



YHA (England and Wales) Youth Hostel Profile

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

Ottery St Mary and Beer Youth Hostels

Ottery St Mary [West Hill] Youth Hostel 1936 to 1960

Melverley, Metcombe Lane, West Hill, Ottery St Mary, Devon

Historic County: Devon

YHA Region: Devon & Cornwall

GR: SY 074942

YHA is indebted to John Palk, nephew of Louie Gard, for his assistance in clarifying many details of the West Hill hostel story and for providing his sketch plans from memory in 2021

In its 1936 annual report, YHA's Devon and Cornwall Regional Council announced that new hostels had been opened at Ottery St Mary in Devon and Lelant and St Agnes in Cornwall. All three had had a very successful year, the total of overnights at Ottery St Mary, 2,123, being the biggest of any of its hostels. Apart from St Agnes on the North Cornish coast, it was also the largest, with 32 beds; the capacity was reduced to 24 the following year, though a new regional record of 3,031 overnights in 1937 continued to eclipse all other area hostels. Alterations and additions were carried out in 1938, when the count of beds was restored to 40.

The warden in the first year was Mrs Hearn. In 1937 Mr Lathrope, who had initiated the building of the hostel premises, took over the day-to-day running, aided by his daughter Miss C Lathrope. She died in that year; Mr Lathrope is recorded as carrying on the wardenship alone from 1938 to 1940.

Charles Allen was Secretary for the Devon and Cornwall Region from 1933 to 1965. In his invaluable YHA memoirs of 1977 he recalled the development:

West Hill youth hostel, Ottery St Mary

This hostel opened through the efforts of a YHA Member, a niece of Mr Lathrope, owner of the West Hill property at Ottery St Mary. The niece prevailed on Mr Lathrope to build a small youth hostel in the grounds of West Hill. Eventually a single storey building was completed, ready for opening at Easter weekend 1936 [on 4th April], and functioned under his wardenship until it was requisitioned in 1940 for the London evacuees, who remained until it was derequisitioned in 1946.

It was during this war period, and following the closure of the Exeter hostel, that the Misses Gards, Louie and Alice, took up residence at *West Hill House* [sic, actually called *Melverley*], the house being separate from the hostel premises, and when the hostel property became available after the war, they were able to take over the wardening from Mr Lathrope and continued to do so until 1960. During this period the whole of the premises was purchased by the Association, it being a popular and busy hostel, wardened by two popular lady wardens. They often stated that they would like to have an all-boys hostel, I think they had a soft spot for the boys.

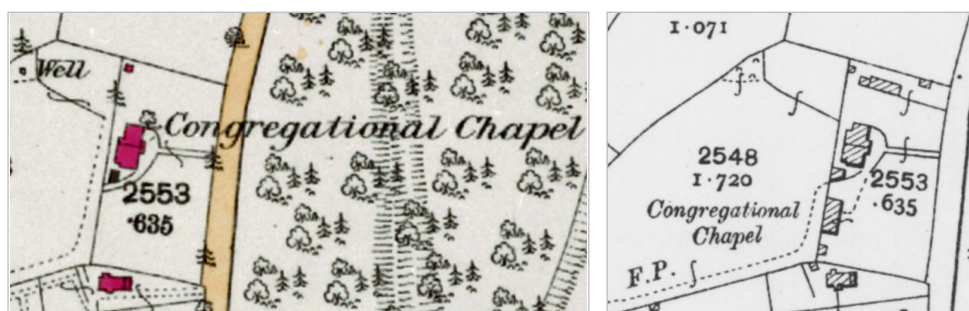
At the opening of the Beer hostel on the coast, it became necessary to close West Hill, the Misses Gards then retiring from wardening after some 25 years' service at the two Bude hostels at Flexbury and Stratton, Exeter and West Hill.



OTTERY ST. MARY. The hostel here has been specially built for the purpose, so it is convenient and comfortable. The building is situated down a turning from the Exeter—Ottery road, about 250 yards from the village of Westhill. Westhill forms a valuable link with the Portsmouth group of hostels.

