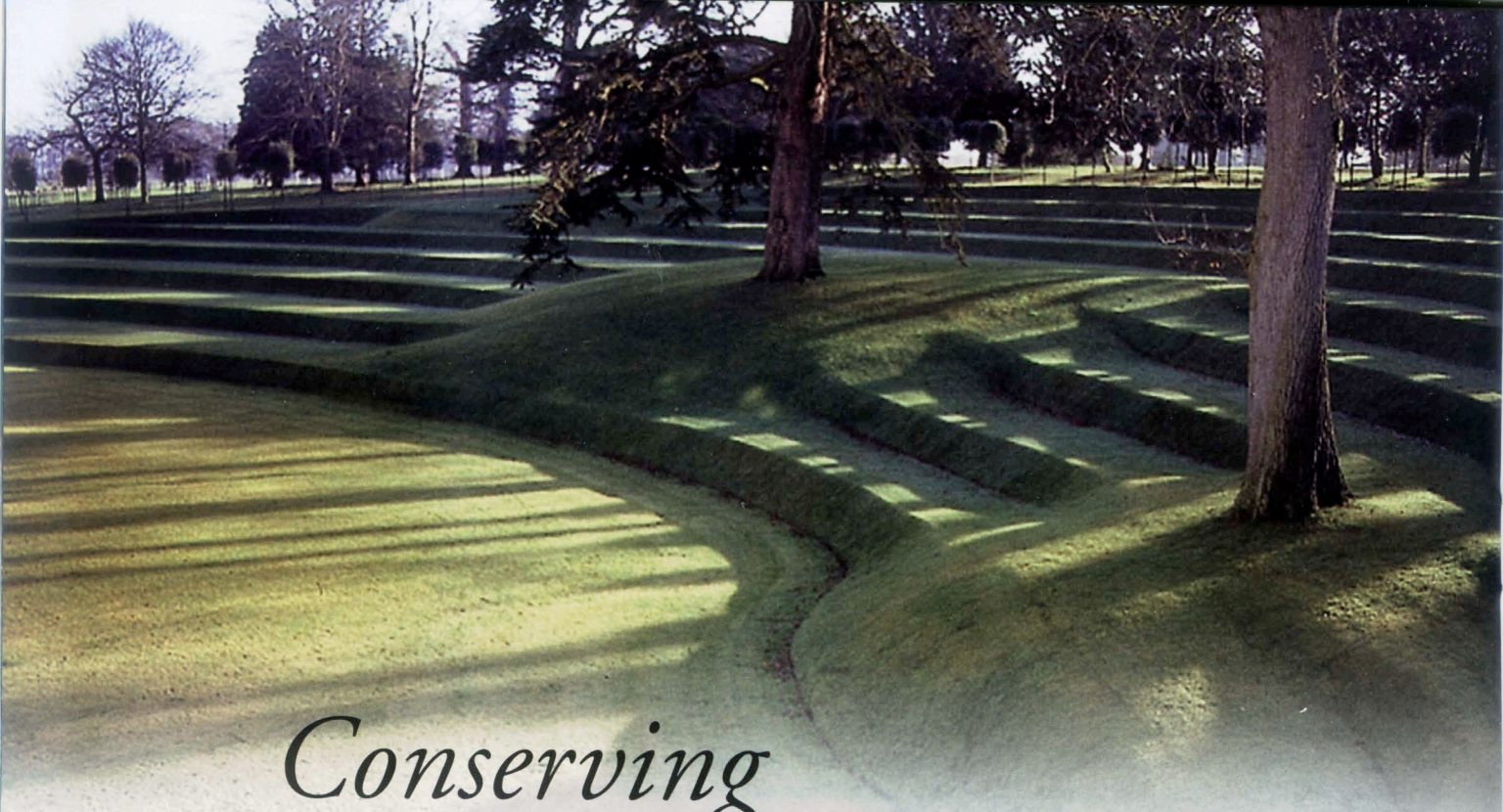


Conserving A SENSE OF PLACE

Landscape architects Kim Wilkie Associates recently achieved international acclaim for an innovative garden for London's Victoria and Albert Museum. But their remit goes much further, exploring and expressing the cultural and ecological interaction of people and nature. KIM WILKIE talks to JOHN AKEROYD.

