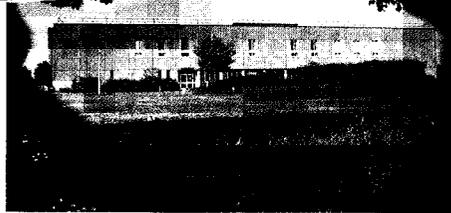


WASTED
The great hulk
of Heyford Park



The NHS is in crisis. Waiting lists are at record levels. But less than an hour's drive from Health Secretary Frank Dobson's Westminster office, a model hospital lies empty.

**Words: Pete Sawyer
Pictures: George Impey**

At first sight, the Heyford Park Hospital in Oxfordshire is like an advertisement for the National Health Service. It has eight wards — 90 beds in all — private rooms, a dental care unit, a gynaecology unit, recovery rooms, laboratories and X-ray facilities. There are also five operating theatres, a baby-care unit and a four-bed mortuary.

What's more, the hospital lies in rural Oxfordshire, between Bicester and Banbury, close to the M40, and less than an hour's drive from central London. No wonder it is insured for £10 million.

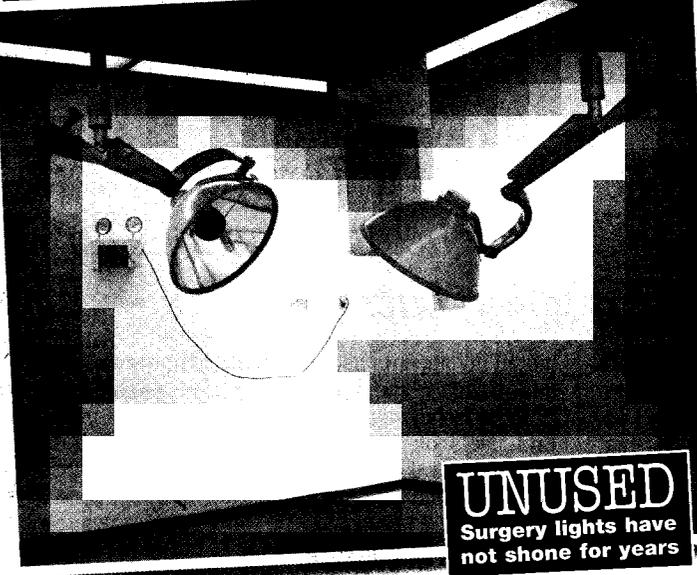
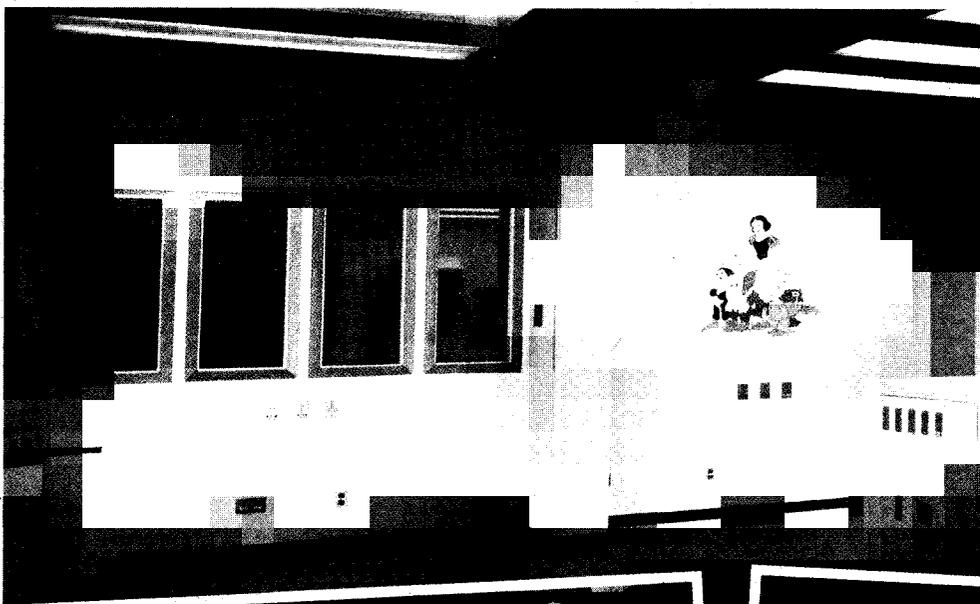
Unfortunately for the government's reputation as the guardian of the nation's health, this hospital has lain empty for the past four years.

