



YHA (England and Wales) Youth Hostel Profile

compiled by the Association's volunteer archivist, John Martin, 2021-03-01

Kirkby Malzeard Youth Hostel 1931 to 1953

Moordale Hostel, Kirkby Malzeard, Ripon, Yorkshire

Historic County: Yorkshire
(West Riding)

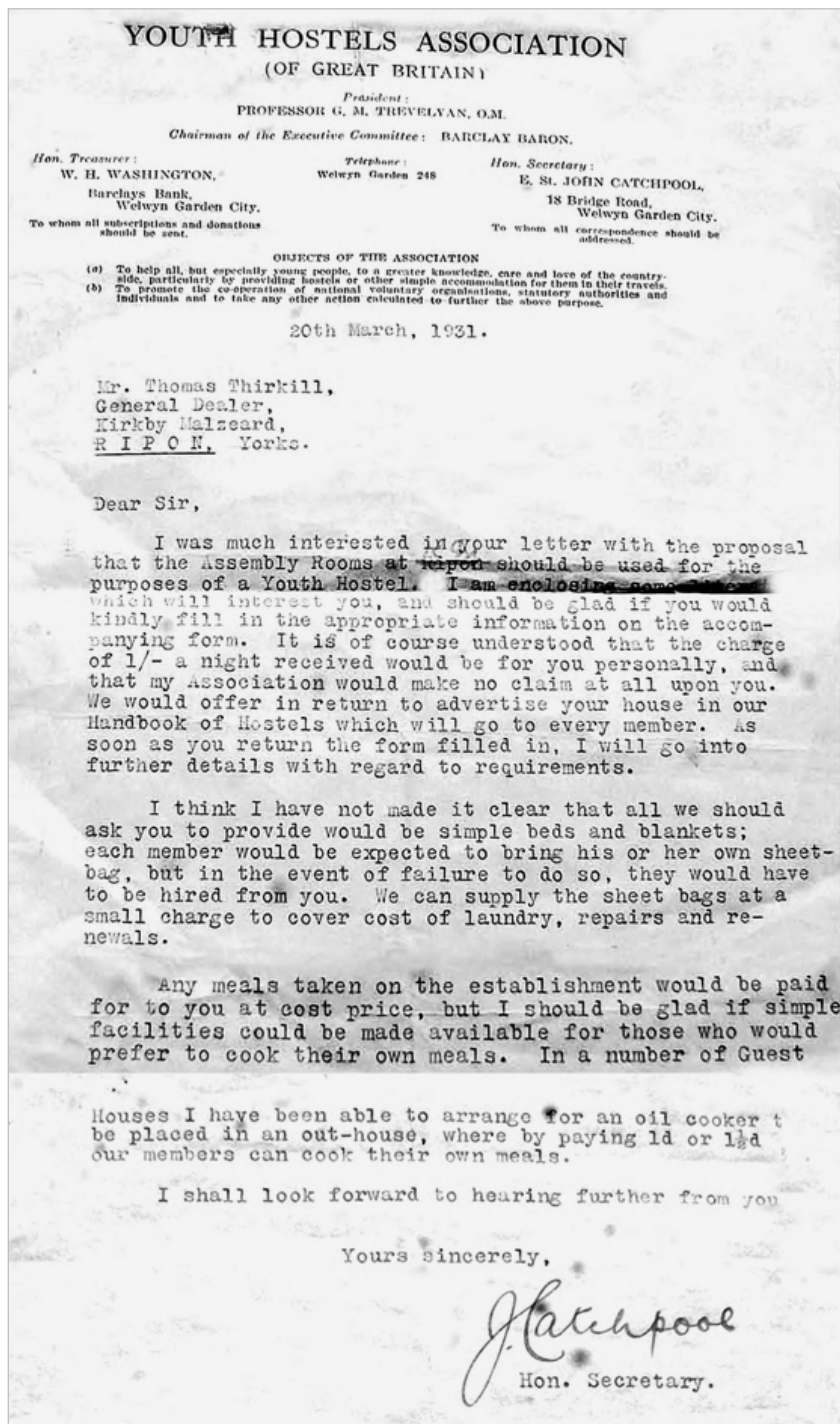
YHA Region:
West Riding

GR: SE 234743

Early in 1931, Jack Catchpool, the Hon. Secretary of the Youth Hostels Association of Great Britain (as it was briefly called), wrote a letter in reply to an offer of hostel premises in the tiny West Riding town of Kirkby Malzeard. The owner, Mr Thomas Thirkill, local entrepreneur, store-keeper and publisher, offered to open and equip the facility. By a stroke of luck, that letter survived in family ownership and in 2008 was shown to the author by Mr Thirkill's daughter and daughter-in-law, with permission to copy.

The text shows that YHA's approach to finding properties at this early stage was surprisingly ad hoc and undemanding, save for owner's necessary provision of beds and blankets, though the requirement to offer self-catering facilities was already fixed. What is astonishing in this arrangement is that YHA would in effect gain nothing financially from the operation; establishing the network seems to have been the overriding concern. Very soon, YHA would draw up agreements with similar adopted hostel owners, who provided the vast majority of hostels pre-war, to ensure a small cut of proceedings.

The date, 20th March, is significant, as it was a bare 24 hours after the opening of Street, generally regarded as the pioneer youth hostel of YHA's first fully operational year, 1931. It shows that Catchpool had already cast his net wide to find properties for the YHA venture, and that Thirkill made his offer at a very early stage indeed.



The 'Moordale' youth hostel opened on 20th June 1931, within eight weeks of the reply. It was West Riding Region's joint-first hostel, Stone Gappe near Skipton, 35 miles distant, receiving its formal opening on the same day. Kirkby Malzeard was among the very first youth hostels in the country, and like almost all at that time was adopted, in other words, a private enterprise run in conjunction with YHA.

