



YHA (England and Wales)
Youth Hostel Profile

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

Special thanks are owed to Harvey Lloyd, long-term hostel manager, for much supplementary information.

Pen-y-Pass Youth Hostel 1968-69 (partial), 1971 (full) to present

Pen-y-Pass, Nantgwynant, Caernarfon, Gwynedd LL55 4NY

Historic County: Caernarfonshire

YHA Region: North Wales, Wales

GR: SH 647556

The story of the famed mountaineers' inn at Pen-y-Pass as is well known, though the various accidents of YHA history combining to place a youth hostel here are less well documented. The hostel was adapted from the celebrated mountaineers' Gorphwysfa Hotel, often also identified as the Pen-y-Pass Hotel. *Gorphwysfa* (*Gorffwysfa*) is Welsh for *resting place* (legend describes a cairn, perhaps a burial place, at the summit) while *Pen-y-Pass* is an anglicised invention suggesting *head of the pass*. It lies at the summit of the Llanberis Pass, at 1178ft (360m), with the hostel on the north side of the road and the restaurant and car park on the south side. There were Bronze Age and Roman interests in the area to the north and east of Snowdon. The Llanberis Pass has been in existence for centuries as a track, and as a constructed road from 1828.



The Gorphwysfa Hotel photographed in Spring 1966, shortly before the YHA took charge of the site (YHA Archive)

A few cottages were built at the summit in the 1840s in connection with the local copper mine. By 1871 the Pen-y-Pass Hotel was established here by the Vaynol Estate, which owned great swathes of land and industrial works in the region (including Llwyn Celyn, the house at Llanberis used by YHA from 1940 and sold to the Association for rebuilding in 1968). In its early years the hotel was eclipsed by the famed Pen-y-Gwryd hotel a mile to the east, but its stock rose when Frank C Cobden, of Capel Curig, bought the lease. It was put under new management and expanded with a new wing and the addition of road-facing gables at the turn of the century, all to the detriment of trade at the Pen-y-Gwryd. Despite initial uncertainty, the tenancy of the renamed Gorphwysfa hostel soon settled into the hands of a Miss Pritchard, who married Mr Owen Rawson Owen. The couple were able to buy the lease of their flourishing business in 1907, and soon established a base for the famous mountaineering parties, organised by Geoffrey Winthrop Young, the Cambridge author, poet and mountaineer, either side of the First World War. These attracted especially a group of mountaineer scholars and writers with links to Cambridge University. Among his illustrious guests were George Leigh Mallory, who died on Everest in 1924, and the historian Professor GM Trevelyan, later President of the Youth Hostels Association. Rawson Owen died in 1962, though by then the attraction of the hotel had diminished. It was next run by Owen's two sisters, and finally by Major O'Rourke.

About this time, YHA was looking to strengthen its presence in the area, though progress would be tortuous. According to the North Wales region annual report of 1966 (almost certainly prepared by the regional secretary, Reg Chapman),

only [the recently acquired] Bryn Gwynant and the new Bangor hostel can be said to be of a standard considered adequate today. Inevitably there must be priorities [and] the initial emphasis should be towards the mountain hostels. In dealing with these we have also taken note of an inadequacy in the accommodation at present available to hostellers. Llanberis [the old Llwyn Celyn house] is too small relative to the other hostels in the area, and we still lack a central Snowdonia hostel to act as a link with those on the periphery. This is the projected PJ Clarke Memorial Hostel... which we still hope to see established. There have been many frustrations over this, but we may reach a position during the coming year which will enable progress to be made. The proposal for this hostel is being prosecuted under the National Parks and Access to Countryside Act of 1949 whereby the provision of Youth Hostels by local authorities in National Parks was made explicitly possible where it would be difficult to provide a hostel otherwise; and certainly the history of the project since its inception would underline the difficulties in this particular instance.

