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Let's Stop Calling This a Crisis and Start Building More Homes

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Michael Heseltine left his mark on British politics, and he has also had a lasting effect on the Northamptonshire landscape. He and his wife, Anne, show Rachel de Thame around their arboretum

LORD OF HIS JUNGLE



Politicians are ambitious people for whom legacy is important. Lord Heseltine, one of the most forceful figures of late-20th-century British politics, has undoubtedly given considerable thought to the trail he'll leave. Yet rather than being remembered for his business acumen as the founder of a successful publishing house, or for his political career as deputy prime minister to John Major, he hopes future generations will think of him primarily as a man who planted trees.

Heseltine, 83, counts as his finest achievement the arboretum he and his wife, Anne, have jointly created over the past 40 years at Thenford, their home in Northamptonshire, near the Oxfordshire border. "I always say that it's the only thing I'll be remembered for," he says. "How many 19th-century politicians can you name? Perhaps a handful of prime ministers. But people will remember Thenford." This month, a book packed with photographs, detailing the creation of the garden, will help to cement that legacy.

As soon as I am through the gate, I'm surrounded by trees, which soften the line of the curved drive that forms part of a horseshoe-shaped frontage.

At its apex stands the house, a vision in warm stone, with perfectly proportioned symmetry that is impressive, but not overly imposing. And on meeting them, I find that both Lord and Lady Heseltine are similar to their home: tall, handsome, elegant, welcoming and in extremely good shape for their age.

Nevertheless, the garden is a large area to cover, incorporating woodland, water gardens and several sizeable lakes – so, as we set out on our tour, we hop aboard his n' hers golf buggies.

I travel initially with Heseltine, and we go at a fair pace, whizzing through the trees, with him calling an occasional "Watch out!". Duly warned, I raise my right arm to rebuff wayward branches that threaten to spring back and thwack us through the open-sided buggy as we pass.

There's a refreshingly haphazard placement to the trees: I'd expected a clearly defined area to be devoted solely to the arboretum, but trees are incorporated across the site. The impression is not so much of a carefully curated collection as of an exuberant and random planting of individual specimens that are there because each is valued for itself alone, not as a constituent of a master design or plan.

Rather than clustered groups of a single species or cultivar, artfully arranged with generous breathing spaces between each grouping, here the trees appear to have



sprung up rather delightfully wherever the man with the spade took a fancy to digging a hole. It's a lively contrast to the more tightly designed, formal parts of the garden. The original plans for the landscape were formulated by Lanning Roper, and it continues to evolve with help from the designer George Carter. There's no doubt that its development is a labour of love for the Heseltines, yet both agree they weren't initially looking for a garden, but for a certain sort of

house. When they moved to Thenford in 1977, they found themselves with about 440 acres, much of it originally commercially managed woodland, planted solely to produce timber. Fortuitously, the gales of 1986 helped to clear the land. "The drive was thickly planted with rubbish – nothing decorative, really," says Anne Heseltine, 82. "The gale was a twister, and took the lot out. We'd been dithering about doing that, and it just made up our minds." Gradually, the remaining existing natives were enlivened by

the addition of the exotic and unusual, largely on the advice of the nurseryman Harold Hillier, who provided much of the stock. For Heseltine, from that point on, developing a collection moved from possibility to reality. Hundreds of trees, many of which were planted after the gales, are now reaching maturity. The contrasting shapes and colours form a visual complex mosaic, deciduous and evergreen, that changes as the seasons progress.

Some were given by family or friends – a pair of western yellow pines (*Pinus ponderosa*) and a blue Atlas cedar (*Cedrus atlantica* 'Glauca') were a gift from Heseltine's mother and sister. Others commemorate visits to the

UK by distinguished political figures of the day, among them George W Bush ("No prizes for guessing" – a *Quercus x bushii*) and Zhu Rongji, who later became Chinese premier (*Fraxinus sieboldiana*).

Not all actually came to Thenford, but some did, including a roster of Tory prime ministers. Trees were planted as mementos of visits by Ted Heath (*Pinus x densithunbergii*) and John Major (*Fraxinus profunda*); and, with Margaret Thatcher's agreement, a cutting of box was taken from Chequers when she was the incumbent.

Ever the diplomat, the normally forthright Heseltine – he has been back in the headlines with a couple of well-aimed Brexit barbs – shies

away from naming a favourite commemorative tree.

I swap buggies and am now Anne Heseltine's passenger. She's no slouch in the driving seat, either, and we continue to zip around and through the trees. At one point, we park up near a stone ice house to admire a dazzling view of the house on high ground beyond a stretch of still water that's edged with lily pads and reflects the azure sky and a fringe of shrubs and trees on the far side.

Finally, to the nub of it all: the working part of the garden, and a series of greenhouses and nursery beds that are filled with pots containing everything from newly emerged seedlings to sturdy juvenile trees, all grown from seed on site.

This seed comes from a variety of sources: as wealthy garden owners of the 18th and 19th centuries would have done, the Heseltines buy shares in plant-hunting expeditions, taking a percentage of the seed that comes back. They are often given seeds, or exchange them with friends and institutions, including the Alpine Society and Cruickshank Botanic Garden, in Aberdeen.

