



YHA (England and Wales)

Youth Hostel Profile

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

Ro Wen Youth Hostel 1947 to present

Rhiw Farm, Rowen, Conwy LL32 8YW

Historic County: Caernarfonshire

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

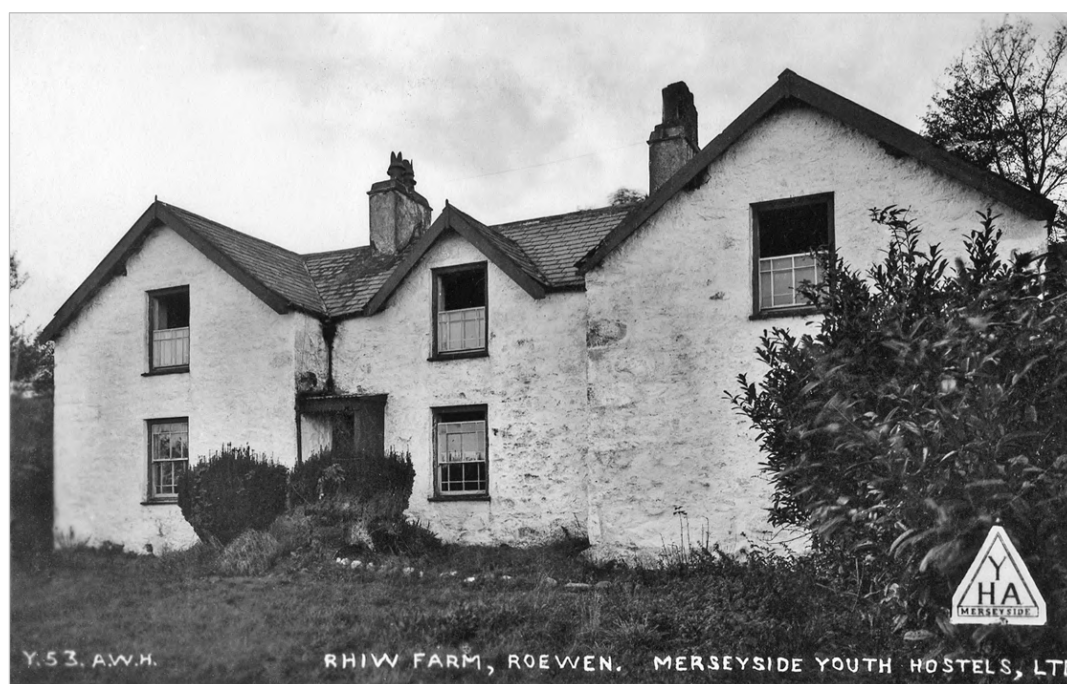
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Late in the 1947 season YHA's Merseyside, North Wales and Isle of Man Group opened a simple type of hostel at a hill farmhouse in the foothills of the Carneddus above the village of Roewen (the authentic Welsh spelling Ro Wen or Rowen being adopted in 1972). The hostel could accommodate 13 men and 12 women at the outset. It was named the Harold Burrows Memorial Hostel after a tireless worker for the Regional Group.



It had been hoped that Ro Wen would be ready in July, but the delayed opening restricted the first year's visits to a few hundred. Initially the hostel was rented from a local farmer and key and bookings were with Miss Davies, Cefn Cae, Ro Wen.



(above) one-inch badge and hostel stamp, both with earlier anglicised spelling;
(below) AW Hutton postcard of Ro Wen hostel from the time of its opening (author's collection)

In 1950 eighteen year old Margaret Wilcox was allowed by her parents to go on her first youth hostelling trip with her boyfriend (later husband) Roy Dennis. It was a trip she would never forget. Unusually, for the time, they were allowed (by YHA) to travel up to North Wales on a motor cycle, provided it was left at the first hostel, Ro Wen, and they walked between the rest. YHA volunteer R Dennis writes of his mother's trip:

Ro Wen

That night there were a total of four people in the hostel, and as the female there Margaret ended up doing the cooking for all of them. The hostel kitchen consisted of one primus stove, located at the opposite end of the room to the single (low powered) oil lamp. The meal consisted mainly of sausages which were cooked by a system of inspired guesswork (put the frying pan over the stove, count to 10, 20 or whatever other number you thought of and then take it over to the light to check on progress). I understand there were no complaints about the food however.

Bed time was also fun as there was no lighting in the dorms and they only had one torch between them, and as the lady, Margaret claimed it. The hostel did however have running water to allow her to wash in the morning (the stream outside). Toilets were another memorable feature, being located at the bottom of the garden. On the door there was a sign *please don't go unless you have to* and there was apparently even less incentive inside. It consisted of a seat over a large drop, which the wind found an excellent outlet. Looking down also gave an excellent view of the village. Margaret rejoined YHA in 2003.



Rhiw Farm youth hostel, high above Ro Wen village, in 1952.

1: the old farmhouse was here into its sixth season as a youth hostel; 2: a jumble of buildings from the other side of the lane; 3: warden Gwen Moffat is silhouetted against the entrance (images donated to the YHA Archive by Gwen Moffat)

In her autobiography *Space below my Feet*, republished by Phoenix/Orion in 2013, pioneer woman mountaineer and climbing instructor Gwen Moffat wrote of her experiences wardening at Ro Wen for a year in 1952, as a means of gaining access to the slabs and pinnacles of Snowdonia. She has kindly provided this extraordinary extended chapter to her book for the YHA Archive:

Rhiw Farm in the fifties

In 1952 access to Rhiw was by way of a rutted stony track passable only to tractors and Land Rovers. I carried supplies up from the village on my back, my daughter too if she tired. She was three. There was no electricity or sanitation, and running water was from a cold tap in the door-less scullery, fed by an inadequate spring on the other side of the Roman road. This last, the continuation of the stony track, was skinned with grass over a cobbled core and far superior.

