

Youth Hostels on the Lizard Peninsula, Cornwall at Kennack Sands, Poldhu Cove, Coverack and Lizard Point

There have been four youth hostels in the Lizard area. Kennack Sands hostel was the first, and operated up to the war. After a gap during hostilities the hostel reopened. A variety of buildings was used. The post-war hostel at Kennack and the next, at Poldhu Cove, lasted only a few years each. Fifteen years then elapsed before the opening of Coverack hostel, joined in recent years by Lizard Point.

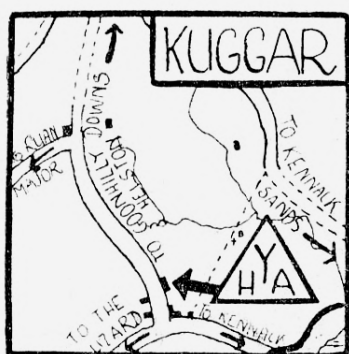
Kennack Sands Youth Hostel 1932 to 1940; 1945 to 1952

Kuggar Farm, Ruan Minor, Helston, Cornwall

Historic County:
Cornwall

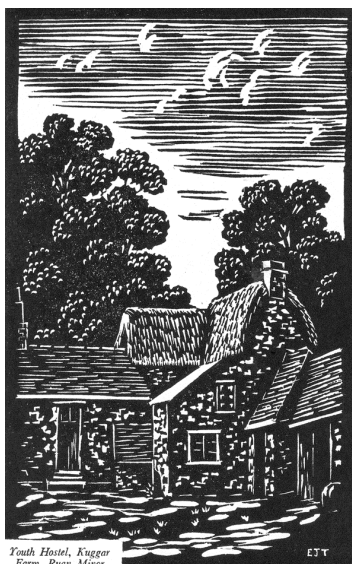
YHA Region:
Devon & Cornwall

GR: SW 724164



KENNACK SANDS (KUGGAR). Kuggar Hostel is a thatched farm building, pleasantly situated on the seaward edge of the Goonhilly Downs and close to the lovely curved beach of Kennack, where bathing may be enjoyed in ideal conditions. A road leads across the Downs to the market town, Helston, and an easy walk will lead the walker to the Lizard, to the lovely Kynance Cove, or to many lovely old villages (Cadgwith, Coverack, Poltesco), each well worth a visit.

Mr. Rowe, Kuggar Farm, Ruan Minor, Cornwall. (24 men, 16 women). *Sta.:* Helston 10 m. *Bus:* Helston—Mullion—Kuggar. All year. *Tel.:* Lizard 53. *O.S.* 146.



Kennack Sands youth hostel – 1: details from the 1937 YHA regional guide;

2: the farmhouse from the yard – an early woodcut-type illustration, much in vogue in the 1930s (postcard);

3: the farmhouse from the road. Parc Behan, the specially constructed hostel 'house' is far left (postcard)

(1-3: author's collection)

The hostel at the small settlement of Kuggar near Lizard Point was one of the first in the new YHA's Devon and Cornwall Region. It opened at Whitsun 1932, with Mr Rowe nominated as warden, though Mrs Rowe was always closely involved with the running and the catering. The hostel premises were established with the assistance of Falmouth T.O.C. in rather simple outbuildings, including a thatched barn, behind a 17th-century thatched farmhouse. At first the establishment was for only 8 men and 8 women, and was called Ruan Minor, after a larger village a mile away, but the more attractive name Kennack Sands hostel was applied from 1934. Farm produce was available, but no meals were provided until 1934. Accommodation for men increased slightly to 10 in 1935, but the capacity was more than doubled in 1936 (1937 according to the article below) when 24 men and 16 women could stay. Camping was allowed from this time.

Courtney Rowe, son of the wardens, has written this account:

During the 1930s and 1940s my sister, Patricia, and I spent our childhood and teenage years at a farm in the village of Kuggar in the south of Cornwall. The farm, which was then fully operational was well stocked with cattle, pigs and chickens, and extended from the village towards Goonhilly Downs on the right-hand side of the road. It was called Kuggar Farm and was run by our parents; looking back it was a good place to be.

