

YHA (England and Wales) Youth Hostel Profile

compiled by the Association's volunteer archivist, John Martin, 2020-03-01

Colwyn Bay and Conwy Youth Hostels

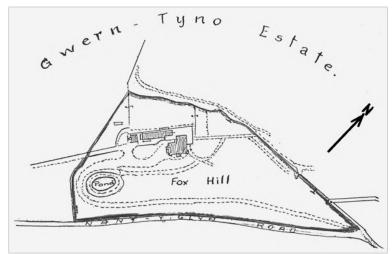
Colwyn Bay Youth Hostel 1954 to 1996

Foxhill, Nant-y-Glyn, Colwyn Bay, Denbighshire LL29 6AB
Historic County: Denbighshire
YHA Regions:
Merseyside, North Wales, Wales

GR: SH 847776

The May-June 1954 edition of *Rucksack* magazine carried an entry for a new hostel in North Wales:

Negotiations are proceeding for a new hostel in the Nant Glyn Valley, one mile from Colwyn Bay on the North Wales coast, probably to open during the summer. This hostel, an eighty bed one, will serve as a link between Bodlonfa, Maeshafn and the Conwy Valley hostels



A sales-plan sketch map of Foxhill, 1952. The house is the large building at the centre of the plot. To the west is a long line of brick outbuildings. The long curved drive and the ornamental pond will be noted. A contemporary auction notice described the property: superbly situated in beautiful timbered grounds – fine entrance hall, mosaic floor, 3 well-proportioned entertaining rooms, billiard room, 5 principal bedrooms (h&c, 1 with bath), bathroom, excellent domestic offices, Esse range, substantial 2-storey range of outbuildings and superior brick-built cottage, productive fruit gardens, lily pool, 2 greenhouses (YHA Archive)

Foxhill was one of Merseyside region's many substantial freehold purchases. Ministry of Education grant-aid was provided in view of its intended service to schools and young groups. The deeds were vested in the YHA Trust on 23rd July 1954 and the hostel duly opened one week later, on 31st July. It was a fine acquisition, a red-brick half-timbered villa of 1895, with stained glass, an attractive staircase and ornate fireplaces and door frames. There were substantial outbuildings. A private curved drive led up to the house from the Nant-y-Glyn valley road through ornamental grounds, which featured a small lake. As was common practice with YHA's larger new properties in the 1950s, capacity was deliberately limited at first, to 50 beds: better to create steady income even with the clutter of stepladders and pots of paint while the finishing touches were being applied.

Guy and Flora Markham were the appointed first wardens, though Miss Bradford from Delamere Forest hostel had stood in for the first few days. The Markhams were already successful wardens; they had opened Merseyside region hostels on the Isle of Man at Andreas in 1947 and Ramsey in 1953 before the move to North Wales. In 1958 they were appointed to the prestigious new London hostel at Holland House, staying until retirement in 1972. Colwyn Bay hostel was popular from the outset, the first two months, August and September, registering 1,100 overnights. By autumn, *Rucksack* was recommending the hostel to those taking late holidays in 1954, as it would remain open through the winter months. The same publication announced in the May-June 1955 edition that the work of adaptation on the fine new hostel was complete and that it was now fully open to members.







Postcards of Foxhill. I: this view dates probably from pre-YHA days. It shows well the elevated position above the narrow lane that leads from northeast (right) to southwest into the secluded Nant-y-Glyn valley. The rising private drive stretches from the white gates, extreme right, to the extreme left of the photograph, before doubling back up to the house (YHA Archive); 2: a postcard view from the southwest of Foxhill's main entrance, at the top of the drive, with lush vegetation all around. The distinctive and attractive appearance of the red Ruabon brick and upper storey mock-Tudor panelling, angled balconies and multi-faceted gables is typical of North Wales and Cheshire, and especially of the Colwyn Bay area (YHA Archive); 3: hikers set out from the gated entrance. Note the delightful period-piece hand-crafted YHA sign (author's collection)

COLWYN BAY

there is a goldfish pond to gaze into idly till the dinner bell goes. Badgers and foxes have been seen in the surrounding wood-

Hostel Close-up No. 34

Badgers and foxes have been seen in the surrounding woodlands and the red squirrel has not yet been displaced by its grey cousin.

