



## YHA (England and Wales) Youth Hostel Profile

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

### Holmbury St Mary Youth Hostel 1935 to present

Radnor Lane, Holmbury St Mary, Dorking, Surrey RH5 6NW

Historic County: Surrey

YHA Regions:  
London, Southern, South

GR: TQ 104450

London Region's showcase new hostel at Holmbury St Mary's opened on 13th July 1935. The development had attracted a large grant from YHA's Demonstration Hostel Fund and was supported financially by the Carnegie Trust. It was one of three prestigious hostels built south of London in a short space of time by or on behalf of the region. Chelwood Gate, East Sussex, had opened in July 1934, a specially planned youth hostel constructed by the Manor Trust on behalf of YHA, but lost to the war. Ewhurst Green lies 6 miles south of Holmbury St Mary, and like its near-neighbour the hostel there was designed by Howard Vicars Lobb, an enthusiastic hosteller and the Region's 26-year-old honorary architect. Ewhurst opened in 1936. Both Chelwood and Ewhurst owed much to the continuing vogue for the rustic Arts and Crafts style, but Holmbury was quite apart, a square brick building with flat roof, metal cased windows and doors, and block sans serif lettering. It owed more to London Transport's bold contemporary styling than to William Morris, and showed that HV Lobb was mastering more than one style.

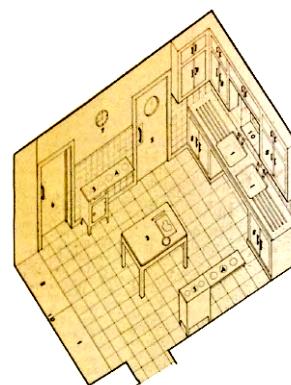
As early as April 1934 *Design for Today Magazine* published an article by RC Smith on Lobb's Holmbury design, *Planning a Youth Hostel – A New Model Hostel in Surrey with a Sketch of a new youth hostel adjoining Shere Common now in course of construction and to be open this summer* – a somewhat hopeful opening date. It explained:

