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WEAVING A LIFE FROM *Willow*

George Nelson meets Kim Creswell, a willow sculptor fighting the powers that be to live a virtually carbon free existence

Deep in the Dorset countryside, tarmac gives way to an indefinite length of crater-ridden track. At the end of the track, I find Kim Creswell has created an eco-haven.

Like her sculptures, Kim has battled to establish her own roots. After buying eight acres of stunning Dorset countryside just outside Sherborne and winning the right to put up three yurts, Kim has built a solid foundation from which she and her 17 year old daughter Rowan continue to live a life devoted to self-sufficiency.

Having grown up in rural Surrey, Kim soon became disillusioned by the impact the M25 was having on the local environment. "There were otters in the stream and a lot of beautiful farmland," she says, "and then it completely changed. As soon as the M25 opened all the plants died and the village community faded because it became a kind of stockbroker dormitory village. From a very young age I thought this is not sustainable, how far is this going to go?"

Living lightly on the land

Kim bought a clapped out transit van and made the decision to move away in search of a less consumerist life. But this was the early 90s and the recession was biting. "There weren't too many job opportunities, rent was high, it was the trap people are in now. I always wanted to follow a creative path in my career so if I had been working full time to pay extortionate rent there would have been no time to do what I do. So it seemed logical for me to live lightly on the land, and the best way to do that was to get a van."


Kim and Rowan

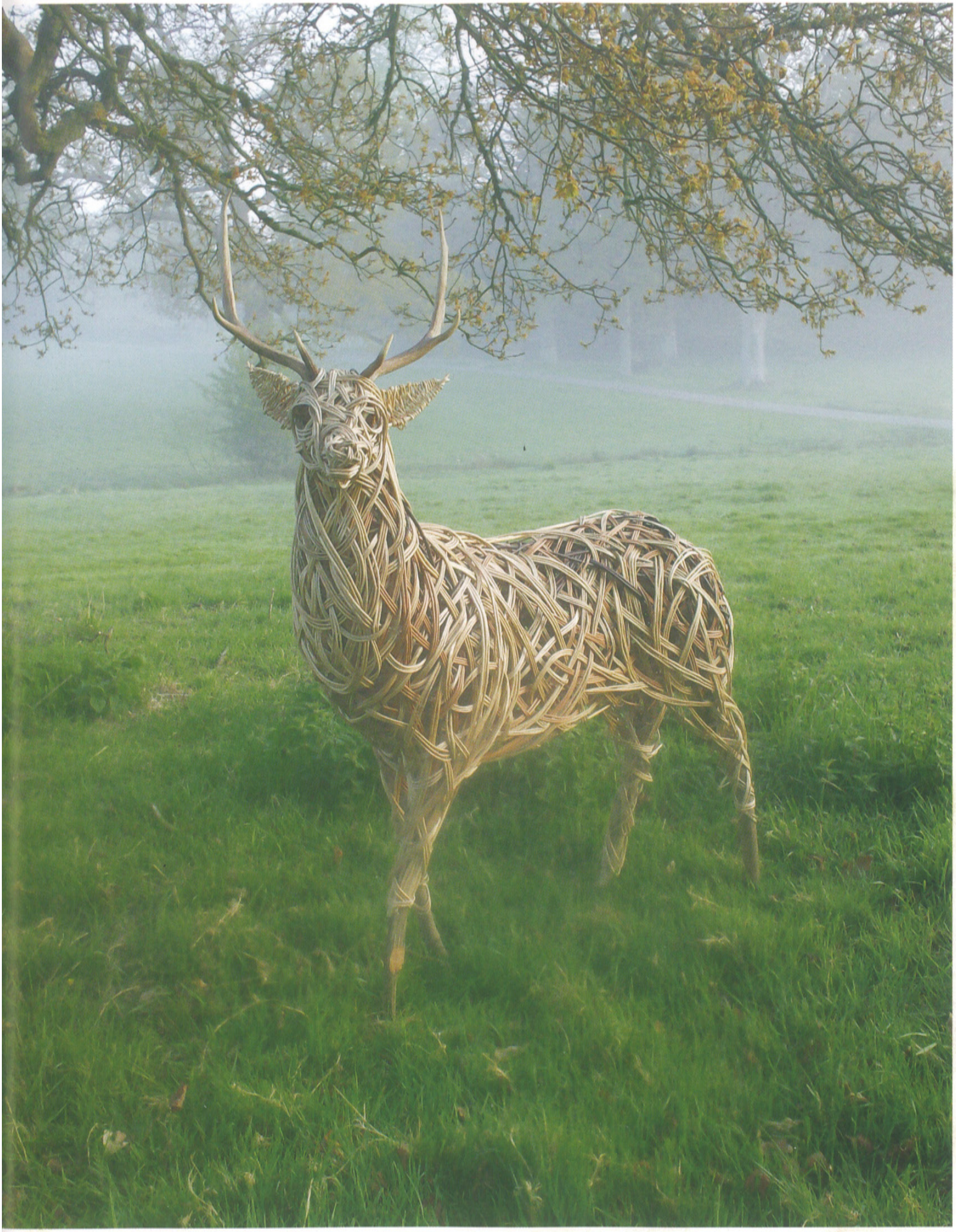
By converting her transit into a campervan and installing a mini-kitchen and bed, Kim was able to travel where she pleased. However, her home on wheels didn't last long, "leaking like a sieve in winter" and eventually grinding to halt. Out of necessity she constructed a bender tent made from willow and a tarpaulin sheet. After a few months, spring arrived and Kim removed the tarp from the willow framework. To her surprise the willow had taken root. "It was actually a living structure," she says, beaming from ear to ear. "It was sort of a light bulb moment. It was a total coincidence, when I took the tarp off it suddenly came to me that I could make animal sculptures that breathe and grow."

