



YHA (England and Wales) Youth Hostel Profile

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

Oxford Youth Hostels

Oxford [Jack Straw's Lane] 1936 to 2001

32 Jack Straw's Lane, Oxford OX3 0DW

Historic County: Oxfordshire

YHA Regions:
Oxford, Midland, Central

GR: SP 533074

YHA Oxford Regional Group was formed in the very early days of the Association, in December 1931. It was one of the smallest of the original 19 regions, and relatively impoverished. By 1935 ordinary membership had risen to 317 and the special-status University membership to 508. However, apart from a short-lived accommodation hostel in 1932 only at Manor Farm, Cassington, six miles north-west of the city, no local suitable building could be found. The region's annual report for 1935 confessed that they had no building and no funds; the best that was offered was a list of temporary bed and breakfast arrangements in approved lodgings in Oxford for 2s.6d.

At last, a large red-brick property became available on Jack Straw's Lane, a mile or two north-east of the city centre in quiet Headington. Cowley House dated from 1898 and had been unoccupied for four years. YHA put out appeals for major loans and gifts to buy and adapt the property to hostel use.



1: an early postcard of the Jack Straw's Lane youth hostel in Oxford. The photograph was recorded before the new wing was completed at the far south-west corner to the rear of the building; 2: a later postcard showing the extension (YHA Archive)

The house was purchased freehold for £2,100, adapted for a further £150 and vested in the YHA Trust on 31 March 1936. It was described as in a barely-ready state when opened on Maundy Thursday, 9 April, of that year, but was afforded the early and rare status of YHA Demonstration Hostel, a kind of national blessing in order to receive financial support, £755 from the Carnegie Trust and £700 from the Cadbury Trust, and essential publicity for the burgeoning association. The first warden was Mrs Daly, who retired after 15 years in 1950, though it is not clear if she was employed by the Association in the years of displacement during the war.

In its first year the hostel accommodated 20 men and 20 women, but was soon hard-pressed to cope with demand, an ever-present story in the history of this youth hostel. The 1937 annual report explained that the capacity was being increased to 64, many being turned away at peak times, and lodging found for them at neighbouring boarding houses where possible; there was plenty of room for more beds but an annexe would be needed for bathrooms, etc, and plans had already been drawn up. Meanwhile, in the spirit of the age, Jesus College had gifted chairs and sofas.

In 1938 the cost of the planned annexe was put at £700. Then, as portents, the hostel became for two days a centre for the fitting and distributing of gas masks, and the Regional Council agreed that all youth hostels would be made available to the authorities. Nevertheless, the new annexe was completed by Easter 1939, and accommodation increased to 98, though the advantage was short-lived.

Jack Straw's Lane hostel was unavailable throughout the war years. It was let at the beginning of hostilities to Poplar (or Poplars) School with Oxford Regional Group responsible for running it, and perhaps with Mrs Daly in charge. By 1940 the region had lost Oxford, Stow-on-the-Wold, Shipton Downs and Watlington hostels to the war effort and only Stony Stratford, North Newington and Weston were available. A summer temporary arrangement at an old Manchester College building provided a small recompense.

The hostel was returned to YHA in June 1945, though no doubt unfit for immediate re-use; it reopened on 2 January 1946 with the full complement of 50 beds for men and 46 for women. The immediate post-war years saw unprecedented expansion of Oxford hostel, as throughout the network. The pre-war record of 6,000 overnights had risen to 13,000 by 1950, a plateau that was maintained, but without further expansion, until 1965.

From 1951 to 1977 shortages of YHA accommodation during the peak summer holiday periods at Jack Straw's Lane were alleviated by a series of temporary seasonal hostels in loaned or hired public or educational buildings mainly to the east side of the city, details of which follow this section.