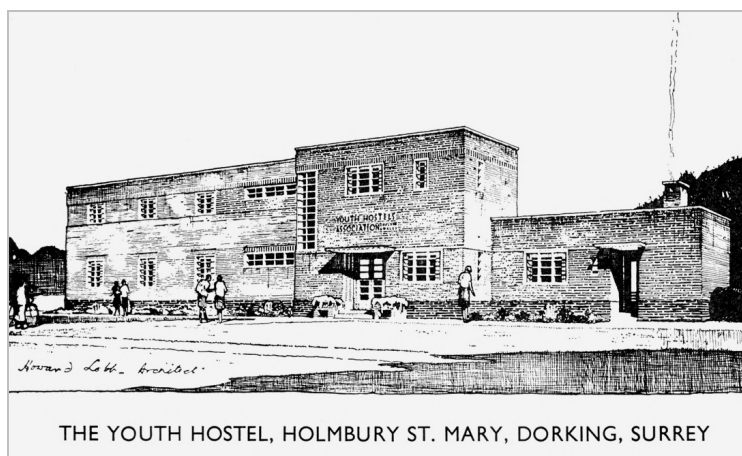
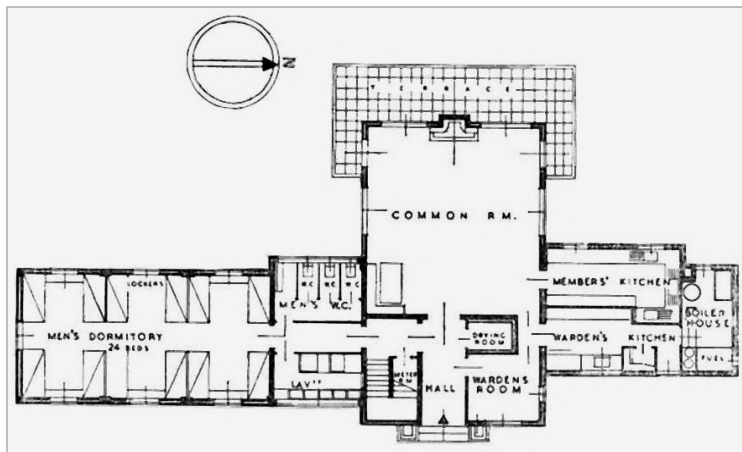
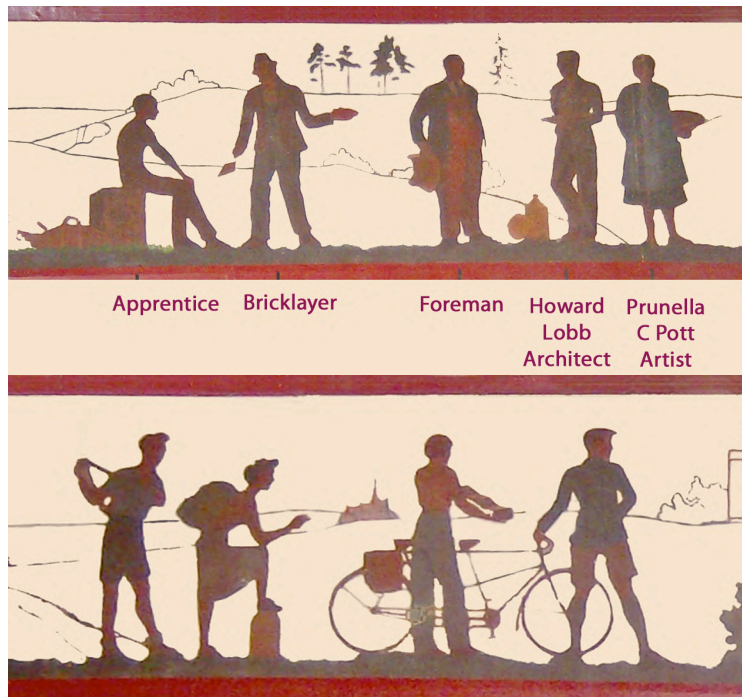
The plan is very simple. The middle block forms the social heart of the hostel, and contains a tiled entrance hall leading to the common room. This room will contain easy chairs and tables and a reserve of stacking steel chairs. Large French windows will open on to a sun terrace with views across the Abinger Valley. The walls will be lined with Australian walnut with large bookshelves on either side of an electric fire. The main heating will be by Crittall ceiling panels. Above this room is a small self-contained flat for the warden. On the right hand wing is the kitchen, which presents a nice problem of design. Many of, but not all, the visitors will want to do their own cooking. But too many cooks are proverbially in each other's way, and the warden or her staff will not want impatient or incompetent hands interfering with her work. So the architect has duplicated every facility on opposite sides of the room. Beyond the kitchen is a furnace and a drying room with separate entrance for the rain-soaked arrivals. The left-hand wing is devoted entirely to dormitories, baths and lavatories - women above, men below. Each dormitory houses 24 beds, double tier, in groups of four, separated by a half-partition and centred about a convenient locker-seat. The beds are built-in and the last four are outsize in length for those over 6ft. In this hostel no separate rooms are available for couples.

The roof of the hostel is flat to afford space for sun-bathing, and perhaps a swimming pool will be a later feature. The design of every detail has been dictated by a desire to obtain efficiency and ease of running, and when it is said that the estimate for building is £2,500 one can realise that there has been no extravagance. It is an interesting new development in countryside building, which is not perhaps unworthy of the mansions and inns of the past.

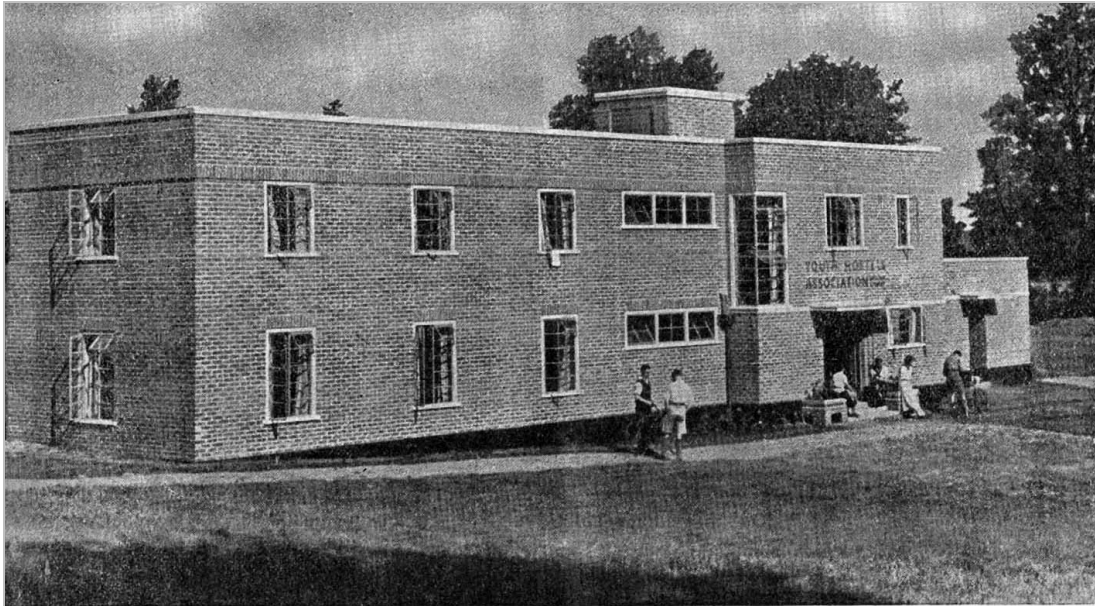
Several points arise from this early document. 'Above this room' seems an odd description. The Crittall heated ceiling panels and an electric common room fire (presumably intended to be the main source of heating in the public space) are not heard of again; instead, the fireplace was provided with a standard chimney flue. The citing of Crittall does however suggest that this well-known London firm may well have manufactured the distinctive metal casements.

