

## Coniston Coppermines Youth Hostel 1931 or 1932 to present

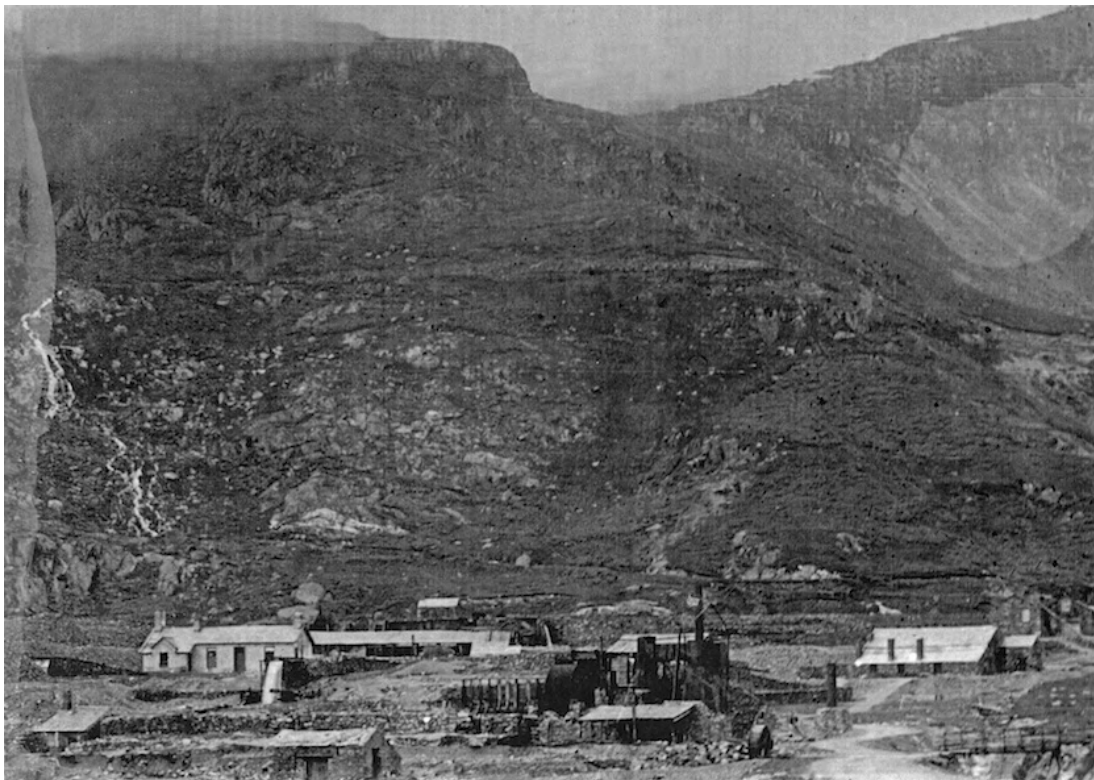
Coppermines House, Coniston, Cumbria LA21 8HP

Historic County: Lancashire

YHA Regions: Lakeland, Lakes, North

GR: SD 289985

The coppermines on the eastern flanks of Coniston Old Man, one or two miles from Coniston village, have been worked for at least three centuries. By Victorian times the workings here were very extensive, creating an industrial landscape hemmed in by the grandest of Lakeland scenery. The mines were in decline from the mid-19th century, however, and very little was worked from about 1920. The squat building that later became the youth hostel was the original home and office, of uncertain date, of the mine manager. The cottage is built of local materials, predominantly slate, and with a slate roof. The walls are thick. The building is of two storeys, though apparently of one when viewed from the front. Slate has been used to provide a fireplace in the original living room or office (later the hostel common room) that is unusually positioned on the first floor, reflecting the difference of height between the old entrance door at the front, leading onto the first floor, and the newer entrance at the back, at the lower level.

