

# COMPANY PROFILE

Landscape architect, garden designer and new design director on the BALI board, **Marian Boswall** reveals how she set up her own practice, its focus on historic landscapes, and how contractors and designers should be sharing knowledge

## How was the practice founded?

I was a management consultant, but retrained in horticulture when I moved to the country. We had a large old garden, and I really wanted to understand the history of the design and how a garden should look to complement a house. I studied garden design and horticulture, and people started asking me to design their gardens. What became really apparent is that you need to be fully qualified to do some of the 'scary' elements, such as levels and drainage, so I undertook a landscape architecture degree followed by a Master's at the University of Greenwich. I was then asked to go back to teach Historic Garden Conservation at the university, which meant I was exposed to some of the most talented people – some of whom I hired – and then I started the practice, as I was already designing gardens. There's now five of us, plus freelancers.

## How has it developed since?

It was a slow burner which then gathered pace. A lot of people who start out as garden designers don't realise how much work needs to go into building a reputation, and you're only as good as your last job. Most of our work has been through word of mouth.

## What services does the practice offer?

Both garden design and landscape architecture. Because we have a focus on historic houses, we have been involved in a handful of developments where an old historic house within parkland is being developed, and they need a landscape that is sensitive to the history of the place. I also work for The Charleston Trust and the Watts Gallery, so we often work for private trusts and as an advisor

MARIAN BOSWALL  
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS  
*in numbers*

**MARIAN BOSWALL  
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS**

Established **2004**  
Employees **Five, plus freelancers**  
Breakdown **All small scale  
landscape architecture or large  
scale garden design**  
Awards **Sussex Heritage Trust  
Award for Landscape**

for historic gardens such as Hole Park and St Clare, which are open to the public.

## What type of projects does the practice undertake?

We have a strong focus on historic gardens, but we also design roof gardens in Chelsea, and undertake parkland developments – landscapes that require a sensitive touch. We've worked for Fenwick of Bond Street and Dolce & Gabbana, and we're currently working on the redevelopment of Bond Street with Crossrail, so we do take on high end



Marian Boswall

commercial projects as well – but it needs to be where the design input is considerable.

## Do you put together a maintenance proposal for each project?

We always put together a maintenance plan, and we usually help in hiring a head gardener, or work closely with the existing head gardener. Caroline Jackson, who taught at Hadlow College and now teaches at Wisley, is my roving head gardener. It's absolutely key that we never say goodbye at the end of a project; we go back, and we make sure that the client knows how to look after the garden. I used to go back myself, but I don't have the time now, so Caroline goes back and mentors the gardeners. It's really good for our reputation. We won the Sussex Heritage Trust Award for Landscape and Gardens last year, and they visited the garden to photograph it two years after it was completed.

## Do you only undertake projects in the South East?

No, we currently have work in Oxfordshire, in Devon, as well as in London, so we work across a broad spectrum. I've worked abroad as well. Working close to home is logistically more comfortable, but my first degree was in French and Italian, so I'm happy to travel and enjoy a bit of continental hospitality. It's also really interesting to work with different soils, temperatures and other aspects.

## Are you involved in the planting palettes of each project?

Absolutely, it's my favourite part. I'm very interested in biodynamic gardening. I'm on the board of the Blackthorn Trust, an amazing charity whose gardens are run completely on

“WE TRY TO KEEP A GOOD WORK-LIFE BALANCE AND TO FOCUS ON PROJECTS THAT ARE INTERESTING AND FUN”

biodynamic grounds. We have been asked to design a new garden for them, for which an appeal has just been launched.