An isometric drawing from the same document (shown right) shows that Lobb at first intended the kitchen to be open-plan, with warden's space combined with members', a plan later tempered by compromise and common-sense. The warden's door is shown on the left, and members' on the right.





- 1: the common room features to this day an extensive frieze, a typical stylised representation of freedom, the countryside and the spirit of youth, designed by Miss Prunella C Pott. It is signed by her, and dated 1935. The mural shows several intriguing features. Amongst the medley of figures depicted – country characters, a Grecian goddess, hostelling types – is a little knot of five figures, reproduced at the top of the page. According to a letter of congratulations sent to the hostel by Mr Lobb on its 50th anniversary they represent, from left to right, the Apprentice, the Bricklayer, the Foreman, Howard Lobb (architect), and Miss Pott (artist). Below this is shown a section depicting the very first hostellers to arrive;
- 2: HV Lobb's plan for the ground floor of Holmbury St Mary's youth hostel. The original open kitchen plan was altered by dividing laterally between members and the warden to provide two narrow corridors, a permanent compromise;
- 3: sketch postcard contemporary with the hostel's opening, signed by Howard Lobb (all YHA Archive)



*Photograph by courtesy of the Weekly Illustrated*

## LONDON'S MODEL HOSTEL AT HOLMBURY ST. MARY

### THE IDEA

In November 1933 the RUCKSACK printed a sketch of a proposed Model Hostel to be built by the London Regional Group. The estimated cost was £2,500, and with the added expense of a site within reasonable distance of London, many people thought the idea fantastic enough. But the London Committee did not. They argued that Youth Hostelling is a new function demanding modern experiment; that admirable as it is to convert old mills and cottages there is yet a responsibility to carry on the tradition that built feudal castles and Elizabethan manors and coaching inns, and prove it still vital for present-day needs. They dreamed of a hostel that should be perfectly designed for its purpose. And then, with the help of Howard Vicars Lobb as architect, they got to work.

### THE OPENING.

On July 13, 1935, the Holmbury Model Hostel was opened on the east slope of Leith Hill, where the fields and hedges of the lowlands join the pines and

bracken. Professor Trevelyan planted a tree out in the sunshine. Lord Allen of Hurtwood, the hostel's next-door neighbour and friend of every progressive movement, welcomed the Y. H. A. into the district and urged its members, when they had seen this beauty near at hand, to go out and across frontiers, making friends and breaking down international suspicion by personal contacts and enjoyments. The Mayor of Guildford, too, declared that the Y.H.A. had overcome the first uncertainty of the countryside towards the townsman on holiday, and that its members were no longer frowned at but eagerly welcomed. Then the audience (beshorted hikers, farmers, and local gentry elbow to elbow) streamed in through the glass doors to see what this hostel that was a hostel could be really like.

### THE BUILDING.

The broad and gentle slopes of the downs, broken by heavy-laden beech-trees, demand a building of long low lines. Here in the picture it is, facing east and west, so that only smallest wall-space

lies open to the north. So too, that the broad windows of the common-room look right away to the Tilling Bourne in the evening sun. The building is of soft-coloured local brick, the metal windows picked out in cream and peacock blue. A broad meadow round about gives room for camping and outdoor sport.