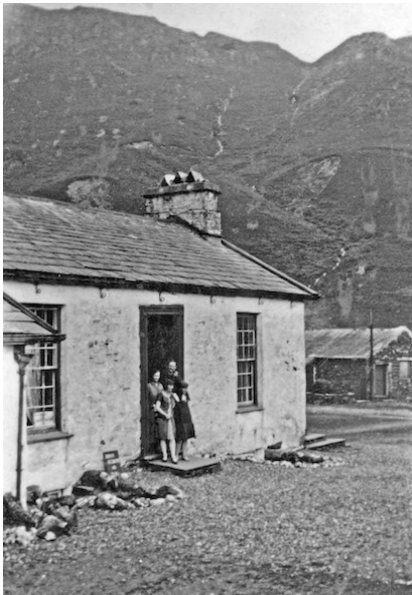


*An old laminated photograph found at Coppermines hostel shows the extent of the industrial landscape with the mine manager's cottage on the left, before its change of use. The Victorian or Edwardian image is undated, but features the old mines settlement, surrounded by waste and industrial materials (YHA Archive)*

It is not certain whether the Coppermines hostel opened in late 1931 or early 1932, though pieces of evidence found recently suggest the former: it had reportedly been open 12 months by the time of the Lakeland Region Annual Report, September 1932, and *Hostelling News* of April 1932 gave 1931 as the opening year. If correct, the hostel shares that pioneer-year honour still with YHAs Street, Idwal Cottage and Bridges. At any rate, it was one of YHA's very first youth hostels and is now reaching its 90th year of continuous use. At the beginning it was an adopted hostel, privately owned but run on behalf of the YHA. In 1932 there were only 6 beds for men and 6 for women, but this was increased in stages in the mid-1930s, to 24 (17+7) then 46 (30+16). In recent years the capacity has been steadily reduced, to 26, in order to provide greater comfort and privacy.



At first there was no reason to name the hostel anything but *Coniston*, though *Coppermines* was often used colloquially, but the opening of the *Holly How* hostel at the north end of the village in 1949 made a distinction necessary. From 1950 to 1963 it was *Coniston (Mines)* in the handbook, then the rather more poetic *Coniston Coppermines* came into force.



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The early hostel years. 1: this is perhaps the earliest YHA picture, as no Association sign is visible. The group of figures is possibly the first warden, Mrs Mowat, and her family; 2: early adopted hostels often showed enterprise in offering refreshments to passers-by. The YHA board was unconventional. 3: the front entrance was in regular use in the early days. At this level, it led to bedrooms. A flight of stairs descended to a lower floor (1: YHA Archive; 2&3: author's collection)

Writing in *Cumbria Magazine*, June 1994, WR Mitchell remembered the early days:

It was one of the first hostels to be established in the Lake District. Way back in 1932 facilities were 'fairly basic'. For some time there was no electricity and we had our own private water supply. Lighting was by Calor Gas. A warden returned one night to find everyone sitting in darkness. One of them explained: 'We switched the lights on, warden, but nothing's come on.' So they sat, with the gas gently hissing. Thank heavens nobody chose to light up a fag.....



Berta Gough was one of the outstanding diarists for YHA in the first pioneer decade. She visited the Coniston hostel on 24th-25th February 1934 with Connie Alexander, celebrated warden of Idwal Cottage hostel in North Wales, and commented:

