



YHA (England and Wales)

Youth Hostel Profile

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

## Idwal Cottage Youth Hostel 1931 to present

Idwal Cottage, Nant Ffrancon, Bethesda, Bangor, Gwynedd LL57 3LZ

Historic County: Caernarfonshire

YHA Regions: Merseyside & North  
Wales, North Wales, Wales

GR: SH 648603



When in 1929 and 1930 pioneering Merseysiders were dreaming of a bold new plan, inventing a British version of German *jugendherbergen* to open up one corner of Britain, North Wales, to their tramping, they imagined a loop of simple hostels from Liverpool to Snowdon and back, spaced 15 or so miles apart, each a hard day's walk. The initial plan was altered frequently, until the Merseyside Group, like a few others in England and Wales, produced a concerted effort to open a few places at Easter 1931. Four North Wales hostels were opened by them just in time, in what appeared to be a breakneck finale of preparations. Idwal Cottage was one of these four; it was not in the initial Liverpool plans, but readily accepted when it was offered. Merseyside was certainly ahead of the other regions in terms of organisation, but Idwal was secured only the previous day. It was opened on Good Friday, 2nd April 1931.



AW Hutton postcards, with the 1931 caption 'YHAGB'. 1: Idwal Cottage and Tryfan. The open air verandah is prominent. The card is dated in pencil, 14th May 1931; 2: Idwal before the motor-car age (author's collection)

In his history of the Liverpool group, *The Pioneering Years of the Youth Hostel Movement on Merseyside*, Reg Taylor described the acquisition and early development of Idwal with such authority it is worth showing here at some length:

The Penrhyn Estate offered Idwal Cottage, a disused quarry manager's house standing in a copse alongside long-abandoned quarry workings, just off the A5 and the end of Llyn Ogwen and on the old road down to the Nant Ffrancon. It was offered at £20 per annum and was opened for the Easter, despite a comedy of misjudgment. It was not a very big place and three-tier beds had been decided on to offset the limited floor space. But the working party found the ceilings too low to accommodate them and they had to be hurriedly shipped to Gwydyr Ucha, which had very high ceilings, and replaced by two-tiered beds. So Idwal Cottage opened with accommodation for only 32 members and Gwydyr Ucha for 84, with a walk of some 12 miles between them. Gyffylliog stood in splendid isolation some 24 miles from Gwydyr Ucha, but Llansannan was soon to become available, midway between the two. It had accommodation for 48 members, Gyffylliog for 32.

Llanfihangel was to open next but it was not to last long. The Committee had picked on the local Church Institute but it would hold only sixteen people. So Colwyn Ffoulkes designed a rather attractive wooden 'dovecote' containing five three-tiered bunks, and the hostel opened for its first and only season with room for thirty-one members. Then the local innkeeper persuaded the authorities that hostelling activity was not compatible with rural Welsh life, and use of the Institute was withdrawn. So the dovecote was dismantled and moved to Idwal, where it still stands in the copse as an integral part of the hostel there. It increased the nominal accommodation by fifteen: the actual accommodation by two, for so popular had Idwal become in its first year that camp beds had been squeezed into every bit of free floor space to provide temporary accommodation. Quite fortuitously it had opened up the climbing grounds to many youngsters who could neither afford, nor knew how, to break into the closely knit climbing fraternities of Pen y Pass, Pen y Gwryd and Helyg, and how they seized the chance.

Usage at Idwal that first year was 2,500. It rose rapidly to over 8,000 and stayed there till the war broke the pattern. Already, by June 1931 there was discussion in committee of the danger of Idwal becoming no more than a climbing club, but in fact there has always a balance of interests. In summer the climbing types slept contentedly in tents on the lawn, leaving the hostel beds for the walkers and cyclists. In winter they moved indoors, or most of them did. In those early years Idwal had an open verandah with two two-tier bunks, and great was the competition to sleep there, summer and winter.



