

# The dream team

We can use this time of uncertainty to think about making things better, says **John Wyer**, and our best chance at change is working together



**John Wyer FSGD**

has more than 25 years' professional experience and is a widely published and respected designer, lecturing on his work both in the UK and abroad. He has designed hundreds of landscape projects over the years, many of which have won awards, ranging from private gardens to large-scale development projects.

**BETWEEN THE SUMMER** of 1665 and the spring of 1667, Isaac Newton retreated to Woolsthorpe, his country residence near Grantham, to escape the bubonic plague, which was raging across England – in the course of 18 months, London lost 15% of its population. Freed from the strictures of everyday academic life, Newton was able to solve problems that had been bothering him for years. During this time, he published three great scientific papers that changed the course of our thinking permanently.

A few days ago, I had an email from my great friend, Annabel Downs FSGD. “It still amazes me,” she wrote, “that people thought up those visionary plans for education, rebuilding cities, health, etc during WW2, when their colleagues/families were being killed or bombed all around them, and it must have seemed like there was no way out of that mayhem and destruction... So please have some good Noah-like thoughts in the bath and get cracking with them. It may not be as long as ’39-45.”

Needless to say, this did set me thinking. Great social cataclysms such as WW2 and the plague often bring long-lasting and radical change to society. The

## “WORKING TOGETHER, WE ARE BETTER ARMED TO LOOK CLOSER AT WHAT WE’D LIKE TO CHANGE”

list of reforms and changes after the war, in particular, is staggering: the new towns, the NHS, social security, the planning system, to name but a few.

These things do not happen by accident. People pondered, dreamt, planned and then finally enacted change. The NHS is at the forefront of our minds these days and is an undisputed national treasure. Yet at the time of its establishment there was much opposition. The dogged determination of those who drove through the reforms came after years of dreaming and thinking. Likewise, far-reaching reforms in town planning and the creation of the National Parks all date from this time.

Few, if any, of us will become great politicians, but each of us has the opportunity for change or some great project of our own. I realise that for some of

us, home-schooling and other things fill the time. For others, working from home is what they do anyway. Nonetheless, the world is turned upside-down, and few can spend time outside, so there are still chunks, or chinks, of time available.

What can you reassess, now that you have more time to ‘detach’? With my work hat on, I am taking this as a chance to accelerate ideas that I had put on a timescale of months or years, including how we can lower the carbon footprint of our business. I am also writing more. Whether this will ever turn into a book remains to be seen, but I have hopes.

Of course, change doesn’t have to be something you create on your own. A friend of mine, who could be described as right of centre, said something interesting a few months ago. We were discussing Blair, whom he clearly despised. “Who do you think was the greatest prime minister?” I asked. His answer surprised me. “Attlee,” he replied, without a moment’s hesitation, “because it wasn’t about the man, but the team. He assembled a world-class team.”

Few people really remember Attlee, but the achievements of that government are still with us every day, 75 years on. Even though there were some amazing people in that team, it was the efforts of the group that brought about the change, and not the individuals. The key here is that the people must be of one mind, focused on one vision, but, crucially, they each bring a different outlook and skills to the table.

Working together, we are better armed to look closer at the things we’d like to change, the seemingly unsolvable issues in our industry. One example is a project initiated by designers Arit Anderson and Marian Boswall MSGD. They are working on a new trust to deliver a more sustainable landscape industry in design, supply and construction, and have assembled an impressive team of people.

It’s a good time to, like them, stop saying ‘if only...’ and start saying ‘what if?’ Maybe you have the kernel of an answer to another problem we face, such as raising the status of gardeners, or educating clients, and now have the time to develop that idea into something real. Big ventures can start from small conversations. We can change the world (or part of it, anyway), and now is a good time to start.

Dreaming, planning, acting together, is there anything we can’t do? ○