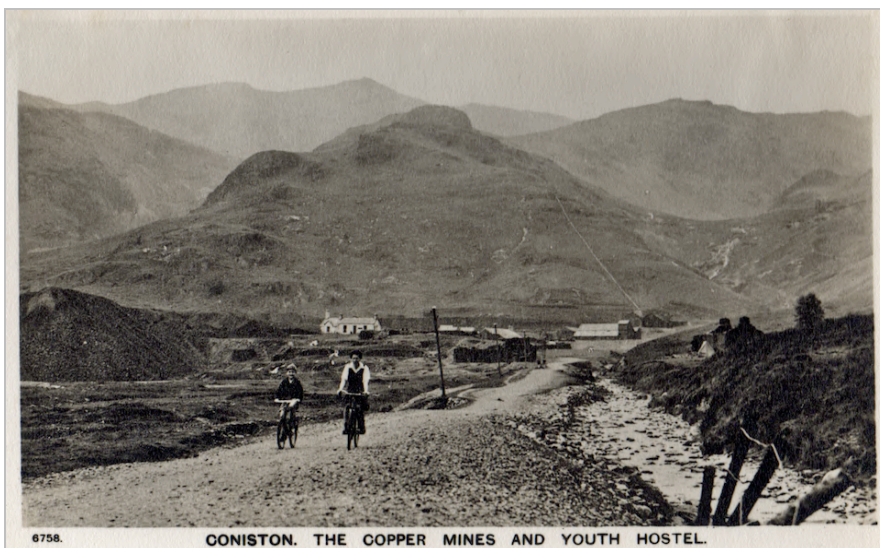
Having Connie with us always helped greatly with getting privileges from the wardens. Mrs Mowat had a very interesting invalid husband who was exceptionally well read. This hostel was an accommodation hostel, which as a member of Council, I objected to strongly, but as an individual, liked best.

Mrs Mowat was the first warden, and stayed until she retired in 1943. Writing many years later in an unknown publication, Sydney Thompson recalled her memorable catering prowess:

#### Christmas Dinner, 1936

Dinner was a huge success. Unless one has actually experienced it, it seems difficult to believe that 46 people could all sit down at once to a dinner of turkey and vegetables, Christmas pudding, trifle, etc, in a room about 7 yards square, with a small overflow into the kitchen. Everyone was very hungry, but there was plenty for all; we agreed that that it was the best Christmas dinner we had ever had...

...At exactly 1am 30 tired dancers [from a hop at Grasmere] received Christmas cake and tea. For the third night in succession washing up was going on at 2am, and yet on Sunday morning breakfast was ready for eight o'clock.



More early images.

1: for many years the rear of the hostel was a stark reminder of the workaday environment and original purpose of the building. The rough tin sheds persisted for at least three decades, no doubt providing the YHA's 'nettles', and were later replaced by an internally-accessed toilet block with warden's accommodation above. Nowadays the hostel entrance is located where the man is standing. 2: two hostel cyclists ride away from an industrial landscape dwarfed by magnificent fells (YHA Archive)

The hostel operated during each year of the war. YHA stressed the need to keep it from requisition, as it was important to members from South Lancashire and West Yorkshire towns. In 1943 it was reported that arrangements were being made for YHA to take over the lease so that they could run a fully controlled hostel with their own warden in charge. An anonymous holiday log of about 1944 rated Coppermines hostel:

4-stars, food vg, position good, especially for lake (skating), washing fair only, warden v good.



Vin and Ann Waring took on the hostel towards the end of the war, but only stayed until 1947 before moving to the new establishment at Hawkshead, and finally to the adopted hostel at Crosthwaite. They were replaced by Mr and Mrs Woods in 1947, after which time wardens' records are scant for a decade or so. The hostel was regularly packed out in the 1940s.

The hostel had to be summarily closed for a period, early in September 1950, because of severe weather damage to the approach track. The regional council now had Holly How and considered closing Coppermines permanently after August 1951, but decided to trial a further year. It persisted because of steady demand, in the established YHA tradition of a popular small rural outpost; like many it remained quite basic in the first twenty post-war years.

Seasoned hosteller Mary Jephcott stayed here in 1956, and in 2008 recalled, with her customary dry wit:

Drying room not working. Chimney bust. Lav. outside of course. But warden later allowed some wet stuff in kitchen. Hot water to wash in, thank goodness. Good supper: meat, spuds, and peas, and goosegogs and evaporated milk – and tea, only we daren't drink too much. Common room – large fire.