We were doubly fortunate as each afternoon in summer months some thirty people would arrive either as hikers or cyclists. These were members of the Youth Hostels Association (YHA), or as known to us youth-hostellers or hostellers, who had come to spend the night at the Kennack Sands Youth Hostel at the farm. Our parents were part-time wardens as well as farmers. The youth hostel was given its name because of the sandy beaches at Kennack half a mile away which were very popular with the hostellers. The Youth Hostels Association enabled its members to undertake inexpensive though energetic holidays as hikers or cyclists carrying on their backs all they needed or on their bicycles or tandems. In the 1930s these heavily-laden hostellers would be seen making their way across Goonhilly Downs towards Kuggar.

The hostel at Kuggar, which was one of the first two in Cornwall, was started in 1934 under quite rustic conditions. The barn at the farm was in very good condition and each year when the corn had all been used it was divided into two and formed dormitories where wooden double-bunk beds were installed; men one side of the divide, women the other. Two blankets were provided for each bed and each person had to either bring a sleeping bag or hire one for 6d (2.5p). A small hut beside the ricks in the adjacent mowey provided a "common room" and this was equipped with a rough wooden table, wooden forms and an oil stove. Another of the farm buildings was used as a bicycle shed. There was no electricity and no mains water or sewage at Kuggar at that time. Lighting, cooking and heating was by oil-lamps and oil-stoves; washing was in a bowl in the mowey with water carried from the nearby well. Toilet facilities were a bucket under a seat in a small corrugated-iron privy.

The fee for each night was 1/- (5p), and most people had booked in advance during the previous winter. Hostellers checked-in at the farmhouse on arrival, hiring sleeping bags if necessary, and leaving their membership cards which would be stamped with the name of the hostel before they left. Each was given a job-card which stated a task that had to be done during the evening or before departure the next day – brush dormitory, clean common room, wash dishes, carry water, etc; no job done – no membership card back. The maximum period of stay was three nights and travel by car was forbidden.

Fresh milk was very popular and was sold and drunk by the pint.

Because the barn was needed to store grain after "threshing day" the youth hostel was closed in winter months, and after a few years it was decided to construct a purpose-built hostel building which could be used all year round. This came into operation in 1937. Its ground floor was a single large common room, the scene of many jolly evenings; there was a small side-kitchen for those who wanted to do their own cooking. Upstairs were two dormitories giving a winter accommodation of sixteen which expanded to about forty each summer when the barn came available. Annual accommodation totals increased steadily and it was not unknown for unbooked persons to sleep on the hay in a farm building when the hostel was full. The new building had its own water well and flush toilets, though all water had to be pumped by hand as there was still no electricity in the village. Pumping water now became one of the regular jobs of the hostellers. A new wash-room was built for the ladies and the old common room in the mowey became the men's wash-room.

My mother offered supper and breakfast at 1/- each (5p) and typically about thirty people would take advantage of this each day. Breakfast was two eggs accompanied by two rashers of bacon or two sausages, with plenty of home-made jam and marmalade and toast and these meals were served in the thatched farmhouse where each person would collect a laden plate on the way to the dining-room. The standard of food at the Kennack Sands Youth Hostel became well known amongst the hostellers, and the meals were always popular. In the early days we as young children were packed off to bed before the evening meal but we enjoyed the babble of voices below. On some days there were up to six different nationalities present. The washing-up afterwards was all done by the hostellers.

Mains electricity arrived in 1939.

Despite the loss of several of the region's hostels on the outbreak of war, Kennack Sands was still operating in 1940. A national notice of 5th November 1940, however, advised that it was closed until further notice and it did not reopen until after the war, despite a hope expressed in the 1943 handbook that it might do so.

Courtney Rowe concludes his account:

A number of hostellers became regular visitors and we looked forward to meeting them each year, but the steadily growing popularity of the hostel was sadly interrupted in 1940. As the hostellers left they would say "see you after the war" and mother would say to us "I wonder". Then with the threat of invasion the new building was requisitioned by the army; the hostel closed and forty soldiers arrived to occupy it and another building in the village. The ladies' washroom became the ammunition store and for a few years my bedroom in the farmhouse was only a few yards from this potentially dangerous building. A sentry was always on guard outside the farm gate, the former corrugated-iron privy being put to a new use as a sentry-box. The soldiers manned defensive positions at Kennack, on Goonhilly Downs and on The Lizard Downs.

The youth hostel opened again in 1945 with my parents as wardens, but having grown older they felt unable to manage both the farm and hostel and they gave up the wardenship in 1947 whereupon the YHA installed a paid warden. The hostel closed in 1952 when our parents considered they needed to convert the new building to a house for someone to help on the farm. Over the years the hostel had provided some 50,000 "bed-nights".

