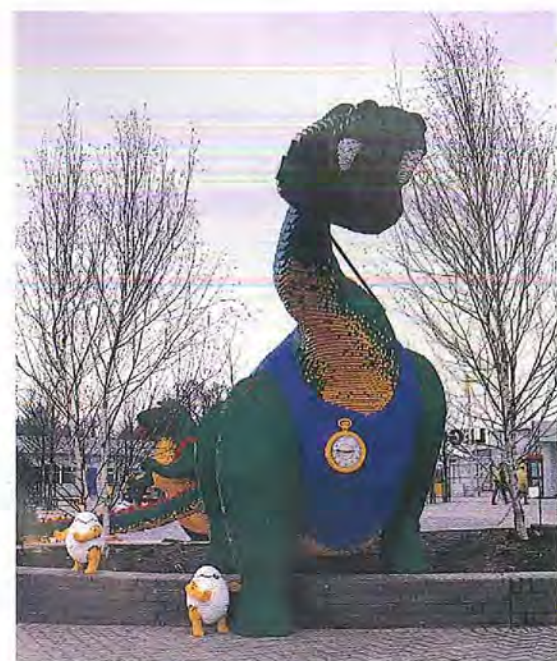




The sloping roofs of the Imagination Centre follow the undulations of the site. Inside, children can build and test their own creations.



Legoland Windsor now boasts the world's largest Lego model – a 250 000 brick dinosaur. The father of a family of dinosaurs, he marks the start of the Legoland adventure, accompanied by his wife, inquisitive son, and babies (still eggs) on their own day out.

GO ON, ADMIT IT. YOU FEEL PANGS of nostalgia at the sight of their colourful, chunky forms. And a few of you have probably been known to prise the blocks out of the sticky fingers of small children to "help" them build.

Now you can indulge your passion at Legoland, which opens today on the site of the former Windsor Safari Park. Where hippos and elephants once roamed the Berkshire countryside, plastic dinosaurs and European cities in miniature have sprung up in their place.

It has taken three years, £85m and 300 million Lego bricks to create a new world of activities, models, rides and attractions dedicated to promoting one of the world's best-loved construction toys.

Visitors arrive at the top of the sloping site where the toytown treasures are spread out before them. Beyond is the castle and, on a clear day, the view stretches past Heathrow to the real city of London, causing you to do a double-take on its plastic miniature closer at hand.

Five key areas

The 65 ha site is divided into five key activity areas: the Imagination Centre, Miniland, Duplo Gardens, My Town and the Wild Woods. From the family of Lego dinosaurs that mark the beginning of the journey, a winding path enlivened by Lego models and play areas leads visitors downhill to the first port of call, the Imagination Centre.

Here, housed in a series of functional glass boxes is what is billed as "the ultimate building experience for Lego fans". Although everything at Legoland carries a strong educational message, this is the place where learning is most to the fore. Inside, children get their hands on more Lego than they ever dreamed existed and are encouraged to build and test their own models.

Maximum use of glazing allows parents and teachers to keep an eye on children without necessarily being in the same room.

Small world

Almost immediately below is Miniland, a miniature world featuring Europe's most famous landmarks, all constructed in painstaking detail out of standard Lego bricks at a scale of 1:20.

Because the site is built on clay, it was important to control ground movement to avoid the risk of damage to the models. Engineer Mott MacDonald stabilised the ground with a granular fill, then built concrete basins as solid bases for the models.

Duplo Gardens is a colourful landscape created from Duplo, the Lego brand for younger children. Interactive water features are matched by giant hot-air blowers fashioned like ships' funnels to dry off the over-enthusiastic.

