



Words & Photos: Catherine Heatherington

Above: Hoblyn's garden at Chelsea 2009 used redwood timber that many people believed was stained, but was entirely natural

Below: Thomas Hoblyn in the Chelsea garden, which has now been rebuilt in a client's garden in Suffolk

RENAISSANCE MAN

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Running a design practice from his own Suffolk garden has been the grounding for one of the most talked-about designers of the moment, Thomas Hoblyn.

The crowds around his Foreign and Colonial Investments Garden at this year's Chelsea Flower Show were divided in their opinions, but several seemed to be asking each other the question: 'was the redwood stained?'. Perhaps they should have trusted both Hoblyn's design ethic and the tree's name, and marvelled at nature's dramatic combination of deep, cinnamon-red heartwood and light, bright sapwood.

Looking to nature for his design inspiration is Thomas Hoblyn's passion, and his work addresses the issues around climate change as well as referencing planting combinations in natural landscapes. As he himself admits: "I rip off nature terribly."

This is to do his own designs a disservice. His gardens are certainly not merely copies of nature – indeed, a recurring element of some of his larger commissions is the formality of the flower beds and trees around the house. In this, perhaps, he is unconsciously referring back to Humphry ➤



Photo: Richard Hanson



➤ Repton, who introduced flower gardens to provide a more formal element for the Brownian landscapes in which they sat. Hoblyn uses other Reptonian elements; avenues of trees, a ha-ha and vistas leading from the house to features in the borrowed landscape beyond the garden. However, his intentions are definitely modern – for one of his avenues he chooses aspens (*Populus tremula*) which make an ethereal quaking sound in the slightest wind, and his vista leads the eye through an uncompromising rigid frame of pleached trees to two existing oaks, slightly off-centre. In his ‘parkland’ he encourages clients to give up the lawn mower, leaving areas of long grass for wildlife, and to allow a towering dead tree to remain as a habitat for insects and birds.

Hoblyn was originally destined to take over the family farm and had plans to convert it to organic production. Instead he began work as a gardener, eventually studying for the diploma at Kew, where he discovered garden design, and then, nine years ago, he set up his own company based in Suffolk. His office must be in one of the most beautiful of settings – in his garden overlooking ponds and marshland. He designed this garden piecemeal using plants and materials salvaged from other projects. Again there is

the very formal juxtaposed with the wild and informal. The back of the house is embraced by a semi-circular sweep of raised lawn created by scraping topsoil from the site in the hope of reducing the fertility to create a meadow. There is also a simple rectangular natural swimming pool surrounded by hedging and pleached trees, reminiscent of

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the pools at the gardens of the Alhambra. Beyond the lawn in the meadow, another curve of pleached trees forms the backdrop for a circular barbecue and camping area for the children. The circle is simply delineated with stones, and the views of the informal landscape through the formality of the trees works surprisingly well. Paths are mown through the meadow to the regeneration area for the swimming pond among the reeds and grasses around the office.

Hoblyn is eloquent and frank in discussion of his work and his ideals, and it is this ability with words that perhaps makes him so

successful with his clients; if they are not already converts he can often persuade them to incorporate many of his ideas for encouraging wildlife and conserving the environment. All his gardens have rain-saver systems, so the water from the roof of the house and outbuildings is channelled into pond and wetland areas. He also works with trees and features that are already on site, adding to or extending them. The relationship he builds with his clients is very important, and Hoblyn usually revisits his designs. He says that it often takes three or four years to get the planting right.

He is a couple of years into this process with his clients at Bacton Grange, a Gothic-style house set in six acres with a view over meadow and marshland. The first consideration when designing the garden was the view from the back windows. Originally the pond at the bottom of the lawn was invisible, so Hoblyn has scraped out the lawn, piling the earth on either side to open up a vista all the way down the garden. The pond has been extended across most of this area of the garden and serves a dual purpose – to create a semi-transparent screen for the tennis courts and to merge the garden with the wider landscape beyond. Around the house and lawn are formal,

Above left: Planting in Thomas’s own garden in Suffolk is relaxed

Above right: With a backdrop of pleached trees, Thomas created an informal ‘camp fire’ style barbecue area, marked out in stones – great for children



rectilinear beds, and to one side a terrace based on the proportions of the adjacent garden room with a tree-lined boules court to the side. Next to the terrace is a small raised pond from which extends a long rigid line of blue irises; this formal river of blue leads the eye from the little pool across the grass to the large pond at the bottom. Hoblyn has chosen irises with good, glaucous blue foliage, such as *Iris* 'Jane Phillips', to keep the interest throughout the year.