IT is in Nantglyn, one of the valleys immediately behind Colwyn Bay, that you will find Foxhill. At Foxhill you are in the country, with country views from all the windows. But you are only one mile from the sea and you may either go down to the seaside to take your pleasures among the multitudes or make for the uplands with their solitude and their magnificent views of Snowdonia.

The hostel is a large and fairly modern building set in woodlands, with acres of well-kept garden. The vegetation is almost sub-tropical and the botanically-minded will find a great deal of interest in the many varieties of trees and shrubs. For the rest

The mocking laugh that may greet you as you come up the drive comes not from the Warden in his lookout but from the green woodpecker in the trees behind. And it is not a Boy Scout practising his patrol that keeps you from sleep at night but the barn owl out on his nightly jaunt. In fact, one might almost be writing about Tyndwr Hall, Llangollen—if it were not for the sea which is only a mile away.

'Hostel Close-Up' for the new acquisition was one of a regular series that appeared in Rucksack Magazine, this one for the November-December 1955 issue (YHA Archive)

The hostel soon settled in to a busy pattern and from 1956 achieved at least 9,000 overnights in most years. In his 1970s *History of Merseyside Youth Hostels*, Reg Taylor described how Colwyn Bay hostel was consistently popular over the years, its success not stemming so much from remaining a rare Denbighshire outpost as from being near the coast. It was the replacement the region had sought following the loss of Beech House, Abergele, as early as 1946.

In 1958 new wardens arrived, Ray and Rachel Morley. They were employees of their age, a hard-working couple dedicated to the YHA cause. Ray had helped to establish hostels at Llanddeusant (where he and Rachel met in 1948) and Neuadd Fawr, and was offered the new Poppit Sands, all in South Wales region, though personal circumstances intervened and enforced a YHA break. Lindsey Porter wrote in memory of Rachel on her death in December 2012:

Rachel had a First Class Honours degree in Geography and had planned a career in teaching but gave the best years of her life to YHA. She and Ray arrived at Foxhill with two very young children just in time for a very busy Easter week. Thus began many hard but happy years working for an organisation they believed in. They remained at Foxhill until they retired.

In 1959, they hosted Richard Schirrmann [the founder of the youth hostel movement in Germany in 1909] and his wife Elisabeth for the reopening by him of YHA Idwal Cottage after the extensions there.

They became successful managers, improving their hostel's profitability during difficult years. YHA's financial resources were stretched to the limit. Youth hostel budgets were woefully inadequate and wardens' wages were very poor. However a roof over one's head with food on the table was considered important, that and a profound love of the job. YHA depended a great deal on the resilience, patience and resourcefulness of its staff.



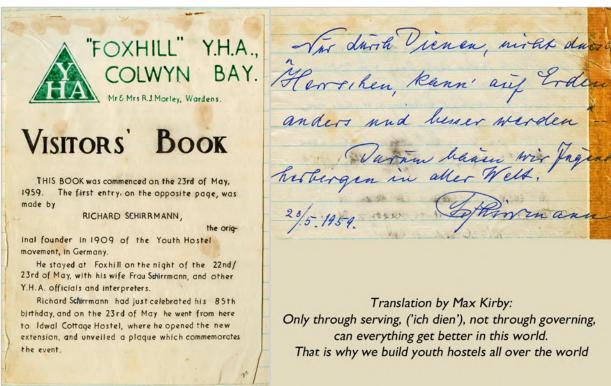


Wardens. 1: Guy and Flora Markham in charge at London's Holland House hostel, their next post after Colwyn Bay; 2: Future married couple Ray and Rachel Morley, second and third from the left on the middle row, at an International Volunteers' Working Party at the ill-fated Neuadd Fawr hostel in Carmarthenshire in 1949 (YHA Archive)

The Morleys stayed at the hostel for over a dozen years, leaving to run local bookstores in 1972. Just before then, in 1971, re-roofing work had been carried out on the annexe. The roofs gave increasing trouble at the hostel. The

Morley's eldest daughter, Helen Maurice-Jones, has continued the family tradition with YHA as National Officer and lifelong supporter, especially of hostels in her native Wales.





