

# The value of a brief walk through time



The Leavesden Asylum/Hospital and Annex in 1937. All pictures courtesy Leavesden Hospital History Association

by **Martin T Brooks**

DURING a recent conversation with Sarah Priestly, curator of Watford Museum and Watford Council heritage manager, the question came up, as it does when two or more history buffs gather together - why do we spend so much time studying history/heritage? After all, it's just a bunch of old stuff.

The answer is most likely just as unique and personal as the history and heritage that makes up the person trying to answer the question.

Our history, helps us to not only understand our society, but to understand ourselves and other people. History and cultural heritage, the good, the bad, and the ugly, can, if not eradicated from our streets, buildings, schools, and collective memories, as we seem on the road to doing, reveal where we have been and could be heading as individuals and as a society.

For Sarah, the study of history and heritage means: "It brings us together, it connects us. In the tough times we've been living through the importance of our heritage has become obvious, demonstrating how much we can learn and enjoy together."

Luckily for us here in and around Watford, there is a great deal of history and cultural heritage for which we can feel nostalgic about.

From such places as Abbots Langley, which dates to 1065 when Norman King, Ethelwine The Black, gave some of his land to the Abbot of St Albans making it the Abbots Land, or Langlai in Latin, to the ecclesiastical Parish of Leavesden which was established in 1853 when the Leavesden All Saints Church was built and would go on to hold within its boundaries many historic features of the local community's history and heritage.

Leavesden or Leaves Dene (Old English denu meaning a vale, especially the deep, narrow wooded valley of a small river) was and is the home of such facilities as the Leavesden Asylum/Hospitals (1868 to 1995), the St Pancras Workhouse/Industrial School (1868 to 1930), the Canadian Hospital/Kaki University (1939 to 1948), Leavesden Green Teachers College (1947 to 1948 and for which College Road is named after), the Leavesden/Springfield Special Needs School (1952 to 1985), the Leavesden Aerodrome/Rolls Royce plant (1940 to 1994), and Leavesden Film Studios (purchased by Eon Production in 1995 after they filmed the James Bond film Golden Eye in the abandoned aerodrome hangars) which became the permanent home of

Warner Bros Studios Leavesden.

It should be noted that the production manager for the filming of Golden Eye in 1995 was a young Dan Dark who would later become the Senior Vice President and managing director of Warner Bros Studios Leavesden, and a great supporter of the efforts being made by local history groups and Three Rivers District Council to maintain and preserve the history and heritage of the local area.

All these facilities, during their time, were the largest employers in the area attracting thousands of individuals from not only the UK but from Ireland and elsewhere.

This means that there are many generations of people whose family's history and heritage reach back as far as the late 1800s and who still maintain a connection to these areas because of their time spent at these facilities and in growing up in the nearby communities that supported them.

Being nostalgic or harking back to the "good old days" is not just a benefit for the those of us who have been around long even to make the comparison, but for the younger people who are today, making their own histories and leaving their own heritage in various forms.

Peter Taylor, Mayor of Watford, sees the many benefits of putting this history on display for all to appreciate and learn from when he recently stated: "Walking through the galleries at Watford Museum, you can see that our town has an important place in history. At one point it was thought that Watford was the biggest print town in Europe! The 'old stuff' on display links back to this and allows residents to get a sense of where Watford has come from. It's this growing understanding and appreciation of a place which really enables people to connect with where they live. Ultimately, the more you connect with where you live, the more you care about it and the deeper the sense of community you feel".

I believe that it is very important, if not a necessity, for young people to learn that their cultural history and heritage is not just created by historical figures, famous people, or those living in other places. History and cultural heritage is created by everyday people, in everyday life, by the connections we make with other people or other communities/cultures, whether that be in our families, our schools, or our neighbourhoods.

This for me is why the time I have spent learning about the history and heritage of the area I moved to in 2006 has been time well spent and not just time wasted looking at a bunch of old stuff.



Leavesden All Saints Church c1900



Leavesden Aerodrome c1940



Leavesden Mental Hospital staff in 1946



Leavesden Aerodrome tower being built in 1940