

Rhyd Ddu and Snowdon Ranger Youth Hostels

Rhyd Ddu Youth Hostel 1932 to 1933

Tan-y-Graig Shop, Rhyd Ddu, Caernarfonshire

Historic County: Caernarfonshire

YHA Region: Merseyside

GR: SH 569528

In 1929-30 pioneers of the British Youth Hostels idea on Merseyside hatched plans for the first youth hostels in Britain. These were to form a chain extending from Liverpool to Snowdonia and back in a loop, allowing walkers to move from one facility to another in a day's hard walk. The original plans were modified many times, but the chain opened in basic form in 1931. There was a gap to be plugged on the south and west side of Snowdon, however. As a temporary measure the Regional Council arranged in 1932 for an accommodation hostel in the village of Rhyd Ddu.



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1: Rose Cottage, Rhyd Ddu, with a gang of hostellers at the opening in 1932. The YHA flag is proudly displayed (YHA Archive photograph donated by Ian Shaw); 2-4: Rose Cottage, Haulfre and Tan-y-Graig (author's photographs, September 2007)

Tan-y-Graig shop on the east side of the road was the address, but *Rose Cottage* on the west side was also mentioned in minutes, and this was the property portrayed in press advertisements, with a gang of hostellers thronging the front garden (nowadays lost to road widening) and was probably the place where the members slept. A further cottage *Haulfre* a few doors along was leased for 3 weeks for £1 per week at Easter 1933. All properties are in close proximity.

The situation at Rhyd Ddu was unsatisfactory, however. 142 bednights were registered early in 1933 before peremptory closure, by the spring, and its stock of bunk beds was sent to Llansannan hostel in April.

Snowdon Ranger Youth Hostel 1939 to present

Snowdon Ranger, Rhyd Ddu, Caernarfon, Gwynedd LL54 7YS

Historic County: Caernarfonshire

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

GR: SH 565550

The loss of Rhyd Ddu was overcome somewhat by the opening of the more substantial Cae Dafydd hostel, some 7 miles south, in the same year, but the popularity of climbs to the west of Snowdon called for another hostel to be provided north of Beddgelert, and in 1939 the Snowdon Ranger Hotel, recently placed on the market, fitted the bill.

In *a Brief History of Footpaths up Snowdon* by G Lindsay Jones, MA PhD, he describes how the Snowdon Ranger sledge path was created to carry copper from mines opened in 1795 to the road at the Saracen's Head Inn near Llyn Cwellyn. This became the Snowdon Ranger Inn, opened by the guide John Morton, who was there when George Borrow passed in 1854. In 1878 the narrow gauge railway was creeping further south from Tryfan Junction and reached a temporary terminus immediately behind the Snowdon Ranger Inn. It was built ostensibly to carry minerals and stone, but increasingly it was for tourists; three years later the line was extended to Rhyd Ddu and eventually to Porthmadog.



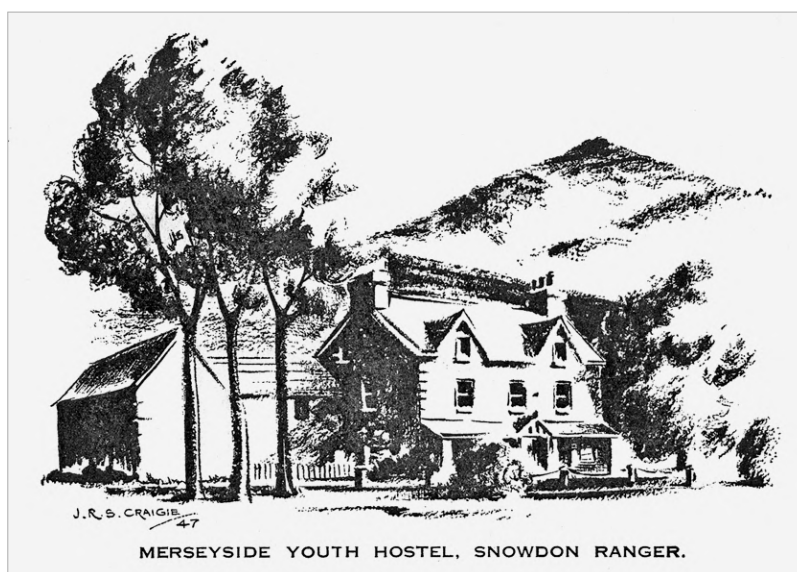
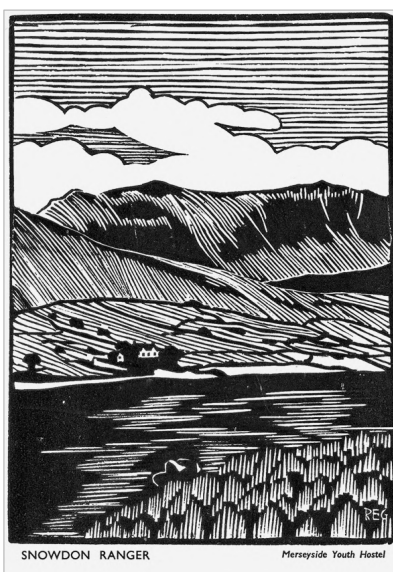
The Snowdon Ranger Hotel was famed almost as much as the Gorphwsfa and Pen-y-Gwryd for the climbing of Snowdon, and tourism flourished, but in the 1930s the hotel closed. Merseyside Youth Hostels purchased the property freehold for £1,800, with the aid of a National Fitness Council grant of £1,000 and a Robert Davies Trust grant of £800. It passed to the YHA Trust on 16 March 1939, and the hostel opened in May of that year, becoming the Robert Davies Trust Hostel. Over 2,000 stayed in its first year. There were beds for 20 men and 20 women.

