

## Van Youth Hostel 1936 to 1956

Greenfields Hall, Van [y Fan], Llanidloes, Montgomeryshire

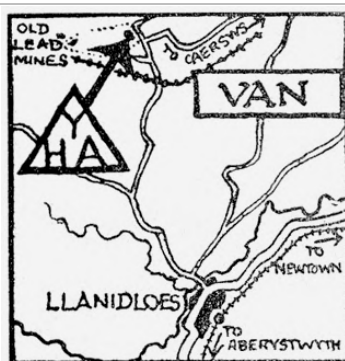
Historic County: Montgomeryshire

YHA Region:

Birmingham and Mid-Wales

GR: SN 948877

Greenfields Hall is a large two-storey cross-gabled detached house built in 1871 as the residence of Captain William Williams of Holywell, the manager of the local lead mines and Mayor of Llanidloes in 1871-72. The house possessed a coachhouse and grounds, and close by Captain Williams erected a Wesleyan Methodist Chapel for the education and spiritual welfare of the miners and their families, a measure no doubt enhanced by the suppression of any alcoholic licence in the village until much later.



**VAN.**—Greenfields Hall, Van, near Llanidloes, Mont. (2 m. N. of Llanidloes). O.S. 69 (D.10). Bart. 16.

Nestling beneath Van Hill and Bryn y Tail is the village of Van, which has slumbered and forgotten its former importance, when the lead mine employed 700 men. To the W. lie the hill tracks leading up to Plynlimon Fawr, home of the Severn, the Wye and the Rheidol. The southward road soon drops into Llanidloes, where a half-timbered market house stands as a reminder of former glory.

Apart from its lead mining and textile industries (shawls and tweeds were being produced 20 years ago), Llanidloes held an important position as a publishing centre for the Welsh language. A XIII century arcade of five arches, brought from Abbey Cwmhir, is one of the attractions of the fine old parish church.

1: an early postcard of Van youth hostel, published by J Jones. It is not recorded whether the coachhouse, to the right, was the barn that Geoff Smith tried to refurbish to accommodate YHA visitors (author's collection);

2: extract from the local YHA guide of 1939. The old mineral railway serving the mines is shown to the south of the hostel on the map, though by 1921 the industry had already collapsed (YHA Archive)

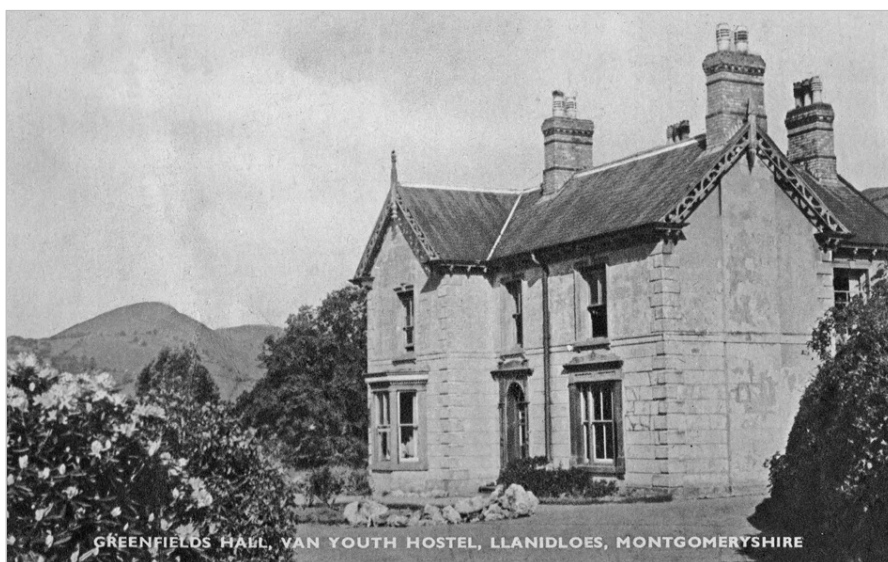




The Mid-Wales branch of YHA's Birmingham Region opened a hostel at Greenfields Hall at Easter 1936 to replace the short-lived example at Brongwy Farm, just south of Llangurig. The hostel was spacious enough to allow 30 beds (for 20 men and 10 women) at the outset. Mrs Clement Jones was the first warden, and welcomed over 800 hostellers in the first year. For the first two seasons, YHA named the hostel after the neighbouring market-town, Llanidloes, before adopting the anglicised name of the village, Van, in 1938.

The hostel was increasingly popular up to the outbreak of war. Apart from a subdued year in 1940, when only 500 souls stayed, it was a haven in wartime for young office and factory workers and a favoured cycling destination from Birmingham – a good hard day's ride. Despite a capacity limit of 20 beds briefly in 1941, the increase of use continued to a peak of just under 3,000 hostellers in 1948, before tailing off into the mid-1950s.

