

Let's Hear it From

MARIAN BOSWALL

This month we met with landscape architect **Marian Boswall**, who runs her practice from a converted stables on her farm in Kent. She spoke to us about her path into landscape architecture, her practice and speciality...



My interest in gardens came from spending time gardening with my grandmother, which was later developed when I owned a small roof terrace in London,” says Marian. “At that time I was a management consultant, having started out as a buyer of interiors at Marks & Spencer. I remember I had these awfully gaudy baskets on my terrace (which I loved) and spent time tending them lovingly before I cycled off to work. We moved here to our Arts and Crafts house in the late Nineties – the attraction was its six-acre garden, which the previous owner told me ‘looks after itself’. I soon found this was a massive overstatement, and enrolled on garden design, garden history and horticulture courses so that I could sympathetically redesign it. I did garden history, garden design and RHS level 3 at Hadlow, and then started to think about next steps. I talked to a tutor about perhaps going into medicinal horticulture, but she advised me to do landscape architecture, to work on a wider canvas. I applied to the University of Greenwich and did landscape architecture, and followed on with a part-time master’s.”

One thing we’re always interested to know is how newly minted garden designers start to gain clients when their training is complete. “After I’d done the advanced horticulture course, people began asking me to do designs for them, and I quickly realised there’s a lot more to it – which can be quite scary if you get it wrong. It started with word of mouth, friends and family, then some contractors and architects – it built and spread pretty quickly.”

Many people come to garden design because they possess a natural creativity, and Marian is no different. “I studied art early on and would have loved to pursue it through art school, but I was quite academic, so my parents encouraged me to take that route,” she explains. “After my education, I tried to find something that was blue chip and arty, and Marks & Spencer fit the brief perfectly. Following that, I became a management consultant at A.T. Kearney, which felt like a glamorous move. It was exciting and very high octane, but it just didn’t work with children.”

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So began Marian’s journey into the landscape industry. Wanting to be sympathetic to the renovation of her new garden, she started with the garden history course, which appealed to her academic side and love of research. “The course covered garden styles through the ages, which gave me a good idea of how mine should look, and funnily enough it all came full circle when I later lectured on historic garden conservation at Greenwich,” she tells us. “As we do a lot of work

on historic gardens, it’s really exciting to uncover all the layers of the history of a house and its surroundings, and we often use archives and even archaeologists to help with this.” Marian is often sought out by clients with historical gardens, although she states that her practice designs all types, including roof terraces and some smaller gardens. Because of her speciality, Marian has worked with a number of top architects that are specifically known for working on historical buildings, including Ptolemy Dean, ADAM Architecture, Julian Harrap and Jamie Fobert.

Academia

Backtracking a little, we expand on Marian’s lecturing. “I really enjoyed the five or so years I taught – it satisfied the academic in me, and I was also able to cherry pick students, which was really good,” she says, laughing. “Two of my first employees were Sue Willmott, an RHS award winner, and Alick Nee who is now senior landscape architect at Andy Sturgeon Garden Design. I had a wonderful time teaching, but because the teaching hours were reduced it became less satisfying – and anyway, we were becoming very busy here. I currently have a great team working alongside me. Jamie Liversedge is a consultant landscape architect,



Francesca Vacirca is CMLi and she is mentoring Ellen Roelvink through P2C. Joe Ennis and Sophie Pollock are landscape architects, Caroline Jackson has a BSc in landscape management and lectures at Wisley as well, and we jointly work on all our projects.”

What’s currently on the drawing board? “We mainly work on country estates,” Marian says; her face lights up as she describes her recent work on a woodland management design as

part of an ongoing project, where she’s had to gain an understanding of the ecosystem that will take the estate through the next 100 years.

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The business operates within a triangle from Kent up to Oxford and down to Devon. It doesn’t currently have any overseas projects, but as Marian speaks French and Italian, she could quite easily take on work from abroad. She notes that working with a very good team of contractors makes the large geographical area easier.

Marian reports that the beginning of this year was very busy for enquiries and that work is coming in constantly. There are some exciting projects on the go, including the Watts Gallery at Compton in Surrey, a delightful walled garden at the Birling Estate in West Malling, and the Blackthorn Trust biodynamic healing garden. →

- 1 Surrey Manor House borders
- 2 Wealden Estate planting
- 3 Brede Valley Walled Garden
- 4 Sevenoaks Masterplan



What are her future plans for the business?
 “We’d like more public realm work as we’re finding that very enjoyable, plus the larger country gardens and estates which we specialise in.”

The industry

We move on to major issues affecting the landscape industry and Marian agrees that plant health is something that affects the business, noting that she has recently changed plans for a Mediterranean scheme, making it incorporate more native species. She is particularly interested in working with nurseries to grow plants and trees that thrive and survive in our climate. Another need, she says, is to bring more new people into the industry, and to that end is very interested in the GoLandscape initiative set up by BALI to encourage more people to join the horticulture and landscape sector; this has just launched throughout the country after a successful pilot in the South Thames region. Marian would like to see the introduction of garden design apprenticeships, but it seems that this requires more work before it can become a reality, due to the legislation involved.

Marian became involved with BALI via an introduction from David Dodd, owner of The Outdoor Room. She was contacted by BALI CEO Wayne Grills and put forward as design director, looking after its 60 landscape architect



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and garden design members. She likes the fact that BALI encourages cross-industry partnerships, and plans to work together with current SGD chairperson Sarah Morgan, who also taught at Greenwich. Marian will soon be setting up a series of BALI webinars to kick off the collaboration, which Sarah and several top contractors will be involved in.

With her busy practice based in her own garden, how does Marian get away from work?
 “I go ski-touring – walking up mountains at La Grave in France.” A small amount of research tells us this is not a holiday for the fainthearted – good luck, Marian!

5 Parterre Axonometric sketch

6 Lake Cascades

7 Planting combinations



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CONTACT

Marian Boswall Landscape Architects
 Bailey Farm, Staplehurst,
 Kent TN12 0DN
 Tel: 0207 305 7153
admin@marianboswall.com
www.marianboswall.com