In 1953 the City Council billed YHA for £500 for repairing Jack Straw's Lane, though the share or the extent of the works on this long thoroughfare was not recorded. The expense was so great that YHA instigated a special fund to meet the cost. It does suggest that the YHA Region saw the site as an essential investment; the following year it was looking for ways to build a second annexe in the hostel grounds to cope with demand, but this idea proved impracticable. Nevertheless, the capacity rose from 98 to 112 in 1954.



The main entrance at Jack Straw's Lane, from a YHA postcard of the post-war era. This face of the building was at right-angles to the Lane. The porte-cochère was a throwback to the Victorian era and was later removed (YHA Archive)

In April 1955 Pat Packham was enjoying a hostelling trip, recorded in her diary *Holiday in the Cotswolds by Bicycle*, where she recorded a stay at Oxford hostel:

The dormitory (Pilkington) was occupied by seven school-girls and four college students. The students were most unsociable. Two Germans, however, occupied the other two beds so I went into supper with one of them. We formed quite a league of nations. In the dormitory were two Malay or Chinese, two New Zealanders, an Australian, a French girl and four other English.

OXFORD (OX). *Jack Straw's Lane, Oxford. Tel. Oxford 6997.* Situated in the Upper Thames Valley where the Cherwell and Thames meet, Oxford offers delightful boating and river walks and gives easy access to the Cotswolds and Chilterns. The briefest stay should include a visit to some of the Colleges, Chapels, Halls and Gardens which are generally open to the public. Magdalen College, the High, St. Peter's in the East, New College, Radcliffe Square, the University Church of St. Mary, Christ Church and the Cathedral must be visited. They provide the visitor with examples of architecture from the Norman of St. Peter's to the Classical Renaissance of the Radcliffe Camera. The gardens have a quiet dignity and beauty of their own. Walks in Oxford include (1) Christ Church meadows or along the river from Folly Bridge to Iffley—the mile of water well known as the Isis on which the May Bumping Races are rowed and where eights are generally to be seen training; (2) the Mesopotamia Walk to the University Parks where in the Summer Term first-class cricket matches are played; (3) Cumnor Hurst to Hinksey and on to Jarn Mound—a splendid view point—and the National Trust Property on Boars Hill. Close at hand are walks over Shotover Hill.



Entry from the YHA Regional Guide of 1957 (YHA Archive)

Extra land near Jack Straw's Lane was purchased freehold on 28 August 1975 and passed to the YHA Trust. Its intended purpose is not recorded, though in the late 1970s a further annexe plan for the grounds was refused by the City Council, as too much traffic would spoil the area's character.



Young cyclist David Ward was pictured leaving Oxford hostel in *Hostelling News* of autumn 1978 (YHA Archive)

By the mid-1980s the hostel had acceded to changing needs and a shift in regulations by the provision of a car park, though coaches still had to be dealt with away from the area. The capacity of the hostel stayed at just above 100 from 1954 through to closure in 2001, with minor variations. In its final year the hostel provided Lounge, TV room, self-catering kitchen, showers, cycle shed, luggage store, laundry facilities, grounds and camping.

The pattern of wardens after Mrs Daly is not fully known, but included Mr and Mrs E Madeley in the 1950s, Rosemary Parkinson for a lengthy period finishing with her retirement about 1993, her replacement Mark Stanley, Stan and Nick Martin later in the 1990s and finally Jonathan Brewer, who transferred to the new hostel in 2001.



*A later colour postcard of the main entrance, now with the porte-cochère removed.
The illustration is framed by two of the popular one-inch pin badges from the 50s and 60s (author's collection)*

The hostel closed on 14 May 2001 upon the opening of its replacement on Botley Road. After closure, plans for demolition and the construction of 19 flats were rejected. St Hilda's College applied to convert the building to student flats and a nursery. The building, now renumbered 32B, has been rechristened Dorothea Beale House after the founder of the College and is used as the college's nursery.

