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# BACA/ FOWLESCOMBE



## THE TRANSFORMATION IS MOST MARKED BY UNAPOLOGETIC INTERFERENCE IN THE NATURAL LANDSCAPE

*By George Ferguson. Photography by Edmund Sumner*

*Barker and Coutts Architects (BACA) was formed by Robert Barker and Richard Coutts in 2003. Prior to forming BACA, Barker worked for Rivington Street Studio and Birds Portchmouth Russum, and Coutts worked in Malaysia and Australia for Ken Yeang and Farrells, and in the UK for Andrew Wright Associates.*

Surely the bravest or most trusting of parents are those who allow their ambitious young architect progeny to cut their teeth at their expense. This is an age-old tradition, with some of the greatest names in British architecture having started this way. I well remember interviewing Simon Allford in the pool of the exquisite RIBA Award-winning Pool House he designed for his parents in Wiltshire. It was an excellent example of parental patronage that gave an early chance to what became one of the most successful young architectural practices of the '90s – and the wet interview made great television.

Robert Barker's clients are his parents, computer software designer Richard and environmentalist Barbara, who seven years ago exchanged the safety of their Berkshire village house for 180ha of a Devon valley – including the completely overgrown ruins of Fowlescombe, a 17th-century manor house. That is the least of it. The Barkers have also swapped their hectic international business lifestyle (Richard was previously on the board of computing giant Oracle) for the bucolic business of farming their herd of prize Aberdeen Angus cattle and a fine collection of rare-breed sheep.

The Barkers had given themselves a challenge: to make their own elegant living and practical working environment, set in a wildlife sanctuary. They pitched their caravan and started to think. This was never going to be a one-hit project, but was to evolve in incremental steps. As an architecture student at the RCA, the young Barker was fortunate enough to be involved in a parallel practical education, working with the highly respected Totnes-based architect Harrison Sutton on design ideas for the house and more significantly the garden – all within a concept that had evolved through family discussion and model-making on and around the kitchen table.

As in all the best-laid plans, the process started with research. Old maps and photographs revealed hidden routes, ponds, orchards and walled gardens. The reestablishment of the historical footpath that ran through the orchard, behind the house and down to the mansion became a key organising device and an important influence in the planning of the house and farmyard. The house was reordered to take advantage of the glorious view down the valley by introducing a glazed gallery along the line of the footpath, pouring light throughout the house and giving a new west-facing front door – which might have been counterintuitive if not explained by the historical analysis and outstanding topography.

The radical reordering of the Georgian farmhouse was just the beginning of the transformation process, which is most marked in the landscape and garden structures. While it





1. From left to right: Robert Barker, George Ferguson and client Richard Barker on the raised lawn

can never be compared with Charles and Maggie Jencks' wonderful land-sculpted garden near Dalkeith, Barker has clearly followed the same principles of earth moving to form unapologetic man-made interference in the natural landscape – starting with the decision to bring the drive down the valley and then swing it round to the new front door.

This set up the conditions to build a raised plateau that gives a level lawn setting for the old house front, and a platform from which to concentrate on the distant views – as if standing at the top of a cliff, unable to see the land below. This effect is accentuated by defining the edge of the lawn with a narrow precast concrete 'moat' which, particularly when lit at night, adds to the magic of the place and provides a gift to the architectural photographer. This lawn, retained by precast-concrete stepped slabs forming a planted wall, contains the excavated waste from the formation of the garden below it. The planted wall echoes the articulation of the new battered dry-stone wall to the driveway, which is punctured by planted niches, and, together with the extension of the drive's avenue of trees, gives protection from the prevailing winds to the lower garden.

The lower garden is home to a mixture of perennial and evergreen planting which softens its sharp features and acts as a setting to Barker's principal architectural intervention – the startling yellow-painted steel pergola and glasshouse. The steel structure follows the curve of the driveway wall and rests lightly on its top, giving a glimpse of the clerestory vents

and faceted glass covering as one approaches the entrance to the house, while providing almost total protection to this sheltered garden. The vents are designed to open automatically to harness the prevailing winds and ventilate the south-facing palm house. While an essentially pragmatic structure, its armadillo form, housing exotic plants, brings sparkle to the garden and the views from the house and lawn. The garden is enlivened by flowing water, spouting from the retaining wall above and flowing down through the stream into the valley beyond.

Below the house and garden – separated by the drive – are the old 'shippen' barns which are the subject of Barker's first fully independent commission by his new practice BACA, providing a mix of commercial, community and holiday accommodation – and giving a well-judged contemporary lift to the old stone courtyard structures.

While this may all seem like the indulgence of a couple that has made good, there is clear method in their madness and the faith placed in their architect son has paid off. Nothing here is extravagant. While main contractors were involved, much of the work has been administered by themselves; bringing in subcontractors, including the neighbouring farmer to manufacture and erect the planted concrete retaining wall and the new agricultural barns. The result is a combination of the application of sound research, a fruitful imagination and loyal perfectionist clients on a mission to achieve their own rural micro-utopia.





