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January 2014

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LET'S HEAR IT FROM  
**ANDREW FISHER TOMLIN**

Fisher Tomlin & Bowyer



# LET'S HEAR IT FROM...

Andrew Fisher Tomlin

**This month, we went to meet Andrew Fisher Tomlin, of Fisher Tomlin & Bowyer at his office in Chobham, Surrey**

The business relocated from London some years ago, Andrew explained, "We moved out here to our office in Chobham because we were getting less and less work in Surrey, it's a great place that used to be an old butchers shop, but being here through the recession we've realised it's not about passing trade as much as being about the connections you make.

"When the recession hit the first two years were fine because we had three or four big continuing jobs, then we also got old clients coming back – people who wanted to deal with us because they already knew us and wanted to support the community they live in. 2010 was the toughest year for us, but by autumn 2011 things were starting to get better, and this year's been phenomenal. The great thing about a recession is that it makes you stand back and look at your business. Dan (Bowyer – co-owner of the business) always worries when I come back from a beach holiday because he knows I just sit there thinking about a new strategy!

"We talk about business skills a lot at the London College of Garden Design – it's all very well to become a designer and do a course to learn about plants but you also need to understand construction and how to run your

business in a modern environment. It's about so much more than insurance and doing the books – it's things like social media that are so important – it's the future. You need to keep reinventing your business."

## **All about banking**

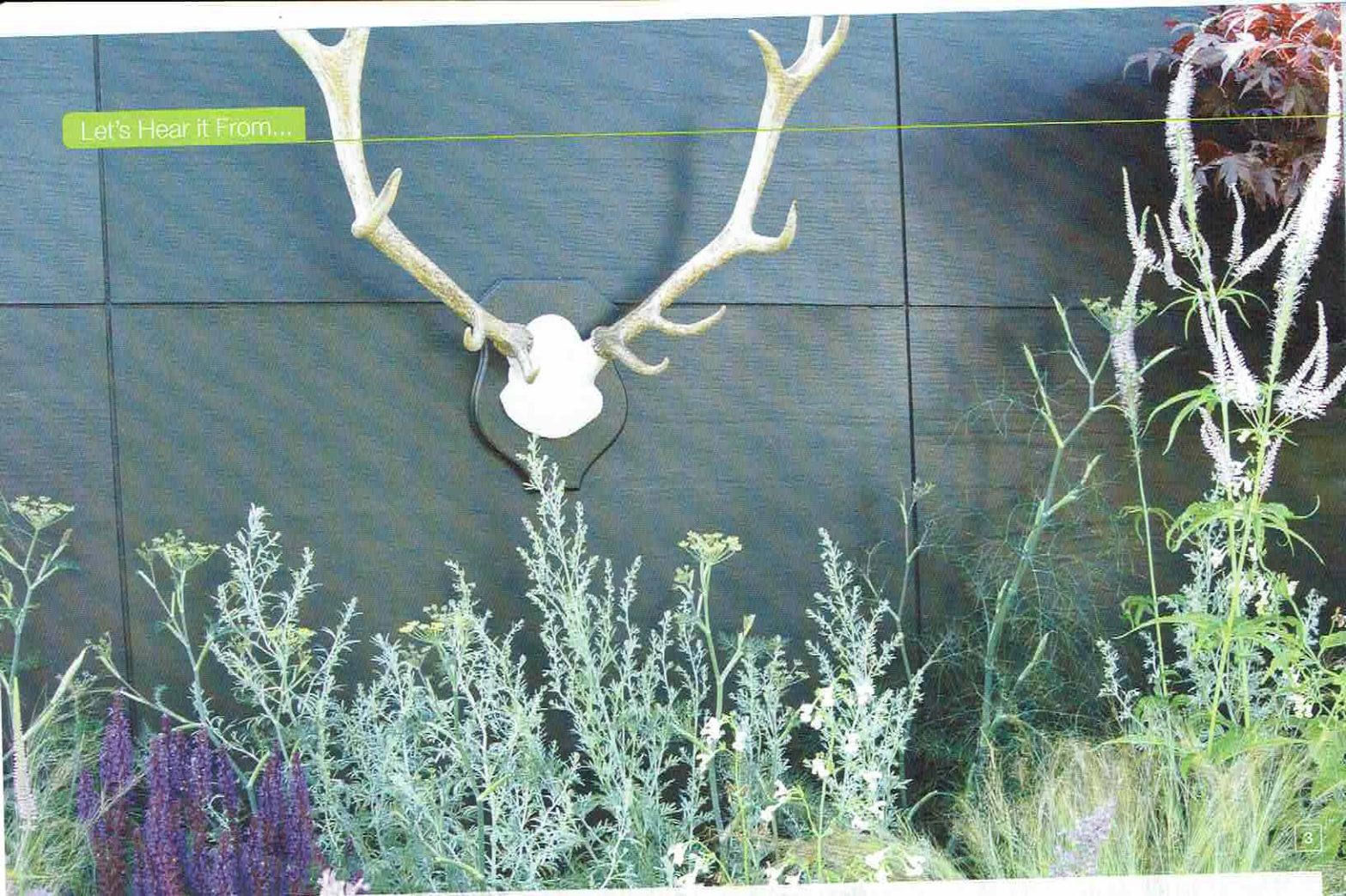
Andrew comes from a family of parks gardeners and printers. "My dad was a builder but enjoyed his three allotments. I grew up near Cambridge where there were lots of fruit picking farms but I rebelled and went to work for Barclays and had a 10 year career in banking. My neighbours in London were landscape architects and over dinner with them I discovered an interest in the profession, then on holiday in Inacullin in Southern Ireland I had a realisation that this would be a great thing to do. At 28 I was already thinking it was time to do something else so I did an HND in horticulture at Askham Bryan with a middle year in Nottingham working for a design and build company which was great fun. I stayed on an extra year to do the research degree at the University of Leeds – primarily so that I could design the Askham Bryan Garden at Chelsea in 1995."