Oxford [Manchester College] seasonal hostel, 1940 to 1945

Manchester College Hostel, Mansfield Road, Oxford

Historic County: Oxfordshire

YHA Region: Oxford

GR: SP 517065

In the summer of 1940 YHA provided a temporary summer hostel to compensate for the wartime requisition of the Jack Straw's Lane site. A building belonging to Manchester College was hired. It was located on the corner of Mansfield Road and Holywell Street, and *obsolete for college purposes*. It opened on 28 June 1940, and operated through July and August, terminating some time in September.

Though barely 1,000 overnights were recorded here in the first season, it was clearly deemed a success; the region successfully asked to use the premises again the following summer, and repeated the request in all the long vacations from 1942 to 1945, by which time over 2,000 were staying each season. The final use was on 17 September 1945.

Misses Haslam, Bailey & Lawes volunteered as wardens in 1940; they were perhaps undergraduates. Volunteer student Cynthia Spoliar was working there in 1943.



*The corner premises belonging to Manchester College that were used as a seasonal hostel in 1940-45
(author's photograph, March 2016)*

Oxford [the Rookery, Ruskin College] seasonal hostel, 1951 only

The Rookery, Headington, provided by Ruskin College, Oxford

Historic County: Oxfordshire

YHA Region: Oxford

GR: SP 542077

The Rookery, now known as Ruskin Hall, lies to the west of Stoke Place in Old Headington. It was the home of the Finch family for two hundred years, was largely rebuilt in 1810 and became part of Ruskin College in 1946.

The Oxford Region annual report of 1951 described using the Rookery, Headington, *a charming house*, as an overflow hostel, thanks to a characteristically friendly proposal from Ruskin College. It was open from 21 July to 13 August 1951 only, a mere 24 days, though over 1,200 bednights were recorded there to supplement the 13,000 at the main hostel.

The Region regretted that it was not available again in 1952 as it was already booked; additional accommodation was urgently needed.



These postcards of the Rookery, Ruskin College, probably predate the YHA's time there (author's collection)

Oxford [57 Hilltop Road] seasonal hostel, 1951, 1954 and possibly other years

57 Hilltop Road, Oxford

Historic County: Oxfordshire

YHA Region: Oxford

GR: SP 538057

Mrs Mabel Pratt, of 57 Hilltop Road, Oxford, was a true YHA enthusiast. She discovered hostelling in those enthusiastic but lean years after the war, cycling round local hostels with her young family before venturing further afield. She was a gifted artist and writer, and produced some 25 volumes of perceptive hostelling diaries and travel sketch-books that are held in the Bodleian Library in the city.

In 1951, 1954, and probably the intervening years, she offered a summer house in her garden *on many nights* as an ad hoc overflow to Jack Straw's Lane. This kind of unofficial appendage to YHA was of a type occasionally found and apparently not discouraged within the Association in the crowded period after the war; another example was at Naburn Hall, which served the neighbouring hostel of York.

A native of Australia, Mrs Pratt eventually returned there, as did her hostelling children. Her son Roger Pratt, who with his sister Margaret formed the hostelling family trio of the earlier diaries, writes:

The references you have are to my mother offering to put up 'strays' after being contacted by the Oxford YHA. Certainly not for any payment. Mother was brought up in Perth and the family being well known in Perth and Adelaide, after the war we would get Australians dropping in and using a spare bedroom or the sunhut at the end of the garden.

Oxford [Old Marston reading room] seasonal hostel, 1954 to 1958

Reading Room, Old Marston, Oxford

Historic County: Oxfordshire

YHA Region: Oxford

GR: SP 526087

This was perhaps the most curious of all the official Oxford seasonal overflow hostels. After the First World War the vicar of Old Marston, the Rev JH Mortimer, converted a former carpenter's workshop on the west side of Oxford Road into an upper and lower room to form a village Reading and Club Room; it was also used by the Women's Institute. During and after the Second World War it was an additional overflow resource for the village school. The building gradually fell into disrepair and was demolished in 1958-59, with the proviso that a small garden, in memory of the Reverend Mortimer, should occupy the site.