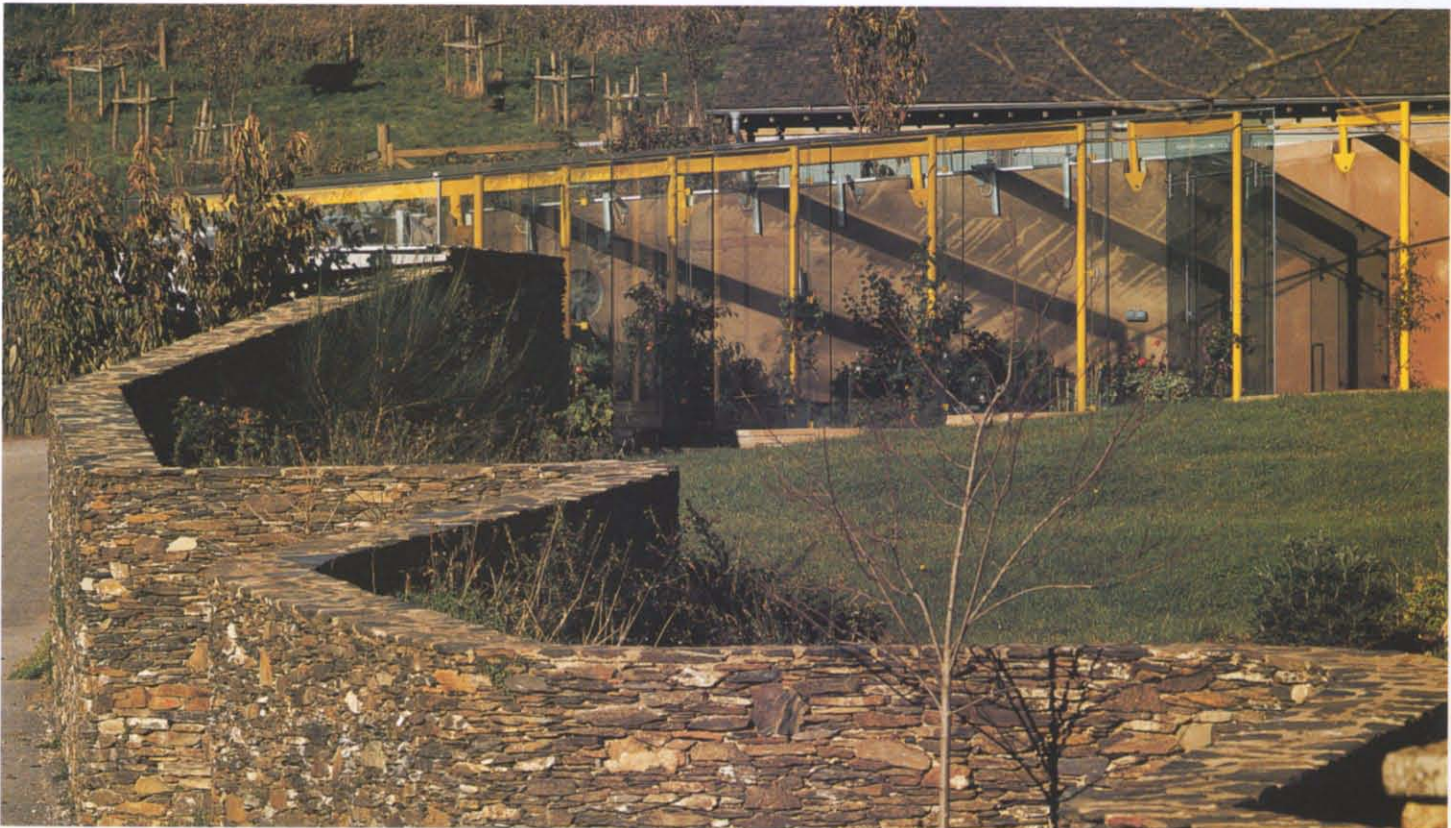


2. The lawn is retained by precast-concrete stepped slabs forming a planted wall





3.



4.





5.