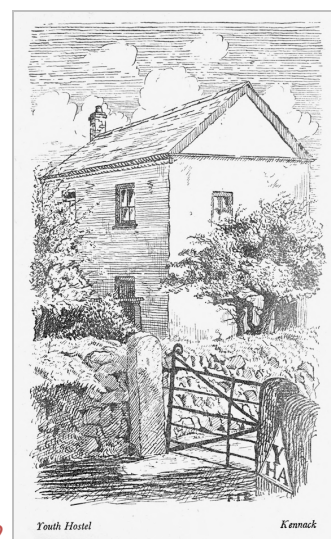
This article has been based on notes written by my mother after 1952 who described the job of warden as very interesting. The other hostel in Cornwall was at St Mawes, so the hostellers had long journeys. It is a pleasant thought that a new hostel has just opened at The Lizard fifty years after the Kennack Sands hostel closed.

Right: Parc Vean, photograph courtesy Ann Pilkington (YHA Archive)

In 1945, the hostel (now called plain Kennack) was still run by the Rowes, but by now Mrs Rowe had assumed the family's wardenship. In that year there were still beds for 24 men and 16 women, but with the appointment of YHA's own warden in 1947 this shrank to a total of 30 for both sexes, probably now just based at Parc Vean. Post-war, the hostel operated for 8 seasons, before closure on 30th September 1952.



The old farm and outbuildings have been renovated in recent years and are no longer thatched, and while the old barn remains, some of the outhouses have been demolished and in 2013 Parc Vean was in the process of replacement by a modern house of similar outline. A guest house called the Coach House now operates at the farm.



Kennack Sands youth hostel –

*1: the barn, cleared of stored produce in the summer to accommodate hostellers via a ladder (Rucksack Magazine);
2: Parc Vean, the house specially constructed as part of the hostel accommodation (1: YHA Archive; 2: author's collection)*

YHA is indebted to Courtney Rowe and the present Coach House owners, Mr and Mrs Makin, for historical detail on this hostel

Lizard [Poldhu Cove] Youth Hostel 1956 to 1961

Gunwalloe Towans, Poldhu, Mullion, Helston, Cornwall

Historic County:

YHA Region:

GR: SW 666204

Cornwall

Devon & Cornwall

Positional note: the Grid Reference corresponds to the location of the present clubhouse.

YHA had been looking to establish a hostel in Lizard Town shortly after the demise of Kennack hostel, and announced in the 1954 annual report that a new 40-bed hostel was planned for the following year. This came to nothing, but it was fortuitous that the National Trust bought Gunwalloe Towans in June 1956, including the Mullion Golf Club, along with a Club House chalet suited to youth hostel use.

This was offered on a temporary basis by the National Trust to the YHA, who with some speed negotiated a short-term lease from 16th July 1956 for a period of seven weeks. 30 beds were established.

The hostel was leased again the following year, from 1st May 1957, this time for a more secure $4\frac{1}{2}$ years, and the arrangement was vested in the YHA Trust on 15th August 1957. The following year it was established even more firmly, thanks to the goodwill and financial help of a life-member.

LIZARD (Poldhu Cove) (Wed. Closing Scheme I.)

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Open June 1st - Sept. 30th. All bookings prior to opening date to be sent to Regional Office.

Postal Address. The Warden, Youth Hostel, Gunwalloe Towans, Poldhu, Helston, Cornwall.

Position and Map. Take 2nd R. from Cudrose Aerodrome on road to Lizard. Hostel on golf course overlooking Poldhu Cove. Mullion 1 m. O.S. 189. G.R. 666204. Bart. 1.

Hostel Details. M. & W. 36 (variable). Store at hostel. P.O., Mullion. E.C.D., Mullion (Wed.), Helston (Fri.). No M.P. K.F.S. Sea bathing. Open June 1st - Sept. 30th, 1959.

Station. Helston 6 m. **Bus.** Helston-Mullion.

Next Hostels. Phillack 18 m. Truro 23 m. Land's End 29 m. Penzance 20 m.

The entry for the Poldhu Cove hostel, YHA 1959 Handbook (YHA Archive)

The tenancy expired in 1961 and Poldhu Cove hostel closed accordingly on 30th September of that year. The chalet was demolished soon afterwards. Kevin Flanagan describes how the chalet site is the open space marked by gorse and scrub at the southern end of the practice area, between No 5 fairway and No 13 green.