SNOWDON RANGER,
RHYD DDU.

Bednight figures for North Wales hostels were unrecorded for 1940-42, but though there may have been disruptions through temporary requisition, the hostel operated for members in those years. One guest wrote a postcard from the Ranger in June 1940, noting:

The hostels are splendid and not crowded. Touring conditions are ideal, very little traffic, fine roads, glorious scenery and lovely weather. We stayed at this hostel, in a grand situation by the lakeside, last night.

Snowdon Ranger hostel was certainly operating in late 1940, a memo of 7 April 1941 advising that it had been in use. In fact the call on accommodation was increasing, and in 1942 beds were found for a further 10 men and 10 women. At first Snowdon Ranger was to close in winter, but it was made available through the change of 1942-43 if booked in advance. The hostel was very busy in 1943-45. Throughout this spell the warden was Miss B Chadwick.



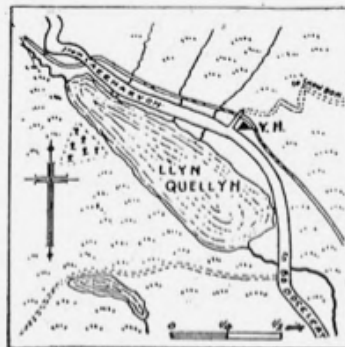
(above) one-inch pin badge and hostel stamp and (below) two YHA postcards from the early years of Snowdon Ranger hostel (author's collection)

SNOWDON RANGER.

Warden: Miss B. Chadwick.

Address: Snowdon Ranger Hostel, Rhyd-ddu, Caernarvonshire.

Position: Map O.S. 49. On main Caernarvon-Beddgelert road, on the North side of the lake (Llyn Cwellyn, and marked on O.S. map as Snowdon Ranger.



Access: Train to Caernarvon, whence buses (for Beddgelert) run past hostel. From Portmadoc railway station buses run via Beddgelert to the hostel, but see time-tables for times and connections.

Distances: Llanberis 8 m. (mountain), 5 m. (mountain pass), 10 m. (road), Cae Ddafydd 10 m., Idwal 12 m. (over Glyders, 3,000 ft. and Snowdon, 3,500 ft.), Snowdon summit 3 m.

Open: Easter to end of September, and during winter by advance Booking only. **Accommodation:** 60. The nearest post office (and store) is at Rhyd-ddu, 2 m. (early closing, Wednesday). Lake bathing. Camping.

Self-Cookers: Separate kitchen provided.

With the acquisition of Snowdon Ranger, an inn famous in mountain lore, Merseyside Y.H.A. adds to the rich variety of buildings which it controls. Our warden has taken the place of the ranger after whom this widely known hotel is named, and of whom George Borrow says, in *Wild Wales*: "He is termed the Snowdon Ranger because he is a tip-top guide, and he has named the house after him the Snowdon Ranger. He entertains gentlemen in it who put themselves under his guidance in order to ascend Snowdon and to see the country." It is up to the hostellers to see that the parallel is continued in every detail.



1: extract from the North Wales Regional Guide of 1944. It is remarkable that YHA did so well in the war; there is a brief reminder of the hardships faced however in the very thin paper (almost tissue paper) used in that handbook;
2: photograph by F Williams, also dated 1944. The full wording on the end gable betrays the hotel origins of the building, with the simple expediency of re-lettering into 'HOSTEL'. There is as yet no fire escape. Somebody has gone to enormous trouble to paint a neat YHA triangle very high up on the gable – it's not the usual enamel metal sign (YHA Archive)

The privations of war took their course; a new septic tank was needed in 1945 and a wartime backlog of extensive repairs and painting was made good in 1948. Merseyside Region had actually built up a reserve of funds during the war from evacuations and other earnings, but it was impossible to spend them on renewals until now.



