

Acomb Youth Hostel 1933 to 2006

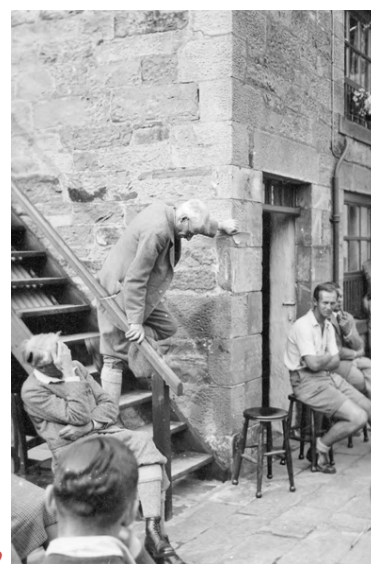
Main Street, Acomb, Hexham, Northumberland NE46 4PL

Historic County: Northumberland

YHA Regions: Northumberland &
Tyneside, Border & Dales, North

GR: NY 934666

YHA's Northumberland and Tyneside Region opened a small hostel at the east end of Acomb village on 15th May 1933, just two years into the Association's existence. The premises were converted from old stables serving a nearby house. There was a single storey barn with a simple two-storey dwelling behind it. Steep stairs left of the house led to the women's dormitory in a loft. Outbuildings completed the picture. The hostel was the first property actually owned by the Region, bought for £60, the alterations costing £60 and equipment for 18 being obtained for £55.



The opening day. 1&2: brothers Sir Charles and Professor GM Trevelyan, great YHA supporters, mingle with a large crowd; 3: silhouette-style YHA sign being fitted by H Eyres; 4: photograph by Edith Bulmer, Sir Charles' secretary. She was chairman of the Northumberland & Tyneside Region and YHA's General Purpose Committee and the first editor of the Rucksack Magazine.
L to R: Mary Carr, Mary Harrold, Jorgen Holmboe, John Gillie, Molly Ellis, Nancy Newbigin, John Philipson (all YHA Archive)

ACOMB HOSTEL

Situation and Description of Premises.

The Hostel is situated at the eastern end of Acomb village, about two and a half miles from Hexham. Accommodation is provided for 10 men and 8 women.

Method of Access. (Bus route, etc.).

From Newcastle-

(i) Via Foster's Bellingham bus from Haymarket; alight at Heavenfield, follow road by Fallowfield to Acornb.

(ii) Via United bus to Hexham; cross bridge, pass The Hermitage on left, follow bridle path past The Riding to Acomb.

Local Places of Interest.

Roman Wall. The best preserved and most spectacular portion of Hadrian's Wall lies along the twenty-three miles route from Chollerford to the Gilsland Hostel. Half a mile west of Chollerford is the camp of Cilurnum at Chesters. The old Roman bridge over the North Tyne, the museum and camp should be visited. Hexham is famous for its Abbey, built in the seventh century.

Entry in the Regional Guide, Youth Hostels in Lakeland and the North-East, 1933

The first warden was Mr Joseph Henderson. He lived in the village and remained in post up to the time of his death 26 years later, in 1959. The hostel he presided over was much the product of local enterprise and voluntary enthusiasm; murals in a naive arts-and-crafts style were common in the early hostels, and above the fireplace at Acomb members painted a *Pilgrims' Progress* depiction of Heaven and Hell, making sure that many of the characters were recognisable from their own ranks.



Acomb hostel's extensive mural. A lovely homely scene, despite some stern allegorical warnings and an unlined roof. Of historical interest as it depicted YHA pioneers, it was destroyed in the war (YHA Archive, by permission of Steve Maden)

The 1934 annual report described Acomb hostel as very popular. Improvements were soon made: the floor of the men's dormitory was relaid at the beginning of 1935 and central heating was to be added in 1939. The initial capacity of 18 (men 10, women 8) was expanded to 32 in 1934 and gradually increased to 40 by the 1990s. By the time of closure it was reduced to a less crowded 26.