Early days — 1: a Danish YHA party posed by the entrance porch. Also present were Tom Fairclough, the regional secretary (extreme left); wardens Ray (kneeling, with flag) and Rachel Morley (two to his right) and on the front row youngsters Andrew and Helen Morley (later Maurice-Jones). Helen has donated these items and other artefacts from the hostel to the YHA Archive; 2: the opening pages of the Colwyn Bay youth hostel visitors' book, introduced on 23rd May 1959. They mark the visit by Richard Schirrmann, originator of the youth hostel movement. His message and signature grace the second page

















Working photographs of one of YHA's finest youth hostels, donated by Helen Maurice-Jones.

I: building date high above the entrance porch; 2: the rear side of Foxhill; 3: the large annexe alongside the left side of Foxhill. This incorporated three men's dormitories, numbered 9, 10 and 11, above tile-floored washrooms that were the original stables; 4: the warden's or manager's 3-bedroomed cottage; 5: a fine stairway and stained glass. In the basement below was Room 12. It had the biggest capacity and there was an external door into the gardens that served as a fire escape. Also in the basement were the self-catering kitchen and dining area, showers, a wash room, and a coal-chute store; 6: period detail in the hallway; 7: dining room with its title emblazoned; 8: Helen gives a cheery welcome (YHA Archive)







1960s designs: two attractive Merseyside region hostel stamps frame a one-inch pin badge (author's collection)

The next wardens were Derrick and Margaret Brown, another dedicated appointment; they stayed for 20 years, from 1973 to 1992. In each of their first few years the hostel achieved record overnights of over 10,000. The Merseyside region annual report for 1974 brought up the matter of roofs again: Colwyn Bay's were in poor condition and a complete re-roofing of the main building was planned for 1975. Another theme common to almost all the region's



hostels at this time was extensive fire precautionary work, necessitated by stringent new rules involving the installation of fire alarms, fire escapes and emergency lighting systems. The region had to find money hurriedly for expensive work at Colwyn Bay, Bangor, Llanberis and Pen y Pass, with further similar work planned for Capel Curig, Idwal Cottage, Llangollen, Lledr Valley and Penmaenmawr.

Left: the ornamental lake in the grounds (postcard, YHA Archive)

There was refurbishment in 1975 when the wardens' kitchen and wash-up were completely redesigned, re-roofing of the main building was nearing completion and plans for showers in the men's annexe building were well advanced. Suzanne Vernon, aged 14, enjoyed her stay here in that year. She wrote in her holiday log:

It was surrounded by trees and in the grounds were two thick ropes hanging from a branch which were really good to swing on. We found that we had been given the room with the balcony. It had a really good view.

A 1990 booklet for YHA school party leaders described the sleeping layout at *Foxhill*, especially with large groups in mind. Among the 11 bedrooms (there had once been 13) were three larger dormitories, two with 12 beds and one with 11. Four medium-sized 8-bed and four smaller 4-bed rooms brought the complement to 87.

When the Browns retired, YHA News magazine of May 1993 wished them well and advised that Colin Schofield, former warden of the just-closed Penmaenmawr hostel, was taking up the position as warden. It was now a sole responsibility post, reflecting a falling-off of numbers staying at Colwyn Bay hostel. Like his predecessors, he would also be responsible for taking bookings for the small Conwy Valley hostel at Ro Wen.

More trouble with the roof of the annexe was reported in a regional minute of 28th April 1995. It helped hasten the end of this fine youth hostel, which closed at the end of the 1996 season. It was thought by YHA's management that nearby Conwy would make a fitting alternative location, and a new hostel was already lined up.