The following annual report shed further light:

The history of the PJ Clarke Memorial Hostel stretches back to 1963 when it was decided that it should be located in the Pen-y-Pass / Pen-y-Gwryd area as a tribute to John Clarke's own efforts to establish a hostel here over many years. The need for a hostel in this area to exploit the full potentialities of mountain walking has been evident since the early days of the movement, but there are few suitable buildings, and new building is fraught with amenity hazards. It was decided therefore to proceed under Section 12 of the National Parks Act which empowers a Park Authority to provide a hostel where a need exists but where it is difficult for the YHA to obtain one by its own efforts. Precedents for this kind of action have already been established in a number of other National Parks.

The proposal was approved in principle by the Joint Advisory Committee of the Snowdonia National Park, but the Constituent Authority, after investigation, decided that it could not proceed. In advising us of their decision, the Authority said this did not preclude the YHA making its own application.

This your Council did, after choosing a site which our Architects said was suitable, and on which the owner was prepared to negotiate if planning approval was obtained. The site was at Pen-y-Gwryd, close to the existing complex of buildings, adjacent to the Miners Track over the Glyders, and with a plentiful supply of water. The building was designed to sit low in the landscape and fit unobtrusively into its surroundings. Nevertheless public opposition to the scheme was generated on a scale which led the owner to withdraw his agreement to negotiate in February 1966, and Council was therefore unable to proceed. It was at this point, in view of future uncertainty, that the decision was made to designate Llwyn Celyn [Llanberis] as the PJ Clarke Memorial Hostel.

Then, in 1967, the hotel at Pen-y-Pass came on the market unexpectedly, when the Vaynol Estate ran into financial difficulty. At first, YHA North Wales Region was interested to use the original long barn as a simple 40-bed hostel, and hoped to persuade any buyer of the hotel to let it to them, but YHA's National Executive encouraged a successful bid for the entire property. It was snapped up by YHA for £35,000 and vested in the YHA Trust. Old outbuildings were demolished and the stone reused in the new extensions. The lintel above the front door is from one of the original buildings here. As part of the agreement, YHA contributed a strip of land on the south side of the highway to Caernarfonshire County Council for road widening.

The regional annual report for 1968 outlined the development:

We acquired the famed Pen-y-Pass Hotel and ancillary outbuildings for conversion to a hostel but, for a number of reasons, it will not become operative before 1970. The purchase of this property by the YHA led to a certain amount of stimulated public outcry, based on errors of both intention and fact, despite a Press release which had given a quite clear picture of how we intended to proceed with the property. The special Council meeting, referred to above, was convened immediately after acquisition to determine, among other things, our public responsibility in the area, and we are satisfied to report here that an enquiry held subsequently by the Sports Council for Wales led to a finding by the Council that the YHA had not been acting in any way against the public interest. We do not expect to have the hostel operating before the Spring of 1970, but the catering service to the public has continued without interruption since the date of purchase, and the YHA has undertaken not only that this will continue but also that there will be provision for non YHA accommodation.

Plans have now been drawn up in the light of consultations with the Planning Authority, the Highway Authority and the Amenity Organisations for the development of the site, to provide a public café and a hostel with accommodation for 130, with some beds reserved for non-YHA use. Through the good offices of Lord Hunt, the noted Visitors' Book, containing among others the names of Mallory, Irvine and Young, has been transferred to us by Sir Michael Duff and it will be suitably displayed when the hostel is opened. It is hoped that formal planning

permission will be given in the near future, in order that the major works of construction can commence early in 1969.

The Snack Bar, which was in existence at the time of the takeover, has been continued as a measure of good faith on the part of the Region, and in the hands of Mr & Mrs Adgey, who moved from Bala Hostel to take this appointment, has served the public non-stop. We wish to thank Mr & Mrs Adgey for their sterling work during this interim period, which they have undertaken until such time as they can take over as Wardens of the new hostel. Management of the café which is to replace this service will be the responsibility of YHA Services Ltd., who have collaborated with the Region in the development of that part of the site which is to include the café.