3. The old stone 'shippen' barns have been given a well-judged contemporary lift  
4 & 5. The pergola follows the curve of the driveway wall and rests lightly on its top

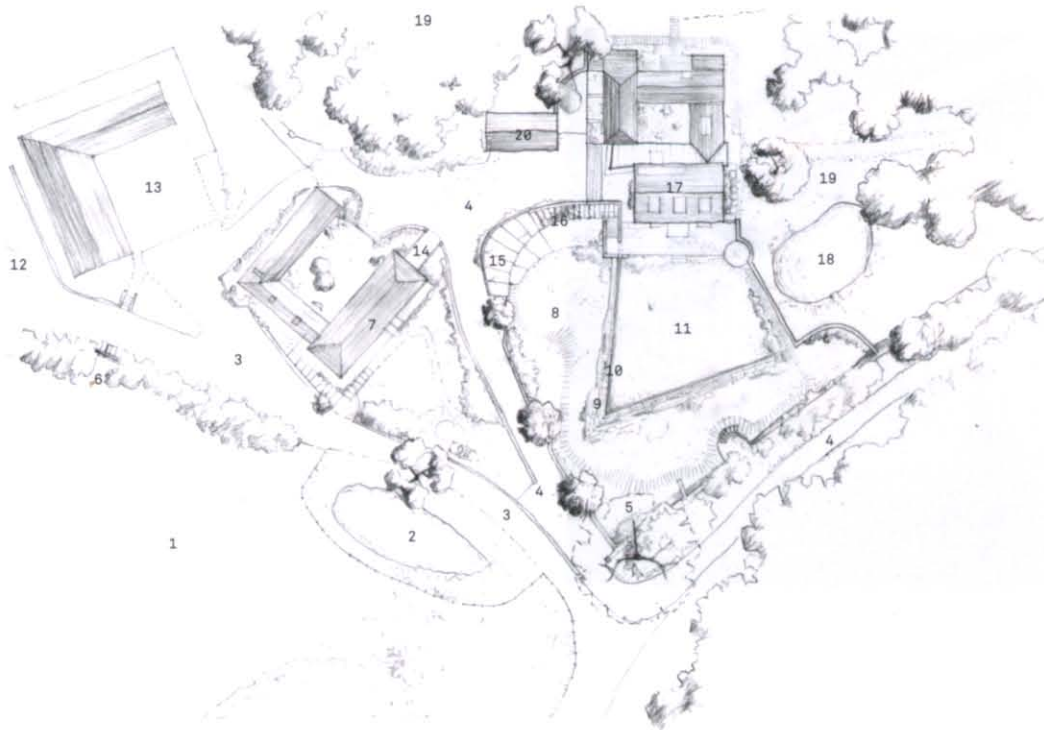




6. The farmhouse in July 1968



7. Aerial view before work began

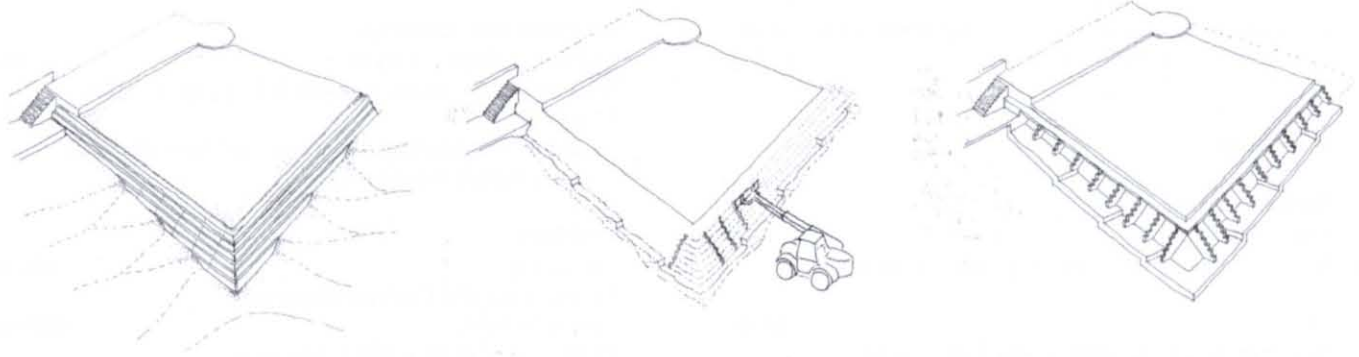


- KEY
- 1 FIELDS/VALLEY
  - 2 FARM POND
  - 3 FARM DRIVE
  - 4 MAIN DRIVE
  - 5 STREAM
  - 6 WIND TURBINE
  - 7 OLD BARN
  - 8 LOWER LAWN
  - 9 TERRACE
  - 10 MOAT
  - 11 UPPER LAWN
  - 12 LIVESTOCK BARN
  - 13 IMPLEMENTS BARN
  - 14 BRIDGE
  - 15 GLASSHOUSE
  - 16 PERGOLA
  - 17 FARM HOUSE
  - 18 ORCHARD POND
  - 19 ORCHARD
  - 20 GARAGE

