

A different view

Mark Lane on health, happiness and horticulture and becoming the UK's first wheelchair garden designer. Words by: Sarah Sturt. Pictures: courtesy of the BBC

LIFE rarely goes in a straight path, but Mark Lane's certainly changed direction forever when a diagnosis of spina-bifida, followed by surgery and then almost immediately a car crash, put him in a wheelchair.

That was 15 years ago and the 47-year-old admits it was tough. "I was in a very, very dark place, I didn't want and sometimes couldn't get out of bed. I just moped around."

Hardly surprising – Mark was only in his early thirties but had already enjoyed a meteoric career in publishing, having been publishing director for the Royal Institute of British Architects and then managing director of Thames & Hudson, the arts publishers.

He'd met his civil partner, Jasen, and the two of them had bought a barn together in Pluckley and commuted daily up to London. Life was pretty good, apart from those wretched back pains

Born in Hertfordshire, Mark grew up in Hove, went to school in Brighton (which he hated) and found his feet at UCL, where he studied History of Art and "absolutely loved it!" Kent came into his life around 2000 when he and Jasen met his now PR, Anna Carpenter, on that daily commute and she introduced him to the delights of Pluckley.

However, the rural dwelling with its stairs and third of an acre of land, which Mark had loved developing, was no longer practical and the couple started looking for a more suitable site. Which brings us to Bramling, a village between Canterbury and the coast, and what was then a run-down, 1960's bungalow but is now both home and the HQ of Mark Lane Designs.

Working with leading landscape architects during his time at RIBA and with gardening experts such as Monty Don and Christopher Lloyd on their books at Thames & Hudson had inspired in Mark a real love of gardening and its relation to architecture. Turning their new place into the sleek, airy, contemporary vision it is today helped him turn a real corner.

"We saw the view and fell in love with the hills and the valley behind and we just thought to ourselves, 'yes, we can

make something here'. I was still in a dark place, I still didn't want to do much but the transformation of the house kept me sane more than anything. We kept to schedule, to budget and Jasen, who is a computer programmer, put in systems so that the whole house is run by computer with four miles of cabling in the house.

"When the house was finished it was almost like these spectres that had been on my shoulders lifted. Because the barn was all small windows and so quite dark inside, then suddenly we had all this light and it really helped my mood. Then I started thinking about the garden and what we could do with it.

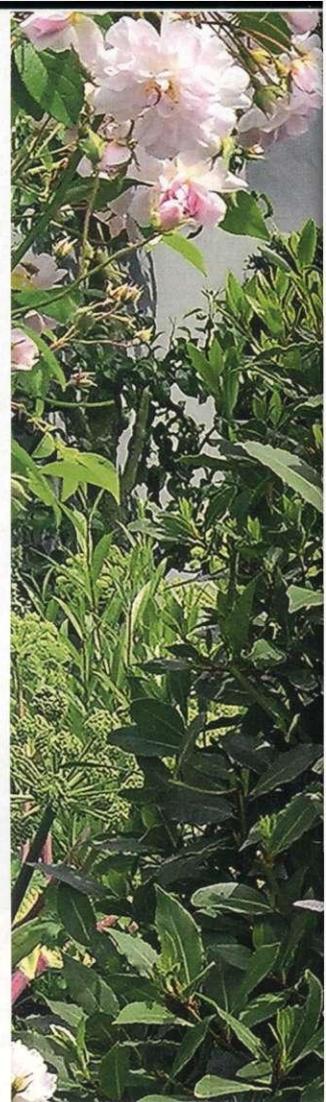
"Jasen is not a gardener, basically I drag him out and his answer to every question about

plants is 'cabbage.' But actually he is learning and knows an awful lot now. I was reading loads of books about garden designers and around 2005 I thought to myself, 'do you know what, this is something I could probably do'."

Then came the quite shocking realisation that there appeared to be no other UK-based garden designers in a wheelchair. When he visited a number of colleges and enquired about their RHS courses, he was asked how he was going to dig holes and do site surveying; even trying to get into some of the college rooms and greenhouses proved restrictive.

So Mark wrote to leading garden designer

I want to make sure I'm not pigeonholed as this 'garden designer in a wheelchair' – I am a BBC garden presenter in a wheelchair



Below : Mark presenting for the BBC at RHS Chelsea Flower Show 2016 in the RHS's own garden, talking about health, happiness and horticulture



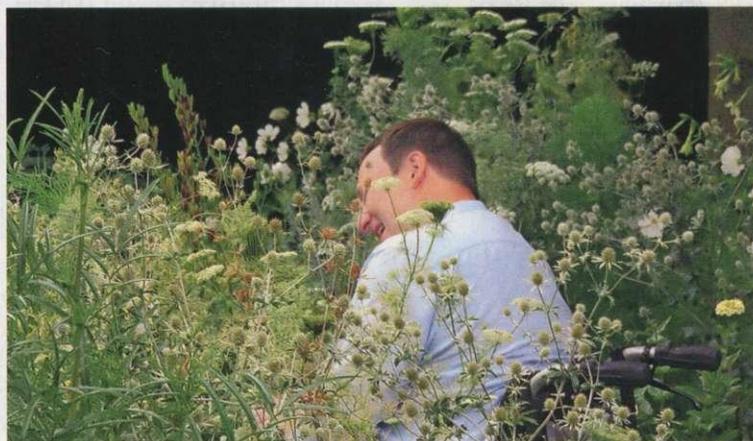
Mark talking to Monty Don about his work and how garden design helped him through a long rehabilitation period, RHS Chelsea Flower Show 2016

Dan Pearson and to Prince Charles and asked them if they'd ever come across anyone in a wheelchair who wanted to do garden design or even if they'd ever come across anyone in a wheelchair who had that interest and wanted to do something with it. All of them came back and said no.