The Warden, Youth Hostel, Westhill, Ottery St. Mary. (12 men, 8 women). *Sta.:* Ottery St. Mary. *Bus:* Exeter—Ottery St. Mary. All year. *O.S.* 138.

Location map and hostel details as found in the South-West Region's attractive regional guide of 1938 (YHA Archive)



25-inch maps of 1888 and 1903

The origins of the building that came to be known as *Melverley* are complex, but are perhaps most clearly demonstrated by the way it is represented on two 25-inch OS maps either side of the year 1900. The two extracts above are dated 1888 and 1903, and show significant differences. In the first, the building is unequivocally marked *Congregational Chapel*. To the immediate southwest of it is shown a small hut or similar, the point from which sprang Mr Lathrope's youth hostel. The author has often been struck by the ecclesiastical appearance of *Melverley's* windows.

The second is dated 1903. The new Congregational Chapel was, in postcard views, an apparently more substantial two-storey building on open ground to the southwest of the old, and one may surmise that the original was deconsecrated and converted to the private residence, at some time named *Melverley*, that became Mr Lathrope's home when no longer needed, and from which he oversaw the construction of the new youth hostel alongside. Both maps show the main north-south thoroughfare, Metcolme Lane (later, Lower Broad Oak Lane). A path leads west from it to the original Congregational Chapel, later *Melverley*. The hostel building that sat south of it, forward of the chapel, was not built until the 1930s.

Curiously, the second chapel gave way to a third, seen on mid-20th-century maps a little way to the west of its predecessors. Like *Melverley* that has been demolished in favour of newer housing.



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The three photographs above are of the central figures in the West Hill hostel story, and are kindly supplied by John Palk. He gives the following brief account of their lives and work:

Photograph 1: Melita Gard and William Lathrope. Melita, the oldest of the Gard sisters, was housekeeper to William Lathrope at *Melverley*. How and when this came about I do not know. I believe William to have been the manager of the Ottery St Mary gas works prior to which he was an engineer in the carriage department of the London South Western Railway / Southern Railway at Eastleigh.

The Gard sisters, Melita, Louise, Alice, Florence (Flo) and Beatrice [John's mother] were born in Malta, their father being posted there. The family returned to England I believe in the late 1920s and resided in Plymouth.

Photograph 2: Louie Gard, the hostel warden from 1946 to closure.

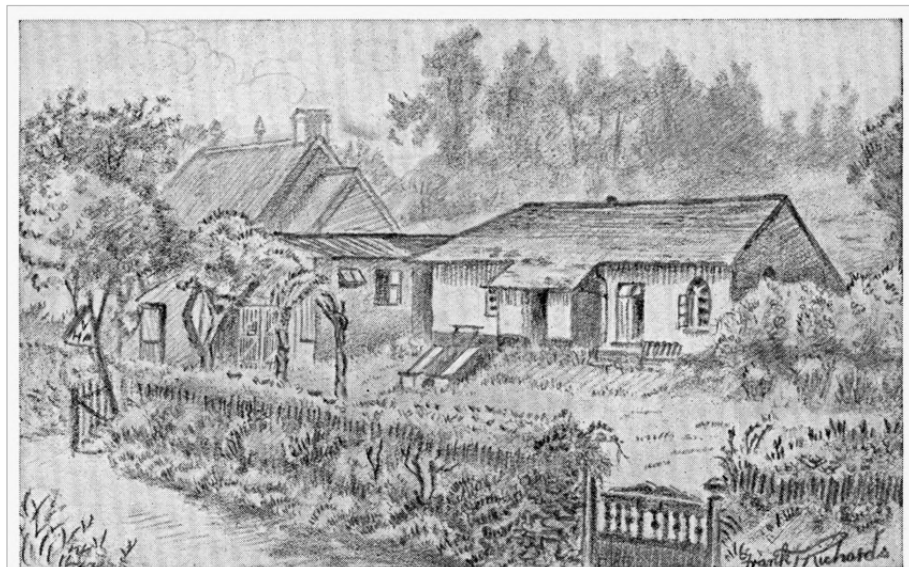
Photograph 3: Alice Gard and an unknown woman.



