

The doll's house model for a hospital



Aerial view of the former Canadian, Kaki University billets (in white) and proposed site of Abbots Langley General Hospital from 1953. Pictures: Leavesden Hospital History Association



The Abbots Langley Doll House after being restored in 2019

by **Martin T Brooks**

MOVING from a country where access to any type of decent medical care is determined by the size of your bank account or your ability to pay for a private health insurance policy, to one where medical care is provided by the Government and has been a part of that country's history of caring since around 1495, was a very pleasant surprise.

The history and cultural heritage of the British people attending to and taking care of the poor, sick, insane and destitute goes back in time as far as society has been inappropriately classifying and labelling people as such.

The one common and unfortunate thread through all this "evolution of caring" is that there has never seemed to be enough room at the inn for those who need long-term physical or mental health care and treatment.

Imagine where we would be now if in 1989 the NHS had put people before profit and kept a small workable part of the Leavesden Hospital, as proposed by the hospital's management committee, or if in the early 1950s they had carried through with their initial idea to build the "Abbots Langley General Hospital" on the almost 20-acre site of the former staff billets for those who, after the war, were attending the Canadian, Kaki University located then on the south side of the newly-named College Road in Leavesden/Abbots Langley.

This Abbots Langley General Hospital would have been a grand, multi-story, multi-use medical facility

with the capacity to treat thousands of patients if, the now 70-year-old architectural model depicting the hospital's proposed layout and features, is any example.

Affectionately referred to as the "Abbots Langley Doll House" by staff of the Leavesden Hospital where the model took pride of place in the main lobby for many years, this architectural model, itself of great size and detail, was created and built in the studio of internationally recognised architect Kenneth McCutcheon, of Shepherds Bush, London.

This was and is an incredibly unique and rare surviving example of professional architectural model making from the 1950s in as much as it is a large piece, is in excellent condition, has electrical wiring and lighting fixtures throughout, is apparently powered by several large internal batteries, and comes from a well-recognised and respected studio.

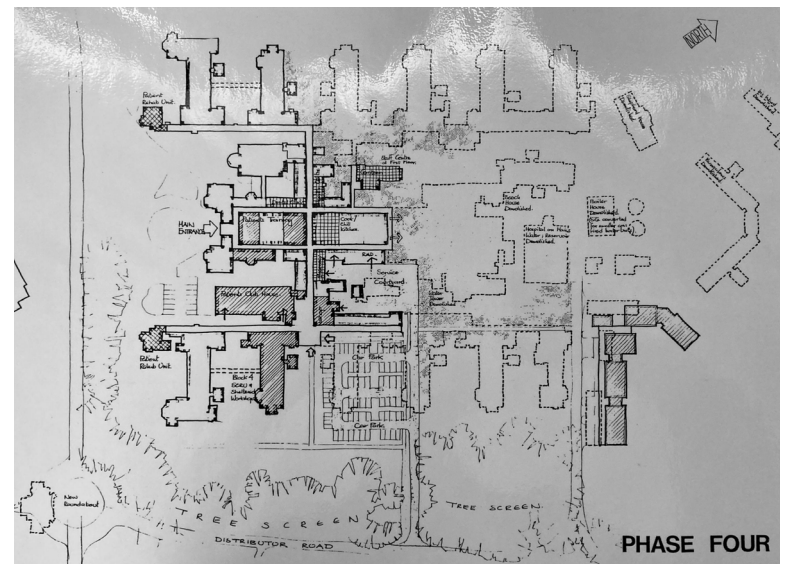
The model was first described to me as containing many small, detailed, and handmade pieces of furniture and fixings which filled such rooms as A&E, maternity ward, operating theatres, ambulance entrance, and a children's ward.

Intrigued by what I had heard about this artefact, I kept my ears open for any information that would lead me to finding this piece of the hospital's history.

In 2014, I had an appointment at the Vine House Surgery in Abbots Langley and after a short wait, was summoned into the office of Dr Peter Simmons. Upon opening the door to his office, I noticed a large, wooden, majestic looking "doll house" along the wall in front of his desk. You can image my surprise and child-like glee at seeing what must be the fabled Abbots Langley Doll House that I had been hearing about since 2008. It was Christmas and Santa had just delivered me the best present ever.

Dr Simmons saw the historic value of saving such a piece and acquired the doll house after seeing it on display during the hospital's closing ceremonies in 1995 where he was told it would most likely end up in a skip by the end of that day.

In 2016, the doll house was donated to the Leavesden Hospital History Association by the Vine House Surgery and in February of 2019, with the much-appreciated help of Giddings and Son Ltd. of Abbots Langley, this piece of the hospital's history found a permanent home in the newly opened HIVE heritage centre where it can be marvelled at and appreciated for what could have been.



Phase Four of proposed plans to keep part of the Leavesden Hospital in operation, from 1989



Abbots Langley Doll House model as seen in Dr Simmons' office, April 2014



Close up of the doll house showing various rooms