The interior design is obvious from the outside view. The central block contains hall, drying-room and stairway, the warden's flat above, and the common-room, opening out on to a sun-terrace behind. Away in the long north wing are the dormitories, men's below, women's above. Each contains twelve two-tier bunks, partitioned into groups of four to give a certain sense of intimacy; while under the window between each pair are built-in lockers that are also seats.

The small south wing covers the boiler-house and twin kitchens—one for the warden and one where for a penny members can cook uninterrupted to their hearts' content. You can see above the built-in drawers for m.p.k.f.s., the ventilated food-

cupboards, the neat electric stoves. You can't, fortunately, see the warden's Aga cooker which would tempt even the sternest devotee of camp-fire and billy-can.

### THE FUTURE

Everything is made for simplicity. Plain surfaces, grey and buff picked out with coral are the order of the day, and the common-room, with its windows on three sides, is the only decorated part. Here is a cheerful painted frieze and a low open fire—not because the panel heating doesn't work, but for sociability's sake. And did I forget to say that there is a flat roof for sun-bathing?

There then the Model Hostel stands—complete if not yet paid for. Sitting in the heather and looking down, one feels a glow of pride in this vigorous landmark of the movement. There are forty thousand Y.H.A. members. As soon as word gets round, I don't think any of them will be content until they've spent at least one shilling under its roof.

R.C.S.

*YHA's Rucksack Magazine of Autumn 1935 proudly displayed this description of the new hostel. The references to the north wing and south wing are mistaken and should be reversed (YHA Archive, adapted)*



Noel Vincent was a key figure in the YHA London Region during and after the war, being instrumental in setting up Leatherhead and Tanners Hatch hostels. In this letter to *YHA News*, November 1994, he recalled an early memory of Holmbury St Mary hostel, and an interesting fact about its wardenship:

It was sad to read of the death of an old friend, Ralph Langford. Ralph and his wife Gwen were wardens of Holmbury St Mary, which was the second Hostel I visited, in 1936.

It was then the specially designed and newly built Show Hostel of the London Region. It was wardened by Ralph and Gwen, both of whom had given up well paid situations to live on wardens' not over-generous salaries. The Hostel had been designed by Howard Lobb, Gwen's brother, who went on to become a very successful architect, and incorporated many new ideas on Hostel design and equipment. I was most impressed by them – built-in bunks, miniature electric cookers in the members kitchen, a spacious common room with tiled windowsills and a big log fire, modern plywood furniture from Finland, and a host of small details.

But most impressive was Ralph's warm welcome and Gwen's cooking, and above all the fact that they came into the common room to share the evening meal, and the subsequent talk-fest and sing-song with us. They were one with us, and that formed for ever my view point of what hostelling was about. Not something done for us, but something that we did for ourselves.

Lobb had a penchant for London red-brown brick and empire timbers and used them in the Holmbury and Ewhurst Green buildings. His Ewhurst design was to be all-brick, with local hand-made roof tiles, but to save money the dormitory wings were altered to British Columbia Pine, slightly stained and polished with beeswax and turpentine. Again, Miss Potts was on hand with a frieze painted direct on to the wood. In 1936 Ewhurst hostel was 'super modern with showers, electric cookers and bright painted furniture', but it was gone by 1980 and demolished soon afterwards for development. He designed no more hostels, but his practice flourished. He was architect to various ministries in the war, designing schools for county authorities. Later, he was involved in national public works such as Hunterston A nuclear power station and service stations for the new motorways.



Common room



Members' kitchen



3 4



1&2: Holmbury design concept – tasteful contemporary fittings in the Common Room and Members' Kitchen (YHA Archive); 3&4: Ewhurst Green, Holmbury's near-contemporary specially-built hostel (1936-83), was also designed by HV Lobb, in a much more rustic style, and decorated by PC Pott. Her murals can be seen here on the beams above the fireplace (author's collection)

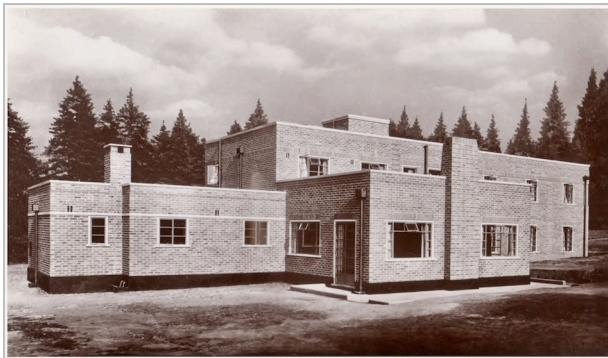
Berta Gough, secretary and diarist to YHA Merseyside Region, paid Holmbury a visit just over a year after its inception, and commented in her diary:

Connie's friends picked us up and took us to see Holmbury St Mary's hostel. I thought this was a very beautiful hostel, but rather overdone. So much money had been spent on it!