## **Design & build**

Andrew had a design and build business which came to an end almost 10 years ago, he explained, "I decided to get out of the contracting side in 2004 when my business partner at the time went back to Australia. →







I wanted more freedom to pick and choose rather than having to take every job; getting out of the contracting side enabled me to do this, and I could do other things that I wanted to, such as go onto the SGD council. So Dan and I completely reinvented the business."

We discuss suppliers and Andrew says he learnt early on that loyalty is very strong in the garden design world. "We are very loyal to our suppliers – and they repay that loyalty by doing their utmost to get us the plants we want, when we want them. We try to be at the top of peoples' lists because we then get the very best service." The company has a real mix of suppliers, including James Coles, Barcham Trees and Jacksons of Chobham, which enables their wide range of projects to be serviced.

That same loyalty applies to the landscapers Fisher Tomlin & Bowyer use for their projects. "There's a company called London Gardens and I've worked with Steven there for 20 years; we all know and trust each other. We are always involved with the build and because we like it, we always set the plants out – that's just how we run our business. We don't sub-contract and clients deal directly with the contractor."

#### SGD

"I went onto the SGD council in 2003/4 and became Chairman in 2005. I thought it would be interesting and felt that if I wasn't happy with certain things (which I wasn't) I should stand up and do something about it. I felt we needed to get out there more and make contact with other organisations.

"The SGD is better connected now with other organisations and the RHS, I feel it still hasn't really sorted itself out in terms of membership and professionalism and the profile still isn't high enough. That said at the start of recession two of the four big jobs we got came from the SGD – but that accounts for about 90 per cent of the work I've ever had through the SGD since I became a registered member in 1999."

