Kim Wilkie's skills of diplomacy and tact would undoubtedly have ensured him a successful career in the foreign service, an occupation he considered as a schoolboy. Time spent in Tehran before the fall of the Shah persuaded him otherwise. Encounters with diplomats who told him he would do something he would be ashamed of, and the opportunity to become an environmental correspondent, which introduced him to landscape architecture for the first time, strengthened his determination to live a life that would make a significant difference to people and the environment. Kim's early years were spent growing up in the Malaysian jungle and Singapore, followed by the complete contrast of Baghdad and the Iraqi desert, and boarding school in southern England. Largely living an outdoor life without television, he developed an awareness of differences in climate, geography and
plants, and he became fascinated by land, vegetation, sky and water. At 13, he and his family moved to their own home, Franklin Farm in Hampshire, where he still lives. Then a ruin, Kim helped with clearing and growing: ‘when a place keeps changing, developing and evolving it draws you in; unlike changing a building, you become committed to watching its evolution.’

These diverse experiences and influences crystallised with the discovery of landscape architecture in Tehran. ‘I couldn’t believe everything I had loved in my life could be combined in one profession.’ At a time when the nuclear threat seemed very real, Kim’s awareness of the fragility of civilisation and life (heightened by an accident at the age of 21 when he fell 80 feet from a mountain on the border between Mexico and Guatemala, sustaining life-threatening injuries), spurred him on to develop his chosen career. Having read history at Oxford, he studied environmental design at the University of California, Berkeley, and established his own landscape studio in London in 1989. Since then he has built up an impressive portfolio of prestigious projects, both in the UK and internationally, as wide-ranging as the influences that shaped him.

SCULPTING THE LAND
Kim’s involvement with the Hampshire Gardens Trust began over 20 years ago when he restored the Victorian gardens at Rhinefield House, in the New Forest. In the characteristic style for which he is renowned, Kim introduced a 20th century overlay into this historic garden, including a grass amphitheatre below the maze with good acoustics for concerts on summer evenings. Inspired by Charles Bridgeman’s design of c. 1725 for a turf amphitheatre at Claremont in Surrey, Kim re-interpreted what he calls the ‘dramatic artistry’ of Bridgeman’s vision for the 20th century, carving and moulding the land with sensitivity and awareness of topography, scale and the play of light. ‘Viking barrows, sacred circles and earth mazes form a deep sediment of landscape memory in the national mind ... Sculpting the land is an ancient and very British tradition. It is one of the most dramatic and yet playful ways of designing in the landscape and enormous fun. The subtlety of the form, often hidden in flat light, can become tremendously powerful at dawn or dusk or in frost and low mist.’ Sweeping grass terraces and amphitheatres are frequently ‘signature’ elements of Kim’s strong but understated designs.

At Heveningham Hall in Suffolk he not only implemented the design created for the landscape of this 18th-century house by Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown shortly before his death, but with the consent of English Heritage he demolished the 1877 parterre at the rear of the house, replacing it with flowing grass terraces that rise in an arcing Fibonacci series fan, ‘encompassing the veteran trees and giving the house

Heveningham Hall

PHOTO: KIM WILKIE
space to breathe’. The result is breathtaking. The house and its setting are as one, in perfect harmony; together they radiate serenity and timelessness. There is nothing more to add. They epitomise Kim’s philosophy: ‘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).

IN HAMPSHIRE
Kim’s empathy with land and its history underpins all his projects as he revives tired or inadequately designed landscapes and makes new gardens. His work in Hampshire includes designing landscape masterplans for the restoration of the 18th-century
gardens at The Wakes, Selborne, the home of Gilbert White, and for Winchester Cathedral Close and its urban setting. He worked with the Hampshire Gardens Trust, Winchester City Council and the local community to create Hyde Abbey Garden in Winchester, built between 2001 and 2006 on the site of Hyde Abbey Church, the burial place of King Alfred and his family, which lay under the leisure centre car park. Archaeological excavations inspired the inclusion in Kim’s typically restrained, elegant design of clipped hollies in tall stainless steel circular frames, echoing the columns of the Saxon church, and ledger stones marking the graves of Alfred, his wife and his son. As with all the community gardens HGT has helped to create, a vibrant Friends group cares for this much-loved contemporary garden which articulates the history of the church that once stood in this significant part of the ancient capital of Wessex and of England (See Barbara Hall’s article on p26).

LONDON AND ABROAD
Kim’s diplomatic skills have proved to be invaluable when a project needs to be guided thoughtfully through consultations with local communities and interested organisations, as was the case with the Thames Landscape Strategy. This 100-year plan for the river through London is based on the historic, natural and cultural landscape and was adopted as the

ABOVE LEFT Steel and holly columns, Hyde Abbey Garden
LEFT The garden at the Victoria and Albert Museum (detail)
BELOW Villa La Pietra

PHOTOS: KIM WILKIE
prototype for the Thames by the Government Office for London’s Strategic Planning Guidance.

