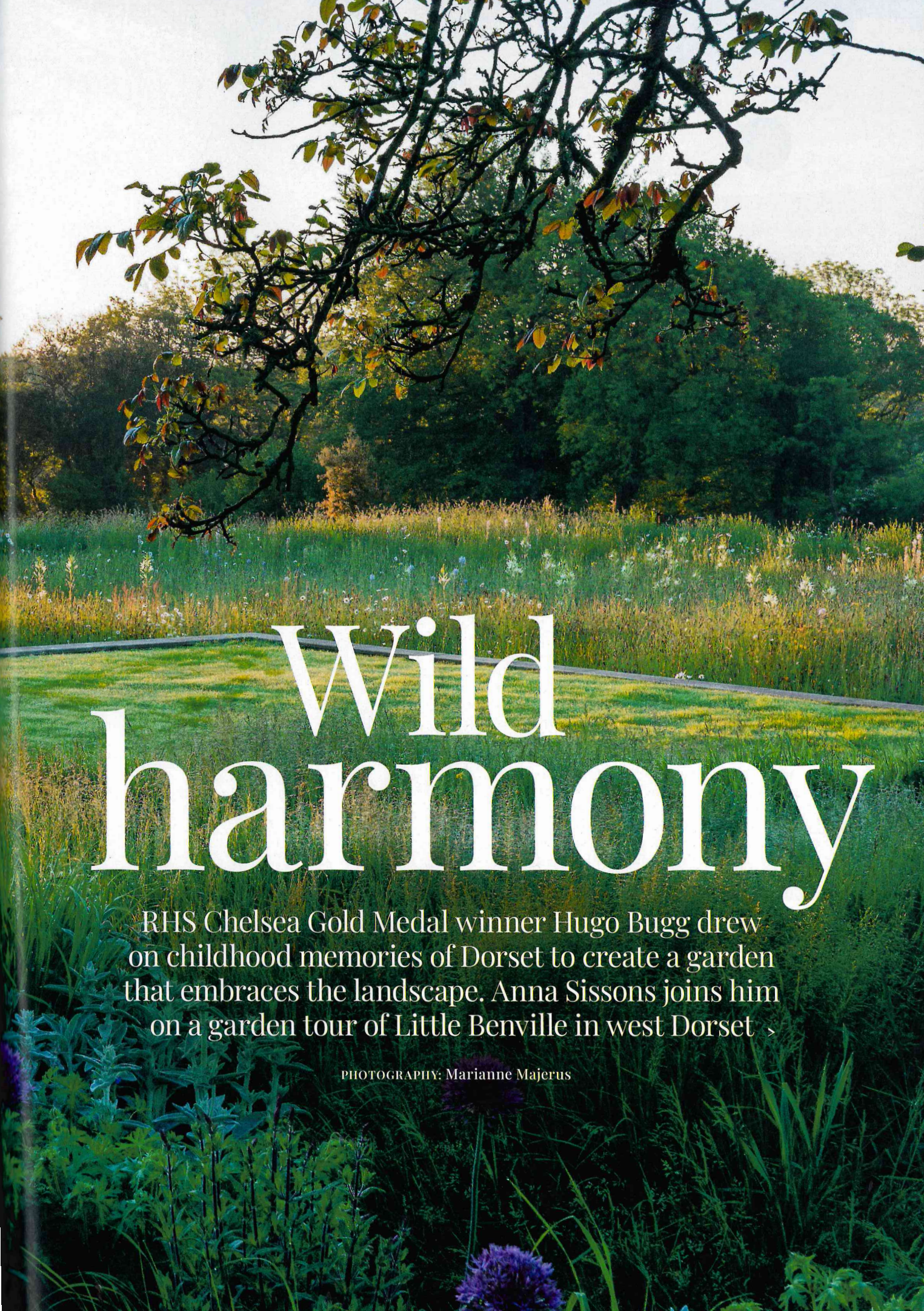




The formal lawn is elevated above the surrounding meadow by a stone ha-ha

A photograph of a lush garden. In the foreground, there are various green plants and a purple flower. A path curves through the middle ground, leading towards a dense line of trees in the background. The sky is bright and overcast. The overall scene is a vibrant, natural landscape.

Wild harmony

RHS Chelsea Gold Medal winner Hugo Bugg drew on childhood memories of Dorset to create a garden that embraces the landscape. Anna Sissons joins him on a garden tour of Little Benville in west Dorset >

PHOTOGRAPHY: Marianne Majerus



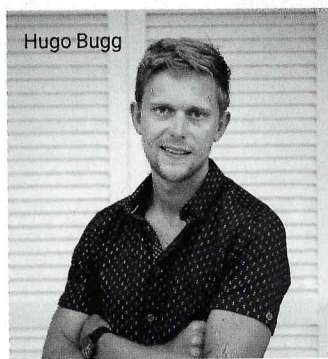
In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Tess passes through the hamlet of Benville on her way from Maiden Newton to Beaminster – Hardy's 'Emminster' – walking through rolling pasture and along oak-lined hedgerows. More than a century after Hardy sent Tess along this road, the garden designer Hugo Bugg found himself studying the same views while reimagining the two-acre garden that surrounds the 19th-century house of Little Benville.