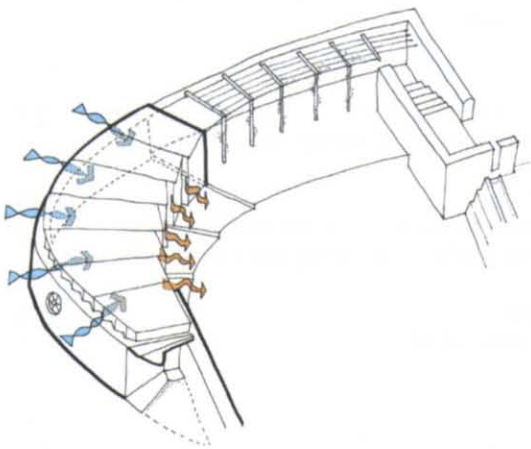
13. Site plan



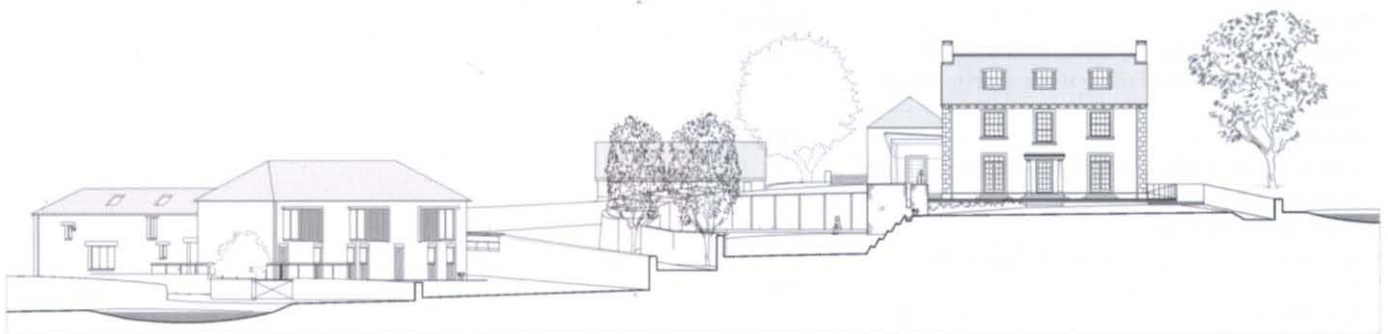




8, 9 & 10. Sketches showing building of the raised lawn and planted wall



11. Diagram showing the pergola's ventilation strategy



12. Garden section





## Costs

Cost analysis based on gross external floor area.  
Costs refer to final account.

### GLASSHOUSE

#### SUPERSTRUCTURE

Steel frame	N/A
Steel pergola and structure for glasshouse, including supports for glass	
Glass	£250/m <sup>2</sup>
Manufacture and installation of all glazing panels excluding vents, clerestory and doors	
Vents and controllers	N/A
Supply and fitting of electric actuators, (electrical installation elsewhere)	
Doors and mechanism	£480/m <sup>2</sup>
Suspended door kit and glass doors	
Clerestory and vents	£640/m <sup>2</sup>
Zig-zag glass clerestory including opening panels, sills and build-up of sills	

#### PRELIMINARIES

Preliminaries; OHP; contractor's glazing; design; engineering design; travel and accommodation	N/A
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### EXTERNAL WORKS

#### SUBSTRUCTURE

Groundworks	£16/m <sup>2</sup>
All earthworks and excavations to reduce/raise levels but excluding trench runs for foundations and drains	
Foundations	£38/m <sup>2</sup>
All supply and construction of concrete foundations, including trenches	
Drainage	£10/m <sup>2</sup>
All supply and construction of pipe runs, including biotec treatment plant but excluding water supplies etc	

#### SUPERSTRUCTURE

Stone walls	£95/m <sup>2</sup>
Construction of block walling, internal skin and stone facing. Excluding stone supply, which was from site	
Rendered walls	£45/m <sup>2</sup>
Construction of block walling and rendered finish, including all materials	
Plateau terracing	£70/m <sup>2</sup>
Installation of all concrete panels, moat etc	
Caithness terracing	£50/m <sup>2</sup>
Installation of all flagstones to terraces, including construction of stairs and cutting and facing to steps etc	

### FITTINGS AND FIXTURES

Light fittings, cables etc	N/A
All light fittings, including moat light; pergola cables	
Planting	N/A
Supply of bought plants, three trees and tropical plants. Planting carried out by client	

### FINISHES

Terracing	£28/m <sup>2</sup>
Supply of natural Caithness flagstones	
Concrete moat	£205/m <sup>2</sup>
Prefabricated moat sections (based on 0.7m standard width)	
Concrete panels	£75/m <sup>2</sup>
Prefabricated concrete panels for plateau terracing	
Timber boarding	N/A
Timber decking and supports to glasshouse and part back of house	

### SERVICES

Electrical and lighting	N/A
Electrical installation of all fittings and actuators to glasshouse	
Plumbing	N/A
Heating system to glasshouse; water supply and installation to garden (from spring and mains)	

### PRELIMINARIES

Machinery Hire; OHP	N/A
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