



Thenford

LUCY BIDGOOD writes about a study day learning about the creation and management of a remarkable woody plant collection in Northamptonshire.

On a bright morning in May, the grass on the village green sparkling with dew, IDS members arrived to enjoy a day of hospitality from Lord Heseltine and his family at Thenford Arboretum.

Thenford House and the surrounding land has a history of being gardened and farmed, but by 1976, when Lord and Lady Heseltine made Thenford their home, little gardening had been done since Victorian times, 'God's garden' as described by Lord Heseltine. With input from many friends, and hard work from Lord Heseltine and his garden team, 70 acres of formal ornamental garden and arboretum have been crafted from wild, overgrown woodland.

Lord Heseltine gave a fantastic, detailed and often humorous explanation of how they developed Thenford Arboretum, and how gardening has been a part of his life since being given a square yard of mud and a packet of Virginia stock seeds back at school. This set us in good stead for exploring, and we broke off into smaller conversation groups and headed off around different routes across the arboretum.

Following lunch, an in-depth Q&A session was held, with Lord Heseltine and head gardener Darren Webster fielding the many varied questions from IDS members. We were then set loose to explore once again, armed with fresh

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Thenford, in Northamptonshire, where members of the Society gathered for a day learning about the history and management of an extensive and remarkable collection of trees followed by the opportunity of a walk round the grounds and garden.



Quercus aliena var. *pekingensis*



Acer palmatum 'Shinobuga-oka'



Juglans cathayensis



Nothofagus antarctica



Fraxinus chinensis



Ulmus 'Sapporo Autumn Gold'



Populus yunnanensis



Acer palmatum 'Beni Otake'



Pinus monticola 'Strobicola'

knowledge and ideas of areas of the garden to visit next. IDS members predictably found their way behind the scenes to sneak a peek at the nursery area, and were all intrigued by the ingenious sand beds for watering from below.

The theme of the study day was managing a woody plant collection, and Thenford certainly provided an excellent selection for us to consider and enjoy. Lord Heseltine works by the idea that if it grows and exists, he's got to try growing it at Thenford, resulting in a huge collection of many different genera from across the world. Plants have arrived at Thenford through a variety of means including acorns from sponsored collection trips and gifts from friends and well-known plantspeople. Some plants survive and others do not, but the

keenness to experiment is admirable, and some interesting results are already clear in the changing climate.

Ongoing challenges are most likely well recognised by IDS members around the world: encouraging ground cover (and embracing weeds), producing enough mulch to use on the collection (here, 200 tonnes a year is not enough!), watering new plantings (when the distance from a hose point can be great), and labelling, mapping and recording the collection using GPS and database technology.

Lord Heseltine recognises the problem of available growing space as time goes on; difficult decisions will have to be taken in the near future to remove



Fraxinus mariesii

some specimens to allow space for others to thrive. This active editing is often carried out before the trees become too large and difficult to remove, particularly when more than one specimen of the same species is planted, so the best example can be kept.

Thenford features not only an incredible dendrological collection but also many features of contrasting design, working with the natural and historic features of the landscape to create a flowing experience of many smaller gardens. The Marston Brook has been dammed to create water gardens, and the historic walled garden has been restored with a contemporary design, simplistic yet effective.

Art plays a large role in the design of Thenford, with both classical and modern pieces placed thoughtfully within the landscape, thanks to the artistic eye of Lady Heseltine. There are many pieces worth mentioning, but one that was particularly moving for many members was *The Armour Boys* by Laura Ward, sculptures of the bodies of five boys in full armour lying dead amongst the wildflowers at the roots of an ancient ash tree.

To borrow a quote from Lord Heseltine from the introduction of the beautiful book about creating Thenford the family produced in 2016, *'I am now pretty rich. I don't have a yacht, or racehorses or any of those sorts of things – but I do have a garden.'* The fortunate IDS members who came on the study day would certainly agree that Thenford is indeed a great treasure.

With great thanks for the generosity of Lord Heseltine and his family in welcoming us to Thenford.