"Prince Charles was amazing, he put me in touch with the Organic Soil Association and they confirmed they'd never come across anyone in a wheelchair, then I got in touch with the RHS and they said that to their knowledge, I would be the first," says Mark.

"So I studied, I did an Open Learning course, which was really good, as was learning through all the gardening books I'd absorbed over the years, and by actually doing work in the garden. I seem to have an encyclopaedic mind for plants too. I became a business very quickly, designed the website myself and I haven't really looked back since."

It is indeed an extraordinary story of a life turned around in the face of a condition that would defeat most ordinary mortals – but it doesn't stop there. Mark started writing and an article published in *Gardener's World* magazine caught the attention of an executive producer with the RHS Shows. She asked if he would do a piece to camera in his garden, then three days later called again requesting that he present at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show. ▶



Mark filming for BBC *Gardeners' World* from his own garden in Bramling. Something funny cannot stop Mark from laughing, October 2016

My garden style

- Contemporary wild – which I prefer to the over-used term 'naturalistic' – in a spectrum from a cottage garden to a modern, quite hard landscaped one.
- Always make sure the garden sits within its environment
- I always try and put in plants that are close to the species and not over bred
- If I can create a sense of space and place for a client then that is everything for me
- Favourite plants: I love ornamental grasses and plants such as eryngium that have an all-year round interest for clients and also for wildlife

MY FAVOURITE KENT

Places to visit:

Pegwell Bay Country Park is lovely, Margate is fine for access at the Turner and on the harbour

Restaurant:

Rocksalt in Folkestone, it has really easy access, a nice view and great food, it's our favourite

View: from the Kent Downs, reminds me of the Sussex Downs growing up

TOP TIP

I always recommend buying the 9cm size plant – you don't have to go for a two or four litre. That larger plant will have got used to that soil whereas the smaller has not been in its pot very long and will establish more quickly because it will need to get its roots out straight away.

If you can plant in early spring or autumn bare-root season that can also help bring costs down

"I was gobsmacked, but I did say yes," says Mark. Following very positive feedback from the broadcast, everything just snowballed. He was asked to do Hampton Court, then a piece for *Gardener's World* filmed in his own garden and now this year he will be at all the RHS Shows and doing six programmes for *Gardener's World*. His publishing success has continued, with pieces in *The Garden*, the RHS magazine, and this year *Which? Gardening*; he has been sought out for many interviews.

However, it's a fine balance. "One side is 'oh, we've got someone in a wheelchair who is a garden designer' but the other side is I'm just another of the presenters. So the RHS treat me as just one of the presenters who just so happens to be in a wheelchair. When we were doing the filming here, it was quite interesting because they said they wanted to see more of Mark 'the person', but at the same time they did also want to see the chair sometimes.

"I now want to make sure they don't pigeonhole me as this 'garden designer in a wheelchair' – I am a BBC garden presenter in a wheelchair," he says firmly.

He is also many other things, including being an ambassador for Groundwork and for Thrive, the disability gardening charity. "The ethos behind both is about changing people's lives through green spaces and if I have to run about with my baton and my flag and tell people about their work, then all the better," he smiles.

Mark has already worked with Groundwork, with the support and backing of Tesco, to transform the Canterbury Pilgrims Hospice garden, where every bed-bound patient can now get out and around the whole garden. And on the horizon is the very real



Mark in the Papworth Trust garden at RHS Chelsea Flower Show 2016, while BBC crew film Mark through the beautiful planting

possibility of designing a garden for Chelsea.

And of course he has his own clients, with eight projects on the go at the moment, including Kent, Cheshire and Milton Keynes – and that's the important bit. "It's my business that has helped me keep my feet on the ground, that's what I'm interested in, that's what I do. The TV work, as and when it comes along, is going to be brilliant. I'm not out there to be on TV all the time – after all they came to me – so I will just have to see how it works out."

He adds: "The RHS and the BBC are both pushing me to do a show garden and I would love to do it, the problem is finding that elusive sponsor. It's likely I'll get funding from the Charities Disability Fund, which is fine, and if it relates to spina-bifida it will be brilliant. Disability in general and horticulture would be even better. Both the BBC and the RHS have said they would cover it and that it would be prestigious – the first of its kind." ♦

www.marklannedesigns.com



Mark presenting for the BBC at RHS Hampton Court Palace Flower Show 2016, talking about the use of old timbers to create a temporary canopy

Chair challenges

Canterbury: we love it, but the downside is of course the cobbles and a lot of uneven paving, plus so many small and often listed buildings where the doorways are quite tight.

Restaurants: I can get into most places but then I am very bloody minded! The worst thing is the height of tables: they are always too low for someone in a wheelchair, so unless you can transfer into a normal chair – which I can do – you're stuck and have to eat at an angle.

RHS Chelsea: they'd never dealt with anyone in a wheelchair before so they didn't quite know how to handle me. All the cabins are raised up, so TV make-up had to be done outside. At Hampton Court they had purposely lowered the cabins, made space so I could get into the Green Room – they'd really thought about it. So I'm hoping Chelsea will be better this year

Clients: some houses have had very tight alleyways down the side, one client I have to go through the house. Sometimes I've been lifted up and around obstacles. We bring portable ramps if needed. I am currently looking for a much narrower electric wheelchair which folds right down. I always say there is a way around a problem.