Photos by Kim Wilkie Associates unless otherwise mentioned

Modern conservation is an eclectic fusion of many elements. Some have tried to reduce conservation to a branch of applied biology, but recent years have shown that understanding the needs of people can provide the key to successful conservation practice. Politics, sustainable development and pure aesthetics are as much a part of the process as plants, animals, soils and water. Scientific botany too is but one way to look at plants. Kim Wilkie, a landscape architect concerned with linking people and landscape, comes to conservation from a very different angle to that familiar to many PLANT TALK readers. In broadest terms he seeks to identify, protect and enhance a sense of place, using the past to illustrate and improve the present.

Wilkie doesn't have a conventional conservation background. In fact he wasn't always a landscape architect. He read Modern History at New College, Oxford, and remains fascinated by how the past interacts with the present. A courteous, genial man with a broad view of design and landscape, he brings to conservation new insights into old problems. Always he seeks out – and tries to maintain – that ineffable sense of place, and aims to distil the essence of the local landscape into both rural and urban projects. "My fascination is how man and land relate to one another", he says, "and how human culture and wildlife have emerged from that relationship. Land affects man as much as man affects the land; and history is a wonderful place to start – it brings out beliefs, philosophy and spiritual connections."

History gave him a sound intellectual basis but did not satisfy his vision. In his last year at university he worked for a time as a journalist in Iran (having grown up in Iraq), becoming fascinated by large-scale landscaping projects just before the fall of the Shah – reclaiming mines, landscaping highways and building a new botanic garden. After Oxford he took up a Unilever management course – following a year working as an acupuncturist in the Andes – and then went back to university, at UC Berkeley, California, where he studied Landscape Architecture and Environmental Planning. After five years with Land Use Consultants, he set up on his own in 1989.

▲ Grass terraces of the amphitheatre, and ◀ the canal at Heveningham Hall, Suffolk.

A recent project demonstrates Wilkie's feeling for history and landscape: the restoration of the landscape around Heveningham Hall in Suffolk. Lancelot 'Capability' Brown designed the grounds two centuries ago, but died before they could be realized. Kim Wilkie Associates have overseen the return of hundreds of hectares of arable land to grazing, and restored and extended woodlands on the estate. They have recreated 2 km of lakes and a modern interpretation of a terraced amphitheatre – inspired by the fine example at Claremont, Surrey, restored since the 1970s after years of neglect and overgrowth by invasive rhododendrons and other woody growth. Another inspiration for the new landscaping was the huge prehistoric mound at Silbury Hill on Salisbury Plan, simplicity itself and apparently of no practical function.