The hostel premises consisted of a large timber and corrugated-roof hut at the rear of the garden of Mr Thomas Thirkill's house and shop on Main Street. Thirkill's letter referred to it grandly as the Assembly Rooms, though the name 'Moordale Hostel' appeared on advertising material. Back Lane ran along its rear wall. The hut was originally built as a 19th century army post office, and then used in the early 20th century as a village concert hall (with stage) and cinema before the YHA arrangements came into force. The entrance gates to the youth hostel were adjacent to Thirkill's General Stores, on the main street. Guests signed in at a door at the rear of the little shop. It is thought that before the war meals would have been taken at the rear of Mr Thirkill's house.



A rare early postcard, produced by kind permission of Melvyn Hines, showed the entrance to the youth hostel through iron gates located to the right of Mr Thirkill's shop on Main Street. Hostellers would have found their way around easily: a wealth of notices was provided, including the attractive official cut-out YHA triangle on the corner of the shop, advertising for the tea room outside the YHA timber hut to the rear, a further 'private' notice on a second hut alongside the road and a hanging sign locating the YHA office. On the fence running along the path is a bold arrowed sign, its message unclear. Emblazoned across the entrance there are three large signs, for 'Moordale', 'Youth's Hostel' and for the number of beds available on that day. They appear to have been added piecemeal. 'Youth's Hostel' was a curious variation of the standard terminology. It persisted, notably in Yorkshire, the Bristol area and the Scottish YHA, and especially on postcards, for a period in the early years of hostelling. The number of free beds shown surpassed the official capacity figures, which were never more than men 20, women 14

Thomas Thirkill was a remarkable entrepreneur, though perhaps entirely typical of the village general dealer in the straitened circumstances of the 1930s. At about the time of the hostel's opening he published a local booklet guide, *Rambles with a Rambler – Kirkby Malzeard and District*. The 'Moorside' hostel takes precedent on the flyleaf with two photographs, one of the hostel's common room interior and another of the hut exterior. After that, the youth hostel barely gets a mention, but the extensive and varied strings to his bow are advertised prominently: the book itself, the concert or assembly rooms, rare Victorian postage stamps, the General Stores, Kodak Film agent.

Rambles with a Rambler.

— around —

Kirkby Malzeard, Dallowgill Moors,
Grewelthorpe, Hackfall,
and District.