1



2



"Ottery St. Mary" Youth Hostel

3

Three postcards of Ottery St Mary / West Hill youth hostel –
 1 & 2: the house Melverley is put centre stage in these two postcards, with little focus on Mr Lathrope's purpose-built hostel, the flat roofed construction beyond the chapel building; 3: a wider view, as sketched by Frank Richards, probably late 1940s. This shows two gated entrances from the road. The more recent chapel lies beyond in pictures 2 & 3 (all author's collection)

During the early years of the war YHA lost many hostels to requisition by the armed forces or for evacuation purposes. Some went for good, while others were able to return to the Association. In some cases this took years. The West Hill property was lost for a time early on in the war, though a national notice of 20th June 1940 was issued, stating that the hostel had been reopened. Later that year, however, it was closed again for the remainder of hostilities, to house London evacuees.

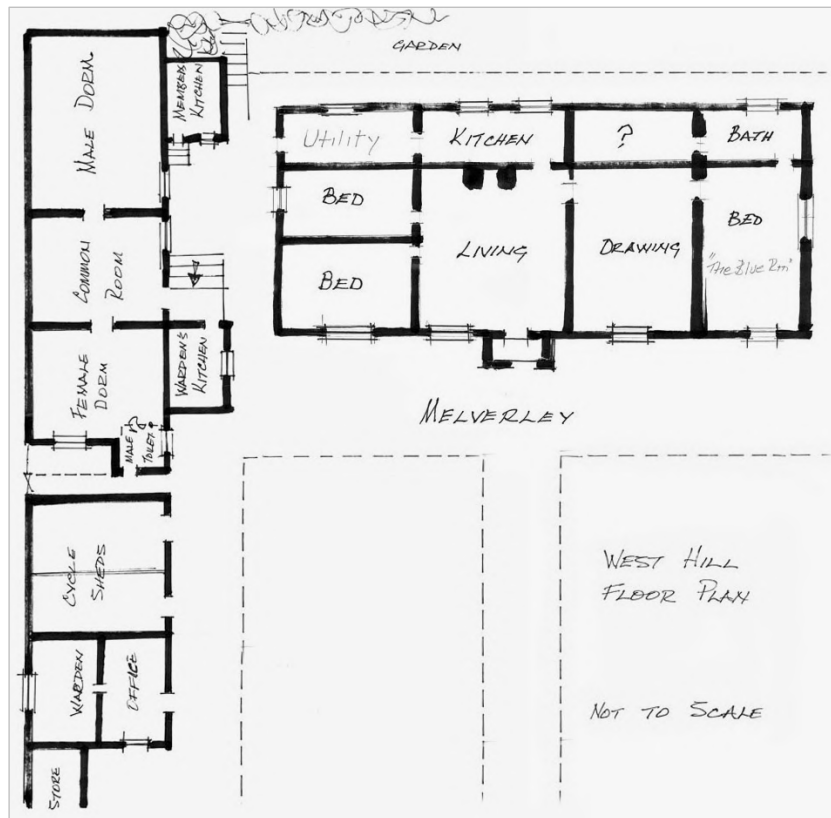
Eventually, on 19th April 1946, the hostel reopened. Devon and Cornwall Region approved plans to expand here. Mr Lathrope continued as owner for a few years, though from 1946, at slight variance with Charles Allen's recollection, Miss Louie Gard became warden. Her sister Miss Alice Gard is also mentioned, though her involvement seems to have been less formal.

The hostel was variously called *Ottery St Mary*, *West Hill* or any combination of the two. By 1948 different handbook identification experiments were being tried to assist with finding the hostel, lying as it did some way southwest of Ottery St Mary in a scattered village. Mr Lathrope died in 1949, allowing YHA to make a freehold purchase of the property for £1,200, in line with the common pattern of acquisition at the time. It is not stated in YHA's property book that the two elements of the property, the house *Melverley* and the specially-built hostel block, both passed to the care of the YHA Trust on 13th April 1949, though the photographs below suggest that they did.

Mabel Pratt stayed here in June 1950, and found it to be *a cosy little hostel, nowhere near the village*.



