

Secret love affair... Alan reveals all

For the last 18 months, Alan Titchmarsh has been quietly cultivating a secret love affair ... but it won't be a secret much longer. The wholesome family man has been spotted at locations across the country, cheeks flushed, eyes moist with emotion, caught (as one of his steamy novels might have it) in the crossbeams of passion. He describes his new love as “achingly beautiful”, “awe-inspiring” and “full of surprises”. But, he readily admits, she's no spring chicken: in fact, she's three billion years old. Alan, you see, has lost his heart to the British Isles.



In BBC One's *British Isles: A Natural History*, Alan travels the length and breadth of the nation to guide viewers through the millions of years of evolution that have shaped the now-familiar face of our landscape and wildlife. From the frozen summit of Ben Nevis to the sun-baked Isles of Scilly, he opens a window on Britain's fascinating past and its stunning present – and invites viewers to stick out their heads.

"What I hope this series does more than anything is to make people aware of the astounding beauty and fascination of the islands we live in. I hope it infects people with a willingness to cherish them and to really care about them," says Alan. "The series opens a window on our world and I want people to stick their heads out of it and say, 'Wow! We must take care of these islands – they're fantastic, they're tremendous, they're like nothing else on Earth.'"

It's the perfect job for a man who, at the helm of both *Gardeners'World* and *Ground Force*, dedicated the best part of the last decade to getting us interested in what lies outside our backdoors.

That mission accomplished, Alan (54) is now set to get us off our spotlit decks, out of the garden gate and off up the road.

To build up a truly evocative picture of our land in the making, *British Isles: A Natural History* features a unique series of regional opt-out films, which give local insights into the themes explored in programmes two to seven. A wealth of online information and associated events also bring this epic story closer to home for people across the nation.

"I really hope it encourages people to get off their bottoms and get out there and up close and personal with the things we're talking about," says Alan. "I firmly believe that if they see it first hand and they get involved in it, then they'll love it and will want to take care of it – and that's really the big message."

But, the presenter is quick to point out, the series is not of the "finger-wagging" ilk: "It's not one of those 'or else' documentaries. It's a celebration of these islands we live on but it also shows that caring for them is a pleasurable thing to do, not an onerous chore."



Hadrian's Wall



Bluebell wood

"Wow! We must take care of these islands – they're fantastic, they're tremendous, they're like nothing else on Earth"

Born and brought up in the Yorkshire Dales, Alan began his career in horticulture in Ilkley Parks Department, which led to an apprenticeship at Kew Gardens. He presented his first TV report when a plague of greenfly invaded Margate back in 1979 and was soon snapped up as a regular on *Nationwide* and *Breakfast Time*. He then spent 10 years presenting *Pebble Mill At One* but it was *Gardeners'World* and *Ground Force* that made him a household name. He became the nation's head gardener, wrote a wheelbarrow full of bestselling books – including two volumes of *How To Be A Gardener* and a series of racy romances – and along the way won an army of female fans, who famously voted him the second sexiest man on TV (after George Clooney). But in 2002, Alan made a break with both series and looked to pastures new.

"I sometimes miss *Gardeners'World*, particularly showing people around my garden every Friday night, but it's very exciting to do something different and I think everybody needs stretching," he says. "It's easy to settle into a rut – and it was a very nice rut – but this series is a good way of expanding. In a way, it's going back to my earliest roots."

"I was a member of the Wharfedale Naturalists Society when I was a tiny tot – I still am – and the gardening really grew out of that. I've always been interested in natural history and I think if you're into things that grow, you're into things that fly, crawl and swim."

Father-of-two Alan, who now lives in a Georgian farmhouse in Hampshire with his wife, Alison, continues: "I've travelled Britain an awful lot in my career and I don't know everything about everything but I've got a tremendous interest in it and a great curiosity."

Filming *British Isles: A Natural History* has been a real eye-opener – for such a small area, we are incredibly varied and I've been like a boy in a sweetshop.

"I've watched red squirrels in Lancashire; I've had swallowtail butterflies fluttering around me in Norfolk; and I've climbed the mountain next door to Ben Nevis and looked it in the eye. I've navigated a narrow boat on an aqueduct in Wales hundreds of feet above the ground; descended into the darkness of Gaping Ghyll; and flown over the Hebrides in a jet fighter."



Sailing past the White Cliffs of Dover

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Alan turned *Top Gun*, he explains, to give viewers an unrivalled view of Britain's incredible coastline. "It was every schoolboy's dream!" he adds, with a grin from ear to ear. But the schoolboy in Alan hadn't banked on the inflatable trousers he would have to wear for his 600mph adventure.

"When the G-force kicks in, they automatically inflate to stop all the blood rushing to your feet," he explains with a grimace. "Unfortunately, though, the pressure on your stomach then goes 'Wumfff!' ... I'm not going to say any more about that."

Another stomach-churning moment saw the series' crew cut off by the tide at Hartland Quay on the north Devon coast. "I managed to leg it over a big rock and go for a cup of tea, but the rest of the crew couldn't follow me so they had to wait for hours until the tide went out again. They teased me mercilessly about being the 'action man'. It's funny how producers doing pieces on natural history forget that natural history takes over sometimes..."

But the crew got their own back on Alan a few weeks later when he was persuaded to spend three hours in the make-up chair and hit the streets of London's West End as a Neanderthal man.

Alan explains: "Neanderthals had a heavier brow than us, a broader nose and lots of hair but they weren't that different to us. It's said – and we were testing this – that if a Neanderthal man walked down Oxford Street today, clad in our clothes, you wouldn't give him a second glance."

They didn't – and "Ice Age Alan" even went on to check into his hotel without the receptionist batting an eyelid. "Says a lot about London, I suppose!" he laughs.

It seems, however, that this bodily brush with the past was more than enough for the presenter. Asked which of the periods featured in the series he would most like to have personally experienced, Alan is adamant that he's happy in the present.



Greenham Common, Berkshire, reverts to heathland

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"The truth of the matter is that we don't really know what's going to happen in the future – and it's not too late for us to do something about it," says Alan in the reassuring tone he usually reserves for gardeners whose wisterias have wilted.

"We're so lucky now because we have the knowledge to understand how our landscape has come to be the way it is and I really appreciate living now. There's a certain romantic notion in saying I'd like to have lived in Georgian times when Capability Brown was doing his landscapes, 'improving on nature', as he saw it. But you realise that, if we take care of it, now is the best time of all to live here – but we must not squander our natural heritage." The Britain our children will inherit is, in fact, the subject of the final film in the series, which takes a frank look at what the next 100 years might hold. But, for once, the story is not all doom and gloom.

"We're pretty sure we'll have a bit of global warming and we're affecting that now more than ever before with greenhouse gases, so we have to be careful there. But we don't know whether global warming will actually make Britain warmer or colder. There are lots of different theories and nobody knows which one is right, but the one thing that is certain is that we have a responsibility not to mess it up. And, you know, I have a great deal of faith that we can make a difference."

If anyone can persuade us that's true, one can't help thinking it's going to be Alan.