The Oxford Region annual report of 1954 describes how about 500 bednights were recorded within a few weeks in 1954 at the Reading Room, Old Marston, *near the hostel (sic)*, and also refers to about 400 bednights at a local member's own home in Headington, no doubt Mrs Pratt's. In 1955 the Reading Room was again made available, through the churchwardens at St Nicholas', and used in conjunction with the now redundant Old Marston school buildings a short distance away, with 1,124 overnights recorded between the two sites from 19 July to 1 September 1955. The facilities were advertised as 'substandard'. Also in 1955 some Bank Holiday wayfarers were found beds in tents on the nearby Vicarage lawn.

Old Marston overflow hostel, consisting of the Reading Room with perhaps the old school in tandem, continued to be used in 1956 and 1957, when there were 886 and 889 bednights respectively. It ran again in 1958, with a different organiser from previous years, after at first being cancelled; 752 hostellers used the facility. The Reading Room would not be available 1959, however, as it was to be demolished; YHA were left without an overflow in that year, and perhaps for the two seasons after that.

A memorial garden now stands on the site of the Reading Rooms.



- 1: even temporary hostels issued hostel stamps for membership cards. This one dates from 1954;
2: the memorial garden to the Rev JH Mortimer, located on the west side of Oxford Road, Old Marston. After the First World War he purchased the carpenter's workshop that stood here and turned it into Reading and Club Rooms for the benefit of the village (author's photograph, March 2016)

Oxford [Old Marston old school]
seasonal hostel, 1955, possibly 1956-58, 1962 and perhaps other years

Old Marston Old School, 9 Elsfield Road, Old Marston, Oxford

Historic County: Oxfordshire

YHA Region: Oxford

GR: SP 527088

Old Marston old school is located on the corner of Elsfield Road and Church Lane. It was built as a National School in 1851, and closed in 1954, when the building became the church hall. It retains this function in 2020.

As well as the use in tandem with the Old Marston Reading Room in the later 1950s, certainly in 1955 and possibly in 1956-58, it was firmly recorded as operating as a summer overflow hostel in 1962, with 370 bednights.



The former Old Marston National School, made redundant in 1954 and converted to Church Hall use, in which guise it served the YHA as overflow for Jack Straw's Lane hostel. The building has all the usual facilities for a YHA temporary hostel – a large public space, good toilets and washrooms, kitchen, and (nowadays at least) two good rooms upstairs that may have formed small dormitories (author's photographs, March 2016)

Oxford [Old Marston new village hall] seasonal hostel, 1963, 1964, and probably to 1966

Old Marston Village Hall, (Mortimer Hall), Old Marston, Oxford

Historic County: Oxfordshire

YHA Region: Oxford, Midland

GR: SP 527084



Mortimer Hall, the new village hall built in 1962. The large hall on the left of the photographs would have suited YHA very well, though it is not clear how sleeping quarters were arranged (author's photographs, March 2016)

Old Marston's new village hall, Mortimer Hall, was opened late in 1962. YHA hired it as their seasonal hostel in late July and August 1963, when there were 553 bednights, and for four weeks in 1964, with 649. Further temporary overnights were registered in 1965 (666) and 1966 (729) at an unspecified address, probably here.

Mortimer Hall is a single-storey brown brick building named after the influential Reverend John Hamilton Mortimer, vicar of Old Marston from 1904 to 1951. The large central space (designed with a floating maple dance-floor), stage, kitchen and other facilities would have suited YHA admirably. A feature of the design was that it incorporated a small branch library, thus replacing a mobile unit. This facility remained in use in 2016.

Oxford [Joscas Little Theatre] seasonal hostel, 1967 to 1968

Joscas Little Theatre, Joscas Preparatory School, 4 Latimer Road, Headington, Oxford

Historic County: Oxfordshire

YHA Region: Midland

GR: SP 541068

This summer seasonal hostel operated in 1967, for one month only, and from 20 July to 31 August 1968, following advertisements for a warden for the mid-July to end of August period in *Youth Hosteller*. Just under 1,000 stayed in each of the two seasons.