*A rare early view of the rear of the hostel. Camping no doubt alleviated some of the pressure on hostel space. Llyn Ogwen and Capel Curig lie beyond (YHA Archive)*

The accommodation was initially for 32, the bunk beds being manufactured by H Dodgson. Of the opening itself, Berta Gough commented in her diary:

The beds at Idwal were only put up on the Thursday night [before Easter, therefore on 2nd April 1931], the members helping to do so before they could go to bed, and things were in a bit of confusion. It was a snowy but

fine weekend, and most of the hostels were full. We all found the beds very cold, as we had not got acclimatised to hostel life then. Les Powell and I did the catering for our party, as we had to cook our own meals. When I think now what a worry we must have been to the poor warden. We cooked 3-course dinners each night, and as the equipment in those days was very scarce, it was rather hard work, but great fun, it being my first experience of such a life. The warden then was a University student called Williams; Connie [Alexander] did not go until May.

The quaint wooden sleeping hut from St Michael's hostel, Llanfihangel Glyn Myfyr mentioned above was transported here in 1932 and has been used variously as an overflow dormitory, wet-weather refuge, cycle shed and store. There was a good deal of approved 'sleeping out' on the verandah and in 1937 canvas screens were provided to create a little more comfort there.

Idwal Cottage was kept from requisition and operated throughout the war, a highly prized escape from the turbulence of the Blitzkrieg raged on Liverpool and elsewhere. It was immensely popular, so much so that electric plant for lighting was provided, surely against the odds, in 1941. In 1944 it showed an occupancy figure of 58%, the highest of all North Wales hostels.

Considerable remodelling of the hostel took place in the 1950s. It was delayed by a lack of finance, but work started when an International Working Party helped to clear the site for an extension in 1954. Such parties were common across continental Europe in the aftermath of war; many were set up by Jack Catchpool, who tackled the reconstruction of international hostelling with great vigour, though they were less common in Britain. The working party also converted the neighbouring stone chapel (the Glan Rhyd Mission Room) into a single men's dormitory. This property and the land on which it stood were newly leased from the Bangor Diocesan Trust.

The extension was considerably delayed by planning problems, and took five years before completed; it opened on 23rd May 1959. It falls again to Reg Taylor's words to describe the events in adequate detail:

Now let us consider actions that we took that time has justified, though most have had their bizarre moments. Idwal Cottage returned the astonishing average nights full figure of 222 for 1948. Though it fell thereafter to around 200 it was still large enough to stimulate thoughts of expansion on the site. The house stood in a copse just off the A5 at the northern end of Llyn Ogwen, at the head of the old road that ran down the western side of the Nant Ffrancon. Till 1948 the hostel consisted of the house and the 15 bunk wooden chalet that had been transported from Llanfihangel, and it provided 42 beds. There was also in the copse, on the same side of the road as the hostel, a disused chapel, in the porch of which climbers were wont to doss down for the night. In 1948, in order to control the area better, it was agreed with the Penrhyn Estate that we should lease both the chapel and its grounds, and the remainder of the copse on the other side of the road, so stopping squatting in the chapel porch and controlling camping in the copse. We arranged to use the chapel for overflow demand and thereby increased the beddage to 48. What we now proposed to do was to increase it further to 60. But the house was only on lease and in proposing to extend we were set to create a most unusual situation of a hostel part-leased and part-owned. It did not deter us, and matters were set in motion in 1953.

A unique feature of the house at that time was an open verandah which held two double bunks, much in demand by the hardier hostellers, summer and winter; we had groundsheets to insulate us from any snow that blew in. This was doomed to disappear when the extension was built, but it was proposed that a similar feature would be included in the extension. In designing this it was planned to copy Lledr House [Hostel] in having a timber construction tacked on to the existing stone building. And it was further planned not to key the extension in but to site it at right angles to maximise the amount of light it would catch, and link it by a short covered way. Colt's produced a plan for a cedarwood building and, since it would require a prepared base, an international YHA working party was organised, with great enthusiasm, to carry out the excavations and construct a concrete platform faced with random stonework.