Curiously, the 1969 regional report described the hostel as already operating under limited circumstances, and gave overnight figures of 162 for 1968 and 92 for 1969: though these were for a few beds *available only in emergency*. The national YHA annual report for 1969 described how the scheme at Pen-y-Pass and the rebuilding of Patterdale were using up most of the current capital resources. In 1970 the hostel received no guests but a newly developed café above the kitchen within the old hotel was converted by the Regional Management Team, under Alan Ashcroft, and operated by Arthur and Mary Adgey. The couple had arrived from Plas Rhiwaedog hostel, Bala, with a view to wardenship at Pen-y-Pass, though they left after their period of caretaking was completed late in 1971.

After some opposition by the National Park the hostel opened fully to members on 15th February 1971, though some work was still progressing; completion of the Long Barn conversion not expected until the end of that year, and only 70 beds were available in the interim. The full complement of beds was now to be 119. The unusual stipulation borne out of National Park influence, and referred to above, that some beds were to be available to those outside YHA membership, made little practical difference, according to long-term warden Harvey Lloyd. It was an unusual requirement, testing the boundaries of YHA rules of the time, and then exemplified only by Crowden hostel in the Peak National Park, opened in 1965.



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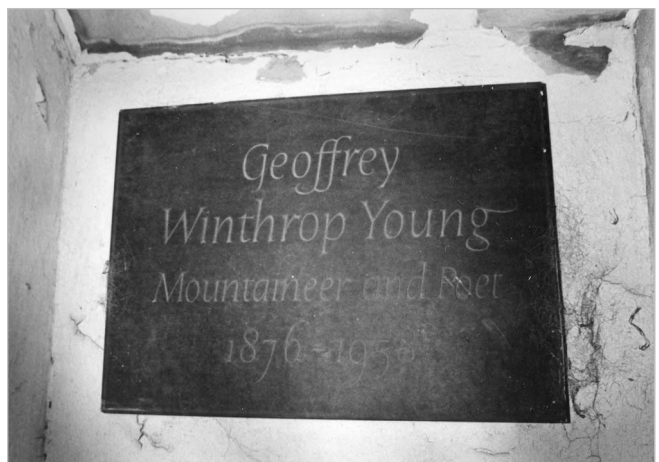
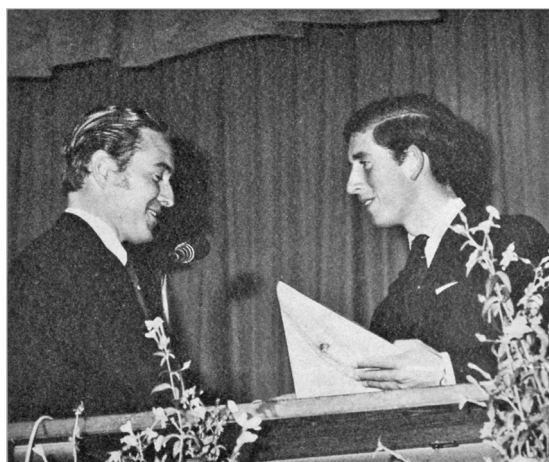
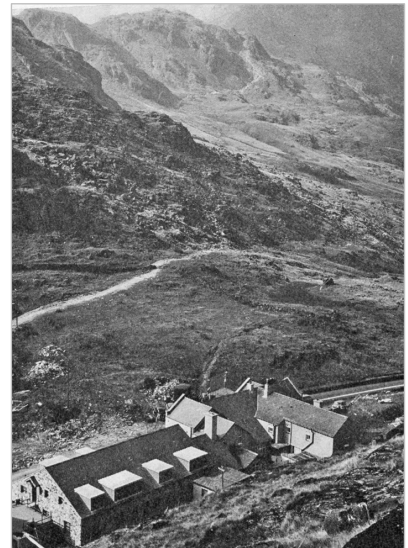
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New premises emerging from the old – 1: old buildings on either side of the road, ready for demolition; 2: the old long barn, briefly considered by YHA as a potential small hostel before the successful purchase of the hotel; 3&4: the long barn is demolished and a new structure arises in its place (YHA Archive photographs, donated by Harvey Lloyd)

There was an official opening on 5th June 1971; the guest was Mr J Cripps, Chairman of the Countryside Commission, and a slate plaque commemorating this event was unveiled in the entrance hall of the hostel. Sir Michael

Duff of Vaynol donated the old hotel visitors' book and it was put on display at the hostel. Mrs Eleanor Winthrop Young attended; she and her late husband Geoffrey had very long connections with Pen-y-Pass.