The author photographed these fine remnants from Foxhill's youth hostel days almost 20 years after YHA withdrew. The house has reverted to its original use as a private residence, now subdivided, and remains in superlative condition (photographs by kind permission of the owners, May 2015)

Conwy Youth Hostel 1996 to present

Larkhill, Sychnant Pass Road, Conwy LL32 8AJ Historic County: Caernarfonshire

narfonshire YHA Region: Wales

On the Sychnant Pass Road, on high ground half a mile west of Conwy, a Victorian entrepreneur built the Lark Hill Hotel. It lay adjacent to the boronial-looking Bryn Corach, where T Arthur Leonard lived and worked for a time from 1914 while he ran Holiday Fellowship. Leonard was a true outdoors pioneer; he started the Co-operative Holidays Association in late Victorian times, transferred his energies to the early 20th-century Holiday Fellowship and later became involved with the Ramblers Association. In 1930 he became YHA's first vice-president. Leonard lived in the locality until his death in 1948. It is a remarkable coincidence that when the Lark Hill Hotel was demolished in the mid-20th century, the new building replacing it became, after time, the new Conwy youth hostel.





GR: SH 774773



Victorian splendour. 1: Bryn Corach, the highly ornate Victorian pile that still stands, is at the centre of this view, while the plainer, four-square Lark Hill Hotel is on the right. The Sychnant Pass road runs along the bottom of the photograph; 2: a postcard of the old Lark Hill Hotel, demolished in the first part of the 20th century and replaced by the TGWU Centre; 3: it is thought that this attractive garden shelter in the grounds of YHA Conwy may be a survivor from the Lark Hill Hotel (1&2: images from YHA Conwy's own Archive; 3: author's photograph, July 2019)

In the 1960s the Transport and General Workers' Union built a holiday and convalescent home for its members on the Lark Hill site. It was a construction typical of its time, utilitarian, flat-roofed, in brown brick, with extensive glazing and a protruding lift tower. Yet the property could take advantage of spectacular views to the north and south by having its dining room on the first floor and a viewing room at the top of the lift tower. The guests' private en suite rooms were located on the left side of the building, on the first and second floors. Staff rooms were on the right, on the first storey only. Lounges, offices, lift, stairs and access to the pleasant grounds to the rear occupied the ground floor. YHA largely adopted this accommodation layout.

A YHA Wales memo as early as September 1992 described how a Conwy hostel project, presumably not the later one, was under consideration. It had to be halted because of capital expenditure restrictions in a difficult decade.





On arrival. 1: YHA Conwy as it presents itself at the front entrance. Much of the hostel's layout is clear in this view. Through the entrance doors is a spacious hall area, from which lead various lounges and utility rooms, the lift and stairs. Until recently the hostel's reception was here, but as it was remote from the real centre of activities it made sense to move it up a floor. Above the entrance on the first floor is the hostel's hub. Here now is reception, main food service counter (which acts as servery for breakfast, bar and bistro), a very large dining room used also by self-caterers and plenty of comfortable lounge seating. On the image's left rise up the two accommodation floors, which are extended out of view behind the central lift tower. The tower itself incorporates an observation room with wide views. Previous TGWU guests would have enjoyed the same benefits. Out of sight to the right is a matching wing, first floor only. Hostel kitchen, self-catering facilities and staff accommodation are located here; 2: the breathtaking view northwards from the hostel entrance. Beyond the flagpole, just above the house roofs, are the Conwy Estuary and the Great Orme peninsula, with the spread of Llandudno and Deganwy at the centre and the Irish Sea beyond. Sloping land between the hostel and the Sychnant Pass road was sold off in 1996-97 for the housing seen here (author's photographs from September 2007 and July 2019)

After a delay, the Spring 1996 issue of YHA News was able to resume the subject of a new hostel here:

Conwy to Join YH Map

Some youth hostel projects take a long time to get off the drawing board, with time spent selecting a site, drawing up the plans, not to mention securing the necessary finance. However, just occasionally, a building crops up that is just about ideal for our use, in the right place. Just such an opportunity has been grasped at Conwy, gateway to Snowdonia.