My Town takes things back up in size, using basic steel-framed buildings but

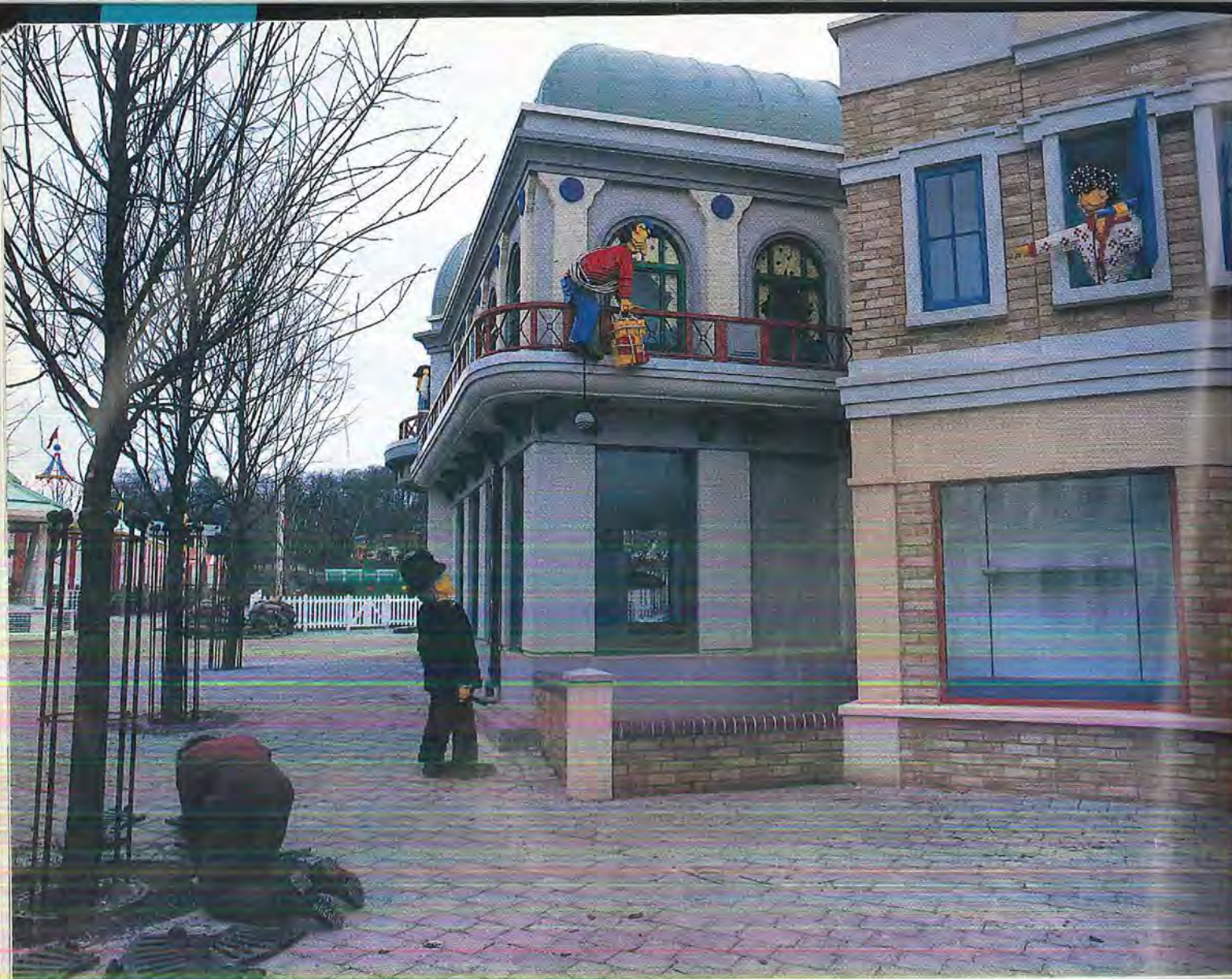
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREW CROWLEY

toyzone

British Lego fans can now enjoy 65 ha of heaven at Legoland Windsor, which opens today. Jessica Cargill Thompson takes a tour round the new theme park dedicated to that well-loved construction toy.



It's playtime – Duploworld's band parades across the square.



In My Town, buildings are scaled down to the size of junior visitors. Its exuberant colours and form give it a toytown feel.

creating a town on a junior scale. Themed materials in bright colours give a toytown feel, while doors and windows are deliberately set low down.

Themed worlds

The main building in My Town, designed by Yorkshire-based design company Ideas, houses animated Lego models displayed in three separate themed worlds: jungle, ancient Egypt and ice caves. To heighten the experience, air-conditioning and heating units in each zone create different climates. The separate units all use electronic sensors to measure the outdoor conditions and calculate how much hotter or cooler a room needs to be to simulate the baking desert or polar climates for someone who has just entered from outside.

Finally, children with any steam left can join the pirates climbing through the Wild Woods. Timber from trees cleared from the site has found a use as treetop walkways and slippery chutes.

To effect the transformation from safari park to theme park, all buildings and services were ripped out, with only the miniature railway considered worth refurbishing. A new 11 km ring main has been installed to service the site, and a

In the Wild Woods, a standard toilet block becomes a battle-scarred fort captured by pirates. The effect has been created by Stress UK, by enveloping the breezeblock buildings in a stainless steel mesh, then applying a lime, cement and sand render which is moulded and carved into shape.



Duplo Gardens (foreground), Miniland (beyond) and the Imagination Centre (top right) mix play, education and fine model-making skills.

new land-drainage system created. During construction, all design teams were housed together in a mansion on the site to facilitate communication. This building has been refurbished to provide permanent administrative offices. Between today and the end of the season on 29 September, Legoland expects to be visited by 1.4 million kids aged between two and 102. So, whether your desire is to be elbow-deep in tubs of plastic bricks, to shoot watercannons at Duplo frogs, or simply to marvel at the intricate models, Legoland is the place to indulge that undying passion for those familiar plastic blocks.

client
Lego
 engineer
Mott MacDonald
 contractor
Bovis
 architect
Wimberley, Allison, Tong & Goo
 landscaping
Gillespies
 attractions
Ideas (Yorkshire) and Wyatt Design Associates

A Lilliputian London is represented in intimate detail by the Post Office tower, St Paul's and the generic Brick Park tube station in Legoland's Miniland. It took 20 million bricks and 100 model-makers based at workshops in Windsor and Denmark to construct Miniland. European countries are represented by famous landmarks and generic styles, all scaled to 1:20. Models are created using the architects' drawings, usually available from architectural archives. These are scaled down and plotted over graph paper. From these scaled drawings, model-makers calculate how many of which type of brick are needed and work out exactly where each one should go. Tower bridge alone includes 100 000 bricks and took 500 work hours to build. All bricks used are from standard Lego kits available in the shops. The model-makers have cheated slightly only by commissioning beige bricks to simulate the characteristic hue of London stone, and by using the raw plastic granules to create creepers and foliage.