THE YOUTH HOSTEL, HOLMBURY ST. MARY, SURREY



THE YOUTH HOSTEL, HOLMBURY ST. MARY, SURREY



HOLMBURY ST. MARY YOUTH HOSTEL.



38. HOLMBURY ST. MARY YOUTH HOSTEL

Picture No. 10000



HOLMBURY ST. MARY YOUTH HOSTEL SURREY

C.O.I. Photograph

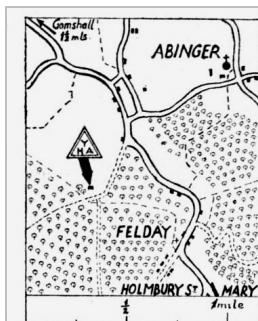


Holmbury hostel has been generously blessed with postcards over the years. Many, including the first four here, were produced at about the time of opening. The second card shows well the lines of the rear of the building. Note the lounge projecting rearwards, its subtly shaped brick chimney and the single storey kitchen block to the left. The later two Dixon coloured postcards represent before and after the replacement of the steel windows (YHA Archive)



Len Clark remembers his introduction to YHA in those early years:

It all started not long after I had left school when an office workmate invited me to join him for a weekend's walking in the Surrey Hills. We will stay overnight, he explained, in a youth hostel. This was terra incognita for me but the experience was to be one of the most important in my life. We arrived at dusk at a modern, specially built hostel at Holmbury St Mary, where I found a whole set of strangers, friendly and likeminded in their enjoyment of the open air. After supper the warden appeared wearing lederhosen and led the singing of what today would be thought of as innocent folk songs. I was hooked on the idea and having enrolled in the YHA found there were 200 other exciting locations where I could stay in all parts of the country. And all for the very manageable sum of a shilling (5p) a night! I began to plan future trips, either alone or with one or two friends.



**HOLMBURY ST. MARY.** *The Radnor Road, Holmbury St. Mary, nr. Dorking, Surrey. TEL. Abinger 175. To be opened on July 13th, 1935.* The London Region's Model Hostel is bounded on two sides by Shere Common, and immediate access can be had to wooded hills and the heaths of one of the most beautiful and popular districts near London. The proximity of other hostels makes a day's intensive exploration possible, whilst its proximity to the Pilgrims' Way makes it a useful half way resting place on the trek from Winchester to Canterbury. Its accessibility from London should tempt those who use hostels at week-ends. The building is of simple, modern design, built in local brick. Kitchens with electric cooking, hot

and cold showers and low temperature concealed heating are other features of the Hostel.

M24, W24 : PROVISIONS, Hostel \*\*\* : MEALS 1/-, 1/3 : STATIONS Gomshall 3m, Dorking North 8m : BUSES Dorking-Guildford, frequent : Dorking-Holmbury, infrequent : CAMPING : DISTANCES Capel 8½m, Shere 4m, Godstone 17m, Ewhurst 6m, Thursley 16m.

1 2



THE YOUTH HOSTEL, HOLMBURY ST. MARY, SURREY



3 4

1: walkers set off from Holmbury in the early days; 2: details from a 1935 YHA Regional Guide; 3: a posed photograph on a pre-war postcard shows the contemporary styling well. Note the Crittall-style metal-framed window and door and Miss PC Pott's work; 4: the men's dormitory downstairs, large enough to accommodate 24, but with segregated sections for greater comfort and privacy – an early glass slide image (YHA Archive and author's collection)

When war came, the hostel remained in regular use and continued into 1940 before being requisitioned by the Sub-Area Quarters Commandant, Guildford, on 6th August. With typical confusion, it was back in use as a youth hostel by December 1940 and for part of 1941 before succumbing to military demands.