Two further postcards of the Ranger hostel.

1: AW Hutton took this striking view of the hostel and its outbuildings from the shoreline of Llyn Cwellyn, with the mass of Snowdon looming behind. It probably dates from 1939, as one can just make out the steel line of the Welsh Highland Railway to the left of the telegraph pole, no doubt removed promptly during the war; 2: this colour postcard by J Arthur Dixon was photographed before the renewal of the porch roof and the removal of its little gable (YHA Archive)

Snowdon Ranger was successful and busy through the 1950s and 1960s, but it was felt by 1970 that it sorely needed modernisation. The Merseyside and North Wales annual report for 1971 elucidated:

Plans for bringing Snowdon Ranger up to a standard compatible with the other mountain hostels did not receive financial backing from the National Finance Committee so we have decided to undertake a programme of selective improvements over a number of years, with emphasis on improved wardens' accommodation.

The other mountain hostels referred to so enviously were Pen-y-Pass, brand new, Llanberis, rebuilt in 1968, and Bryn Gwynant, new in 1959. The work involved the development of the annexe to the west of the hostel to provide improved warden's quarters; it was ready by 1974. During that year significant rebuilding was put in place, with the demolition of the single-storey building at the rear and a new two-storey structure built to replace it. There were roof repairs and a new water supply and septic tank. Consequently, there was a loss of capacity during that summer and a dip in usage, but it was pain before gain. On reopening in 1975 Snowdon Ranger was to be a Superior grade hostel, with better facilities for members and staff and 7-day opening. The warden, Dave Woods, built an imposing slate fireplace for the Common Room. The Superior grading was actually put in place in 1976, and the car park between road and lake was provided at this time. In 1989 Mr Woods arranged for the entombing of a celebratory casket of contemporary objects to be walled up in the hostel, for opening at a key anniversary many years hence.

Overnights – inclusive periods each year as follows									
1932-1991: previous Oct to Sept; 1992: Oct 1991 to Feb 1993; 1993-present: Mar to following Feb									
¶: Rhyd Ddu Hostel; Snowdon Ranger Hostel									
*: 17 month period; +: notional figure included for exclusive hire									
...	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938	1939
...	...	747¶	142¶	2187Δ
1940	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945	1946	1947	1948	1949
openΔ	openΔ	openΔ	4178Δ	5949Δ	5369Δ	5305Δ	5482Δ	5915Δ	5803Δ
1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959
5898Δ	5376Δ	5332Δ	5516Δ	5025Δ	4992Δ	5459Δ	5762Δ	6083Δ	6121Δ
1960	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969
6574Δ	6072Δ	7235Δ	6287Δ	5826Δ	5996Δ	5749Δ	5454Δ	6361Δ	6187Δ
1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979
7224Δ	6626Δ	6516Δ	5623Δ	3451Δ	4764Δ	6843Δ	7575Δ	7426Δ	7088Δ
1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989
7802Δ	8010Δ	7608Δ	7524Δ	7874Δ	8026Δ	7719Δ	8602Δ	8672Δ	9525Δ
1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
8351Δ	8518Δ	10441*Δ	7679Δ	7585Δ	7398Δ	9238Δ	8470Δ	8401Δ	8126Δ
2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
7384Δ	6720Δ	7672Δ	7862Δ	8072Δ	8584Δ	8145Δ	8579Δ	7519Δ	8471Δ
2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
7918Δ	10014+Δ	9791+Δ	9522+Δ	9392+Δ	9602+Δ	9821+Δ	10268+Δ	10358+Δ	11213+Δ

With the improvements came an increase of bed numbers, from 60 to 66, and a rise in annual usage from about 6,000 in the 1960s to 7,000 and 8,000 in the following two decades. A crest in bed numbers was reached by 1990, with 68, but with the move to greater personal comfort for guests, the limit has been 59 since the new millennium. Michael Manning took over the managership of Snowdon Ranger in 2003 and record overnights were recorded in 2019.

Tailpiece – the Welsh Highland Railway

The line had a financially precarious existence and closed in the 1930s, but was brought back to life in stages either side of the millennium. It is now possible to reach Snowdon Ranger hostel again, uniquely, by steam train.



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1&2: Snowdon Ranger hostel and the novel 'inn' sign, captured by YHA volunteer George Miller in 1985 (author's collection);
3-5: the hostel on a beautiful September day in 2007. A hosteller is waiting for the Sherpa bus (author's photographs)

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