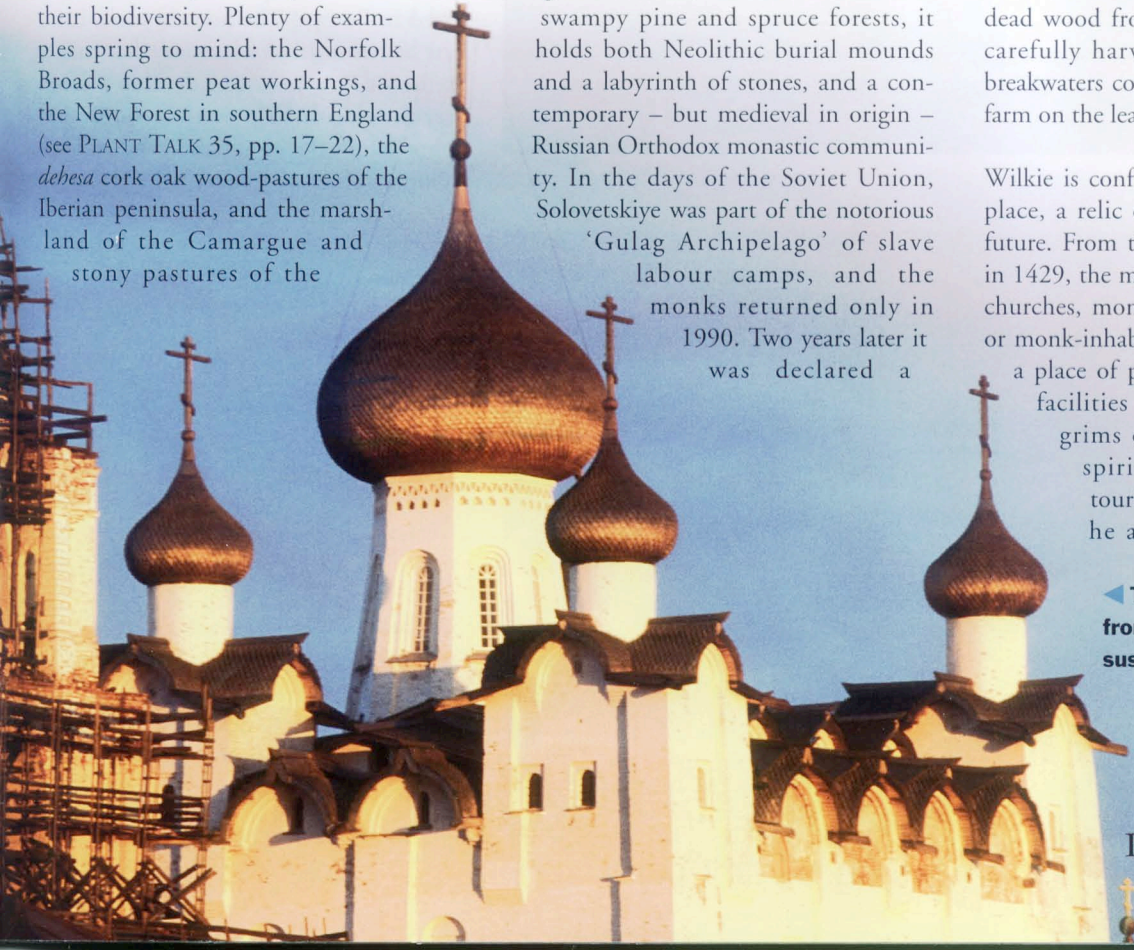
Protecting an older Europe

Whereas England is a mixture of town and countryside, and North America, as Wilkie puts it, comprises "city, agribusiness and wilderness", much of Europe lies between these two extremes. Some of the most important European landscapes are artifacts of human intervention that has been in tune enough with nature not only to have enabled plants and animals to thrive but has also resulted in special cultural landscapes as irreplaceable as their biodiversity. Plenty of examples spring to mind: the Norfolk Broads, former peat workings, and the New Forest in southern England (see PLANT TALK 35, pp. 17–22), the *dehesa* cork oak wood-pastures of the Iberian peninsula, and the marshland of the Camargue and stony pastures of the Crau in southern France. Eastern Europe especially retains large areas of undeveloped countryside, of the highest cultural and ecological value. Wilkie has been particularly inspired by studies he has made of two remarkable surviving Eastern European landscapes, profoundly altered by local people but retaining a spirit of wildness in their rich biodiversity and open spaces.

One of his most absorbing commissions was to report and produce a strategy plan for the Solovetskiye (Solovki) Archipelago, west of Arkhangel'sk (Archangel) in Russia's White Sea. A 350-km^2 mosaic of sea, low-lying granite and gneiss islands, freshwater lakes and swampy pine and spruce forests, it holds both Neolithic burial mounds and a labyrinth of stones, and a contemporary – but medieval in origin – Russian Orthodox monastic community. In the days of the Soviet Union, Solovetskiye was part of the notorious 'Gulag Archipelago' of slave labour camps, and the monks returned only in 1990. Two years later it was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. "Part of the interest", says Wilkie, dissecting the landscape with an architect's eye, "is that it's on the margin of human existence near the Arctic Circle. The area has been settled for thousands of years and has long been seen as a sacred space. Because of its fragility, the monks devoted themselves to sustaining life. They built channels inland to lakes to provide fresh water and to reclaim just enough marshland to grow enough hay, to feed the cows that produced the dung needed for their vegetable plots – enabling them to survive the winter. They selectively harvested dead wood from the sparse forests, and carefully harvested seaweed. Curving breakwaters connect islands – with a fish farm on the leaward side."