Then, to our dismay the planning authority turned down our plans. The National Park had been set up by now and, so far as Caernarvonshire was concerned, all roofs must be slate roofs, and preferably Caernarvonshire slate roofs. (The argument was ideological, but the reason was frankly commercial.) The trouble for us was that a timber building could not carry a Welsh slate roof, and if a timber building was out, then we could not afford the very attractive design drawn up for it. We would have to make do with a simple elongation of the existing building. So the planning committee, having the last word in these things, gained its slate roof, and lost the chance of something of greater character within the Park. And we were left with a very solidly constructed concrete base of no possible use. We did not give in easily, though the end was inevitable, and it was not till 1957 that plans were approved.

They provided for a new dining-cum-common room on the ground floor and a men's dormitory above, with access to it by a staircase in the corner of the room. The verandah and open air bunks disappeared without trace. An

ablution block for men was to be built out at the rear from the half-landing of the staircase, but when the building was finished it was found tacked on to the end of the extension.

Seemingly difficulties had been met trying to put it where it was meant to be and John Clarke had approved the changed position. We had the usual condensation problems that were inexcusable after the experience at Lledr House but, what was worse, the new siting blocked drainage flow from the hillside behind and that had to be corrected. There was no purpose in having windows in the rear wall downstairs since they would only have looked out on a rock and earth wall some three feet away, and the lower room was dark in consequence. Still, we did have a bigger hostel, with 60 beds, and the concrete platform came in useful fortuitously when Richard Schirrmann, then 85 years old, came to open it formally on 23 May 1959, six years after we started to plan it. It was not till 1963 that the Penrhyn estate agreed to sell their part of the property (but excluding the copse on the other side of the road) to the Association and so end a rather unusual situation.

One reason why we had made the move to purchase was that it had been thought that fitting out the old chapel as a hostel annexe would make a suitable memorial to Alf Embleton and the Ramblers Association had agreed. So, by fitting in a floor, it was converted to a two-storey building with self-cooking and dining and washing facilities below, and dormitory accommodation above. It was opened on 26th May 1963, in the month that John Clarke died: Gerald Haythornthwaite, President of the Ramblers Federation for that year, handing over the key and Margaret Embleton, Alf's widow, unveiling the plaque to his memory.

Even with these sweeping improvements, there could still be elements of discontent from hostellers. Pat Packham was on a cycling tour of North Wales when she visited Idwal in April 1966:

I asked the warden where the cycle shed was. I was very disconcerted when told to leave my bicycle outside until 10pm and then put it on top of the coal.

As explained above, the chapel dormitory was adapted into self-contained quarters and an upper floor was provided. This new development opened on 26th May 1963 and the dedication to Alf Embleton was as Hon Treasurer of Merseyside Region and President of the Ramblers' Association when he died in 1961. Showers were provided in the chapel in 1975. The freehold mentioned by Reg Taylor was the purchase of the cottage itself at a cost of £5,000. This was entered into the YHA Trust Property Book on 10th October 1963; at the same time a plantation of trees in front of the hostel was leased by YHA for £1pa, with an option to buy. It became the focus of long-drawn-out discussions between the YHA, the County Council, the National Park and other bodies concerning the provision of a public car park, an amenity block, a tea-room and screening from the main road while retaining as much of the natural environment as possible. There were many variants to the solution. The plantation land was purchased and passed to the YHA Trust on 22nd June 1981, while the chapel itself was finally acquired for the Trust in 1986. This building is now the manager's residence.



Two DB Hutton postcards from either end of the fifties.

1: before the expansion. Note the public telephone box. The areas to the front and east of the hostel were still undeveloped;  
2: the extension has replaced the veranda, to the detriment of nostalgia and to the likely benefit of health (author's collection)

In 1971 improvements continued with the provision for the first time of mains electricity, releasing YHA from the perennial problem of generators at this site. An electric pump for the winter water supply was supplied and extra toilets were provided. Fire precautions work was a preoccupation of YHA in the 1970s, involving the installation of more sophisticated alarm and emergency lighting systems. Nine North Wales hostels, including Idwal Cottage, were included in the 1974-75 programme.