In 1940 an anonymous writer wrote this holiday log entry. The electric cookers had by now given way to gas:

The hostel had a huge inglenook in which a small fire basket filled with logs gave out tremendous heat. We had little gas cookers on which you could boil or grill and in normal times hot water would presumably come out of the taps.

The hostel remained closed for 1942-45, though always with a healthy prospect of being returned to YHA; as early as April 1945, London Region announced that Holmbury hostel was derequisitioned, but it was to be a year later when it could resume. *YHA Rucksack Magazine* announced that reopening would be early in 1946, while the 1946



handbook advised summer. Limited overnight figures for that year would suggest the later opening. In keeping with the times, the property was re-equipped with second-hand materials and equipment from closed hostels.



Walkers and cyclists. 1: an anonymous photograph, probably of pre-war vintage. It shows off well the clean lines of the design. 2-4: post-war photographs from the archive of the Harrow and Wembley YHA Group. YHA Social Groups such as the H&W flourished after the war. London alone had 50 or so. The final photograph shows the Group's proud banner (YHA Archive)

Schoolgirl Catherine Hannam (15) entered a holiday log for a YHA essay writing competition in 1962 with this comment; 25 years after it opened, Holmbury was still considered modern for a youth hostel:

We were very impressed by this, as it had baths, electricity and hot water.

The hostel had begun with 48 beds, equally divided between men on the ground floor and women upstairs. Though there was only one large dormitory for each sex, a degree of privacy was provided with partition bulkheads separating the beds into three groups of four double bunks, each group with its own window, beneath which was a fitted locker-cum-seat. In 1979 60 beds were somehow squeezed in, according to the annual handbook, but it is not clear how that was achieved. In recent times the dormitories have been divided into family rooms, easing to 46 beds.

On the occasion of the hostel's 50th anniversary in 1985 Graham Collyer wrote an extended article in the Surrey Advertiser, titled *Youth Hostel was a Trendsetter 50 years ago* and summarised as follows:

Its success in recent years is due in no small way to the resident wardens, Howard and Elizabeth Piner who, with their children, live on site and extend a warm welcome to all who seek shelter. They have been at Holmbury for 16 years and run a happy home for people from all walks of life, and of all nationalities, and shapes and sizes. Many of their visitors are members of young people's groups, from schools or clubs, who come to Holmbury to enjoy a break in the beautiful Surrey countryside. The hostel, purpose-built in 1935, stands in its own grounds of about two acres and is surrounded by a network of leafy lanes and woodland walks.

When the hostel at Holmbury was built the YHA movement was little more than five years old. The idea had started in Germany and when, in 1930, it arrived in England, the Carnegie UK Trust emerged to finance the building of four model hostels. They were to be situated not too far from large centres of population and Holmbury, at a cost of £2,500, was the third to be built. It was 'positioned at a junction point for many beautiful walks' and was opened in July 1935.

'The generous use of tiles and other easily cleaned surfaces made Holmbury reminiscent of the new schools, colleges, clinics, cinemas and even bus and Underground stations being built at the time,' say Mr and Mrs Piner. 'The provision of under-floor central heating, showers, a drying room and modern electric cookers in the members' kitchen was seen as a means of demonstrating how hostels might look in the future, at a time when many people did not enjoy some of these facilities in their own homes.

'In the eyes of some it was too posh, and this, combined with its uncompromising shape and functional layout, seemed far from the idyllic simple country retreat sought by keen youth hostellers. Indeed, in 1939, a mixed foursome of jokers entered the common room in evening dress to sit down to a four-course dinner to suggest that if hostellers have beautifully appointed hostels they should dress accordingly.'

Local reaction to the idea of a youth hostel at Holmbury in an area of opulent homes was at first unfavourable, says Howard Piner. 'The original signboard was tarred and feathered and another was removed.' But now, he says, the hostel is well received and part of the scene, although one has to look carefully for the distinctive green YHA triangle, minute in this case, if one is to find the hostel at first attempt.

In the lead up to the war regular hostellers rubbed shoulders with evacuees. When hostilities ended the hostel was in need of some refurbishment, but it did not take long for the house in Radnor Lane to be alive again with the walking and cycling brigade. By 1967 up to 5,000 visitors a year stopped at Holmbury and as further changes were made that figure rose towards 7,000.

Thirty years after it had been established the hostel started to take on the role that the architect had had in mind: that of summer camps for schools. But greater use began to put a strain on the building in spite of the efforts of the then warden.