As with all the Northumberland and Tyneside hostels, Acomb was closed immediately on the outbreak of the war but it was soon allowed to reopen for week-ends, from 6th November 1939 to the end of March 1940. The hostel was then in constant YHA use to 30th September 1940, but requisitioned by the Sub-Area Quarters Commandant, Newcastle, on 1st October 1940, and closed to members. Such uncertainty was typical of the early years of the war; the hostel was running again on 7th June 1941 and was able to operate for each year for the rest of the war, probably with further interruptions. At the end of the hostilities, the luxury of washbasins was brought to the little hostel.

It would seem that the 1933 purchase had not included full freehold rights: in 1948 YHA bought the freehold of Acomb hostel; it was vested in the YHA Trust from 28th April of that year. A new men's wash outbuilding was built in 1953.

In 1955 the Region was looking to improve and expand its properties, and was seeking funds for a new Acomb hostel, or even a new place at Hexham. In 1966 there was an attempt by a local developer to persuade the Regional Group to accept a new hostel built free of charge on neighbouring farmland (Chare Head Farm) in exchange for rights to demolish the hostel and use the site as an entrance road to a projected housing estate. These plans were not successful and the hostel continued to serve wayfarers with few major changes for another half century or so.

Acomb Y. H.
10/8/67
Northumberland

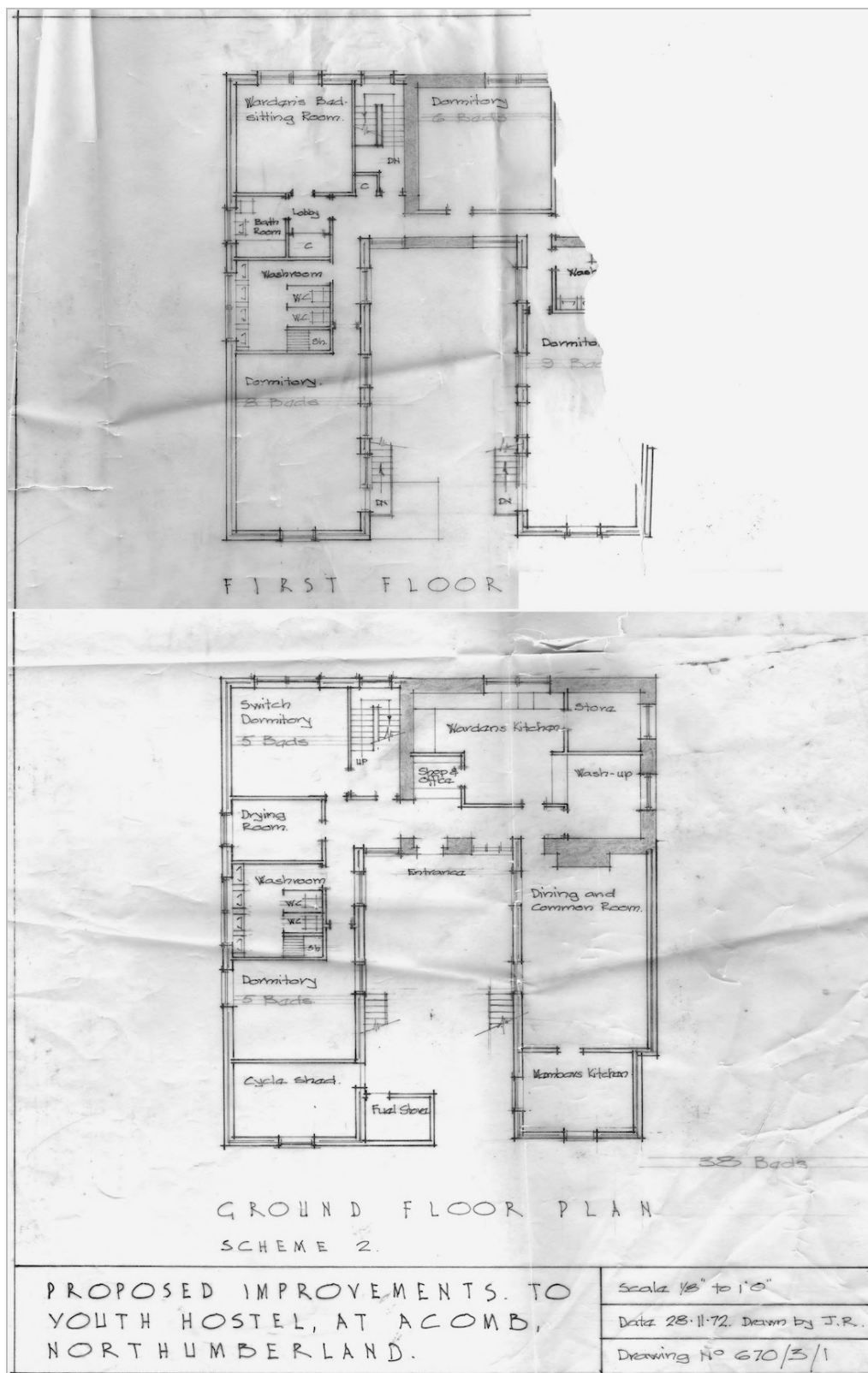
After working as a miner for over 50 years, Bill Otterside became warden of Acomb in 1962 and soon made friends with hostellers from all over the world. He retired in 1971. Member Pat Packham visited the hostel during a cycling tour of Northumberland in August 1962, and remarked:

The warden, an elderly gentleman who did not live on the premises, took me up to the women's dormitory and said I could lock and bolt it if I did not like being alone... He did not like giving out duties as his wife and daughter cleaned the hostel thoroughly once a week.



- 1: Acomb hostel, some time after the war. The enamelled YHA triangle in green and white was a short-lived early post-war style that weathered badly and is distinguished by the curious serified letter 'A';
- 2: this cheerful picture shows more recent homely touches – the garden seat and picnic table, flower displays and what appears to be a new outside stair. The signage is new, and there is a rare view of the ablution block, of some rustic charm, though perhaps not for women sleeping in the loft on an icy Northumberland night (both YHA Archive)

In 1972 Peter Kirsopp began a 31-years association with Acomb as warden. The early 1970s saw a surge of use for Acomb hostel, with annual bednights aspiring to a record 4,000 mark. In 1972 YHA drew up plans to rebuild the hostel considerably in a three-sided design with two storeys throughout and 33 beds, as shown below in a damaged but fascinating document, but development was not proceeded with.



This damaged 1972 plan shows the considerable development that YHA had in mind; there would be five dormitories, including a switch downstairs to allow for greater flexibility, and an all enclosed layout that would do away with the need for lengthy and draughty nocturnal wanderings. There would now be provision for a warden's bed-sitting room and en-suite, while the pair of stairs close to the entrance would have been fire escapes (YHA Archive)

In 2002, for its final few years, Acomb was a volunteer-run hostel, supported by the manager of YHA Edmundbyers. It finally closed on 30th September 2006, one of many hostels given up in that year as a consequence of the great losses incurred during the foot and mouth epidemic of 2001. Unlike others in Northumberland, it could not continue as a privately-owned YHA hostel; legal small print prevented the premises from being offered as YHA Enterprise potential. The property was sold on 31st October 2007 for residential use. It has since undergone extensive enlargement and modernisation, during which the gated entry seen below has been walled off.



The cheerful stable block that welcomed hostellers for over 70 years. The 1972 two-storey plan would have surrounded the little courtyard on three sides, with bedrooms on both floors. Here it is looking spick and span, not long before closure, a credit to the voluntary wardens and others who cared for the little hostel (photograph by Colin Schorah, May 2005)

<i>Overnights – inclusive periods each year as follows</i>									
<i>1933-1991: previous Oct to Sept; 1992: Oct 1991 to Feb 1993; 1993-present: Mar to following Feb</i>									
<i>*: 17 month period</i>									
...	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938	1939
...	606	1237	1353	1361	1668	1713	1867
1940	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945	1946	1947	1948	1949
1564	862	2093	2350	2492	2782	2857	3126	3643	3301
1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959
3547	3466	3840	3617	2975	2649	2471	2664	2050	2190
1960	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969
2258	2680	3121	3215	3335	3365	2873	3083	2952	2983
1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979
3233	3849	4071	4264	4633	4911	4317	4445	3871	3232
1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989
3099	2509	2119	2481	2611	2665	open	2881	3291	3378
1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
3370	3023	3284*	2902	2502	2503	2877	1943	2065	2150
2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
1697	1169	1568	2071	3114	2442	1586

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