With waiting lists at record levels, you could be forgiven for thinking that such a building would be a valuable asset. But the story of why this hospital now stands empty graphically illustrates the problems facing the fragmented National Health Service.

Heyford Park is based at the former American air force base at Upper Heyford. Originally an RAF camp, it was leased to the Americans in 1966 and during the Cold War it became immensely important. It took on the form of a self-contained town, with shops, school and sports facilities serving the 14,000-strong American community.

The hospital is easily the largest above-surface building on the base, looming ominously over the rolling corn-fields. It was built by the Americans in 1980, and at the time it was state-of-the-art, serving as one of their main military hospitals in Europe. It was also used extensively in 1991 during Operation Desert Storm against Iraq. The hospital had an unusually large dental

THE HOSPITAL



UNUSED
Surgery lights have
not shone for years

EMPTY
Heyford Park's
echoing hallways

unit, because American servicemen did not trust British dentists.

The Americans pulled out of Upper Heyford in September 1995 and, in a deal which remains secret, the Ministry of Defence leased the base to the North Oxfordshire Consortium, owned by three house-builders — Taywood Homes, Wimpy and Westbury Homes. It was renamed Heyford Park. Now North Oxfordshire Consortium appears to be at a loss with what to do with the

in the process. Keith Watson, chief executive of the North Oxfordshire Consortium, describes the plight of the hospital as "scandalous", given the shortage of NHS facilities.

"We would desperately like to find a use for it," he adds. For two years, two successive governments pondered a plan to make the hospital into a specialist centre for the treatment of sporting injuries, as part of a bid to turn Heyford into the National Centre for Sporting Excellence. The

The Ministry of Defence doesn't want it, and the health authority can't see a use for it

hospital. The MoD doesn't want it and the local health authority cannot see a use for it.

Admittedly, the hospital's location, in an area poorly served by public transport, counts against it as a general hospital. But it is ideally suited as a specialist hospital, or even as a recovery centre to free up much-needed beds in urban hospitals

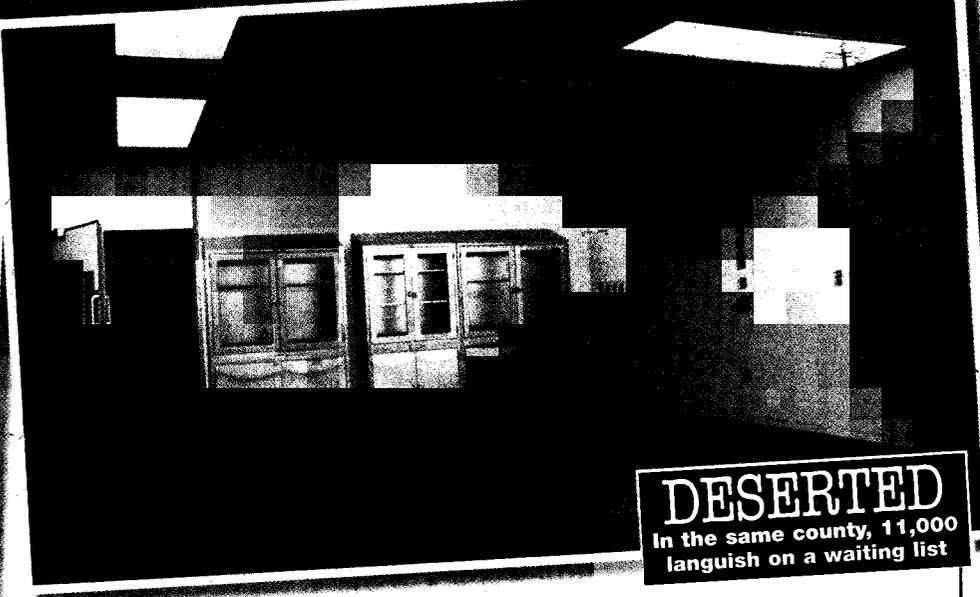
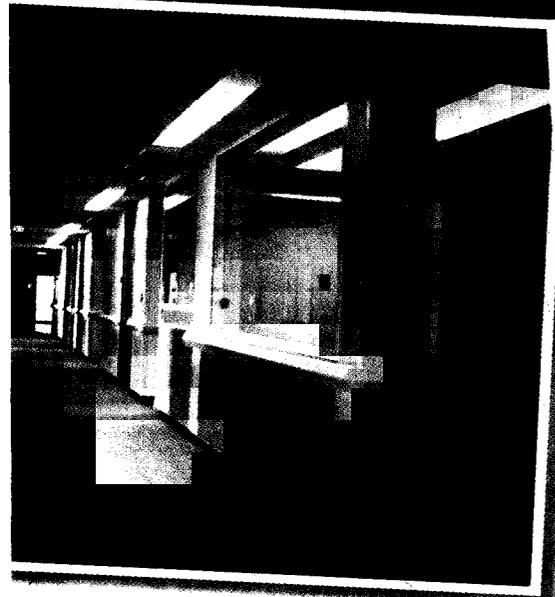
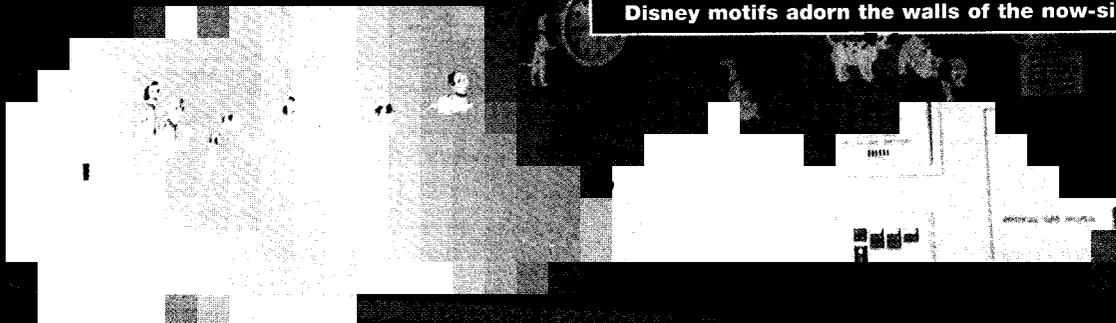
scheme would have attracted between £40 million and £60 million of National Lottery money.