#### London College of Garden Design

"When I first came back to London, I wanted to get into lecturing and Rosemary Alexander asked me to come and speak about construction. Following a conversation with Andrew Wilson (who I barely knew at the time) at a Chelsea launch event, I mentioned to him that I was in talks with Rosemary about buying the English

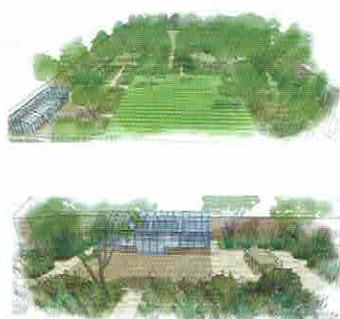
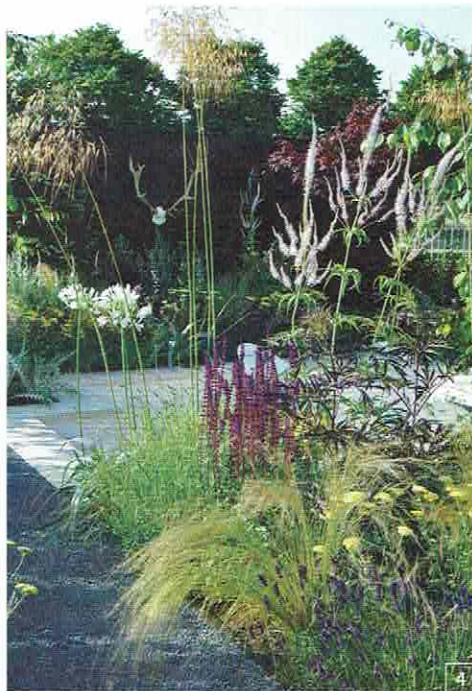
Gardening School and he then revealed he was trying to buy the Inchbald so after some discussion over drinks we decided to set up the London College of Garden Design together with Mark Gregory. We had all taught at the same places but only vaguely knew each other at the start, but it was a great feeling to start something from scratch like that.

"Obviously we set the college up as a business but got some criticism from people who thought we should be doing it for free. We realised there was an opportunity for us to aim ourselves at a professional market. The thing I love is that having a group of students is like having your own set of researchers, our students are so varied and all bring something different. There are young people coming in, but less than there were five years ago. Students now understand how committed you have to be and that you have to gain a knowledge of business to make money out of it."

#### The RHS

Andrew is heavily involved with the RHS and is currently chair of the Chelsea Flower Show selection panel, a voluntary position. He went onto the selection panel for Chelsea five years





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ago. He explains what the panel look for when selecting the mix of show gardens. “In terms of selection we’re looking for a good mix of well-designed gardens – not just Gold medal winning gardens. We often like it when people comment that there are some gardens they didn’t like at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show – it means we’ve done our job well in selecting a varied mix that will appeal to all different tastes. We are also looking for some experience of show gardens within each application – because it’s probably the hardest place to do a show garden due to the space and time restrictions. It’s important to know, however, that the design always comes first. The selection panel will advise the RHS as to what would make a good show from a design point of view and that can also include planting design and construction quality, and from there the RHS shows department will put it all together. Nobody on the panel apart from myself as Chairman sees the budgets for the gardens, and the only reason I do is because I need to make sure there are sufficient funds to cover the build.”

#### Charity

Andrew and Dan both get involved in quite a lot of charity work; they are involved with Thrive and also a great charity called Streetscape. They feel it’s important to stand up and do something, to put back into the industry in some way. “We’ve thought about taking student placements for work experience but because we are situated out in the sticks it’s often hard for people to get to us – so we try and give back in other ways. Another charity we have started to work with is Blind Veterans UK – who contacted me through Twitter. We’ve just designed a 4.5 acre woodland in Llandudno with them. They’re really inspirational to work with.”

#### International

When the original construction business was sold 10 years ago, Dan had only been working with →

- 1 ‘The Garden Pad’ at RHS Hampton Court Palace Flower Show 2013.
- 2 Demetriou residence Lakatamia, Cyprus.
- 3 ‘The Garden Pad’ at RHS Hampton Court Palace Flower Show 2013.
- 4 Hard and soft landscaping in ‘The Garden Pad’.
- 5 The Rectory Garden, Norfolk.
- 6 Huf House Garden, Surrey.
- 7 ‘Sometimes you need to see what’s behind you’ at Ellerslie International Flower Show 2013 (with Tom Harfleet).