It was a primitive hostel and my chores corresponded; in the morning there was the fettling of Primus stoves, pressure lamps, hurricane lanterns and the curious oil stove called a 'Florrie' housed in the dark back kitchen. There were the Elsan closets to empty; the men's lavatory was in the pig sties and I was forced to put up a notice directing that they should be used 'only when necessary'. (Full chemical closets are heavy.) This didn't apply to the women who used my place: a hole in a bench in a miniscule stone outhouse. Below the hole was my neighbour's field.

I washed the sheet sleeping bags by hand, heating water on a Primus stove. I earned three pence apiece: a nice little earner augmenting my salary of one pound a week in summer (£25 today), halved in winter when the hostel closed and I was merely a caretaker. The following year I got a rise of 50 pence in the high season. So in summer we lived well helped out by the sale of talks and short stories to the BBC and by way of food from the RAF Mountain Rescue team who brought us their leftovers after the weekend exercise rather than take them back to Valley where they would go for pig swill.

Leisure was limited. By the time I'd dropped Sheena off with her current minder and hitchhiked round to Ogwen, there was only an hour or so to climb before I must get back to open at five. The sharp little crag on Tal y Faen was more convenient. Sheena learned to climb there and the day I caught her walking along the ridge-pole of the house in pursuit of the cat who was after swallows, she was introduced to the rope. I was the one who, never troubling to rope on boulder problems, fell thirty feet from a hard crack and broke my ankle.

Winters at Rhiw were solitary. Evenings in the lamplit kitchen (Sheena asleep, myself attended by dozing cats) you could imagine the chink of armour beyond the gate as the legions passed on the Roman road. I wrote compulsively – about them and everything else as one does when young – and the rejection slips poured in. I was on half-wages, my lover was in the Highlands and the source of supplementary food from the rescue team had dried up and we were skint. Together we fell ill and, without a telephone, no one knew. Two hostellers, passing by, not meaning to stop because the hostel was closed, decided after all to look in. They found me comatose and Sheena sick with whooping cough.

The village was alerted. Sheena was carried away to the isolation hospital while I left Rhiw on a stretcher, taken down the mountain by two stalwart medics to the ambulance which couldn't get up the track.

Two years later I returned: to the cottage three fields to the south where I stayed for seven years and climbed and wrote my first book. The YHA gave me the beautiful ship's cookstove from Rhiw which was to grace my kitchen for the rest of the time I lived on Tal y Faen. It was a good stove.



Another early image of Ro Wen hostel. Here the garden entrance has a lintel; whether this predated the previous views and had since fallen down, or postdated them after repair, lies in the realm of mystery (YHA Archive provided by Ian Shaw)

In 1975 schoolgirl Suzanne Vernon entered a YHA holiday essay competition, and remembered her stay at Ro Wen:
 At the bottom of the hill that we had to go up was a notice that said something like: *If you haven't booked don't bother coming up.* You had to sleep on straw mattresses.



A rare colour view of Ro Wen hostel in its middle years. The simple porch had by now been demolished. Many traditional images of this hostel and others like it show YHA's preference for the natural airing of bedrooms, sometimes to the discomfort of the inmates. The open window also provided an ad hoc drying space (YHA Archive provided by Ian Shaw)

When the hostel opened in 1947 it had been an experiment for the Merseyside and North Wales Region in running a hostel without a resident warden (though Roman Bridge was almost in that category). Within a few years Gwen Moffat was experiencing her year-long tenure as warden *in situ* (paid for the summer but on reduced rations for the winter's caretaking job). In later years Ro Wen has existed on volunteer wardening, and is now one of a group of established youth hostels operating in this way. Towards the end of the twentieth century bookings were kept by Colwyn Bay hostel, but after its closure in 1996 responsibility passed to Conwy hostel.

Overnights – inclusive periods each year as follows									
1947-1991: previous Oct to Sept; 1992: Oct 1991 to Feb 1993; 1993-present: Mar to following Feb									
*: 17 month period; +: notional figure included for exclusive hire									
1940	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945	1946	1947	1948	1949
...	385	2049	open
1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959
open	1896	2065	1992	1456	811	1033	1110	1168	1106
1960	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969
938	1129	1382	1202	1122	835	774	930	929	890
1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979
1080	1795	1747	1746	1599	1414	1753	1714	1843	1829
1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989
1481	1436	1629	1616	1864	1619	1485	877	841	1642
1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
1478	1338	1108*	1344	870	1396	1379	1363	1344	1423
2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
1820	1878	1952	2191	2549	2028	2219	1835	794	907
2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
940	1647+	2362+	2264+	2457+	2720+	2598+	2200+	1844+	2425+

The capacity was at its maximum in the 1980s, with 28 beds, but in recent years the number has been reduced to a more spacious and comfortable 20, using a 2-bedded bunk room, a bedroom with four single beds, and two dormitories, of six and eight beds.

Ro Wen hostel received a significant refurbishment ready for reopening on 8 August 2011, with new beds, washroom facilities and refreshed dining room and lounge. Popular open fires have been retained in the dining room and lounge but there are new electric heaters elsewhere. The kitchen too has been modernised.

Where the hostel had for a period recently been restricted to exclusive hire for the whole year, it has now been allowed to revert to a more traditional flexible role in the summer months.



Modern images of Ro Wen hostel from the 2011 refurbishment (YHA Archive)

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