The Headington Village website describes how, in 1956, a small group of people, teachers, and parents had set up their own school to prepare boys for Common Entrance. Originally the school only had about ten pupils including the three Farrell brothers, and was based in an outbuilding in the Farrell's garden. It was named Joscas after the nickname of the eldest brother, Julian Farrell. The headmaster soon purchased a large house in Latimer Road, and the school grew, taking in weekly boarders as well as day boys. But the owners of the house in 1969 wished to sell the site and the school had to move. From April 1970 the 70 boys were transported each day to the new school site at Frilford Heath. Graham Davies adds that Joscas Preparatory School used to stand on the site of St Luke's Hospital in Latimer Road, Headington, Oxford. The buildings have since been demolished and the site redeveloped.

Oxford [Slade Park old school] and Oxford [Cowley St James old school] seasonal hostels, 1969 to 1977

Slade Park Old School, Slade Park, The Slade, Headington, Oxford.

Historic County: Oxfordshire

YHA Region: Midland

GR: SP 551058

Cowley St James Old School, Beauchamp Lane, Cowley, Oxford.

Historic County: Oxfordshire

YHA Region: Midland

GR: SP 539038

Slade Park School was named as the summer seasonal hostel for men only in 1969. It was open between mid-July and the beginning of September 1969. Almost all the 1,000 guests came from overseas. Graham Davies adds that the school has since been demolished.

According to Midland Region annual reports during the 1970s, further temporary accommodation was available in each year 1970-77, usually with the same 50 beds. In 1973 it was open for one month only. The only sure fix at Slade Park was 1969; the overflow hostel may have remained there for some or all of the remaining years up to 1977, though from 1970 the address was unspecified. In the years between 1969 and 1977 the numbers at the overflow hostel were: 1165, 2180, 1994, 1888, 2293, 1965, 1339, 2218 and 2646, and for some of at least the earlier years the accommodation was for men only.

Lesley Williams, Chair of Friends of St James Old School has advised that the former St James School, Beauchamp Lane, Cowley, was used as a Jack Straw's Lane summer satellite. The school became redundant after the summer term 1975; the following article explains that YHA used the building in 1975; this may well have been the site in 1976 and 1977. The old school has fallen on hard times more recently, and various efforts to save it are in hand.

As Oxfordshire County Council vans drove off from St James' School last month with desks, tables, chairs and school equipment, another large pantechnicon drew up at the gate loaded with bedding for the old building's new role as a temporary youth hostel. The first youth hostel guests entered the building exactly seven hours after the last pupil had left [Cowley Chronicle, September 1975].



Cowley (St James) old school – Thelma Telling says farewell to pupils in 1975 (Cowley Team Ministry, by permission)

Oxford [Botley Road] 2001 to present

2A Botley Road, Oxford OX2 0AB
Historic County: Oxfordshire

GR: SP 504062



*The bow-shaped new millennium youth hostel, photographed from the south side of Botley Road, Oxford.
The station overbridge can be seen to the right of the hostel (photograph by the author, March 2016)*

YHA spent many decades searching for a site larger and more convenient than Jack Straw's Lane. The old hostel had served with distinction, with over one million hostellers staying since it opened, regardless of the temporary overflows elsewhere, but with a capacity of just over 100 and severe restrictions on parking, especially inconvenient for groups, a move had become increasingly essential by the end of the twentieth century. Any improvement was always constrained however by Oxford's property prices and shortage of development land within the city.

Nevertheless, towards the end of the twentieth century, ideas were beginning to flow for a new-build replacement in the suburb of Cowley, or on railway land to the west side of the tracks north of the station, near the canal. An idea developed for YHA to purchase a freehold plot of land on Botley Road, immediately west of Oxford railway station, on which to build their new hostel. The site could not have been more convenient. It opened on 14 May 2001, with an official opening following on 14 December 2001.