Wilkie is confident that this remarkable place, a relic of a lost era, has a viable future. From the monastery's foundation in 1429, the monks evolved a complex of churches, monastic buildings and sketes or monk-inhabited villages. It was always a place of pilgrimage, and the visitor facilities the monks built for pilgrims offer a basis for modern spiritual and environmental tourism. "Despite the Gulag", he adds, "most of it is still

▲ **Solovetskiye monastery is in harmony with a semi-natural environment.**



◀ **The monastery dates from 1429, but now has a sustainable future.**

says, "It was perfectly regulated, sustainable and *static*. How can you move from that to a modern, responsive, dynamic society, and yet retain the best landscape and environmental benefits? We mustn't regulate too closely, otherwise we shall end up with a folk museum, like Williamsburg [in the USA]!" Unlike that of the Solovetskiye Archipelago, the future of the Saxon Villages is distinctly uncertain, although a proposed Natural Park, and a promise of government subsidies to those farmers who maintain some of the traditional practices that maintain biodiversity, offers one solution for sustainable development.

Enhancing London's river

Wilkie is fortunate to work in one of the most stimulating of all historical and natural environments for someone of his profession and sensitivity to landscape. Just 100 m away from the Kim Wilkie Associates office lies the escarpment of Richmond Hill, falling steeply to the wide meanders of the River Thames in one of England's most iconic vistas, immortalized by William Turner and other great landscape painters. Looking down and out across the western suburbs of London towards a distant Hampton Court, one takes in a landscape still recognizably 18th century in form and spirit. It is widely regarded as fine an urban view as anywhere in Europe, scarred by some modern building but softened by trees, and largely intact. Cultural associations continue right up to the present. Kew Gardens continues to evolve and develop, while Eel Pie Island in the Thames was one of the birthplaces of London's rock 'n' roll and blues scene of the late '50s and early '60s.

This local landscape is the site of one of Wilkie's most inspired concepts, the Thames Landscape Strategy. Part of the project, 'London's Arcadia', is funded by an award from the Heritage Lottery Fund in 2004. This will help to restore the fabric and special atmosphere of the urban countryside of the Thames as it passes through some of London's finest suburbs. It is a corridor that not only takes nature right into the city, but also possesses a series of magnificent, mostly 18th century buildings, dating from the time when poets, writers and architects were generating the English Landscape Movement. Alexander Pope lived at Twickenham, where his garden and grounds gave major impetus to a creative

▲ The Thames seen from Richmond Hill – one of England's finest views.

▼ Not Transylvania but the London suburb of Petersham

◀ Cows graze riverside pastures below the Star and Garter home for wounded servicemen on Richmond Hill.

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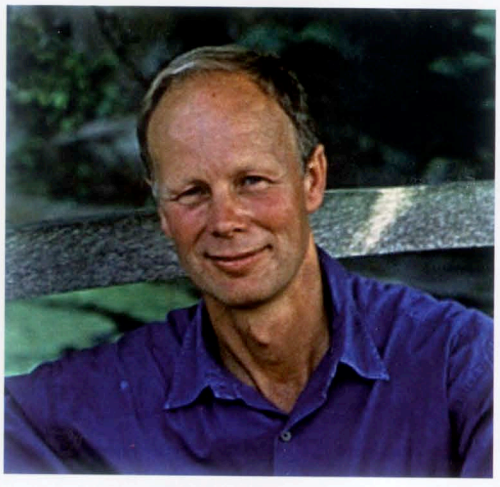
view of landscape, nature and gardens that the English made so much their own (see PLANT TALK 39, pp. 33–36).