—

Being a brief Record of the Old Customs,
Legends, and Superstitions of places of beauty
— and historic interest. —

—

ILLUSTRATED.

—

By T. THIRKILL, Warden of "Moordale."

COPYRIGHT.

**For Concerts, Teas, and all Social
Functions, book**

**THE CONCERT ROOM,
KIRKBY MALZEARD.**

Largest available floor space, and best equipped room at
lowest charges.
Telephone No. 23 Kirkby Malzeard.

Are you interested in Old English Penny Brick
Red Stamps? If so please ask to see our large col-
lection. Plate numbers from 71, dating from 1840.

We are prepared to dispose of above stamps, per-
fect condition, at half catalogue value, as shewn by S.
Gibbons, London.

All Genuine Stamps, No Fakes or Forgeries, any
number supplied.

Odd Stamps a speciality.

Apply—THIRKILL, Warden.

For what you may require try the

"GENERAL STORES"

AT HOSTEL ENTRANCE GATES.

Authorised Dealer's Agent for Selo Roll Films
and Kodak Films.

For Requirements in advance Telephone 23
Kirkby Malzeard.

Advertisements in Rambles with a Rambler (author's collection)



In the first year, beds were provided for just 12 men and six women, but the capacity increased from 1932. The independent *Hiker and Camper* magazine, October 1932 issue, gave this description of the hostel:

Kirkby Malzeard – Moordale Hostel, Kirkby Malzeard, via Ripon. The hostel is near the Post Office. Ripon, 7 miles. Bookings to Mr T Thirkhill, General Dealer, Kirkby Malzeard via Ripon. Meals provided. Accommodation for twenty men and fourteen ladies. All correspondence regarding the West Riding Group should be sent to the General Secretary, West Riding Regional Group YHA, YMCA, Albion Place, Leeds.

In its first few years the hostel was modestly successful. From a steady start of 400 overnights in 1931 the hostel grew in popularity year by year. Almost 1,000 stayed in 1934 and from 1935 until the final season almost twenty years later, over 1,000 bednights per annum were achieved in every peacetime year. In December 1938, YHA's West Riding Region produced a frank review describing the hostel as pleasant and popular, though the standard was in some respects low, and the regional council wished for full control of the premises. They raised the topic regularly but never achieved their aim.

Left: Kirkby Malzeard hostel's 1931 house book, a prized family possession shown to the author in 2007 by Mr Thirkill's daughter, Mrs Pearson (author's photograph)



1: illustration from the flyleaf of 'Rambles with a Rambler' by Thomas Thirkill, published probably in 1931. His booklet advertised for village concerts and meetings here. Fitting such events in with youth hostel life could create interesting, perhaps conflicting, experiences for both sets of users. A sign on the right pointed to the cycle store (author's collection);
2: Mrs Thirkill, Thomas Thirkill's daughter-in-law, showed this fascinating 'Moordale' hostel stores menu to the author in 2007. It dates from the pre-war years, as meals were then provided to hostellers. Tempting offers included ready-cooked meals with bread at 9d, sild sardines on toast at 7d, egg on toast at 6d, soup at 4d and cakes at 1d each. Popular drinks were Oxo or milk at 2d and tea or coffee at 4d. Supplies of tinned food and other self-catering essentials were no doubt supplied from the store

The charming postcard below was bought in 1944 from Mr Thirkill's little General Store. His house stood adjacent. The early YHA triangular silhouette-style insignia (shown in solid red, the postcard colourist exercising some artistic licence) is sported on a bracket that was still visible in 2007. One of the children seated by the roadside was Mr Thirkill's daughter. The gates to the hostel are just off the picture, to the right. The first of the 2007 photographs below the postcard relates to the same scene in a modern context. The second shows the Hostel Enquiry sign at the back of the shop, clearly visible 54 years after closure, with an invitation to Walk In.



1: early postcard, author's collection; 2&3: author's photographs, 2007

With the outbreak of war Kirkby Malzeard hostel was closed immediately, reflecting the area's strategic importance with the armed forces. 'Moordale' was commandeered by the army, but was released and reopened as a youth hostel intermittently throughout the war, for example from July to the end of September 1941, and from late August 1942, to help cope with overcrowding in those Yorkshire youth hostels that had held on. Indeed there was YHA use here every year of the war except 1940, though 1942 could muster only 52 overnights.