These two images by an anonymous photographer date from 1951. They show an element of disrepair at 'Melverley', and a plethora of sheds and doors in the hostel block (YHA Archive)



- 1: John Palk has kindly provided sketch plans of West Hill Hostel from his memory of family visits there after the war; they are presented as a composite here. The house Melverley (the original Congregational Chapel) is the part upper right, and was not part of hostellers' accommodation. Mr Lathrope's purpose-built hostel lay alongside, on the left (YHA Archive);
- 2: postcard view of the hostel's side entrance; 3: postcard view of the common room and door to the men's dormitory. Despite the hostel's humble construction, the room has been made inviting with its piano and flower displays (2&3: author's collection)

In 2021 John Palk has recalled his visits after the war:

As a 5-6 year old I have some memories of Charlie Allen. In the late 40s he had a car! He was held more as a friend rather than the 'boss'.

We visited Louise many times at West Hill during the late 40s and throughout the 50s, indeed my mother (and I) would spend many Augusts there helping out. I seem to recall that for most of the summer months the hostel was fully booked. For some it was the end of the first day's cycle from London on their way to more popular holiday areas of the south west.

The facilities were rather basic. The only heating was from a cast iron stove in the dining / common room. I do not recall that there was any provision of running hot water but the self-catering kitchen may have had a point of use electric water heater. The dormitories each had a couple of wash hand basins. Access to the men's toilets was external (through the common room, out of the main entrance, turn right, and right again in 20 yards and it was on the right. The women's was off their dormitory. The warden's cooking provision was an ageing double electric oven and hob and a small 'Calor' gas oven. The member's kitchen had a small Calor gas stove. But there was a telephone, the number being Ottery St Mary 300. With such basic facilities it is little wonder that closure came in 1960.

Milk was delivered in quart bottles, with the cardboard top, from Castle Farm just up the road. Cream extended for at least a third of the bottle. I would be dispatched for more if it was seen to be running short. Water was from a spring in the 'Dell' at the back (northwest corner) of the property whilst drainage was to a septic tank in the southeast corner by the road. The Post Lady delivered twice a day and outgoing mail would be left on a table in the office and collected at the same time.

General supplies were ordered from a representative of Beechwoods of Plymouth, who I think called monthly and arranged delivery the following week.

Referring to the photographs:

The main white building I always knew as *Melverley*, indeed this was the name on the gate. This was the residence of William Lathrope. The corrugated asbestos roofed hostel buildings are more clearly shown in the sketch postcard on page 3. The large window in the centre of the sketch is that to the warden's kitchen, the members' kitchen mirroring this beyond the steps to the entrance and out of sight behind *Melverley*. The small high-level window was to the gents' toilet, the entrance to which can just be made out in the sketch.

The window just visible by the corner of *Melverley* in photograph 2 on page 3 is that to the common room; the handrail to the main entrance can just be made out in front of it. The slatted work to the left centre of the sketch is to the cycle sheds. The door to the left of these was to the warden's office/accommodation. Between the cycle shed and the gents' toilet was a path that gave access to the chapel grounds, the [second] chapel being the gabled building beyond in both the sketch and photo 2.

There were two entrances, the main one being by the large gate in the foreground of the sketch, the second a pedestrian entrance used primarily by the post lady.

In 1956 a new self-catering kitchen was being planned. Pat Packham stayed at West Hill in 1958, and observed wryly:

The same meals were served every day. For evening – potatoes, peas, mixed veg, meat roll, jelly and blancmange, and bread and butter and jam. For breakfast – porridge, gluey potatoes, cold egg and a few beans. We wondered if the jellies were wartime relics.

In 1960 time caught up with the enterprising and useful hostel that Mr Lathrope had opened almost 25 years before. Devon and Cornwall Regional Council and the Exeter Area Committee felt that the property could not be adequately expanded, and an improvement had been found at Beer. It was sold on 15th June 1962 for £2,800. John Palk adds:

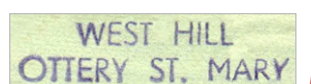
With the closure of West Hill looming, I believe that Louise was offered the soon-to-open hostel in Boscastle. I recall that we visited the proposed building on the quay. However, there were some difficulties which delayed the project and hence Mullion [the first YHA hostel at the Lizard in Cornwall] came to the fore.

