

PRIVATE VIEW

PHOTOGRAPHS CLIVE NICHOLS | WORDS DEBORAH CURTIS

In co-ordinating her first garden project, an interior designer made sure this property in Kent would sit pretty in the surrounding countryside



Interior designer Bella Whiteley was initially commissioned to transform the inside of this traditional red-brick house in the Kent countryside, but from the moment she saw the property, it was clear that the success of the project very much depended on how the building rested in the landscape. 'While the house was a refurbishment project in itself,' she explains, 'the client, Elizabeth, and I agreed that the grounds were integral to the property's success in its setting.' And so Bella embarked upon a three-year project to redesign ►

private view

the house and garden together.

At the outset, the challenges they faced were the heavy clay Kentish soil and the fact that the five-acre garden is on a significant slope. 'It was just one giant hill sloping down to a rather overgrown natural lake, with no vistas or focal points,' Bella says.

Elizabeth wanted to be able to travel around her garden and have interesting features and seating areas along the way, which would encourage her to stop awhile and enjoy the beauty and tranquility of the setting.

'Our original aim was to break up the space, the levels and angles,

▼ **MEADOW SWEET** Wild meadow turf was laid in autumn to create the wildflower garden on the hillside. The following summer, an instant blanket of poppies, ox-eye daisies, meadow sweet and achillea sprang up. A path was cut through it to give the slope a smooth contour.



◀ **SWEEPING DRIVE** Passing drivers stop to photograph the striking scheme that runs up both sides of drive, planted by Laura xxxxxxxx. Birch trees *Betula utilis* var. *jacquemontii* 'Grayswood Ghost' were chosen to give permanent structure, underplanted with purple *Allium giganteum* to add another level, and punctuated with uniform rows of box balls (*Buxus sempervirens*).



▲ **PURPLE PATH** The paved path to the lawn is lined with bay cones and mixed standard roses (*Rosa Flower Carpet White*, *R. L.D. Braithwaite* and *R. Iceberg*) and is underplanted with *Lavandula stoechas*, a favourite with bees and other pollinating insects. ▶

'Our original aim was to break up the space, and to blend areas of wildlife garden with formal lawns and planting'

and to blend areas of natural wildlife garden with more formal lawns and planting up around the house,' Bella says.

To do this the contractors created a stream that tumbles over randomly placed Kent ragstone rocks in a gentle 's' shape, which starts at the top of the hill, near the house, and runs merrily down to the lake.

Around the lake, they put in a path and seating areas, and cleared a lot of dead trees so the established silver birches, willow and tree ferns could all flourish. 'The team planted more tree ferns

and other ferns, and put in irises and gunnera on the island,' says Bella. 'We kept the original duck house, and now the ducks and other wildlife are coming back, so the client's desire to encourage wildlife is definitely working.'

The house is traditional English with contemporary touches, and this has been continued throughout the garden, with modern sculptures. Also, the black stone used in the master suite is echoed outside, in both the driveway paving and also in the *Dark Planet* sculpture by David Harber, which stands at the front of the pool house.

▶ **SILVERED SCREEN**

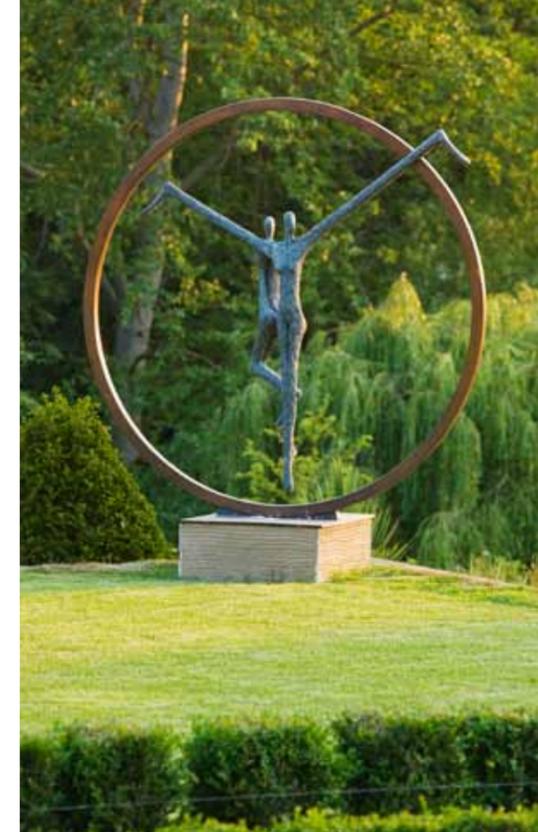
The log wall is a simple, crisp but rustic feature that hides a utility area and provides a natural contrast to the contemporary sculptures in the garden. The upright posts were needed to support the cords, and have now been cut off level with the top.



▼ **TUMBLING DOWN** A rich mixture of plants follows the stream down the hill to the lake, where the open handrail of the rustic bridge frames views of the water beyond. Plants chosen for this spot include the tall grass *Miscanthus sinensis*, and more compact species such as *Phormium tenax*, *Persicaria bistorta* 'Superba', and *Penstemon* 'Sour Grapes'.



▲ **IN THE SHADE** The path around the lake goes past tree ferns (*Dicksonia antarctica*) and other shade-loving plants including *Viburnum x bodnantense* 'Dawn'. Seating areas at intervals invite visitors to stop and enjoy their surroundings. A large Italian urn sits among the tree ferns.



◀ **IN THE ROUND** Three pieces of circle-shaped art have been carefully placed in the garden as focal points. *Harmony* by Michael Speller is cast in solid bronze with a verdigris finish, and signifies unity. It was difficult to place because of its size, but now stands at the corner of the ha-ha on the formal lawn, where it frames the views beyond. See www.spellersculptures.com



▶ **MIRROR, MIRROR** *The Portal*, by sculptor David Harber, stands on the far side of the lake to give the eye a resting point at the bottom of the hill. The mirror-polished surface contrasts with the green of the bank planting, which includes *Butomus umbellatus* and *Carex pendula*. www.davidharber.com

Seating areas at intervals invite visitors to stop and enjoy their surroundings

PROFILE

BELLA WHITELEY trained at Wimbledon School of Art in London in three-dimensional design. She then worked across the fields of theatre design, TV set design and styling for photographic shoots and magazines. Having focused on interior design for more than 15 years, she can turn her hand to any style of decorating or client brief, and now also undertakes outdoor and landscape design, from terraces to whole-garden projects. Working with a team of skilled trades and contractors to help realise each project, Bella oversees and guides all aspects of the process. On this project, she worked with landscaper xxxxxxxx, and gardener Dan House, who is now responsible for the continued upkeep of the garden. For more information, tel: +44 (0)7976 255543 or go to www.bellawhiteleyinteriors.co.uk



◀ **ON THE TERRACE** An oak pergola hosts a mixture of scented honeysuckle and roses, including scrambling *Rosa Flower Carpet White*. These frame the *Dark Planet* sculpture, also by David Harber, which stands in front of the Marston & Langering pool house. The artwork is softly lit inside at night. www.marston-and-langering.com ♦