In 1945, the hostel reopened in full, but for self-caterers only. In this respect it was mirrored by the opposite arrangement at Ellingsring hostel ten miles to the north where, because of cramped conditions there was for a period an unorthodox 'meals only' facility before that hostel too reverted to self-catering only.

West Riding Region's annual report for 1948 announced that the hostel was scheduled for improvement, with plans prepared. In contrast, when Margaret and Joan, two young girls from Southwell in Nottinghamshire, sampled the place in March 1949, they could barely conceal their gleeful enthusiasm at how spartan, old-fashioned and quirky it seemed. They had been enjoying a youthful cycling and hostelling adventure in Yorkshire – perhaps their first trip away from their parents – and a letter card (another of Mr Thirkill's enterprises) hastily scrawled to Mum and Dad is worth quoting in full for a sense of the innocent abandoned joy they were experiencing:

Dear Mother & Dad

Just had our supper (made by ourselves) Menu Tomato soup Stewed meat and bread Grapefruit & custard. We were too full for tea so we are going to make some later on. We felt very pleased with our cooking efforts.

This hostel is primitive except for an electric fire in our dorm which is small so we are quite cosy. There is a youth & girl here as well, they are trying to get the stove in the Dining Room to go and as they have found an envelope dated 1948 inside they are having to clear out quite a lot of rubbish before lighting it.

Today has been fine and fairly warm but there has been a mist all day so we haven't seen much.

We got the rest of the rations in Masham which is about the biggest place we have been in since Ilkley. We went to the Co-op as all the other shops we saw were closed for dinner. We struck luck as the man & wife running the shop were keen cyclists & were very interested in our travels. The lady let the bacon slicer 'slip' and we got 4 good rashers, also 4 eggs (we could have had more) and some Cheshire cheese which Joan says is allright. We also got the soup & a tin of grapefruit there. The butcher was also generous & we got 1/3d worth of meat instead of 8d worth.

We seem to be progressing without hitch so far. My rucksack is OK now (I am still hoping you received the parcel I posted on Monday from Ilkley). My shoes are also allright.

The villages we pass thro' are all very small some without even a Grocers so we are finding lunches a problem, we can get teacakes but nothing else, no cakes etc. However this should improve as we go thro' Ripon tomorrow and Harrogate the day after.

We are warm at night as there are plenty of extra blankets, we should be very warm tonight as this dorm is getting nicely aired.

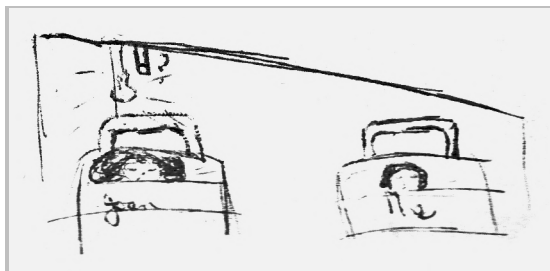
I forgot to say what we are doing with the 4 eggs. One went in the custard with 1/2 pt of milk tonight, 2 have been hard boiled for tomorrow lunch & we are sharing the 4th between us with the bacon for tomorrows breakfast.

There is a pipe above Joan's bunk which intrigues us, whether it is to let air out & water in we don't know. We have decided not to make some tea as it is much too warm in here & much too cold to go outside to the lean-to shed which is the cookhouse but doesn't lean to on anything except the air. There are numerous pans & frying pans, kettles & we cook by calor gas, very interesting... we have just gone into fits of laughter over the pipe & the cook house & the whole hostel in general.

The electric fire went out a few minutes ago so I have had to go and investigate the meter, we have to turn a small handle back, insert a penny & turn the handle round again & lo! on comes the fire. We have learnt quite a lot of things lately, how not to light a fire with damp wood (Askrigg hostel) how to use Calor gas and how to use an electric meter, also how to cook.

