



# Let's Hear it From ACRES WILD

Pro Landscaper visited the rural offices of **Acres Wild**, the Sussex-based design practice led by **Ian Smith** and **Debbie Roberts**. They talk us through how they started out in design, the way they work together in the business, their 'invisible' style and how their designs evolve



## So how, when and why did you both begin careers in garden design?

**Debbie:** We both trained in landscape architecture at Leeds, and although that's where we met, we are both from Sussex. There were very few places at that time where you could study landscape architecture and Leeds had a reputation of being quite arty, which suited both of us – we are both art students really. But when we graduated it didn't feel like there would be enough creativity and design work to continue in the profession and we fell into garden design almost by accident. We met John Brookes, who was encouraging. We signed up to the enterprise allowance scheme and received a bursary from the Princes Youth Business Trust.

**Ian:** I originally went to art college and intended to go on to do illustration which is why I still

enjoy that side of things. But I took a year out and side stepped into landscape. The attraction was the outside and the connection with nature. Of course, ironically, when you get into landscape architecture you realise it is pushing you more and more into the office. Following the degree, we both felt a little disillusioned with landscape architecture – the attitude was quite elitist, it didn't chime right. We moved back to Sussex, made some contacts and somebody we met through a garden centre asked us to design a garden, so we thought it would be interesting. →

- 1 Ian and Debbie at the 2014 SGD Awards Ceremony
- 2 The BALI award-winning garden at Nursted Barns
- 3 Norneywood, designed in the Art & Crafts tradition
- 4 An intimate courtyard at Le Haut on Guernsey

**When did you start your business?**

**Ian:** We started in 1988, on 17 October. I don't think we knew what we were doing. We spent time learning about business plans, all that sort of thing, then it just grew from there.

**Debbie:** At Leeds we tended to focus our studies on community based projects and ecological schemes. So when we came back to Sussex we linked up with the Sussex Wildlife Trust and worked with them for a while to provide design advice on various local community wildlife projects.

**How did the name Acres Wild come about?**

**Ian:** Because we are from a landscape architecture background, we feel much more

comfortable working on larger scale projects, so we knew the name had to reflect that in some way and we started off doing a lot of ecological schemes. First of all it was going to be Wild Acres and then we thought about turning it round to become Acres Wild – it was only later that we found out it was a song.

**Debbie:** It's actually from an album called Heavy Horses by Jethro Tull! Rather touchingly it was played when Ian received the Grand Award at the SGD Awards earlier this year.

**Did you start the business in Nuthurst, your current location?**

**Debbie:** We started quite close to here, in a town called Billingshurst.

**Ian:** I'm from Crawley originally and Debbie is from Brighton, so it's our local patch.

**What were your first jobs as a business?**

**Ian:** We designed a show garden for a local garden centre, so I suppose we were quite proactive about trying to make contacts with people in related businesses. We also linked up with an interior designer who was working on some big schemes in Surrey. Another landscape architect was moving to America, so wasn't available to do the work and recommended us. We must have designed four or five very large gardens through that contact.

**Debbie:** Then after only three years in business we had a horrible recession that lasted three years. We were working on some amazing projects, and then in the space of one week about seven clients pulled out on us – this was October 1991. We struggled along for the next three years, supplementing our income by lecturing and tutoring at various design colleges. That was great because it filled in a gap when there was very little work.

I think everyone was struggling then, but it was also a good experience because teaching makes you analyse what you are saying and consolidate what you know. On my way back from teaching at the Inchbald one evening I met an old school friend on the train who was then deputy editor of the business section in The Times. We got talking and he said he'd like to write a piece about us for a feature on small businesses. He did so, and that one little article led to so many projects and contacts with whom we are still in touch with now.

**How does it work between the two of you, do you work on the same projects together?**

**Ian:** We both meet clients initially, usually because we don't know at that point which one of us will take on the project and also we both need to understand the issues. We undertake site analysis visits together. Then what invariably happens is that one of us takes the lead.

**What happens if one of you doesn't agree with the other?**

**Ian:** If it is a matter of opinion or taste there isn't a right or wrong and so we'll discuss. Ultimately if it's your project, you have to decide if it's what



“ WE AIM TO CREATE TIMELESS AND ENDURING GARDENS. WE LIKE THE IDEA OF INVISIBLE DESIGN – IF IT WORKS, YOU DON'T NOTICE IT ”

1



2

“ YOU ALWAYS LIKE TO WORK WITH PEOPLE THAT YOU KNOW AND TRUST, WE TRY TO PITCH CONTRACTORS WHO ARE RIGHT FOR THE JOB AND ARE ON THE SAME LEVEL ”

you're comfortable with, or if you think it is a better idea, you go with it. Design is a very practical process, in which you are answering questions and organising the space and the flow. It's actually just a question of practicality.

#### Would you say your style is more traditional or contemporary?

**Debbie:** We try not to have a style as we don't feel it is our role to impose ourselves on a site or a client. Our designs evolve from the site and according to our clients' wishes and aspirations. We are very grounded – every site, every property is completely unique, we respond to a particular house or site, and also the lie of the land.