*This coloured postcard probably dates from the 1960s. It shows well the steps to the side-entrance, and a newer door at the far end (YHA Archive)*

Pat Packham, another regular female hosteller, similarly observed in July 1962 while on a long cycle tour:

Bicycles surrounded an outbuilding. The dormitory was almost full; a queue was waiting for the two wash basins. However, I found one outside which I had to myself. [The warden was a] Mr Portwine.

Ken Portwine had come to run the little hostel at the beginning of the 1960s and stayed until 1968, when the grip of adventure took hold of him. He enlisted as cook on a BAS expedition to the Antarctic, where he was taken seriously ill, and despite a heroic rescue by an Argentine airlift, tragically died of peritonitis. It was probably he who was recalled cheerfully by cyclist-hosteller Harry Willey who, reflecting the spirit of the 1960s, wrote on a postcard home:

Always remember this hostel because of the goon warden there. Really mad goon language. Huge cauldron of soup.

During the post war years YHA made several important additions to the original building. A toilet block was built at the back of the hostel. The warden used to sleep in a *hole under the stairs*, but in 1975-76, after much complaint by the staff and deliberation by the regional council, a warden's flat was provided on top of the toilet block.





*The first self-catering kitchen.*

*1: a lovely photograph by the West London YHA Group shows the hostel and the first members' kitchen hut. The signage indicates that this is an early 1930s image. Despite appearing to be in line with the main building, evidence shows that this hut and its successor were set back by some distance. The use of a prop indicates that this structure was somewhat rickety;*

*2: Pat Packham's commentary – 'Bicycles surrounded an outbuilding' was accompanied by her July 1962 photograph of the first members' kitchen hut. The unimproved rear of the hostel was still there (YHA Archive)*

At last, on 12th July 1972, and in line with some other leased properties about this time, YHA made a freehold purchase of the Coppermines hostel; it was vested in the YHA Trust.



For many years the members' kitchen was in a separate wooden hut to the north-east of the cottage, (there were two such structures over time, the second being rescued from the old Goldrill House hostel at Patterdale when that closed for rebuilding in 1967). By 1986 the second hut was just about time-expired and the hostel was ready for a major PDMP development that provided in 1987 a new self-catering extension on the rear east corner of the



main building, with water supply piped and chlorinated, and other refurbishment work. Duncan and Caroline Simpson remember the hut for the self-caterers' / games room and it being blown over in a gale, while in 1989, a fierce blast blew down the cycle shed. Rosalind Norgate wrote in her holiday log that the hostel was *a determined little squat grey building sitting comfortably at the foot of the Old Man... our assigned task: peeling potatoes.*





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*The changing outline of Coppermines hostel.*

*1&2: the main building from the south-west, before and after the 1976 provision of the warden's flat above the toilet block.*

*The self-catering building in the first image was the second hut, rescued from the old Patterdale hostel after its closure in 1967. The image therefore shows that the rather primitive sanitary provision here persisted into fairly modern times;*

*3: a lovely anonymous colour photograph showing developments at an intermediate stage between 1976 and 1987;*

*4&5: the main building from the north-east, before and after the provision of the new integrated self-catering kitchen of 1987.*

*Image 4 is an anonymous photograph of 1979, while image 5 is a postcard showing well the true ground-floor level, with the hostel's main entrance now at the rear of the building (YHA Archive)*



In the period from 1970 to the end of the century, wardens came and stayed for varying lengths of time, sometimes for a few years only, or even for a single season, but rarely for longer than five years. Coppermines was a proving ground for several well-known staff who went on to much larger premises, though it also hosted a number of relief wardens serving for short stints, and was also one of several small hostel locations involved in Lakeland's own version of wardens' musical chairs. Those in charge in this period included Keith Brown, Eddie Stanfield, Jim Pewtress, Joe Hardy, Bob Moore, Allison Walton, Colin Chadwick, David Benson and Mick Blamires.

