



YHA (England and Wales) Youth Hostel Profile

compiled by the Association's volunteer archivist, John Martin, rev2020-01-01

London Earl's Court Youth Hostel 1952 to present

Strathallan House, 38 Bolton Gardens, London SW5 0AQ

Historic County: Middlesex

YHA Region: London

GR: TQ 257783

Note: there is absolutely no general or local consensus about the use of the apostrophe in Earl's Court.



During the first 20 or so years of the YHA, the only Central London hostel of any permanence was the crowded and old-fashioned leased property at 38 Great Ormond Street. It operated from 1936 to 1952, but closure and demolition of the hostel premises were necessary when an extension to Great Ormond Street Hospital was planned.

Left: one-inch pin badge of Earl's Court hostel, as sold during the 1950s and 1960s (author's collection)

Its direct replacement was several miles west of that Bloomsbury site, in a substantial mansion in the Earl's Court district. Strathallan House is a typical mid-Victorian three-storey house in London brick, with dormered roofline, tall slender chimneys and central steps leading up to the grand arched entrance door. Below the entrance is a half-basement. The rear of the building is plainer, but tall and imposing.

Between the mid-1860s and mid-1890s James and Robert Gunter had developed 60 acres around Earl's Court with speculative housing. 38 Bolton Gardens was in a small development of Nos. 36 to 39, built by J Spicer in 1870-71, during the rapid expansion of Earl's Court and Kensington after the development of railways in the area and the Hyde Park Exhibition of 1851.

The 1881 census shows that this was an area of high-class Victorian patronage. For residents in Bolton Gardens, Wetherby Gardens etc, each member of the family had on average one servant to attend on them. There were at least a few butlers on each street.

In that year Strathallan House School was operating at 38 Bolton Gardens. On the register were 22 girls. Educational use of a probably exclusive nature continued from then up to 1923. Kelly's directories list Misses Ellen & Julia Frances Spark's ladies' school here between 1898 and 1902; a similar business, Mademoiselle Élodie Dessaint's, continued until 1923, when Mrs Arthur Benson & Miss E Rohde took on the Strathallan House School for Girls, *telephone Kensington 3975*. A change came in 1924 with the establishment of the Strathallan House Hotel, proprietor Mrs JH Evans. Misses E and R Evans continued that business up to at least 1939; it was a hotel again in the post-war years leading up to 1950.

In 1952 Sir Ronald V Gunter, Bart, of Aldingbourne, Sussex, was the lessor when YHA signed a tenancy on Strathallan House for 99 years. The initial rent was £300pa.

In an article entitled *London Double Event* (the opening of London Region's Earl's Court and Alfriston hostels within a week of each other), YHA's *Rucksack Magazine* for September / October 1952 advised:

[The hostels were] opened by London Region in July, the successful conclusion to a long search.

At the beginning of the month, the new London hostel at Earl's Court opened its doors. For several years, London Region has been searching for suitable premises for a London Hostel that would enable a better service to be offered to hostellers travelling to and from the Continent, often arriving late at night or departing early in the morning. For many foreign visitors, their first impressions of our hostels are gained in London, so it was important that the premises should be good, though not, of course, luxurious!

But property in London is difficult to find, and costly to buy or rent, so though many properties were visited, and a few considered, it was not until premises at 38 Bolton Gardens became available that the search for the London hostel ended.

The youth hostel opened on 4th July 1952 with 150 beds, but closure was proposed almost immediately because Kensington bye-laws demanded a reduction in the number of guests; the Borough would not approve the standard of sleeping accommodation normally accepted by the Ministry of Education. The situation led to the Scottish Youth Hostels Association's *Newsletter* of May 1953 incorrectly announcing the permanent closure of Earl's Court; a compromise was hurriedly reached, however, when YHA agreed to reduce capacity to only 60 beds from 1954.

The first wardens were named as Mr and Mrs Mills, who had established themselves at Hartington Hall between 1948 and 1952, but it seems likely that Miss Dora Fisher, warden of the old hostel at Great Ormond Street in the late 1940s, was soon in charge at Earl's Court; she was certainly in place in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s. In 1969 she received a gift from YHA for 21 years' service.



An early YHA-issue postcard view of Earl's Court youth hostel, photographed by DJ Boorne. The dining room is left of the entrance, and reception is to its right. The hostel takes in the taller two-storey block on the right, which extends rearwards considerably; the hostel office is at the front here. The lower block further right is part of a private mews (YHA Archive)

When Pat Packham stayed here in 1956 on a cycling holiday she was struck by the sheer size of the hostel:

When I returned to the hostel I cooked some soup, walked up the 82 steps from the members' kitchen to bed number forty-two, and went to bed at 9pm.

Even with the older small hostel in Highgate, the opening of Earl's Court in 1952 and the new Holland House hostel in 1957, the YHA in London was perpetually stretched to provide enough beds through the middle decades of the century, and had to take recourse to a number of leased schools and public buildings to act as temporary hostels in the summer months. But facilities were always better at the full-time hostels like Earl's Court, where, in 1961, hostellers could enjoy the new showers being fitted. Ironically, beds earmarked for seasonal hostels in the late 1950s at Ethelm Hall, Waterloo and Park Walk LCC School, Chelsea, were stored out-of-season in the basement at Earl's Court, as that space was not allowed to be used for guests. As calls went out for yet more equipment for temporary hostels, it was at least recognised that new double-deck beds should be retained at Earl's Court and the residue of single and older beds sent to the temporaries. Some of the older stock came from the closed hostel at Nazeing, Essex. The basement was also used for the sorting and despatch of 60,000 YHA renewal notices annually.

