

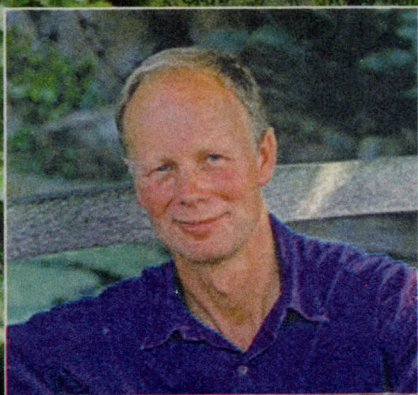
By John Akeroyd

CONSERVATION involves more than just plants, animals, air, soils and water. Landscape architect Kim Wilkie, based in Richmond-upon-Thames on London's western edge, comes to conservation from quite a different angle to the biologist or environmental scientist. Taking a historical and aesthetic overview, he seeks to identify, protect and enhance landscape, using the past to illustrate and improve the present. "My fascination" he says, "is how man and land relate to one another, and how human culture and wildlife have emerged from that relationship." Recent commissions for his company, Kim Wilkie Associates, include a botanic garden for Moscow University, the garden of London's Victoria and Albert Museum, and modern grounds for Heveringham Hall in Suffolk based on 18th-century designs.

Some of Europe's best habitats are artifacts of human activity where plants and animals thrive in a cultural landscape. In Ireland, the Burren and the Curragh of Co. Kildare spring to mind; and Eastern Europe is rich in such places. One of Kim Wilkie's most exciting projects was to produce a strategy plan for the future of the Solovki Archipelago, north-west of Archangel in the White Sea of northern Russia. Local people have profoundly altered this 350-km<sup>2</sup> mosaic of sea, rocky islands, freshwater lakes and coniferous forests, whilst retaining its spirit of wildness. The site holds both Neolithic burial mounds and stone labyrinth, and a working Russian Orthodox monastic community, established in 1429, even before Russia was a nation. In



## Conserving a Special Landscape in Russia's White Sea



Solovki Monastery is an integral part of its island and forest environment. Inset: Inspired landscape architect Kim Wilkie.

Soviet Union days, Solovetskiye – which features in Alexander Solzhenitsyn's 1973 book 'The Gulag Archipelago' – was a slave labour camp. Monks returned only in 1990, and two years later it was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

"Part of the interest", says Wilkie, dissecting the landscape with his 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. 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 leeward side." Wilkie is confident that this remarkable place is not a relic of a lost era but has a viable, secure, sustainable future. From its foundation, the monastery evolved as a complex of churches, monastic buildings and villages. Facilities the monks built for visiting pilgrims offer a basis for modern spiritual and environmental tourism.

This Russian project led to a commission from Prince Charles and others to produce a review and management plan for the Saxon Villages of Transylvania, Romania, a landscape of medieval villages, timeless patterns of rural life, and biodiversity-rich countryside (see *Sherkin Comment* 32 and 40). But Wilkie's most ambitious project lies nearer home. His office on Richmond Hill is close by one of England's most famous vistas, of the River Thames winding through trees and meadows across London's western suburbs – both historic 18th century landscape and green corridor taking nature right into London. The Thames Landscape Strategy is an ambitious project, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, to restore the meadowland, trees and 18th century gardens of this Thames urban countryside corridor. It will create a



An old monastic building and well-head blend into the landscape.



A mosaic of islands and conifer forest in the White Sea.



Photos: ©

Canals bring fresh water unobtrusively through the forests.



Solovki Monastery, founded in 1429, has a bright future built on a long tradition.

fitting backdrop for fine period buildings such as Ham House, Kew Gardens and Hampton Court Palace. Alexander Pope, the 18th century poet whose naturalistic Thames-side garden here inspired the English Landscape Movement, would certainly have approved. "All must be adapted", he wrote, "to the Genius and the Use of the Place, and the Beauties not forced into it, but result-

ing from it." Indeed, this quote appears on Kim Wilkie Associates website ([www.kimwilkie.com](http://www.kimwilkie.com))!

*Dr John Akeroyd edited The Wild Plants of Sherkin, Cape Clear and adjacent islands of West Cork (1996) and remains active in botanical recording at the Marine Station.*