In 2004 Kim Wilkie Associates won an international competition to design a garden for the Victoria and Albert Museum. At the heart of this simple, dramatic, popular courtyard garden of lawns, trees and boundary planting in rich blues and golds is a sunken, stepped, stone-paved ellipse which can be flooded with water to create a shallow reflecting pool, or filled with fog for night lighting. Large ice-blue, opaque glass cubes containing lemon trees in summer and clipped hollies in winter add to the sophistication and drama. Theatrical for parties and events, playful when children paddle in the pool, quiet and contemplative for reading a book, the garden has many guises.

In 2009 Kim completed a major project in the early 18th-century Boughton Park in Northamptonshire, home of the Duke of Buccleuch and his family (see p12). A monumental inverted grass pyramid descends seven metres below the level of the grass terraces, complementing the Olympian Mount opposite. Kim says, ‘the new design is not immediately visible, but drawing near to the mount a gentle grass path spirals down to a square pool of still water deep underground. The water reflects the sky, a little like an inverted James Turrell oculus. The earthwork is named after Orpheus to celebrate the descending form and as a place for music and contemplation.’ The Duke of Buccleuch describes ‘Orpheus’ as ‘a vision of power and intelligence ... Here we can rediscover the importance of landscape, ponder how it plays on our senses and how we take our place within it.’

Kim’s travels have seen him involved in numerous projects, including implementing a restoration and management plan for Sir Harold Acton’s gardens at Villa La Pietra, overlooking Florence, now the Italian campus for New York University. The plan includes replanting olive groves and bio-purification of water.

He produced a report on the conservation and economic regeneration of 12th-century Saxon villages and medieval landscape in Transylvania, as well as a strategic masterplan for Solovki, a monastery on the edge of the Russian Arctic Circle founded in 1492. In 1920 Solovki became the first camp of the Gulag Archipelago; the monks returned in 1990, and Solovki is now a World Heritage Site. The Solovetski islands are managed sustainably and innovatively and a mosaic of habitats has been created. According to Kim, ‘the initiative at Solovki will restore one of the most remote, sacred and environmentally sensitive parts of the world. Historically the monastic complex was designed to host large numbers of pilgrims and could set the pattern for an exemplary kind of cultural and educational tourism. If restored and managed imaginatively, the historic cultural landscape should be able to conserve both the natural environment and the historic monuments, while sustaining the island population and economy in a way of life which has evolved over many centuries and remains particularly relevant today.’

SLOW WATER AND CITY FOOD

A measure of Kim’s integrity is the thoughtfulness he brings to his work about the careful, slow use of water. Kim has written: ‘The Germans manage to lead perfectly comfortable lives while consuming a third less water than the English. Dual flush loos, water butts, drip irrigation rather than sprinklers, and parking areas made of permeable gravel rather than impermeable tarmac, are some of the small changes that can make a big difference.’ At Longwood Gardens in Pennsylvania, USA, his potentially influential design for a performance space and square outside the new East Conservatory incorporates not only the signature sweeping grass terraces but domed top-lit lavatory cabinets hidden within the landform, opening off a glass-roofed spine through walls of orchids and ferns. Rain and grey water will be recycled.

Kim believes landscape architects should know more about farming and agriculture, that is, about growing food, ‘as we face a combination of crises, financial and political. We should grow grain and rice on an industrial scale. Fruit, vegetables and salads are perishable and need lots of water. Many things are easy to grow in a small space and don’t need transportation — we could transform towns and cities.’ He is excited about his plans for the proposed redevelopment of Chelsea Barracks, in London, which will combine luxury homes and affordable housing. At the centre of this pioneering project will be ‘immaculate, productive gardens’ with a nuttrey, orchards, space for beehives, and hedgerows to attract wildlife. ‘If you can do it at the most expensive development in Europe you can do it anywhere,’ says Kim.

At a very young age Kim recognised how the ability to grow plants both for food and to enhance our environment improves our sense of well-being and mental health. He is ‘deeply optimistic’ about the future of the environment and excited by the possibilities of coalition for redefining greed and neutralising the extremes that can confound change. Recalling the early 1970s, ‘the Cold War was still
serious, apartheid entrenched, Great Britain deflated; London was bankrupt and sordid and it is now the richest and most exciting city in the world. Obama has turned US politics upside down, Africa is moving forward and we have a youth that believes in the environment and politics.’

‘Understanding traditions and leaping forward into fresh ideas inspired by history’ is Kim’s assessment of the creation of ‘Orpheus’ in Boughton Park. It also encapsulates how this modest and supremely talented man approaches each new project. ‘Landscape Architecture deals with man and land, and the stories they tell about one another. We need to listen to the stories and continue the tale, allowing the memory and imagination of what has gone before to inspire fresh design in the evolving pattern.’