Andrew for five months and they decided together that they would like to do some work overseas. "Once people know you travel, the enquiries come in. I was at the Ellerslie Flower Show in Christchurch six years ago and then last year Tom Harfleet and I talked about doing a garden together there. We decided to do two gardens together, and with a small amount of volunteer help we built them ourselves. I came back and told Mark Gregory how easy all this show garden building stuff is! There's a great camaraderie about international shows, and people really appreciate it when you come from a distance. As soon as we were back from there we got the call from Sydney who wanted me to be a horticultural consultant for the Sydney show." Andrew realises how lucky they are now to be able to pick and choose the work they do. Dan tends to hold the fort back at the office whilst Andrew's away, which is made all the more easy because of the really good landscapers they work with.

#### Future plans

This year Andrew plans to get involved in an immersive technology project with Tom Harfleet, and also another project to launch a miniature garden show using 3D printing. He is very enthusiastic about this prospect and at the time we met was looking for sponsorship support.

#### Garden design industry

At the FutureScape event last November Andrew was on The Detail in the Design panel debate and got a chance to air his views about snobbery in garden design. He recalls that over the last five years at Chelsea there have regularly been designers who thought they should have won Best in Show and questioned why they didn't get it. "It's astounding really. It's very rude to say that judges are 'also-rans' and don't understand the gardens these designers create – the judges are very experienced and are there on a completely voluntary basis".

Andrew speaks of his love and enjoyment of collaborating with people and producing new ideas with other designers. "There is quite a naivety amongst some designers – they

“There's a great camaraderie about international shows, and people really appreciate it when you come from a distance”



'September Sky' at Australian Garden Show Sydney 2013 (with Tom Harfleet).

become a big fish in a small pond and start to treat landscapers very poorly. I just can't understand it, we're all together in this business and should enjoy it together. There's a lot of arrogance at the top end – people who believe their own publicity and think they're invincible and indispensable. A lot of those people will have a reality check next year as they will have been pipped to the post for the big Chelsea gardens by a whole new generation of designers – which is brilliant. Sponsors are realising it's a bit dull to keep using the same people."

Asked to give advice for any aspiring designers wanting to step into the world of show gardens, Andrew says "If someone were unsure whether or not to apply for Chelsea, my advice would be to only do it if you really want to and for the right reasons. I would also advise never to self-fund a garden and not expect a medal at the end of it. People have to realise as well that there are a whole group of wonderful designers who have no intention of doing show gardens.

We finished by asking Andrew what his interests outside of work are, but learnt about

his passion for art halfway through our interview as a new painting arrived at his office. His partner works at the London College of Fashion so a love of textiles also inspires him. He also tried to learn the banjo once but got tennis elbow! He loves bluegrass country music and travel, and would love to go to Nashville – maybe there's a chance to combine a visit with work there...

#### About Streetscape

Streetscape is an award winning social enterprise providing apprenticeships in landscape gardening to 18-25 year olds who are long-term unemployed, helping them to build the skills, experience and attributes they need to fulfil their dreams and move into and retain work: growing lives, transforming landscapes.

[www.streetscape.org.uk](http://www.streetscape.org.uk)

#### About Thrive

Thrive is the leading charity in the UK using gardening to change the lives of disabled people. It helps people who want to garden at home, on an allotment, in a community setting or who may wish to access structured horticultural therapy programmes.

[www.thrive.org.uk](http://www.thrive.org.uk)

#### Blind Veterans UK

Formerly St Dunstons, Blind Veterans UK not only care for ex-Service men and women blinded in action, but for veterans who have lost their sight through accident, illness or old age.

[www.blindveterans.org.uk](http://www.blindveterans.org.uk)

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