The three rectangular beds opposite the irises also relate proportionally to the garden room. These are filled with bold blocks of brightly coloured perennials – salvia, lythrum, nepeta and fennel among others. The planting is designed to mimic the billowy nature of the landscape beyond the garden.

This garden demonstrates Hoblyn's design style of linking the formal and informal with no significant transition. It is uncompromising, and some might criticise this and find the juxtaposition jarring or unfinished. However, the careful consideration of scale and proportion links the house with the wider landscape, and the large lawn areas mitigate the contrast between the two states.

Hoblyn's planting philosophy aims to recreate balanced habitats that co-exist

Top: At Bacton Grange salvias, lythrum and nepeta mimic the billowing nature of wild plantings

Above: Hoblyn has opened up the vista down the garden to the pond

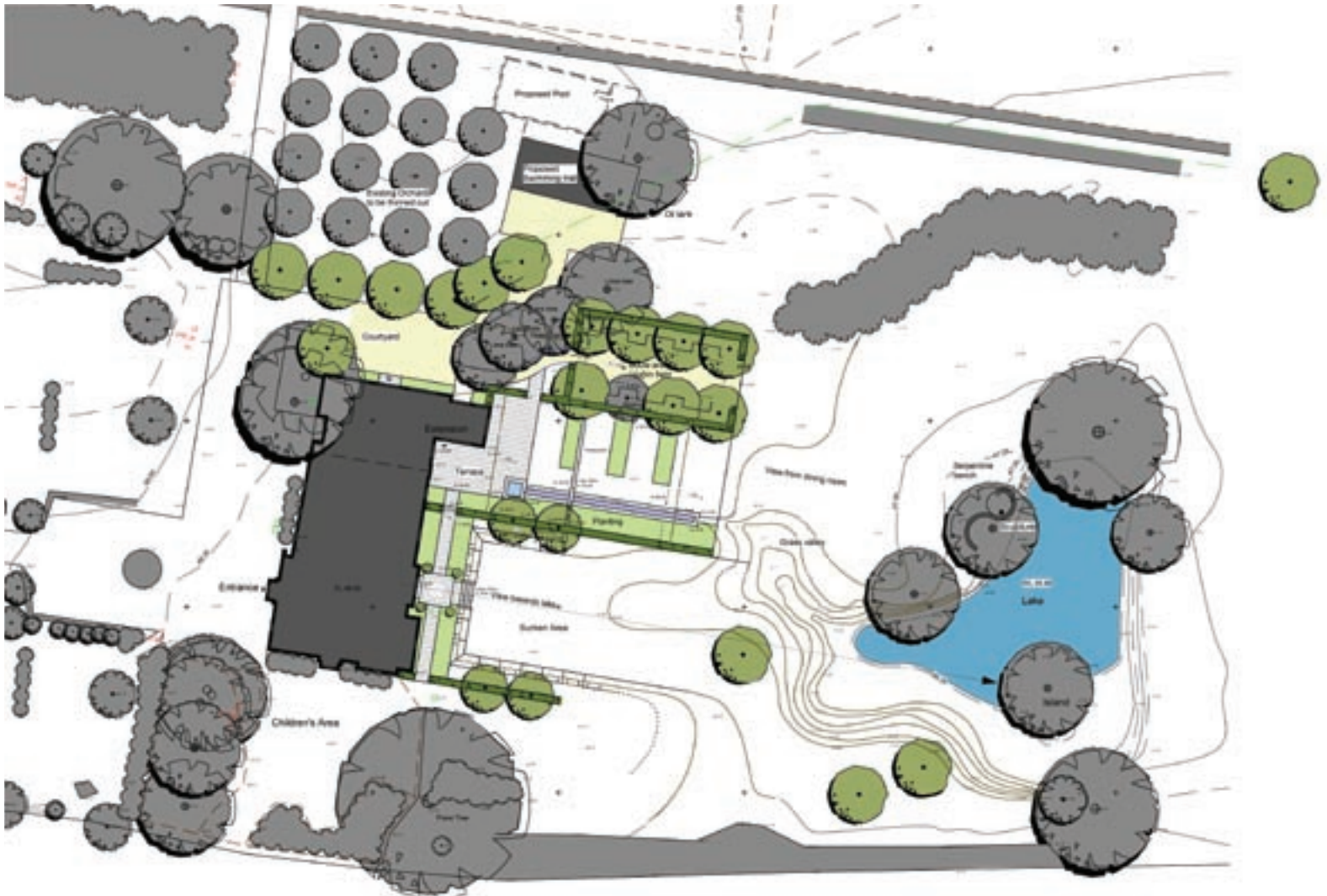
Above right: Planting around the house at Bacton Grange