It was promoted by, among others, the swimmer Duncan Goodhew and the site made the short-list in May 1997. Unfortunately, a general election intervened and, finally, in December 1997, Chris Smith, the Culture, Media and Sport

NOBODY WANTS

PREGNANT PAUSE

Disney motifs adorn the walls of the now-silent incubator unit



DESERTED
In the same county, 11,000 languish on a waiting list

Secretary, chose Sheffield as the site for the centre.

After that, a consultant tried to set up a specialist hip-replacement unit at the hospital. The scheme was shelved because of lack of money and, more importantly, enthusiasm.

The local Community Health Trust also looked into a plan by local doctors to take over the hospital. However, it faced difficulties keeping existing community hospitals in the area going, and in the end decided to rebuild one of those instead.

"One of the issues is the sheer size of it," says Watson. "It is a big hospital, and everyone who comes around has a different thought or idea. We envisage a mixture of NHS and private funding. There is also the possibility of using the hospital for specialist research programmes, perhaps for a large urban hospital which has a shortage of space."

It all sounds very promising but, when pressed, Watson admits that he has had only "informal" and low-key contacts with the local

health authority about the hospital. Although he is quick to blame the workings of the "NHS sausage machine", there have been no formal proposals.

The truth is that the consortium has other, more important priorities. It is suspected of trying to build a new town in the Oxfordshire countryside by stealth. It is seeking planning permission to build around 5,000 houses on the base, and has an option to buy the land from the MoD once planning permission is granted. Local councils are opposed to the scheme.

"At the end of the day we are a consortium of house-builders. It seems scandalous to demolish the hospital," says Watson. "If we can re-use it that's fine."

Suspensions remain that the three shareholders of the North Oxfordshire Consortium would be much happier with houses covering the site of the hospital and its attendant car-park.

Steve Argent, a spokesman for the Oxfordshire Health Authority, denies that there

has been any contact between the consortium and the health authority over the hospital but admits that the health authority "couldn't see a use" for the hospital. "We have no interest in it at the moment," he says. "It's to do with need rather than lack of money."

This is a surprising comment given that the health authority has nearly 11,000 on its waiting list, of whom around 600 have been waiting for more than a year.

When *Punch* approached the Department of Health about the hospital, we were told: "Someone will get back to you." They never did.

Ann Widdecombe, the Shadow Health Minister, says: "It seems incredible that Frank Dobson should be ignoring the potential which this very important resource could represent for our Health Service."

It begs the question: how many other Heyford Parks are dotted around the country? How many hospitals and other health facilities are half-forgotten and hidden away on government-owned land? □