Further developments came in the 1990s. Early in the decade, Coppermines became one of several smaller hostels in the Lake District to offer Rent-a-Hostel for the first time. Over the winter of 1996-97 YHA funds and a grant from Chris Brasher facilitated the refurbishing of the dormitories, the fitting of an LPG-fired boiler, improvements to the hostel kitchen and some daytime access, while Kendal members tidied up the exterior.



1-3: these photographs were recorded for a Rent-a-Hostel advertising campaign in the 1990s, and show –  
 1: the hostel wash-up and dining area. For a time there was a separate store-room to the right, nowadays opened up to make a pleasant meals-provided environment; 2: the self-catering kitchen, newly built in the late 1980s; 3: the upstairs hostel common room or lounge, with slate fireplace. This would no doubt have been the mine-manager's office and/or living space;  
 4: a most attractive postcard of the hostel and its surroundings. The industrial impact is somewhat softened by the passage of time and when seen in full colour, though many interesting relics of the mine workings persist. The track leads to the top of Coniston Old Man, highest point in the historic county of Lancashire, past further industrial workings (YHA Archive)

Jonathan Stray took over as manager in 1997 and stayed for some time, seeing the hostel through the difficulties of the foot and mouth outbreak. A different arrangement came into force in 2013, with a joint-hostel manager based at Holly How (Philip Conway-Jones in that year and Glen Duclos from 2014) and annual site managers at Coppermines, including Andy Clark, Jacob Richmond, Gregor Findlay and Claire Cupit.

The presence of an intense network of youth hostels in the Ambleside – Troutbeck – Grasmere – Langdale – Hawkshead – Coniston area has always been to the mutual benefit of each, and even after the once-vaunted YHA notion of walking or cycling from hostel to hostel had faded somewhat from its original intensity, it remains strong in the Lake District. Annual overnights at Coppermines were generally of the order of 3,000-4,000 in the 1930s, rising to 4,000 to 5,000 in the 1940s, when 40 beds were available. After a dip to under 2,000 in the 1950s, numbers were usually in the 3,000 region, building again after the foot and mouth epidemic of 2001 to 4,000-plus. Between 2015 and 2017 over 5,000 overnights were recorded here annually, despite the limitation of beds to just 26 for greater comfort.

On the ground floor Swirral How is the men's dormitory, with eight beds. The remaining bedrooms are on the first floor: Grey Friars, Weatherlam and Little Carrs, each with four beds, and the Old Man of Coniston, the women's dormitory, with six.



The latest hostel postcard features both Coppermines and Holly How hostels (YHA Archive)

<i>Overnights – inclusive periods each year as follows</i>									
<i>1931-1991: previous Oct to Sept; 1992: Oct 1991 to Feb 1993; 1993-present: Mar to following Feb</i>									
<i>*: 17 month period; +: notional figure included for exclusive hire and/or camping</i>									
...	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938	1939
...	in use?	1289	2631	3500	3673	3827	4360	4586	3984
1940	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945	1946	1947	1948	1949
3485	5205	5277	5592	4500	5021	5462	5274	5339	4897
1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959
3250	2381	2708	2538	1881	1914	1841	2217	2236	2962
1960	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969
2571	2479	2665	2993	3085	3390	3263	3324	3161	3257
1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979
2989	2698	2650	3006	3447	4271	4314	3761	3744	3839
1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989
3840	3363	3005	3501	2953	2810	2734	3517	2775	3466
1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
3426	2946	4007*	2865	2137	2582	3473	3971	4020	4071
2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
4135	1855	3962	4198	4244	4691	4348	3374	2898	2799
2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
2899	3922+	4256+	4673+	4864+	5220+	5447+	5036+	4011+	4770+

John Martin, 2020. YHA Profiles are intended to be adaptable in the light of new materials gained by YHA Archive