harmoniously. He is not obsessed by using natives and likes to call his plants 'pseudo-natives'. He uses lots of juncus, carex and calamagrostis, and tries to imitate the proportions of each from observations of natural habitats. He rarely draws up planting plans for these wilder areas and, before planting, needs to be on his own in peace and quiet. His method is to close his eyes and picture the meadow or wetland and how it works; his office, surrounded as it is by semi-natural planting and a small area of woodland, must be a good place for these deliberations. Hoblyn also spends hours looking at old maps, divining ley lines and walking old footpaths and riverbanks. He tries to commit these things to memory in their entirety rather than taking photos of a snapshot in time. When the sun is low and the meadow is backlit it's possible to see how the plants grow throughout the field giving an understanding of their relative proportions and the way they interact with their neighbours.

His Chelsea garden allowed him to experiment with one of his favourite habitats – the wetland. Foreign and Colonial Investments (his sponsors) requested a garden relevant to the unsettled times of financial upheaval, and Hoblyn translated this into a discussion of adaptation and

specialisation in the era of climate change. He practises what he preaches, as the decking, walkway and sculptural elements in the pool all came from one redwood, which had to be felled in the south of England, and on press day he gave away 100 redwood seedlings to people who promised to plant them, including several which returned to the village of the original tree. The blocks for the subtle green boundary wall were all made from recycled materials, and the whole garden has now been rebuilt for a client in Suffolk. The redwood waves which caused so much discussion were designed to represent upheaval; whether thinking about the financial markets or climate change. They are also reminiscent of animals bending down to drink at water holes or even pneumatophores, the root systems that some trees in marshland throw up above the ground to allow them access to oxygen in waterlogged soils.

Hoblyn's interest in the carnivorous pitcher plant, *Sarracenia flava*, began on a trip to the US in 2000. The plant is extremely specialised and therefore very vulnerable to climate change, and it is already under threat in its natural habitat. Many of the other plants in the garden were chosen either for their ability to adapt, such as *Taxodium* ➤



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Above: Concept plan for the six-acre garden at Bacton Grange

Below: Hoblyn at work in Suffolk



distichum, or for their specialisation. Hoblyn writes:

“Normally those species that we now consider most at risk would have generations to adapt to climatic change, something they have done for thousands of years. Unfortunately, due to the sheer scale of man’s activities, both plant and animal species are being wiped out.”

The planting design centres on a ribbon of bright blue *Baptista australis* which is woven through the subtle shades of lime-green *Thalictrum delavayi* and burnt ochre *Aquilegia canadensis*. This unusual aquilegia, which runs through the whole garden, echoes the colour of the deck.

For those interested in the financial practicalities of Chelsea Show Gardens, Hoblyn is very candid. His sponsors gave £90,000 and they estimate that this gives them in return the equivalent of £325,000 worth of media coverage. In fact, Hoblyn’s garden was planned for a 10 x 12m plot and the RHS asked him to stretch it to a 10 x 18m site with no extra money. Perhaps if he had not agreed he would have received more than the silver medal this garden was awarded, but as he himself says, it is the reaction of the public and the subsequent commissions that are also important; he estimates that a

show garden takes up 100 working days, so it has to bring in the business.

As the Chelsea gardens were being dismantled Hoblyn was in the news for his guerrilla gardening exploits; Greenpeace has bought up areas of land around Sipson, a village in West London which is due to be demolished if Heathrow’s new runway goes ahead. Hoblyn begged spare plants from designers and exhibitors and, with Richard Reynolds and Greenpeace, planted up various sites around the village. In the autumn they hope to plant an orchard on the land using local varieties of apple and pear.

Hoblyn’s enthusiasm and way with words has taken him around the world. His latest venture is a Hindu temple garden in north-west Bengal. Originally his client envisaged a traditional English rose garden. Somehow, after taking them on a visit to the jungle surrounding their town where there are nearly 200 species of orchid alone, Hoblyn has persuaded them to bring this abundance of plant life into their garden. It is this interest in a wide range of plants and habitats that is Hoblyn’s strength; he chooses the plants appropriately for the site and then intermingles them to give structure, colour and interest. His links to the landscape are not created by the use of natives, although they play their part, but he draws on the feel and texture of the natural planting in his designs. His greatest strength is his passion for the landscape and the ability to pass this on to his clients. 🌱

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