The first hostel at the Lizard - Poldhu Cove - photographed by Don Errington in July 1961 (YHA Archive)

Coverack Youth Hostel 1976 to the present day

Parc Behan, School Hill, Coverack, Helston, Cornwall TR12 6SA

Historic County:
Cornwall

YHA Regions:
South West, South

GR: SW 782181

Parc Behan, formerly described as a guesthouse, was built about 1901 and features a fine pitch-pine staircase and some doors salvaged from the US liner the SS Mohegan, a local wreck of 1898. The house stands high above the little Cornish coastal village of Coverack.

An early advertising brochure, possibly for sale or holiday letting, enthusiastically described the property as follows:

An Ideal Home on the Cornish Riviera, the Homestead known as Parc Behan

Parc Behan is a splendidly built, homelike, freehold house, made imposing by the exclusiveness of its position on the cliff, and surrounded by over an acre of delightful grounds that comprise lawns and flower gardens, kitchen gardens and orchard. It is a self-contained homestead, with stable and garage, conservatory and vinery, summer house and peach-house, with cherry, apple and plum trees and fruit bushes in abundance, and flowers that bloom all year round. The ground floor apartments, in addition to the spacious and compact kitchen, scullery, pantry and larder premises, consisting of a handsome dining room measuring 24 ft by 15 ft, and a drawing room and smokeroom with a superficial area of 190 sq ft and 150 sq ft respectively, with a large conservatory adjoining both. The first floor contains four large bedrooms, with dressing room, bath and lavatory, equipped with hot and cold water services, a maid's bedroom on a back stairway, and a charmingly situated morning room, with French window lead on to a spacious balcony overlooking the English Channel. The three large bedrooms on the second floor, one of which measures 22½ ft by 16½ ft, are supplied by a boxroom and a linen closet, fitted with shelving pins, etc. The extensive basement is divided into a capacious coal cellar and a wine cellar furnished with four tiers of wood shelves. The house is lighted throughout by acetylene gas, with a new installation. The premises are exceptionally well drained, with in and outdoor sanitations, the water supply is abundant, and the whole of the building and its appurtenances are in excellent repair.

The youth hostel was purchased freehold by YHA on 15th August 1975, with assistance from the Countryside Commission, and vested in the YHA Trust. It opened in 1976, probably at the start of the season on 1st April of that year. An official opening was held much later, on 7th May 1977. In all likelihood there was at first only essential alteration to the layout from that set out in the early advertising brochure.



Coverack hostel – YHA volunteer warden George Miller photographed the hostel in 1980 (author's collection)

The hostel underwent extensive improvements in 2010. Bedroom accommodation was considerably improved, taking advantage of the acquisition of the former hostel manager's flat on the top floor to create more room. Several rooms were given en suite facilities, in line with the popularity of the hostel with families.

In July 2010 Coverack hostel began hosting holidays for the organisation FAB, a partnership between YHA, the three armed services and the Ministry of Defence, to give families who had lost a loved one the chance to rebuild their lives through meeting others in the same situation on a holiday at a youth hostel. In that year more than 50 families took part in holidays at Coverack, Conwy and Whitby.

Camping is accommodated in the grounds, and there is a separate campers' service building with outdoor facilities.



Coverack hostel – 1: attractive aerial view of the property and grounds, probably 1990s (YHA Archive); 2: hostel entrance from the road; 3: hostel road entrance; 4: looking out to sea (2-4: author's photographs, October 2013)

Lizard Point Youth Hostel 2003 to the present day

Lizard Point, Cornwall TR12 7NT

Historic County:

Cornwall

GR: SW 703115



*Lizard youth hostel – 1: the former Polbrean Hotel lies in most attractive grounds at the southern tip of England;
2: the stunning view from the hostel door at sunset (author's photographs, October 2013)*

Polbrean House is a large Victorian villa, standing adjacent to the lighthouse on the headland at Lizard Point. It was built between 1864 and 1867 as a private house for the landscape painter Thomas Hart to improve on having to work in Plymouth or commuting to Falmouth. The house featured a specially constructed studio and a bell-tower, subsequently demolished but in recent years reconstructed. Hart lived at Polbrean until his death in 1916.

The house was then bought by Roland Hill in 1921, who joined the house and studio together and built various extensions to form the Polbrean Hotel, the most southerly hotel in mainland Britain. Hill and his wife opened the establishment to the rising swell of motor-car tourism in the 1920s, running it as a guest house until 1960 and serving afternoon tea on the lawns to coastal path walkers.