1 2



3 4



5 6



7 8



1&2: good amenity use has been made of the segment of land between the station and the hostel building;
 3: optimising space next to Roger Dudman Way; 4: an unusual view showing the proximity of the hostel to Oxford Station;
 5-7: the reception and Corner Café café-bar area; 8: the small terrace to the rear of the property
 (1-4: four more images by the author of the Botley Road hostel, March 2016; 5-8: recent YHA digital images)

The new YHA Oxford was built in brown-faced brick as a three-storey hostel with a lounge, quiet room, restaurant, self-catering kitchen, luggage and laundry rooms on the ground floor. Three accessible rooms were also placed at this level, while the bulk of the bedrooms were located on the upper floors.

At first there were 184 beds, rising by gradual degrees through 194 and 199 to 203 beds by 2016. The hostel was built with a manager's flat on the first floor, at the north end of the building. Very soon the manager, Jonathan Brewer, elected not to use the dedicated suite for his personal use, and within a year it was converted to three extra guest rooms, 117-119, creating 6 more beds. Two more 2-bed guest rooms, 100 and 200, were converted from a meeting room and a store room. For a time YHA made use of a staff flat across the road from the hostel; some staff accommodation remains, in reduced form, within the hostel. The reception was considerably modernised in 2009.

More recent managers have been Paul Sapwell (2006), Babeta Schneiderova, Nick Hoyle (2011), Nick Clements (2013), Jamie Grierson (2017) and Holly Swallowe (2019).

Youth hostels in Oxford have developed considerably over 80 years, and since the war have always been amongst the busiest in the YHA network. In recent years the Botley Road site and Cardiff Central have become the busiest hostels outside of London and Cardiff.

<i>Overnights – inclusive periods each year as follows</i>									
1936-1991: previous Oct to Sept; 1992: Oct 1991 to Feb 1993; 1993-present: Mar to following Feb									
♣: Jack Straw's Lane Hostel; †: Manchester College Hostel; R: The Rookery Hostel (seasonal); H: 57 Hilltop Road (unorthodox seasonal arrangement); M: various Marston sites (seasonal, see text); J: Josca's Little Theatre (seasonal); S: Slade Park/St James Schools (seasonal); Δ: Botley Road Hostel W: wartime closure; *: 17 month period; ^: the 2001 overnight figure is for both hostels									
...	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938	1939
...	...	...	...	...	...	3791♣	5983♣	6844♣	6250♣
1940	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945	1946	1947	1948	1949
W♣	W♣	W♣	W♣	W♣	W♣	7823♣	11112♣	14174♣	12995♣
1066†	1763†	2407†	2234†	2458†	2220†	...	...	...	...
1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959
13017♣	13283♣	13261♣	13232♣	12112♣	11257♣	11427♣	12417♣	11661♣	13046♣
...	1289R	...	...	506M	1124M	886M	889M	752M	...
...	openH?	openH?	openH?	openH?	...	...	...	...	...
1960	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969
13574♣	13608♣	13765♣	13436♣	13907♣	13950♣	14179♣	15304♣	15426♣	15878♣
...	...	370M	553M	649M	666M	724M	926J	992J	1165S
1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979
17539♣	17816♣	20585♣	21786♣	22484♣	21432♣	22791♣	22373♣	22304♣	23230♣
2180S	1994S	1888S	2293S	1965S	1339S	2218S	2646S	...	...
1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989
22220♣	20326♣	20478♣	18988♣	21728♣	22860♣	22492♣	23712♣	22432♣	25772♣
1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
27107♣	26692♣	31585*♣	25334♣	30655♣	32834♣	30752♣	30660♣	29503♣	28393♣
2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
30019♣	open♣	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
...	36935^Δ	46191Δ	48100Δ	50154Δ	50722Δ	47794Δ	52381Δ	51098Δ	54208Δ
2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
53251Δ	58141Δ	62586Δ	61187Δ	61400Δ	60245Δ	57306Δ	57329Δ	55413Δ	55380Δ