The river corridor has long attracted naturalists – walking the Thames towpath is a classic excursion for the London Natural History Society, Botanical Society of the British Isles and others – but it has become overgrown and its flora is more ruderal than that of a surviving portion of an older Thames Valley. Already Richmond Terrace Field, a meadow and public space above the river has been restored, inappropriate ornamental trees have been cleared to reveal vistas, and plans are moving ahead to replant an avenue of trees in the grounds of historic riverside Ham House and restore the floodplain at Petersham. The meadows at this tidal limit of the Thames were lost after World War II, as rubble from wartime bombing was dumped to a depth of 5 m over ancient grassland. The proposal is to dig down to the level of the old floodplain and restore cattle grazing. Above all the scheme will alleviate winter flooding.

"Petersham Meadow is such a good example of what we are trying to achieve", says Wilkie, who clearly warms to this very personal challenge. "Here is a long-term relationship of people living by a floodplain, an illustration of how land absorbs water and cattle are grazed on a well-organized rotation. This is a productive way to generate food and allows public access for recreation, and if grazing is properly managed you can restore some of the rarest habitats in the country. And London's two best SSSIs [Special Sites of Scientific Interest], Richmond Park and the grounds of Syon House, are connected by Petersham Meadows and the river itself. Conservation is a way of using and managing land that has evolved over centuries." Wilkie recognizes that actual plant species diversity may well fall, as the bomb rubble – rich in lime – has been colonized by a range of plants, notably aliens (and it was a famous site for London botanists, even from Kew), but believes this change will be justified by the rarity of the habitat that will be re-created. Grazing marshes possess a small, if rather specialized, flora of mostly grass species. Moreover, the area has deteriorated badly in recent years as elm scrub and Japanese Knotweed (*Fallopia japonica*) have invaded, along with other weeds.



The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, is one of the most significant places in this cultural and ecological corridor of the Thames. Wilkie is clearly disappointed that the scope of Kew's recent listing as a UNESCO World Heritage Site was not broader. "The designation should have gone further. Kew is an extraordinary place, with a wonderful history, but should be seen in the full context of the wider Thames landscape. Science was just one offshoot of the royal patronage that created the special English landscape from Richmond through Ham House to Hampton Court." The ethos of Wilkie's own work derives directly from the philosophical views generated by the creative explosion in this 18th century world of the Age of Enlightenment. "One of the most difficult things", he says, "to get across is that the Rousseau view of taking man out of nature does not work in places like this. Alexander Pope's view – that man is a part of nature and an animated prospect is as good as the wild – is more sustainable, as it accepts man as part of natural processes. His interaction is more than management, reflecting beliefs and culture – how they lock into place."

◀ Kim Wilkie

Kim Wilkie Associates are generating a valuable and eclectic portfolio in their contribution to the conservation of human landscapes and nature. These include the garden at the Victoria and Albert Museum, a simple yet effective layout of lemon trees and water; a new botanic garden for Moscow University, based on a garden established by Peter the Great in the early 18th century. They have also been instrumental in restoring aesthete Sir Harold Acton's garden at Villa La Pietra, Florence, now the Italian campus of New York University, restoring topiary, statuary and a green theatre, as well as replanting olive groves and setting up a scheme for the bio-purification of the garden's water.

It is this sensitivity to place, the story of that place, and the need to conserve a living landscape in tune with the aspirations of people who live there, that makes such a vision of conservation so vital. Conservation needs to escape from the narrow bounds of science – it is no academic subject at the best of times – and to embrace wider aspects of human existence. Perhaps Alexander Pope, Kim Wilkie's great inspiration, ought to have the last word. Indeed that brilliant, inspired, little unhappy man is quoted on the Kim Wilkie Associates website: "All must be adapted to the Genius and the Use of the Place, and the Beauties not forced into it, but resulting from it."

Further information about the work of Kim Wilkie Associates can be found at www.kimwilkie.com.