1: the west end of the Gorphwysfa Hotel at about the time of acquisition by YHA. Note the old stone shed across the road; 2: the new complex from across the road, before the restaurant took shape. The old tin shed near the camera came from the coppermine workings and was used as a men's dormitory in hotel days; 3: the new long barn from behind, viewed towards Snowdon. The restaurant site is cleared; 4: the Prince of Wales presents his award to the YHA's North Wales Regional Secretary, Reg Chapman; 5: plaque to the memory of Geoffrey Winthrop Young, Mountaineer and Poet, 1876-1958

The builders were HO Davies and Watkin Jones. YHA received a Prince of Wales Award for the hostel as being 'of traditional local materials and superb Welsh craftsmanship combined to create a unique mountain centre for hostellers and public.' The design of the dormitory block to the right of the entrance caused some controversy at the time, but was later widely appreciated.

Pen-y-Pass hostel was given Special Grading under YHA's new 4-point differential pricing system of 1971. A Pen-y-Pass Joint Committee had been set up to see the project brought to completion. It also exercised day-to-day authority for the continued running of Gorphwysfa Café in the old hotel. The café continued to provide a good service right up to May 1973, when it was replaced by the Association's new public restaurant and cafeteria on the Snowdon side of the road. Work on this was under way by the end of the 1971. Earlier plans for the facility had been withdrawn to cut costs, but an anonymous donation of £50,000 allowed the shortfall to be overcome in providing the cafeteria.

In view of the public benefit, the Countryside Commission made a grant of £5,000 towards the total cost of the project. Always aware of its amenity responsibilities, YHA offered to channel underground the electric spur line serving the hostel and to build a sub-station attached to the restaurant, though it regretted that the local Electricity Board Manweb was not following suit with the main cables where they passed overhead at the top of the Pass. Unfortunately, the County Council was slow to draw up plans for a car park, though YHA's offer to incorporate public toilets within the restaurant probably hurried matters on. In July 1973, YHA Services Ltd added the running of the car park to that of the new restaurant. These interests were sold off by YHA early in 1980.



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The new hostel and restaurant take shape – 1: the restaurant under breeze block, glass and timber construction; 2: the new long barn (the date is probably 1971, as the Car Park charges are portrayed both in shillings and new pence); 3&4: old huts still jostle for space alongside the newly emerged restaurant (photographs by Max Kirby, YHA Archive)

After a brief spell when assistants Robert Owen and Christine Ireland were in charge, Harvey and Rosie Lloyd took over in February 1972 on a joint appointment; Rosie resigned the post in March 1987, but Harvey stayed for 25 years. At first the hostel had rather cramped dining rooms and common room, but in 1973 various adaptations saw the development of a new common room in the old hotel and a lecture room for climbing courses in the Long Barn. That

building was the subject of a Public Inquiry, however; YHA's architect had received telephone approval for the insertion of additional dormer windows and roof lights in the Barn roof and had proceeded on this basis, though confirmation in writing had not been approved. An application for formal planning approval therefore had to be submitted and it was refused. An appeal was lodged and the decision reversed. Meanwhile, the original café within the old hotel was converted by the regional maintenance team to staff rooms and members' dormitories. A new common room was provided. A paddock behind the new restaurant, owned by YHA, was eventually used by the county council to extend the busy car park.

Throughout the 1970s YHA was subject to exacting compliance orders with respect to fire prevention and emergency lighting systems. Hostels at Bangor, Colwyn Bay, Llanberis and Pen-y-Pass, for instance, received extensive safety work, at a cost to the region of £50,000.