An article in *Youth Hosteller* of September 1962 described the unstinting service Louie and Alice gave to YHA:

Pioneer Days

In 1936 Miss Louie Gard volunteered to open a hostel at Flexbury, Bude, and with the help of her sister Alice, she put up £100 to pay the first year's rent. This generous impulse was well rewarded in that the hostel was a great success. Eventually they moved into bigger premises at Stratton, Bude, which was used until it was taken over in the war by the RAF. Louie continued wardening at Plymouth, Exeter, Penzance and the Lizard, and from 1946 until it closed in 1960 at West Hill.

Louie has retired for domestic reasons. The Region extends sincere thanks for 25 years of unstinted service with best wishes for a happy retirement.



1: hostel stamp, 1949;

2: hostel sixpenny one-inch tin badge, 1950s (author's collection)

Beer Youth Hostel 1961 to present

Bovey Combe, Townsend, Beer, Seaton, Devon EX12 3LL

Historic County: Devon

YHA Regions: Devon & Cornwall,
SouthWest, South

GR: SY 223896



Bovey Combe, Beer, is a most attractive Arts and Crafts country house in honey-coloured stone, built about the beginning of the twentieth century for Charles Bartlett, the artist, possibly by a Mr Webb. Bartlett (1860-1940) was reported as living in Beer in 1903 (about the time of the building of Bovey Combe, it is thought), though he set off on a round-the-world trip in 1913 and took up residence in the Far East after that. The house stands isolated on high ground at the north-west corner of the village, about ¾ miles from the coast and with a view of it.

The Devon and Cornwall Region annual report for 1961 was proud to announce that the main event of the year was the opening of the new hostel. An energetic working party had been organised to precede its opening on 17th May of that year; Mr and Mrs Beck from Penzance hostel were welcomed as wardens. As usual within YHA at this time, the hostel was opened hurriedly and piecemeal; only 24 beds were available at first as a temporary set-up, and no doubt planks, ladders and the smell of paint pervaded. Nevertheless, overnights were encouraging. The report expressed a hope that adaptations could be carried out prior to the 1962 season to give increased bed-space.

In his 1977 YHA memoirs, Charles Allen described the move from the aging Ottery St Mary hostel to its replacement, Beer hostel:

Beer hostel, Seaton, Devon

The Exeter Committee and Council were always keen to establish a hostel nearer to the East Devon Coast, and many a weekend was spent scouting around the area trying to locate a suitable property. Eventually, by keeping in contact with all the local housing agents in the area, we were informed of a property, Bovey Combe House, in Beer, near Seaton. A visit was arranged and we were all very impressed with the house, and its position. Negotiations were set in motion forthwith, with a view to purchase being made, but regrettably, the owners, Clinton Estates, were only prepared to enter into a lease. This was reluctantly agreed, but luckily, after a few years, Clinton Estates agreed to the sale of Beer hostel to the Association.

The house is beautifully situated on the hillside overlooking Beer, and fits in well with the new South-West Peninsula Coastal Path, which runs nearby. The opening of the hostel in May 1961 made possible the sale of Ottery St Mary hostel that had been on the cards for a long while. The hostel is still very popular, and the setting as lovely, through all these passing years.



Arts and Crafts at Bovey Combe: a shaped doorway, a mullioned leaded window and a rustic view – this one beneath a balcony and with a glimpse of the sea; all are typical of the first decade of the twentieth century. The lovely gentle ellipsis arch at the crest of doors and windows is repeated throughout the building (author's photographs, July 2017)

Curiously, the initial lease for 99 years was dated from 25th March 1903, possibly the year of construction. Typically, the hostel received grant aid from the Department of Education for setting up. The YHA Trust took on the safeguard of the leasehold.