A former holiday and convalescent home for members of the Transport and General Workers' Union has been acquired by YHA and will be converted into comfortable accommodation for around 85 members in rooms of 2 and 4 or 5 beds. All rooms will have en suite shower facilities and will be ideal for families, couples and groups. Disabled visitors will have access to the bedrooms via a lift, enabling the wheelchair-bound to enjoy the facilities. The building boasts full central heating, a large dining room, two lounges and an 'observation lounge' on the top floor. The new hostel is about half a mile west of the historic town of Conwy just off the road leading to the Sychnant Pass.

The YHA Network Working Party in its recent review of hostel provision in North Wales identified Conwy as a key location and this building came up at just the right time. The same group also recommended to the Board the closure at the end of the 1996 season of the hostel at Colwyn Bay and this was expected to go ahead.

Set in pleasant lawned grounds that offer ample parking for cars, minibuses and coaches, offering views over the town and Conwy Estuary, this will definitely be the place to stay for those planning a visit to Snowdonia (the rail link to Betws-y-Coed is ideal for this) or the beaches of the North Wales Coast.

In almost record time Conwy hostel opened, on 26th July 1996. Manager Eric Audige-Soutter said that it was full within hours. Like Colwyn Bay hostel 40 years before, it started on a reduced self-catering only basis with about 40 beds, while he was overseeing the development.

Early in October 1996, YHA News' Autumn edition chipped in with more detail:

Catch Conwy this Autumn while you can! On 13th September the Hostel opened its catering facilities to visitors. YHA Conwy occupies a stunning hill top location giving panoramic views over both the town with its busy harbour area on the one side and the picturesque Conwy Valley on the other. Facilities include comfortable en suite rooms. There's a well-equipped, well-designed self-catering kitchen, games room, meeting room, lounges, dining room and even a roof top observation area. Above all, there's a feeling of spaciousness about the whole place, something which YHA can rarely afford. During August, the hostel's first full month, 1,000 visitors came and enjoyed the facilities and the setting.

If you'd like to try out Conwy during 1996, there's just a couple of weeks left as it closes on October 27th for further conversion work during the winter, to reopen its doors on 14th February 1997. By this time it will be offering around 90 high-quality beds together with enhanced customer facilities. It will be a popular hostel, especially for families and international visitors, with good beaches on the North Wales coastline, many nearby historic attractions and easy access to major roads and the mainline rail system at Llandudno Junction. As the hostel manager puts it, 'Book now if you want to stay with us during the 1997 high season, as bookings and enquiries are already flowing at a high level.' Eric, formerly of Manorbier hostel, and his wife Julie, come with a high reputation for quality food and customer service, and they like the feel of the place: 'Manorbier was a challenge for us, now Conwy is an even bigger one. I'm sure we're going to enjoy it. Even our four-year old, Colin, is facing up to a challenge, that of learning Welsh in his new school.'

An open day for local people followed on 21st October. The next day Ian Lang, journalist with North Wales' *Daily Post*, elaborated:

A new-look youth hostel proud to be flagship for Wales

Staying in a youth hostel can be more like staying in a comfortable hotel. That is the new 21st century image the Youth Hostels Association is battling to create in the minds of the public.

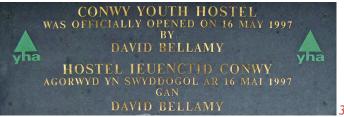
Now North Wales has a flagship youth hostel of its own. Association members can expect comfortable rooms, cleanliness and a friendly welcome as well as a bit of privacy. That comfort comes for members at a remarkably low price of just £9.10 a night per adult and £6.15 for under 18s. Yesterday, the new hostel just outside Conwy threw open its doors to allow the public to have a look around.

The building was formerly run as a convalescent centre. Now the Youth Hostels Association are spending £300,000 on revamping the building and hope to get a further £100,000 from various sources to carry out more improvements. Eventually, the hostel will have 90 beds [actually, it never listed more than 82] and estimates that it will accommodate up to 15,000 visitors from around the world every year. As well as being a boost to the tourism industry, the local economy will benefit with the hostel expecting to provide up to 20,000 meals a year for those people not self-catering.

