Design for living
Marc Peirson talks Sheringham with Will Alsop

Will Alsop OBE, member of the Royal Academy and 'Enfant Terrible' of the Architectural profession is a passionate man. Passionate about food, about art, about architecture, about life. Passionate about Sheringham.

Will has had a house in Sheringham since 1982. His wife had parents who lived in Sheringham, and so it seemed a natural move to have a base here. He still has a house in London but loves the fact that Sheringham, unlike a lot of other beauty spots around the country, has absolutely nothing to do with the sprawling Metropolis some 134.2 miles or so south! With projects around the globe Will Alsop is an architect of immense talent and reputation, his unique, idiosyncratic style is immediately recognisable. Bold, innovative, bright. The man and his buildings! And the town should be extremely proud that his first commission was Sheringham's very own swimming pool; although the council went ahead, without consulting him, and painted the exterior blue and yellow to ‘cheer it up’, rather than the stained timber exterior which is what he had envisioned. As a visionary it must be very painful to have your work ‘adapted’ by others. It’s akin to someone painting a moustache on the Mona Lisa. I should imagine, or adding a fig leaf to Michelangelo’s David - if not actually taking a chisel to it.

I asked Will, like a great number of artists who are drawn to the area, whether the surrounding played any part in inspiring or informing his art and architectural vision. He told me that his art doesn’t feed on the immediate environment in that traditional kind of way. He originally had a great interest, and still does, in geology and patterns of land settlement in the area, and confesses to spending an inordinate amount of time in his studio in the garden. Three or four hours in his studio and he gets as much work done there as a whole, full days work in his London office. Will is passionate about his garden. He is famously on record for stating that he would rather win the best front garden in Sheringham award than the Stirling prize - which he won in 2000 for the Peckham Library! I asked if he applied any architectural principles to his garden design and he chuckled good naturely at my simple ignorance. With his garden he has tried to create a piece of the Mediterranean - as the climate here on the coast is not as cold as further inland. I know what he means - I put a large olive tree in my front garden occasioning much finger pointings and mutterings of ‘idiot’ and etc. But it has survived two brutally harsh winters. Not made a living from selling the oil as yet mind.

But what is it about Sheringham Will likes so much? ‘It is its unpretentiousness. The fact that it’s not been got at. It’s a proper, genuine old fashioned sea side town with a mix of good people. What he would like to change though, given the chance, is the car park. It is the first thing visitors are presented with when coming into the town and he’s not happy with it. And he’s right. There is a beautiful Railway station behind it blocked from view, after all. I wondered what Will would do if he had his way? His solution is genius. A large underground car park with a covered market above in the style, say, of the great market in Valencia. Where food and local produce is celebrated, with brass bands and with joy and delight and something rather more splendid than a hog roast in the rain and a stall selling hearing aid batteries.

So random places that gets Will’s thum up vertical? Hastings in the High Street where you can get pretty much any fruit and vegetable known to man. The Wivelin Farm Café were you can have tapas and look over the marshes to the sea in the setting, summer surf; the delightful East Ruston Gardens; the glorious woods and the magnificent walled Garden at Felbrigg, and his favourite building in Sheringham? ‘The Lifeboat House, he says. Its sits very well. And so it does. Very well indeed!

Splish swimming pool.