'In the early 1970s we embarked on a programme to renovate the hostel to restore some of its original smartness,' said the Piners. 'However, this was not enough, because as early pictures showed, although luxurious compared to other hostels in 1935, it seemed spartan by modern standards. What was needed was for us to update the original internal appearance and add new things which would be appropriate to its original purpose, that of demonstrating new features to hostelling, and offering a high standard of comfort.

'Each year small improvements were made to the hostel internally and in 1975 new window frames gave the building a more modern look. However, in the late 1970s the biggest change of all took place when an extension was designed by Cliff Hatfield. This was to provide a much-needed improvement to the warden's living and working conditions, at the same time enhancing the overall appearance of the building.'

The late 1970s improvements were made through the Job Creation Programme, at a nett cost to YHA of £11,000. In 1991 a major rebuilding plan was drawn up, to include a large extension to the rear, under a gable roof; it was soon much reduced to a small capital project to subdivide the dormitories provided 12 four-bedded rooms and two two-bedded. Washing and showering facilities were replaced and the enhancements proved very popular with families. The oil tank was renewed. Plans to expand the warden's quarters further were carried out in 1992.





*Keen YHA member and volunteer George Miller of Lincoln travelled the network, recording a host of hostels with excellent colour transparencies. These two show the rear lawn and a cheerful, if narrow, members' kitchen at Holmbury in 1974 and 1984 respectively. Note the six bright blue gas-ring kettles, a rarity in hostels nowadays, and the surviving Lobb-designed cupboards from 1935 (author's collection)*

Nevertheless, the hostel was put on the closure list after the 2001 foot-and-mouth losses, and the 2003-04 handbook advised that it might close during its currency. There was a change of heart, however, as the hostel could offer, uniquely, rural group facilities close to London. From 2007 the capacity was further relaxed to ten 4-bedded, two 2-bedded and one family room for three. Holmbury St Mary hostel was used as a Do It 4 Real Summer Youth Camp Site in 2006, 2009 and 2010.

The original staff accommodation was in the area to the immediate right of the hostel entrance, above the warden's office. In later years this was expanded with two building phases, first another floor above the kitchen area, and second a new two-storey extension to the right of that. At some stage two small brick structures on the roof, housing water tanks, were replaced with timber equivalents.

Wardens have included, at the outset, Mr and Mrs AW Richardson, followed before the war by Mr and Mrs Ralph & Gwen Langford. Later managers have been Mr Scott-Cowell, Mark Farmer, Ian Collins, Gary Jervis, and most recently Gwen Owen and Daniel Stammers, who has overseen the development of an adventure playground within the hostel grounds, including a story-telling circle through a project provided by Bolsover Woodland Enterprise Ltd.



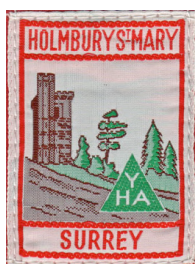
*Modern images of Holmbury St Mary youth hostel. 1: cheerful back garden; 2: manager's accommodation built above the kitchen and to the right of it; 3&4: entrance lobby (the plaque saved from Ewhurst Green) and dining room (YHA Archive)*





A very well maintained hostel. 1: stairwell, with original tiles and brass handrail; 2: bedroom; 3 garden volunteer (YHA Archive)

Overnights – inclusive periods each year as follows									
1935-1991: previous Oct to Sept; 1992: Oct 1991 to Feb 1993; 1993-present: Mar to following Feb									
W: wartime closure									
*: 17 month period; +: notional figure included for exclusive hire and/or camping									
...	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938	1939
...	...	...	...	...	1067	3841	4003	4320	4553
1940	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945	1946	1947	1948	1949
3285	open	W	W	W	W	1709	4531	5104	4930
1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959
4704	4421	4776	4901	4833	4483	4493	4721	4113	4139
1960	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969
3978	4227	4606	4310	4527	5006	5856	6061	5368	5156
1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979
4999	5961	5834	6044	6884	6586	7101	6845	6529	5550
1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989
6607	5405	4927	6502	7147	7456	6956	7891	8659	8149
1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
7696	7075	9887*	7673	7047	7434	8830	8020	8648	7739
2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
7825	5577	7483	6491	6615	6234	5867	5948	5626	6052
2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
5001	6739+	6936+	7641+	7246+	8478+	9505+	9050+	7480+	9058+



Another frieze detail, framed by Holmbury hostel ephemera

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