Home is where the hearth is

Before being able to afford the land they now live on, Kim and Rowan spent ten years travelling in a horse-drawn bow top wagon built by Kim, a far cry from the yurts now forming their current home. The three individual tents are set a foot from the ground on a platform made from locally sourced cedar. Each canvas is lined with sheep's wool felt and supported by a wooden framework. Stitched together, they form a honeycomb structure, identical to that found in a beehive. Light brown in colour, the tents merge into a backdrop of hedgerow and oak trees. Inside they are light, airy and comfortable. The middle section is both a kitchen and sitting room with a wood-burning stove doubling up as range. Pots and pans hang from hooks, and everything is compact and easy on the eye. Flanked by a bedroom on either side, with a double bed in each, the whole set up is brilliantly crafted and very much a home. Kim makes a pot of tea before asking if I mind goat's milk and honey instead of sugar. "I'll show you the goats later," she says. "I get about a litre of milk from them everyday." Beekeeping to produce honey does not yet feature on the plot but it is very much in the pipeline, "only in natural hives though" adds Kim.

Renewable energy

Solar energy is used to power the lights and other electrical equipment in the yurts, a set of panels collecting the sun's rays from the roof of a handsome, open-faced barn built by Kim and a few friends. By >



> alternately charging a couple of 12-volt car batteries, Kim can supply her home with enough electricity to last four days. Not bad for solar panels bought on the cheap from a nearby job that over-ordered.

An impressive shed housing a long drop, shower and sink sits nearby. Designed with Kim's 17-year-old daughter in mind, the building houses all the bathroom appliances a teenage girl could wish for. The electricity required to run the lights and shower is again generated from a separate set of smaller solar panels, the entire site is off the grid.

Animal companions

As I am shown around this ecological sanctuary Kim tells me that she makes her own mead and wine. A bottle of 'melomel' is produced from a cupboard, a heady mixture of mead flavoured with fruit. Golden in colour and 18 per cent proof, it goes down very well. While we drink we walk around the vast vegetable patch. "I'm planning on making it smaller next year," Kim tells me. "Last season we were inundated with produce from cabbages to courgettes, far more than we could possibly eat." For this reason pigs are next on Kim's agenda, as they will happily consume any leftover vegetables while enriching the soil for future cultivation, not to mention providing free-range organic bacon.

Four goats, a mixture of Old English and Toggenburg, can be seen shading beneath an oak tree on the far side of the paddock. Each afternoon they are rounded up into the goat shed for milking. A rustic wooden milking stanchion holds each creature in place while Kim sits beside, bucket in hand. Stodge and Faye, the two horses chewing the cud in the next-door paddock, are mother and daughter, both enormous and gleaming in the early spring sun. Until recently they were Kim's only form of transport but out of necessity a car has crept into the fold, Rowan works in a Sherborne restaurant so punctuality is vital. As efficient and hardworking as the two cobs are, using them is just not feasible for such deeds, especially during winter. However, their talents are not going to waste with Kim planning



Inside Kim's carbon-free home

"By selling these sculptures Kim is able to support her eco-conscious lifestyle"

on setting up a 'hire a horse and cart' business for champagne picnics and days spent exploring the English countryside.

coppicing the willow

The willow used for her sculptures is usually cut from hedgerows but in recent years Kim has planted her own withybeds from which she can grow different varieties and colours. By managing cultivated willow and only taking what she needs from the wild, Kim is having a positive effect on the local environment. "You're actually planting more trees and coppicing which is good for the tree. I like to think of it as the opposite of leaving a carbon footprint," she says. "To me, it fitted in with my ethics, it made sense. To coppice makes a root stump last longer than if you were to leave it naturally."

The technique used to create the sculptures is unique to Kim, developed over the years by trial and error. "Because everything is fairly bespoke, I have to look at the specifications of what the customer wants. I'll make the frame which is non-living, then I'll plant living willow around the legs and weave it in through the body." It is not until after the first couple of years that the figures really begin to grow, taking root and sending out new shoots "like a furry beast". During the following summers each creation is trimmed to keep its shape. The sculptures are only made during the coldest months, "when the sap's down", between November and March. "In the summer I use all the willow that I have cut in the winter and make non-living sculptures that don't grow. These are better for some people because they don't require any maintenance." Usually taking on the form of animals and mythical figures, past 'living' creations have included a giraffe and a pair of ¾ size elephants.

worth fighting for

By selling these sculptures Kim is able to support her eco-conscious lifestyle, but to get to where she is today has by no means been an easy journey. 'Travellers' have accumulated their fair share of bad press in recent times and certain villagers were not afraid to voice their opinions when the yurts went up. I ask Kim if she defines herself as a traveller and she replies by saying "I'm just Kim". She is willing to talk about her struggle but it has obviously taken its toll. The fact that she has had to fight tooth and nail just to receive temporary planning permission - meaning that in two years time she and Rowan will have to go through the whole application process again - is hard to take. One might be forgiven for thinking that living an eco-friendly life would be championed by those in power, especially given that the coalition Government has enforced such a clear set of environmental policies. While her first planning submission was pending, Kim even invited the villagers and the MP for West Dorset, Oliver Letwin, to visit her site in an attempt to prove her way of life was nothing to fear. It worked, and although Kim is already bracing herself for another round of protracted council meetings next year, she is in no doubt that her very own Eden is worth fighting for.

what to read

Living Willow Sculpture *Jon Warnes* tinyurl.com/livingwillow
Make It Wild 101 Things to Make and Do Outside tinyurl.com/makeitwild