**Ian:** Usually the client determines the direction your work takes. If we are presented with a modern house, we respond to that, however, inevitably through work you have done in the past you get steered in a certain way. I suppose with us that would be a mix of contemporary with honest materials – if anything, we wouldn't want to do something that is 'of the moment', because of course it's going to date immediately.

**Debbie:** We aim to create timeless and enduring gardens.

**Ian:** It should look like it's always been there. We like the idea of invisible design – if it works, you don't notice it. So in a way you are hiding what you do.

**Debbie:** But that is typical of us, we keep ourselves under the radar, we're not big names, we have always ploughed our own furrow (like those Heavy Horses!) and tend to hide behind the company name. We don't work for famous people, but very often we work next door to famous people!

#### Is there a size of project that you work to?

**Debbie:** One acre is a good size, three to five acres is a normal size for us. We have done small gardens as well as much larger projects



3

that can last four to five years.

**Ian:** It's nice to do smaller gardens for a change.

#### Does most of your work come through recommendation and repeat business?

**Ian:** Yes it definitely does. I would say 60% to 70%, but we haven't analysed it. Our website is a good shop window for acquiring new contacts.

#### Do you charge for the initial visit?

**Debbie:** We do, a potential client visit takes two of us out of the studio for half a day, plus another couple of hours writing a quote. Another thing about charging is that it does keep the meetings focused. You can share ideas and give advice freely whereas if you're not charging there might be a tendency to hold back. It is an interesting debate.

#### How do you choose the landscapers you work with?

**Debbie:** We try to use contractors who are local to a particular project. There are those we work with a lot like The Outdoor Room and Outdoor Creations and others we'd like to work with more including Steve Swatton, Transform, Belderbos and James Scott at The Garden Company. We try to ensure that everyone who is competing is the same sort of company.

**Ian:** You always like to work with people who you know and trust. We try to pitch contractors who are right for the job and on the same level, so the quotes should come in quite closely. →



4



5

1 The garden at Millwater won the 2014 SGD Large Residential and Grand Award

2 The garden at Le Haut won the 2014 SGD International Award

3 Lush and tropical BALI award-winning garden in Surrey

4 The garden at Brightling Down Farm won the 2012 SGD Large Residential Garden Award

5 This Surrey water garden was inspired by surrounding willows and water meadows

“OUR DESIGNS EVOLVE FROM THE SITE AND ACCORDING TO OUR CLIENTS’ WISHES AND ASPIRATIONS. EVERY SITE, EVERY PROPERTY IS COMPLETELY UNIQUE, WE RESPOND TO A PARTICULAR HOUSE OR SITE, AND ALSO THE LIE OF THE LAND”

**Do you manage the tendering process or let the client deal with it?**

**Ian:** We manage it. We will send out all the drawings and specifications and ask the contractors to itemise everything so that we can compare like for like. When it comes back to us we can advise the client, and liaise with the contractors if there is something they’ve missed or encourage them to call us with questions while they are putting the quote together.

**Who buys the plants, you or the contractor?**

**Ian:** It depends on the project, we try to be involved with the sourcing of the plants, as we obviously have contact with the nurseries. If the contractor is supplying the plants or the clients themselves, then we would charge for the time involved in liaising with that.

**Do you carry out planting yourselves?**

**Debbie:** Sometimes the clients, specifically on bigger projects, have gardeners, so although the landscape contractor might prepare the borders, that may be where they stop and then we come in, the plants arrive, we set out and the gardener plants.

**Who do you use for plant supply generally?**

**Debbie:** It would be Provender, Palmstead and Coblands.

**Do you offer a maintenance manual on completion of a project?**

**Debbie:** We produce maintenance guides, set out seasonally, which show a client how to care for their plants.

**How many projects would you have on the go at any one time?**

**Debbie:** Six or seven each, maybe more, all at different stages – some are at master plan,

some would be layout plans, and others planting plans. Then there are the projects under construction and at the setting out stage.

**If and when you are not thinking about gardens what do you like to do?**

**Ian:** I like to cycle a lot, mostly on road stuff. It is my exercise and my headspace away from designing. But funnily enough you do still end up thinking about work. I also like seeing live bands.

**Debbie:** I immerse myself in the cultural and gastronomic life of my hometown of Brighton, and enjoy roller blading and jive dancing. I also holiday in Italy at every available opportunity, in fact I’m probably there now!

- 1 Detail of the garden at Le Haut including kinetic sculpture by Ivan Black
- 2 Detail from the water garden at Brightling Down Farm
- 3 The garden at Le Haut was inspired by the characteristic plant-festooned granite walls of the island

**ABOUT ACRES WILD**

1 Helm Cottages  
Nuthurst, Horsham  
West Sussex RH13 6RG  
United Kingdom  
**Tel: 01403 891084**  
**Email: info@pclandscapes.co.uk**  
**Web: www.acreswild.co.uk**