Hostel manager French Canadian Eric Audige-Soutter explained that new standards of welcome, comfort, cleanliness, privacy and care had been devised for youth hostels around the world: 'The YHA in England and Wales is among the first to adopt them. It is what people expect these days. People want a safe, clean and secure environment. The Conwy hostel is very much a flagship for Wales. Our standards here are very high.'





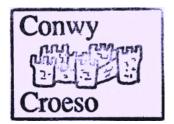


1: David Bellamy, Eric Audige-Soutter and staff welcomed chief guest Betty Williams MP to the official opening (YHA News);
2: about the time of the official opening, there was a ceremonial planting of a prunus, a double-flowering ornamental cherry tree in the grounds behind the hostel. Among the 12 YHA representatives were (1st from the left) Assistant Treasurer Chris Boulton, (2nd) Vice Chairman Chris Darman, (6th) Chris Evans, (7th) Chairman Derek Hanson, (8th) Chief Executive Colin Logan, (11th) Treasurer Martin Green and (12th) Hostel Manager Eric Audige-Soutter. The tree was dedicated to the memory of Martin Green's wife. Twenty years later it is a fine large specimen (YHA Archive);

3: this plaque (author's photograph, April 2015) was unveiled at the official opening, with assistance from Ada Slater

Full opening with 80 beds came a few months later, on 14th February 1997. The hostel received an official opening on 16th May 1997 after its £500,000 refurbishment. YHA president David Bellamy and Eric Audig-Soutter welcomed chief guests local MP Betty Williams and Ada Slater to the official opening. Ada and her late husband Frank had given many years of voluntary work since the 1940s to YHA in North Wales. In 1995 it was Ada who alerted YHA to the fact that the TGWU Centre was on the market The Wales Tourist Board helped with funding the improvements to the building necessary to make the most of its superb setting.

'This is the place to stay,' enthused YHA News in the Summer 1997 edition. 'Work on the former convalescent home at Conwy is now complete; rooms designed for single occupancy can now be used by several people and still give privacy for washing and showering; the toilets are nearby. YHA essentials like a drying room and a bike shed are now



available, and daytime access has been created. Reception is now opposite the entrance'. Full en suite facilities were still relatively rare in YHA premises; here a partial compromise was necessary until renewal work a decade later: the hostel was given a major renovation in 2009. The bedrooms were configured on both floors so that larger rooms were on the eastern side of the corridor.

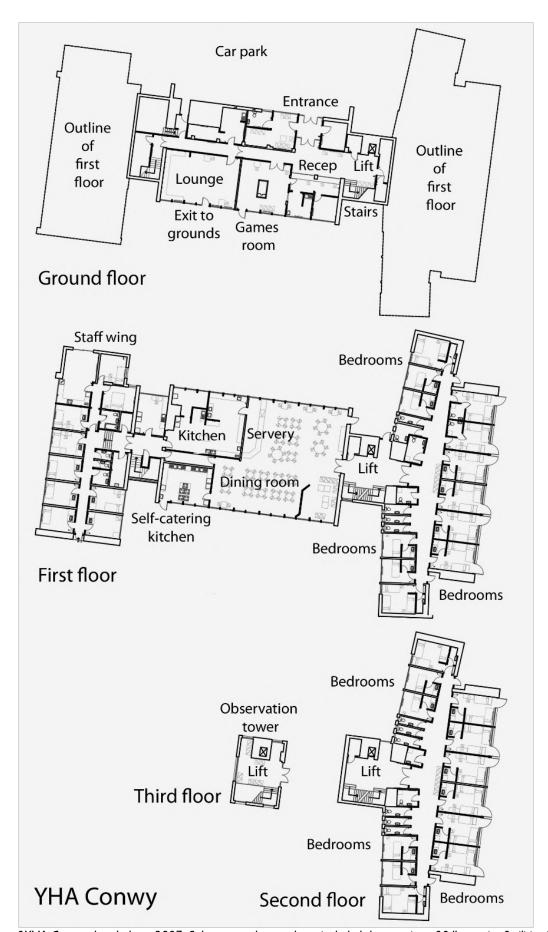
Left: the Conwy hostel stamp. 'Croeso' is Welsh for 'welcome'

In keeping with its charitable objectives, YHA selected Conwy hostel as well as YHAs Coverack and Whitby as a location where the Association in partnership with the three armed services and the Ministry of Defence sponsored Family Activity Breaks. It gave families who had lost a loved one the chance to rebuild their lives through meeting others in the same situation on holiday at a Youth Hostel. In the summer of 2010, for instance, more than 50 families took advantage of these breaks holidays at the three centres.