1: the Dining Room; 2: the lounge; 3 manager at work; 4: the display of climbing equipment originating with Winthrop Young and attractively presented on the stair well of the old hotel building (images from YHA Archive)

There have been further changes to the hostel since then, including the relocation of the reception. Capacity remained at over 100 until 1997. After that it reduced in stages as large dormitories gave way to family-friendly smaller

bedrooms, some en suite. In 1998, 84 could stay, and in 2003, 79. Like almost all YHA hostels, Pen-y-Pass took a serious hit with the foot and mouth outbreak of 2001. Capacity was further reduced to 61 when, for operational reasons, the Long Barn had to be taken out of use in 2006. This entailed loss not only of income but also of staff accommodation on the upper floor of the barn. The intermediate building was adapted to accept both guest and staff accommodation. In 1996 Dave Ramsay succeeded Harvey Lloyd and in 2001 Cath Young took over as manager, followed by Dave Roberts, Paul Semple, Mathew Teasdale in May 2010, Trevor Howard in 2016 and Jonathan Al-Qazzaz in 2018. Record overnight figures were achieved in 2019.



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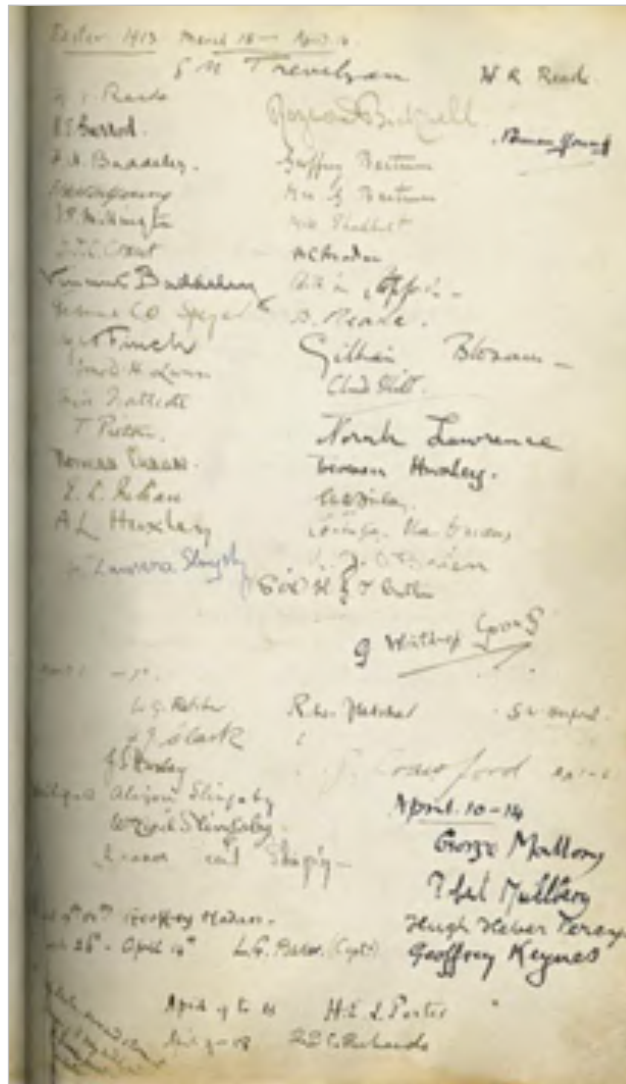


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Modern images – 1&2: the west end of the hostel, showing the ‘Alpine Garden’ established by manager Harvey Lloyd, the adjacent stile and right of way, and the well-laid Pyg track at the start of the Snowdon climb (YHA images); 3-6: Pen-y-Pass youth hostel on a sunny day in August 2007 (author’s photographs)



Famous names from the Gorphwysfa climbers' book. These include G Winthrop Young, George Mallory, GM Trevelyan, and AL and JS Huxley. The date is Easter 1913.

