

YHA Archive News, July 2018
from the volunteer archivist, John Martin

This year has been especially fruitful for key anniversaries of our hostels. Malham celebrated its 80th birthday on Saturday, 7th July, while it was London St Paul's turn for its 50th anniversary eight days later, on Sunday 15th July.

The Malham celebrations took the form of an open day, especially for local people and hostel guests. In the evening Laura and her team provided an excellent barbecue, and there was entertainment from a brilliant classic rock and folk band. Earlier in the day, I provided the Malham hostel profile and a display of YHA historic materials, with the emphasis on Malham hostel's history especially, and the old West Riding's hostels generally – of which there have been about 40 over the past 87 years. The historical highlight was a lovely surprise, a visit from 92-year old Harry Smith, who with his wife Pam managed – or rather wardened – the hostel from 1968 to 1988. Harry's sharp memory enabled him to spot the very many changes to Malham hostel over the years. He and Pam arrived just at the time that the hostel was expanding in the late 60s, with the new Fold annexe block and staff house providing extra space and comfort for guests and wardens. He could just remember the old wardens' quarters on the top floor, cheek by jowl with members' dormitories. Harry's son accompanied him from their home in Skipton; he remembered growing up in the hostel with great affection.

Though we had to compete with the England-Sweden game and impossibly hot weather the day was a great success.

The celebrations at London St Paul's were quite different in character. While it was Laura and her team at Malham who planned her hostel's events, St Paul's was a joint affair between Steve, his team and a reunion Facebook group of staff from the early days – assistants, as they were called back in the 1970s. Special guest was the long-standing first warden / manager, Ken Lester, who travelled in from Kent with his wife Sigi. I attended, as I am part-way into compiling a profile of St Paul's, and had a hundred questions I wanted to ask those in the know about the early years there.

It has always been a unique hostel: in the 1960s there was each year a pattern of two or three large temporary summer hostels in London to supplement the two main hostels (Earl's Court and Holland House) and one smaller (Highgate). The old St Paul's Choir School building suddenly became vacant in the late 1960s, with an expectation of demolition for a coach park! The choristers got a new home and YHA a huge, if rather tumbledown, temporary hostel. Immediately it became the Association's biggest, with 300 beds (rising to 320), 60,000 overnights – more than any other hostel, though its customers arrived chiefly by word of mouth, and for about a dozen years it was not even mentioned in the handbook. During this period the guests were very largely from foreign youth hostel associations.

There were some fantastic stories – how crummy flea-bit independent hostels used to tout for custom on Carter Lane, outside the hostel, to be shooed away daily by deputy manager Colin Jackson; how an elderly member of staff, Millie Casson, renowned for her meat and potato pies prepared for the hostel staff in their tiny basement staff kitchen (now the luggage room), was suddenly elevated to Freeman of the City of London; how the chapel (now the conference room) was pressed into service as a makeshift dorm; how laundered sheet-sleeping bags were dried on the strange flat roof, once used for hockey practice by the choirboys, and how Ken Lester instigated so many innovative ideas – nowadays almost taken for granted in YHA – in his unique hostel: an early penchant for duvets rather than blankets, a desire to get rid of hostel duties (members' chores), as they were a strain on members and staff alike, a very well-researched listing of activities and things

to do for young people in the capital, and opening the hostel at 3pm rather than have old-fashioned hostel queues at 5pm for booking-in.

Gradually St Paul's took on a more permanent role within YHA, and in 1990 a considerable sum was spent in sweeping away the Victorian choristers' dormitories (two, of 44 beds each, with a row of sinks down the middle) to provide more modern small bedrooms, washrooms, showers and so on. A kitchen and dining room appeared at this time too – previously the hostel had served only snacks from a table at one end of the common room. These improvements were necessary, as St Paul's had just topped 100,000 overnights in 1989, a magical figure never surpassed in Britain until London Central's achievements in the last few years.

The 50th anniversary was a great success, with about 30 former employees meeting for the first time in many decades and exchanging stories and photographs. Steve and our CEO James gave some warm words of welcome. Food, cake and fizz were served up by the St Paul's team. I look forward to further exchanges with those present and providing a profile of this most fascinating hostel.

...and there are other anniversaries coming up in August, including St Briavels' 70th, Minehead's 60th and Liverpool's 20th.