YHA Conwy also offers views to the hilly south, contrasting greatly with coastal vista to the north. In this image early morning mist shrouds the Conwy Valley towards Betws y Coed and the Snowdon Massif. YHA's first ever hostel, the experimental and short lived Pennant Hall of Christmas 1930, lay ten miles beyond the trees on the skyline in the centre of the image (author's photograph, 2007)

Eric and Julie Audige-Soutter resigned their posts in 2015 to move to France. In their place came Mathew Teasdale, former manager at YHAs Borth and Pen-y-Pass. In that year YHA provided ten folding beds to boost capacity at critical times in Conwy's popular 4-bedded rooms. About this time too, the flat roofed-construction proved ideal for the fitting of some 89 solar panels, almost certainly a record number for the Association.



Floor plan of YHA Conwy, dated about 2007. Subsequent changes have included the creation of full en suite facilities in almost every bedroom, the removal and repurposing of redundant toilets, the transfer of the original reception from ground floor to a position along the north wall of the dining room, next to the servery that became a bar and bistro in the modern YHA style. The games room has moved across the corridor on the ground floor (YHA Archive)

In 2019 the hostel offered one first floor accessible bedroom, accessed by lift, with an associated WC and bathroom just off the corridor. Except for that and one double room with a dedicated bathroom next door, all rooms are en suite. The separate corridors and wings on either floor can be locked for flexibility of security arrangements. The spacious ground floor meeting room for 40 provides for school use and popular YHA, community and committee meetings.

The dining room generally seats about 60, but more tables and chairs can be added to seat a maximum of 100. It also houses reception, and two comfortable seating areas. On the ground floor there are a games room and a TV lounge that leads onto the spacious garden. This offers facilities for various activities, but there is no camping here.

Mathew Teasdale is manager in 2020. He has overseen great expansion of the numbers staying at YHA Conwy.













1&2: ground floor rooms -

1: the comfortable TV lounge, with exit onto the rear garden; 2: the entrance corridor, with stairs on the right; 3-6: the rear of the property, a healthy, calm and spacious green area with a lovely aspect (author's photographs, July 2019)

Overnights - inclusive periods each year as follows 1954-1991: previous Oct to Sept; 1992: Oct 1991 to Feb 1993; 1993-present: Mar to following Feb ¶: Colwyn Bay Hostel; Δ: Conwy Hostel *: 17 month period; +: notional figure included for exclusive hire 1166¶ 7853¶ 9501¶ 9447¶ 9122¶ 9329¶ 9000¶ 8852¶ 7941¶ 10412¶ 10194¶ 8685¶ 9469¶ 9872¶ 9904¶ 7834¶ 7895¶ 8899¶ 7685¶ 7292¶ 7992¶ 8224¶ 7156¶ 5425*¶ 6342¶ 5683¶ 6862¶ 5415¶ 13470Δ 15713Δ 15896Δ 2306Δ 13546Δ 14517Δ 14492Δ 14316Δ 14367Δ 13861Δ 13537Δ 13567Δ 12758Δ 10877Δ 14947Δ $18020 + \Delta$ 18198+∆ $18525+\Delta$ $15775{+}\Delta$ $16412+\Delta$ $17884{+}\Delta$ $18716+\Delta$ $18892 + \Delta$ $18429 + \Delta$ $open\Delta$



The spectacular double-flowering cherry tree that was planted as a memorial twenty years or more before the author's photograph of July 2019 (see page 9)

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