Growing up on the Devon/Dorset border, Dorset was part of the backdrop to his childhood. 'Going to places like Stonebarrow, being out in the wider landscape, you see how the topography shifts between Bridport and Lyme,' he tells me, turning to take in the view and the sweep of countryside. 'That really steered the design approach here. Dorset banks are filled with so many things, from primroses and foxgloves to ferns and pennywort. In some of those banks you can have a thousand species packed into a small space.'

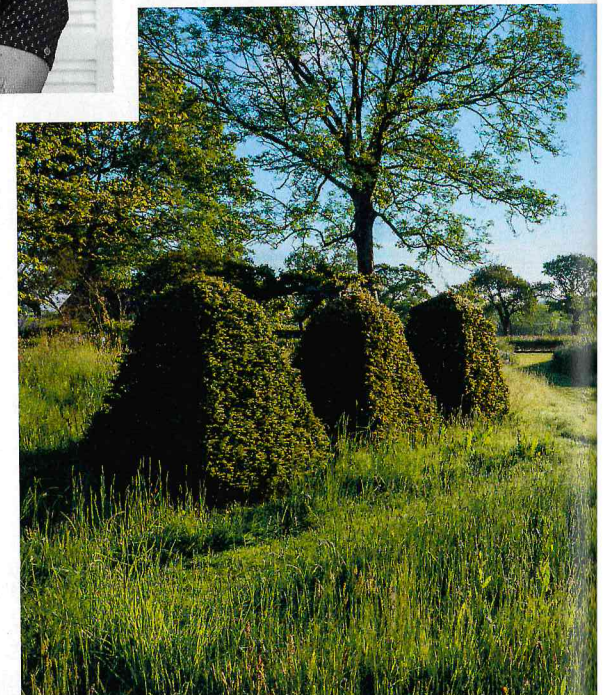
When he first came to Little Benville the house had been sensitively modernised with a contemporary extension to respect the house's 19th-century origins, but the garden was not speaking the same language. A large rhododendron dominated the site and a brief from the owners was to create a more 'diffused and connected feel'.

Looking around the garden today, everything about Little Benville House and its garden harmonises with its setting and it's hard to picture the old rhododendron. The sandstone of the terrace matches that of the house; a basket of dried walnuts sits below the kitchen window, looking out at the tree from which they were harvested. The planting looks uncannily like it has just wandered in from the surrounding fields and woodland, albeit with a fresh makeover. The house feels very much within the landscape, meaning the garden must, as Hugo explains, 'promote it rather than fight against it'.

Leading off the perfectly proportioned dining terrace, garden steps rise to a formal lawn, elevated above the surrounding meadow by a stone ha-ha. This creates a sense of boundless space as the garden melts into the countryside, while also screening a sunken tennis court, which the owners describe as one of 'the most beautiful in the country', cleverly enveloping players in nature. One of the garden's most striking features is a trio of large yew >



Hugo Bugg



top: A contemporary extension to respect the house's 19th-century origins

right: A trio of yew pyramids, positioned off-centre, on the view south towards a medieval moat

far right: The owners' brief was for a 'diffused and connected feel' to the surrounding landscape



Everything about
Little Benville
House and its
garden harmonises
with its setting







Clients in the countryside have a better understanding of the seasons

pyramids, standing as 'sentinels anchoring the view and providing great winter structure'. They mark the way towards a medieval moat and the homeowner's rotating studio.

Seasonality drives the garden. Late winter begins with hellebores, chionodoxa and snowdrops scattered beneath loose mounds of holly. Early spring gathers pace with drifts of *Narcissus* 'Elka' and 'W. P. Milner', threading through *Epimedium* × *warleyense* and the arching stems of Solomon's seal. Burgundy and apricot tulips carry the colour into late spring. By early summer the lawn looks out over a wide sweep of electric blue and white camassias. As their colour fades, the area relaxes into meadow, forming a gentle transition between the formality of the house and the looseness of the wider land. Later in the season, the dark leaves of *Rodgersia* 'Chocolate Wings' provide contrast for the orange flowerheads of Geum 'Totally Tangerine' and *Helenium* 'Moerheim Beauty'.

With such commanding views, there is an overpowering urge for the eye to be pulled through the planting to the outer landscape. The oak-leaved hydrangea (*Hydrangea quercifolia*) mimics the foliage of the surrounding trees while hart's-tongue ferns and *Geranium pratense* would feel at home in the woodland beyond. 'It's all those little ferns you start to see growing on the banks that we wanted to bring into the shadier bits,' says Hugo.

Now 15 years in the making, Little Benville has evolved alongside Bugg's design practice. In 2017, he joined forces with Charlotte Harris to form Harris Bugg Studio, with projects including Atelier Gardens in Berlin and the renewal of the Barbican Conservatory.

This collaboration between designer, client and a team of gardeners is what Hugo feels most proud of. 'It's not like architecture where it's built and finished, it is always evolving.' That long timescale has also allowed the garden to respond to environmental change and the demands of the clay soil. 'Clients in the countryside have a better understanding of the seasons and how our landscapes are responding to climate change,' says Bugg. 'They are forced to be more connected and notice the first frosts and when it's wetter.'

As we stand and observe the view, the countryside galloping away to pastureland, tufty marshland and hedgelines studded with mature oaks, we discuss whether if we were dropped here by helicopter, out of context, would we recognise our surroundings as Dorset? 'Yes, most definitely,' we both agree. ●

Little Benville will be open to the public on May 17. Preorder tickets via ngs.org.uk

Bugg has designed the garden to 'promote the house, rather than fight against it'