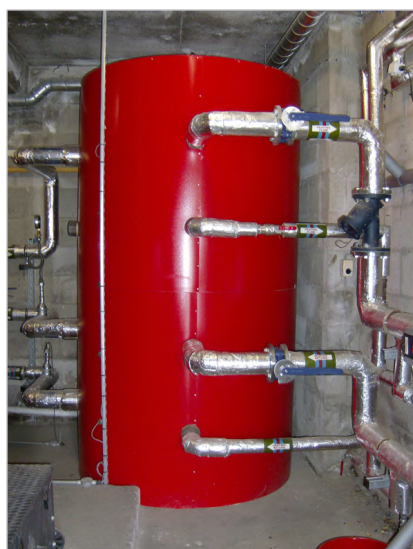
| Overnights – inclusive periods each year as follows | | | | | | | | | |
|---|-------|--------|-------|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1968-1991: previous Oct to Sept; 1992: Oct 1991 to Feb 1993; 1993-present: Mar to following Feb | | | | | | | | | |
| *: 17 month period ; •: closed for refurbishment, September 2013 to May 2014 | | | | | | | | | |
| 1960 | 1961 | 1962 | 1963 | 1964 | 1965 | 1966 | 1967 | 1968 | 1969 |
| ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | 162 | 92 |
| 1970 | 1971 | 1972 | 1973 | 1974 | 1975 | 1976 | 1977 | 1978 | 1979 |
| 0 | 5752 | 14197 | 15538 | 18715 | 19038 | 17029 | 17579 | 19285 | 19039 |
| 1980 | 1981 | 1982 | 1983 | 1984 | 1985 | 1986 | 1987 | 1988 | 1989 |
| 16387 | 14143 | 13054 | 14693 | 14159 | 16050 | 16009 | 17188 | 17121 | 14920 |
| 1990 | 1991 | 1992 | 1993 | 1994 | 1995 | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 |
| 16625 | 14232 | 17589* | 13869 | 14284 | 14040 | 13968 | 15268 | 12013 | 13564 |
| 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 |
| 12345 | 8548 | 11503 | 13649 | 9568 | 12107 | 12140 | 8806 | 7286 | 7358 |
| 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 |
| 9878 | 10512 | 11454 | 6768• | 15503• | 23608 | 24713 | 24572 | 23998 | 25396 |

In 2013 YHA announced a £1.3m complete refurbishment and expansion scheme for the youth hostel, made possible following generous contributions from the Welsh Government's Tourism Investment Support Scheme (TISS), Snowdonia National Park Authority (SNPA), Welsh Water and a legacy left to YHA by a long-standing member of YHA's Welsh regional council, Tony Drake MBE. The works ran from 2013 to May 2014. Guest rooms were extended into the previous staff accommodation and the unused Long Barn to allow an increase back to 111 beds. The ground floor was considerably reconfigured and the barn brought back into use to provide 22 beds arranged mostly as 2- and 4-bedded en suite rooms. A greatly enhanced self-catering kitchen and dining space and a modest amount of staff accommodation have been provided. The investment created the new Mallory's Café and Bar with a modern relaxed atmosphere. Additionally, the hostel offers a classroom with audio-visual capabilities and public WCs and showers for day walkers.

Late in 2013, as a result of a successful public voting campaign, YHA was awarded £25,000 from the Hostelling International 2013 Sustainability Fund towards the cost of £167,000 for a pioneering biomass boiler project for Pen-y-Pass. The improvements were seen as essential in reducing both the heating costs and the carbon footprint, as previously the hostel's heating oil costs were the highest across its network and the new plant would enable a reduction of 86% on carbon emissions.



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In 2015, in recognition of its enhanced role after refurbishment, the hostel was renamed YHA Snowdon Pen-y-Pass. Here are four images of the renovated facility from July 2014. 1: as part of the refurbishment, YHA considered moving the hostel's entrance to the old inn entrance, but deferred. The 1970s insignia has been thoughtfully restored; 2: housing for the bio-mass boiler, with the high-level connecting corridor behind; 3: the new plant in operation; 4: the attractive décor of a corner of Mallory's Café and Bar (author's photographs)