Both admit to being collectors by nature, finding satisfaction in the thrill of the chase before adding one more to the hoard. Financial transparency helps to maintain the status quo, Heseltine says: "We never make a serious purchase except in agreement, and we've never found it difficult to reach agreement."

I feel sufficiently emboldened to ask what the cost of this mammoth undertaking has been thus far. "We don't ask... it's better not to know. What is certain is that if we'd done a plan 40 years ago, we would never have done it."

Despite succumbing to the temptation to put in semi-mature specimens and hedges in the early days, when the garden lacked structure, Heseltine now firmly advocates planting them young: "The smaller you plant it, the stronger it seems to be and the faster it grows." He points out that some of the plants they added as saplings in 1980, including a *Quercus rubra* (northern red oak) and a liriiodendron (tulip tree) are now fully mature.

Forget the adage of generously leaving something for future generations that you won't be able to enjoy yourself: "The message is simple," he says. "Don't think it's all about planting for your grandchildren. You can get huge pleasure yourself from doing this."

Anne Heseltine is in charge of the sculpture garden, while "Michael's the plantsman – there's no doubt he's overtaken me by a hundred years".

Here, the man who famously stormed out of a cabinet meeting over the sale of Westland Helicopters when he was defence secretary in Margaret Thatcher's government can't resist a tongue-in-cheek interruption, pointing out: "I'm [also] an awfully reasonable, nice person."

The care and attention has paid off. This is now an important collection, comprising about 3,200 types of tree and shrub.

Ultimately, though, it is also a family garden – albeit not on the usual domestic scale – with two keen and knowledgeable custodians.

The success of Thenford's arboretum is just beginning to be realised.

Thenford: The Creation of an English Garden by Michael and Anne Heseltine (€40, Head of Zeus) is available at easons.com



Over almost 40 years, Michael and Anne Heseltine have amassed a collection of 3,200 varieties of tree and shrub. Above left, the couple show Rachel de Thame around the grounds



Let's stop calling this a crisis and start building more homes

Over the past couple of years I have made a concerted effort not to use the phrase "housing crisis", and I've been doing quite well, too. Recently, however, I have been using the dreaded phrase more often than I like.

I don't like the word "crisis" because it often gets abused, and although I'm talking about housing here, the same point can be applied to many economic and social problems and solutions.

Behind every policy lies politics, and behind politics lies language. Note, for example, that the government pledges to "deliver" social housing, not necessarily build houses. There's a world of difference. Actually, there's tens of thousands of homes difference. For example, the government "delivered" 13,000 social houses in 2015, but built only 74: the rest came from existing stock or approved housing bodies.

The word "crisis" is similar. By repeatedly using it, especially in relation to housing, we are potentially giving the state carte

blanche to do what it must in the interests of resolving the crisis. Also, by referring to a crisis we are demanding immediate results, thereby giving the state a free pass on examining the causes of the problem in return for addressing the symptoms now.

There have been numerous examples of this in the past 12 months: apartment-size standards have been nationalised and made considerably smaller;

applications for developments of 100 or more housing units go directly to An Bord Pleanála; and so on. These are serious (and to my mind, democratically deficient) policies that give the illusion of tackling a "crisis", but don't.

Apartment sizes are not the problem – the cost of development finance might be; and planning is not the problem, as used properly it is more of a

solution. So, instead of examining the costs of producing houses to reinvigorate house-building, we see industry-pleasing policies such as those above, and worse.

A crisis, to me, is a natural phenomenon – a storm, an earthquake, a landslide – not a market crash or a lack of housing. Market crashes, dysfunctional rental systems and a lack of housing are man-made issues, but by using the word crisis we are complicit in covering up the man-made aspect of the problem and instead granting it act-of-God status.

A crisis then becomes a convenient way for governments – and the lobbyists – to do as they please, all under the guise of solving the crisis (but usually it results in inflating land values). This is dangerous territory.

It is also often the case that the only people with the apparent skills to solve the crisis are those who were instrumental in causing it in the first place. Coincidentally, they also tend to be the ones to benefit most from resolving the crisis.



Storms and earthquakes constitute real crises, not our man-made dramas

The word "crisis" also implies that events have come as a surprise, but when we have governments, and increasingly people, treating houses as commodities and not as homes, then what is surprising about a

crash? Aren't commodities always at risk of fluctuating in value? Of course, some people do have a housing crisis – I am particularly thinking of the homeless, of those living rough or in hotels rooms, especially with

children. These people have a crisis. A professional on a decent wage who takes five years to save a 20% deposit for a house that she won't be able to buy until she's pushing 40 years of age has significant challenges, but not a crisis. That is quite the norm in many countries.

We do not have a right to a "crisis" because it has taken us years to save for a deposit in a crappy rental system. We do have a right to a functional housing system, though. However, the state repeatedly fails to grasp the nettle on fundamental changes that would stabilise our system and make housing affordable, turning instead to superficial and ineffectual tweaks. Irish housing is therefore in a perpetual state of flux, but not crisis.

Housing – real housing, where we build homes and communities for people – is a stupendously beneficial thing and what any society should be aiming for. In getting there, though, let's keep the crisis terminology for those in genuine trouble: using the word less might have more impact.

LORCAN SIRR ON THE HOME FRONT