About this time extra beds were made available. Idwal Cottage had started off with 32 beds in 1931, increasing to 42 within 2 years (though it is not clear how the arithmetic worked with the dovecote hut and the verandah sleeping). 53 beds were available in 1955 (with the single floor dormitory in the chapel included), only 48 in the late 1950s (possibly limited during the building programme) and 60 with the new development in 1960. In the 1970s extra beds brought the total to a peak of 68. Since then, a move to greater comfort and privacy has reduced the capacity steadily: 56 in 1990, 44 in 2000 (by which time the two dormitories in the chapel had been removed from service) and 36 in 2014. It is worth noting that despite all these capacity reductions, the yearly usage at Idwal has recently risen beyond the 1990 total. The nadir, of course, was during the foot and mouth epidemic of 2001, when the hostel was hit very hard, but it soon recovered strongly. In 1998, for the first time, Idwal became a self-catering-only hostel.



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Modern images. 1-3: a bright and cheery welcome at Idwal Cottage. Picture 3 shows the dedication plaques (YHA Archive); 4: the Glan Rhyd Mission Room, leased and converted for dormitory accommodation, later bought and improved, and now the managers' quarters. It lies a little way from the hostel (author's photograph, July 2010)



1: a rare AWH Hutton postcard of the short-lived 1931 youth hostel at St Michael's Hall, Llanfihangel Glyn Myfyr (author's collection). Situated between Ruthin and Cerrigydrudion, it was one of the stepping stones in early plans for a loop of hostels from the Mersey to Snowdon. It is included here both for the remarkable charming wooden structure, designed especially for the Region by Colwyn Ffoulkes and soon whisked off to Idwal Cottage, and for the hut's even more remarkable longevity;  
2: the Ffoulkes hut, in its bucolic and accidental setting of 80 years at Idwal Cottage (author's photograph, July 2010)

Sydney Colwyn Ffoulkes was a successful architect in North Wales. He had studied at the Liverpool School of Architecture and was no doubt part of the circle of distinguished architects Professor Sir Patrick Abercrombie and Clough Williams Ellis; all of them were practical supporters of the Merseyside Youth Hostel Group in its formative years. Early in 1931 Ellis designed the first purpose-built youth hostel in Britain for the Group, the timber structure at Maeshafn near Mold, and it is likely that Ffoulkes completed a triumvirate of enthusiastic YHA promoters with his design of the hut. The shuttered windows have a faintly ecclesiastical character. Like Clough Williams Ellis, Ffoulkes designed his hostel building with triple-tier bunks

<i>Overnights – inclusive periods each year as follows</i>									
<b>1931-1991: previous Oct to Sept; 1992: Oct 1991 to Feb 1993; 1993-present: Mar to following Feb</b>									
*: 17 month period; +: notional figure included for exclusive hire and/or camping									
...	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938	1939
...	2500	4757	5153	5407	5908	5926	6176	6320	5387
1940	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945	1946	1947	1948	1949
open	open	ca8000	8319	7790	7909	7636	8880	9321	8553
1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959
7831	8574	7936	6116	5699	6898	6742	5884	5683	7207
1960	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969
7669	7594	7405	7738	7754	7461	7258	6266	5836	6614
1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979
7568	6776	7155	7625	8750	8281	8635	8102	8258	8074
1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989
7512	5652	5824	6734	5995	5245	5863	7001	7506	6504
1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
7039	6732	7118*	5929	5576	6901	7563	4987	4615	5826
2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
6227	2612	4166	5796	7294	7728	7073	6628	6403	5708
2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
6464	6743	6615	6948	7163+	7787+	7774+	8264+	8130+	8227+

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