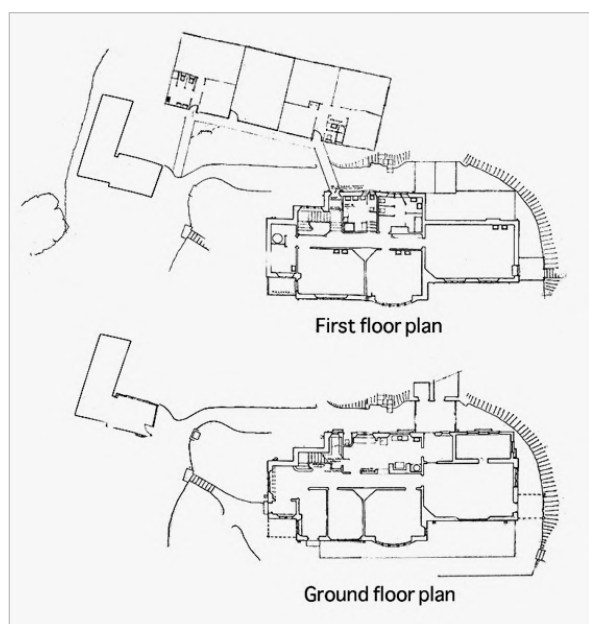


This attractive colour postcard of Beer hostel by J Arthur Dixon probably dates from about the time of opening. It shows well the terracing of the landscape on which the house sits. A second balcony is to be seen on the right (YHA Archive)

The 1962 annual report described the completion of the adaptations to the full capacity of 40 beds. This is likely to have been achieved by converting the house's garage, a simple L-shaped timber outbuilding to the left of the house, into a dormitory. In the first years the house itself was shared between the wardens, female accommodation and communal areas, while the garage annexe, initially with 12 beds, was used for decades as the men's dorm.

In 1967 the Becks left Beer hostel to run their own adopted YHA hostel at Marnhull, Dorset, until their final retirement in 1970. They were replaced, thanks to the long arm of coincidence, by Mr and Mrs Beer from Tavistock hostel, who stayed until 1975.

In 1969 Clinton Estates, the owners, offered to sell Bovey Combe to YHA. It is quite likely that YHA had been angling for this for some time, as purchases of formerly leased larger hostels were common in the post-war era. Such purchases gave the Association the confidence to invest that ownership brought; in this case the region envisaged developing an extension. Plans were already forming in 1973-74. The following year, the Trustees of Clinton Devon Estates accepted an offer of £42,050 for the freehold and finally, on 5th January 1975, the hostel belonged to YHA.



In November 1973 YHA outlined a substantial plan, the scheme shown on the left, to extend to the higher ground at the rear of the house. This would be an entirely new single floor extension, probably of unit-construction design in common with YHA's other contemporary developments, to be accessed from the back of the upper floor of the house, but the idea was not proceeded with. The expanded hostel would have featured a new common room, dining room, dormitory with five beds and warden's office. Considerable levelling of the extension's foundation would have been necessary.

Further plans in 1978 were not pursued; instead the garage / hut to the left of the house was rebuilt and enlarged in 1979 to continue serving, initially, as a men's dormitory; latterly it has been used as staff accommodation. The 1979 hostel reconfiguration led to improved layout and a small expansion of capacity from the established 40 beds to 46.

In summer 1982 wardens Maggie and Martin Usher, who had arrived in the mid-1970s, and stayed through the 1980s, welcomed new facilities within the hostel, according to *Hostelling News*:

Beer cheer

Maggie and Martin Usher appreciated the help of Bucks Berks Border Group in clearing the undergrowth and overgrowth and preparing the ground for a new cycle shed at Beer Hostel. Also new this year at Beer are improved reception and shop facilities. Another attraction that Martin is laying on is tea on the terrace, with cream teas during the season.



1 & 2: the garage / hut annexe can be seen to the left of the house in both photographs. 1: Ron Sant's photograph of May 1978 shows (just) the simple old garage / hut annexe; 2: George Miller's photograph of 1986 shows the annexe transformed. The original design of the house placed the western balcony to advantage for a sea view (both photographs author's collection)

In time YHA came to recognise that further investment at Beer was necessary. The Southern Region annual report for 1995-96 described action taken to deal with candid criticism:

Beer hostel has always failed to match in terms of facilities its lovely setting. This winter the building has been totally refurbished, giving central heating, family rooms and separate staff accommodation. The building will now be available in winter as a comfortable Rent-a-Hostel.