(Upper): postcard views of the early-twentieth-century Polbrean Hotel. The low building to the left was the original artist's studio, converted in the twenties to provide diners with the same stunning views that Thomas Hart had once enjoyed and that, more recently, hostel guests can soak up, though the room has been redesigned as the lounge (author's collection); (lower): images of the main hostel entrance and verdant cliff-top approach frame the lighthouse sculpture in the unique local serpentine stone specially commissioned from specialist turner Derek Pitman (author's photographs, June 2016)

Later owners modernised the property extensively in post-war styles. A new bar and a swimming pool were created, the hotel being awarded a fairly lowly two-star status in 1976. It was always busy, and usually full throughout the season.

It fell on hard times, however, and by the time the National Trust bought the property and over 2 acres of land on 8th August 1993, had been derelict for some time. The Trust had already been negotiating with Trinity House to buy the lighthouse complex, which was due to be automated in 1997, and had discussed with the YHA plans to develop a hostel in the lighthouse. Trinity House later decided to keep the lighthouse, however, and the focus switched to restoring the old Polbrean Hotel for the Association. The National Trust spent almost half a million pounds on the renovation, using a £425,000 grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund. Further generous support came from the Tanner Trust and the Viscountess Boyd Charitable Trust.

YHA announced that they hoped to open the hostel in 2001. It was considerably delayed, however. The renovation of the Polbrean began in 2002, and took over a year to complete. The architect was David Scott, whose design brief was to match as carefully as possible the style of the original house with the demands of a modern youth hostel. Out-of-keeping extensions were demolished and the interior of the hotel was gutted. The exposed location and the lengthy neglect of the building guaranteed that there was considerable damp and rot to eliminate, so timbers and floors were entirely replaced, a new Delabole slate roof was put on and Hart's missing bell tower was recreated. The premises were redesigned for wheelchair access and to encourage educational work through field studies.

Considerable research went in to recreating the gardens that Thomas Hart had laid out in the 1860s. The National Trust's head gardener from Llanhydrock devised a planting scheme based on salt tolerance, colour and attractiveness to wildlife. Granite benches were placed in the garden, cast-iron benches situated around the hostel buildings, and a sun-dial especially commissioned.

The hostel finally opened on 1st April 2003, some 10 years after the National Trust's rescue began. YHA leases the property from them. It has been volunteer-run since 2011 and is organised from the parent Coverack hostel.



Lizard youth hostel's welcoming signs – 1: slate plaque; 2: at the footpath entrance from the cliff
(author's photographs, October 2013)

Overnights – inclusive periods each year as follows									
1932-1991: previous Oct to Sept; 1992: Oct 1991 to Feb 1993; 1993-present: Mar to following Feb									
K: Kennack; ¶: Lizard [Poldhu Cove]; Δ: Coverack; L: Lizard Point									
W: Wartime closure; *: 17 month period; +: notional figure included for exclusive hire and/or camping									
...	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938	1939
...	...	194K	335K	628K	1153K	1431K	1883K	2367K	1812K
1940	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945	1946	1947	1948	1949
421K	W	W	W	W	2067K	2521K	3581K	3629K	3362K
1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959
3021K	2750K	2839K	...	...	...	602¶	1362¶	2066¶	2026¶
1960	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969
2216¶	1821¶	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979
...	...	...	...	...	...	openΔ	2377Δ	2506Δ	2677Δ
1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989
2280Δ	2730Δ	3437Δ	3815Δ	4236Δ	4537Δ	4818Δ	4828Δ	4853Δ	4710Δ
1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
5270Δ	4353Δ	4555*Δ	5042Δ	4942Δ	5220Δ	6268Δ	6592Δ	6362Δ	5461Δ
2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
5345Δ	5445Δ	6509Δ	6376Δ	6297Δ	6528Δ	6860Δ	6756Δ	5191Δ	6127Δ
...	...	...	3864L	4825L	4941L	4736L	3995L	3784L	3886L
2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
6547Δ	7861+Δ	7658+Δ	7140+Δ	6589+Δ	7250+Δ	7955+Δ	7878+Δ	7535+Δ	7178+Δ
3451L	5059+L	4848+L	4630+L	5217+L	5087+L	5462+L	5404+L	4693+L	5091+L

