

# SPRING OUTING

Saturday 12th May 2018

The Haslemere Gardening Society visited

**Thenford House Gardens and Arboretum,  
Thenford, BANBURY, OX17 2BX**



**Thenford House** – The gardens and arboretum, under the stewardship of Michael and Anne Heseltine, have been meticulously restored with guidance from prominent horticultural experts, including Lanning Roper, Roy Lancaster, Sir Harold Hillier, and Keith Rushford. The arboretum spans seventy acres and encompasses a collection exceeding three thousand species of trees and shrubs, complemented by extensive herbaceous borders, water gardens, and an alpine trough garden.

Michael and Anne Heseltine bought Thenford House and its gardens in 1976, expanding the estate by acquiring over 400 acres of agricultural land for Haymarket Media Group. For the next twenty-five years, they focused on reviving the woodland, clearing out debris, replacing fallen trees, restoring the walled garden, dredging medieval fish ponds, and rebuilding the lake's stone wall. The Heseltines sought guidance from prominent horticulturalists like Lanning Roper, Sir Harold Hillier, Roy Lancaster, and Keith Rushforth to shape their replanting efforts.

Thenford House Gardens, now formally called Thenford Gardens & Arboretum, is a renowned private estate near Banbury in Oxfordshire. Home to Lord and Lady Heseltine, the gardens are widely recognised as one of Britain's foremost modern gardens. Spanning about seventy acres, the estate is celebrated for its impressive plant collections, sweeping landscapes, and thoughtfully restored historical features. By the late twentieth century, much of the woodland had been neglected since Victorian times, though the area immediately around the house and the walled garden remained cared for and in use, primarily to protect lambs from local foxes by the 1970s.

The arboretum boasts over 3,000 species of trees and shrubs, cultivated over nearly fifty years. Among its highlights is an exceptional snowdrop collection, with more than 600 varieties—making it one of the best in the UK. Water features include restored medieval fishponds, canals, lakes, and water gardens. The redesigned two-acre walled garden by George Carter features pavilions, mirror pools, an aviary, and distinctive garden architecture. Sculptures by artists such as Elizabeth Frink, Lynn Chadwick, and Michael Ayrton are exhibited throughout the various garden rooms. Additionally, the rill and alpine trough garden add dynamic water and rock elements to the grounds.

Having purchased Thenford in 1976, the Heseltines dedicated decades to revitalising the landscape. Their work transformed the woodlands, restored water features, cleared historic yew avenues, and enlisted top horticulturalists to develop a garden and

arboretum of international significance. Garden access is limited to select days annually, with advance ticket bookings required due to popularity. Special events, like winter Snowdrop Walks, are also hosted.

Originally established for commercial forestry in the eighteenth century, the woodland has been reimagined. The Heseltines broadened the range of trees and shrubs, laying the foundation for today's diverse array. As their public duties lessened around the millennium, they added ornamental features and improved both design and planting quality. Now, the arboretum covers seventy acres with over three thousand tree and shrub varieties, extensive herbaceous borders, water and alpine trough gardens, sculpture and rose gardens, and a rill. Medieval fishponds, canals, and lakes have all been restored, and two new lakes were created. The eighteenth-century yew avenue was cleared to reveal its original grandeur once more.