## How do you market the business?

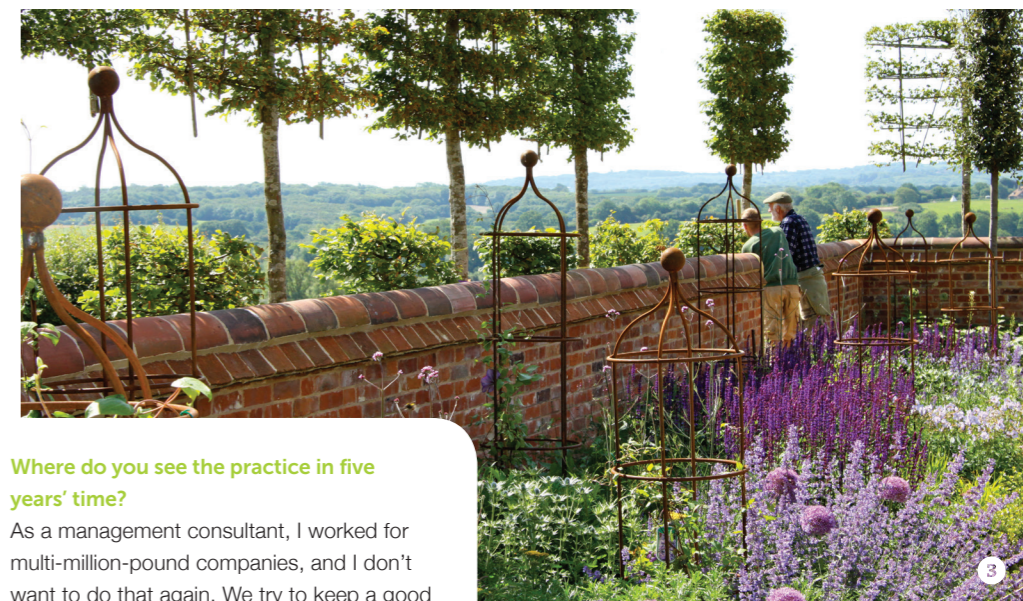
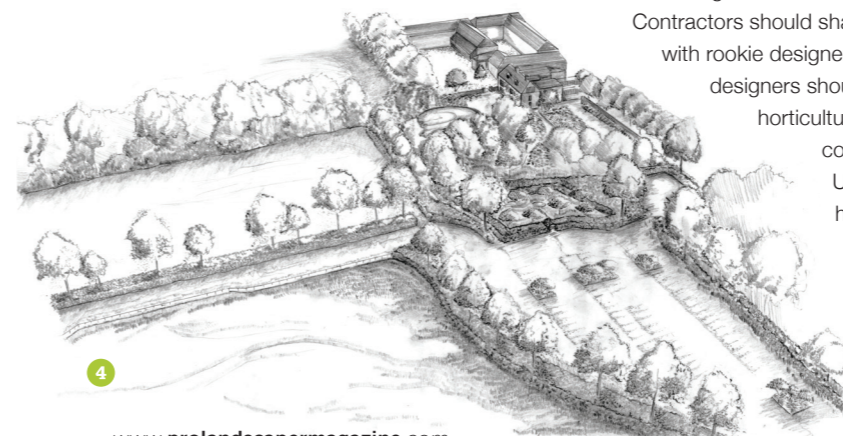
I'm on Twitter and Facebook, but I think they're best for just talking to other people in the industry. Instagram is a good platform, though. I use it to chat to architects and interior designers. I also market the business through being involved in, for example, Kent Gardens Trust and in Chevening, and getting involved locally.

Appearing in magazines is also really useful for us, but most of our work is still through word of mouth, which is a fantastic way to get business because you've already ticked a lot of boxes in terms of people trusting you.

## Which industry associations is the practice a member of? How do these benefit the business?

We're a member of BALI, and a practice member of the SGD. One of our senior designers is CMLI, and three are members of the Landscape Institute.

I have also just been elected as the new design director for BALI. Being a member of the association definitely benefits the company. After our clients, the most important people for us are contractors, nursery people and suppliers, and so it's really important for us to work with them and to have a forum.



## Where do you see the practice in five years' time?

As a management consultant, I worked for multi-million-pound companies, and I don't want to do that again. We try to keep a good work-life balance and to focus on projects that are interesting and fun for us, that are profitable, and where we're working with good people. We turn down a lot of work, and we choose very carefully what we undertake. I think that's what we want to carry on doing.

## What is the one thing you think the industry could, and should, do better?

'Cross-fertilisation', which will be my role as the new design director on the BALI board.

Contractors should share their knowledge with rookie designers, and similarly, designers should share their horticultural knowledge with contractors.

Understanding horticulture is really important – visiting nurseries and having nurseries come and talk to us.

When I was a management consultant, industry benchmarking was key – looking at what other people in the same industry were doing, as well as looking what people in other industries were doing, and trying to find the best practice. This is really important for us to do as a growing industry.

- 1 Hole Park Gardens
- 2 Marian's garden in Kent
- 3 Sussex Heritage Trust and APL award winner in Sussex
- 4 Charleston Farmhouse

## CONTACT

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