Duncan Simpson was Regional Operations Manager at the time and remembers well the older hostel, and some of its old-YHA modes of operation. He recalled in 2015:

What a special place, tucked above the village, looking out to sea. For a long time the wardens kept the grounds private, between ten and five. Some wardens had done that for years and they saw the hostel as their private domain when it was closed. The cycle shed was halfway down the drive and there were signs all the way up the drive, warning hostellers not to come any further between ten and five. Then, long overdue, the changes came along and signs like that were swept away. In the mid-nineties, the staff accommodation was moved into the cedar wood annexe, the rooms in the house made into bedrooms, new showers installed and the whole place given a shaking up.

Overnights at Beer remained steady for its first 35 years, at 4,000-5,000 per year, but with the 1995 improvements came a rapid expansion that has continued unabated. Christine Elsam, Nikki Keating, Guy Holdsworth, Sarah Willoughby, Jo Andrewes, Jon Norman, Mike Ruiter and Amy Bates guided the hostel through a 25-year period of growth through the 1990s into the new century. In the 2000s, high 6,000s were the norm, and when Gwen Owen took the reins in 2013, 7,000. In 2015 camping and glamping in bell tents were added to the attractions of Beer hostel, and the dizzy heights of almost 10,000 overnights were reached in 2017.



Today the layout of Bovey Combe House remains straight-forward: downstairs, a long corridor from the entrance serves, on the left, the stairs, reception and staff kitchen. It leads to a pleasant large dining room for 34, with self-catering kitchen to the rear of the house. On the right are two bedrooms, for 4 and 5 respectively, and a spacious lounge. Upstairs are six further bedrooms: two 4-bedded, two 5-bedded (one for females) and two 6-bedded (one for males and one en suite). There are 39 beds in the house and two standard bell tents and camping on the lawn.



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4 5



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A beautiful building and setting.

*1: Bovey Combe, Beer, is a typically asymmetrical Arts and Crafts house to show off a range of design features;
2: the lovely central lounge, with curved bay; 3: above the lounge is this bedroom with similarly attractive windows;
4: the theme is carried on in the spacious dining room; 5: camping and picnicking opportunities at Beer hostel;
6: a beautifully landscaped lawn, ideal for relaxation and outdoor accommodation (YHA images)*



Bovey Combe House, in its lovely surroundings, from the south-east (aerial photograph, YHA Archive)

Overnights – inclusive periods each year as follows 1936-1991: previous Oct to Sept; 1992: Oct 1991 to Feb 1993; 1993-present: Mar to following Feb ♣: Ottery St Mary Hostel; Δ: Beer Hostel; ●: 18 bednights probably for the end of 1960 *: 17 month period; +: notional figure included for exclusive hire									
...	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938	1939
...	...	...	...	...	...	2123♣	3031♣	3034♣	2149♣
1940	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945	1946	1947	1948	1949
681♣	W♣	W♣	W♣	W♣	W♣	2263♣	2865♣	3075♣	2762♣
1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959
2813♣	2774♣	2726♣	2379♣	2240♣	2185♣	2105♣	1970♣	1835♣	1804♣
1960	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969
1723♣	18●♣	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
...	1369Δ	3311Δ	3927Δ	4089Δ	4002Δ	3802Δ	4050Δ	4094Δ	4342Δ
1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979
5164Δ	4989Δ	5091Δ	5335Δ	4851Δ	4997Δ	openΔ	5019Δ	4634Δ	5111Δ
1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989
4959Δ	4241Δ	4141Δ	3907Δ	4063Δ	3483Δ	3527Δ	5503Δ	4239Δ	4354Δ
1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
4703Δ	5465Δ	5465*Δ	4545Δ	4083Δ	3994Δ	6282Δ	6287Δ	7019Δ	6835Δ
2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
6294Δ	6423Δ	6781Δ	6870Δ	6732Δ	6586Δ	7433Δ	6982Δ	5418Δ	5215Δ
2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
6451Δ	7796+Δ	7886+Δ	8203+Δ	8426+Δ	9016+Δ	9063+Δ	9904+Δ	9510+Δ	9421+Δ

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