When the London Hostels Management Committee was forward-planning for its new hostel at Holland House, opened in 1958, it was admitted that the life of its smaller hostel at Highgate might be in jeopardy, and even Earl's Court's future might be 'problematic': it was anticipated that overnights might drop at Earl's Court in consequence. The fears for both were unfounded. There was a small dip in 1960, to 17,500 overnights, but then a steady stream of

19,000 annually throughout the new decade. The hostel was smartened up considerably, internally and externally, at the beginning of the 1960s, so that it could stand comparison with the new neighbouring hostel. £2,100 was spent, with a further £11.12s.2d on curtains for the common room and office. A new fire escape was fabricated in metal in 1961. YHA had to admit that there were some members who preferred Earl's Court to Holland House, and some who preferred Highgate to Earl's Court.



1: a fine portrait by Eileen Durrant, from 1960 at the earliest. The new triangle sign is known to have been ordered in 1960; 2: a rare middle-period colour view by cyclist Ron Sant. The rectangular 'This Youth Hostel...' sign had by now been attached (1: YHA Archive; 2: author's collection)

The agreement with the Borough to restrict capacity to 60 was a thorn in the side of the hostel's development, and was to last through to 1969. In that year, a meeting with the Borough Architect resulted in a compromise standard of 40 sq ft per bed space at Earl's Court hostel; rooms not previously approved for dormitory use could now be used for that purpose. Plans were in hand to increase the complement by 49 beds, an increase of 82%, making a total of 109. There was an all-out effort to have these extra beds available for spring 1970. About this time there was much frustrated talk of a fourth London hostel, but YHA could now announce that the pressure was somewhat alleviated by the Earl's Court enlargement. The investment was rewarded with a huge and immediate increase in usage in 1971, from a steady 19,000 or so to above 30,000.



Mr and Mrs R Cotton took over from Miss Fisher in 1969-70 and were wardens into the 1980s at least. About that time, and in keeping with the rule changes of the period, a car park was provided at the rear of the property, accessed from the left hand side of the building; it proved a nuisance to local residents, however, and was later converted into the present pleasant courtyard, picnic area and circulating space. The loss of the car park has been no real hardship, as most visitors arrive by public transport to the Earl's Court hub.

The capacity was fixed at 111 beds in 1971, a figure maintained until 1990. A booklet for educational visits of 1990 described the sleeping facilities as spread over 14 bedrooms, six of which were of 10 or more beds. Two large dormitories of 14 and 13 beds were part of the layout. A mix of traditional large dormitories and smaller 4-bed rooms was maintained right up to 2006, while the total of beds continued to rise, up to 159, in line with demand. During this 36-year period starting with the expansion of 1970 the annual overnights soared from around 20,000 to the mid-40,000 figure. YHA managed the growth by redesigning the building, especially by reconfiguring store-rooms in the lateral block at the rear, at courtyard level, into small guest rooms. Managers through the 1990s and into the new millennium were Nick Christian and Duncan Green.



Earl's Court hostel sustained serious fire damage to the top floor on 6th April 2006. Duncan Simpson remembers that the fire caused much smoke and water damage, but was very successfully handled. The opportunity thus arose to remodel the hostel considerably and it reopened, after work costing £2m, on 1st March 2007.



1 2



3 4



5 6



YHA's youth hostel in West London's leafy suburbs. 1: grand entrance; 2: Strathallan House has hardly changed externally since the postcard view of the 1950s. During the lifetime of the hostel the lime trees have been regularly pollarded; 3: another streetside view; 4: 1961 fire escape; 5&6: the pleasant rear courtyard and 'garden rooms' (author's photographs, July 2009)

Caroline Hammonds became manager in 2006 and stayed until 2018, when Cal Wymann took on the post. There are now 186 beds, an expansion possible since the conversion of the manager's quarters on the left hand side of the first floor to guest accommodation after the fire. Numbers staying at Earl's Court have continued to swell, reaching 50,000 in each year of the 2010s, aided to an extent by the closure of YHA Holland House. YHA have placed faith in the

hostel by investing in a Springboard programme of improvements to all the public areas in 2014-15. A figure of £0.5m was invested during the winter of 2015-16 to completely renew all toilets, showers and en-suites and transform the self catering kitchen in the property.

<i>Overnights – inclusive periods each year as follows</i>									
<i>1952-1991: previous Oct to Sept; 1992: Oct 1991 to Feb 1993; 1993-present: Mar to following Feb</i>									
<i><: 'almost 19,000' (in memo); *: 17 month period; f: fire damage; •: lengthy closure for refurbishment</i>									
1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959
...	...	5748	<19000	19499	18929	18561	18562	18304	17965
1960	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969
17597	19014	19054	18409	19357	18699	19596	18264	19096	19574
1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979
19586	33592	36066	35313	33605	33463	34015	34931	34503	33248
1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989
33343	30172	27492	30019	32247	35996	34593	open	open	open
1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
41700	43010	46118*	38267	41323	43116	46630	49150	49655	47029
2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
43769	46663	46361	42663	43710	43008	3484•f	40896	46361	46417
2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
51232	51794	52164	52694	57707	50381•	54115	52619	52012	51761



Earls Court youth hostel: a modern welcome (YHA images). Top row: entrance and self-catering kitchen; middle row: reception / breakfast servery and computer room; bottom row: dining room, lounge and 'garden' bedroom

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