Joan says that I have to tell you Dad that you put all my break blocks the wrong way round, the end which is turned up should be placed so that the break block does not come out. I had to take them all off & in doing so broke the screw of one so I had to get another one in Kettlewell. Fortunately there was a garage besides about one shop, we were very surprised as we thought Kettlewell was quite a big place.

The other two people are now cooking their supper (8.30pm) and there is quite a pleasant smell of onions pervading the room.



Margaret's lettercard sketch of the mystery pipe above the girls' beds.

Kirkby Malzeard hostel closed on 30th September 1953, when Mr Thirkill retired and the lease was terminated. So ended the lifespan of his simple moorland hostel. Harry Smith, one time warden of Malham hostel, remembered that you were *baked in summer and frozen in winter*.



In 2007 the majority of the hut was still standing, used as a store and much patched up. Yet it was still possible to compare several features with the hostel facilities that closed more than half a century beforehand. The old hostel was finally demolished in 2014 or 2015. A new house stands in its place.

The author is indebted to Mrs Pearson (Mr Thirkill's daughter) and Mrs Thirkill (Mr Thirkill's daughter-in-law) for their kindness and information and permission to photograph the old hostel and related artefacts.



SPACE FOR MEMBER'S PHOTOGRAPHS (OPTIONAL)		SPACE FOR SWISS YEAR STAMP	
YOUTH HOSTELS ASSOCIATION (ENGLAND AND WALES) Year Ending 31st Dec. 1939 DATE 15.3.39 MEMB. NO. 15397 Mr. C.W. Maitland, 59 South Park, Lincoln		DECLARATION (This card is not valid until signed by the member.) I agree to abide by the rules and regulations of the Association as printed in the current National Handbook and undertake not to use any hostel if I have been in contact with any infectious disease. Signature of holder: <i>C.W. Maitland</i> HOSTELS VISITED:	
1	Burton Lazars I.H.A.	9	
2	BEMPTON	10	
3	WHITBY.	11	
4		12	
5	DURHAM	13	
6		14	
7		15	
8		16	

Before using hostels abroad please fill in:
 Date of Birth _____ Occupation _____
 Passport No. _____ Bicycle No. _____

New blanks for stamping obtainable from National or Regional Offices.

1: Laurie Landon's photograph of Easter, 1951; 2: from a similar viewpoint in 2007. The structure is patched with temporary roofing to keep out the Yorkshire rain, and the entrance altered. All appears somewhat precarious; 3: another Thirkill enterprise was his publication of YHA postcards such as this attractive view of the common room. All is spick and span, with neatly gathered curtains, flower vases and tables ready for meals. It was posted in 1933; 4: the same view in 2007, bare and with windows boarded. Yet the former location of that homely stove is clear, as is the window's position on the far wall. The side door retains its ancient panelling, though the Exit sign is long gone; 5: Clint Maitland's immaculate 1939 membership card. Four of the hostels – Burton Lazars, Bampton, Durham and Kirkby Malzeard – did not survive into the modern era. Only Whitby (Old Palace Stables) will be remembered by more than a few. 1939 was the first year that YHA issued space for hostel stamps on its cards. So many youth hostels, like Durham Gilesgate and Burton Lazars, did not survive beyond 1939, so their stamps are a great rarity (1&5: YHA Archive; 2&4 author's photographs; 3: author's collection)



An entirely speculative addition. This lovely uncaptioned image was acquired by the author a few years ago as a negative. The provider had reason to believe that it was a youth hostel somewhere in Yorkshire. It has some of the hallmarks of Kirkby Malzeard hostel (but many potential mismatches too), and though the case is far from proven, no other location yet springs to mind. A somewhat whimsical conclusion is that, even if not our hostel, it is redolent of the early spirit and style of YHA and deserves a showing

Overnights – inclusive periods each year as follows									
1932-1953: previous Oct to Sept									
W: Wartime closure									
...	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938	1939
...	400	673	793	991	1324	1224	1372	1469	open
1940	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945	1946	1947	1948	1949
W	262	52	917	1657	1781	1260	1383	1523	1497
1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959
1597	1395	1067	532

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