*Left: an undated photograph of the neat and tidy hostel approach (YHA Archive)*



*1: another postcard of Van hostel. Attractive features of the house are the decorative bargeboards and stone coins externally and the heavy wooden shutters internally; 2: a lovely Archive photograph from an unusual angle of a car at the hostel entrance in 1949; it probably belonging to a regional officer (or the warden) in those days of heavily enforced travel rules for hostellers. The slate-tile-hung west wall was protection against the prevailing wind (YHA Archive)*

Running the Mid-Wales hostels had its lighter side. Sylvia Errington, who with her husband Don did so much sterling work for the Region, recalls:

The Treasurer of the Birmingham and Mid-Wales region was of German extraction, always referring to Van and Wilderhope hostels as 'Wann' and 'Vilderhope'.

The hostel closed in 1956, some time after Easter. The reason cited was a difficulty in finding a warden, though the establishment of the small hostels at Nant-y-Dernol (near the original Llangurig hostel) to the southwest and in the Newtown area to the northeast earlier in the 1950s would have made its retention unlikely.



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<b>VAN. B.</b>	<b>131</b>
The Warden, Greenfields Hall, Van, Nr. Llanidloes, Mont.	
<b>Position and Map.</b> Large white house in village of Van, 2 m. N of Llanidloes ; at terminus of disused G.W.R. from Caersws westwards. O.S. 69. Bart. 16.	
<b>Station.</b> Llanidloes 2 m. <b>Bus.</b> Llanidloes.	
<b>Next Hostels.</b> Newtown 15 m. Ponterwyd 20 m. Clun 25 m. Erwood 30 m.	
<b>Other Details.</b> M. 20. W. 10. Store & P.O : Van 200 yds. E.C.D : Thurs. S.B.H. Lake bathing. Camping. J. Advance booking essential Oct.-Easter. I.P.	

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1: an attractive postcard view of Greenfield Hall to the left (west) and its attendant Wesleyan Chapel to the right. Both buildings are now private residences. The field in front of the hedge belonged to the estate, while the hall's drive ran behind it. The railway branch from Caersws to serve the Van mines ran behind the photographer;

2: 1952-53 membership card stamp of tireless YHA worker Bernard Selwyn;

3: entry in the 1938 YHA Handbook

In March 1950 *Regional Roundabout* advised that Daisy M Davies had been appointed as the hostel steward at Van, with Geoff Smith as assistant. 'Hostel steward' was one of several terms coined by the various YHA Regions to describe a unique and valuable service provided by volunteers to fill the void between the YHA regional executive and hostel wardens, especially in terms of communication in an age when the twopenny post was the most reliable method. Stewards made it their responsibility to visit remote hostels on a reasonably regular basis, by the best means available, usually by bike, public transport or hitch-hiking. They would listen to any grievances or requests of the warden and report back to base.



Geoff was another of those legendary Birmingham Region-based members who devoted countless hours to the cause of the YHA. In the 1990s he gathered many of his memories together in the informative and highly amusing *Caveat Nostalgia - the Personal Reminiscences and Reflections of a Hosteller, 1937-90*, now a prized asset in the YHA Archive. He had a soft spot for Van hostel:

A former mine manager's house on a lovely dramatic site on the approaches to Stay-a-Little above Llanidloes. Before, during, and for a time after the war, it was run by the incomparable *Mrs Jones the Hostel*. (16 of the 18 miners cottages in the hamlet were Jones occupied). She of the warm and motherly greeting and the generous meals which she must, surely, have produced at a loss. Perhaps it is fortunate not many partook. I became Hostel Steward of this one around 1947 and had to make monthly visits mainly by cycle and sometimes with rail assistance to or from Shrewsbury. It is some 80 miles from Birmingham and I worked most Saturday mornings. There were occasional extraordinary journeys in deep snow by hitch, bus and foot. I once had to leap off the weekly Stay-a-Little bus in to a snowdrift as it went round the bend above the hostel – the driver would not stop at Van as he would never get going again.

Mrs Jones spoke, but did not write, English beyond that necessary to deal with ABVs [Advanced Booking Vouchers]. As was the norm neither the hostel nor my home was on the phone. Thus it was that in some long forgotten crisis I got a telegram in Welsh. I took it to the Birmingham Welsh Club, got it translated, consulted colleagues, constructed an answer, had that translated, and very late at night cycled to the Birmingham Central Telegraph Office (then open all night) and handed it over.

When I took over I found the hostel badly run down and almost devoid of equipment other than beds and bedding. Mrs Jones was getting too old to manage and living in pretty poor conditions even for those days. I got hold of a load of gear from the closed Ludlow Hostel (Angel Hotel), bought oil lamps and a new coal fired range, and took it all down there in a borrowed cattle truck.

Tried to refurbish the barn to provide additional peak period beds – a waste ultimately as had we but known it the peak was over before it was finished. The only volunteer who ever came this far to help me was Arthur Truby – he had to hitch hike.

A later notable effort was a cycling working party arranged by Bill Yates and friends of North Birmingham Group. They created a partitioned passageway to the members' kitchen which doubled as her living room. They also refitted the members' kitchen.

Following Mrs J's retirement there were a number of changes of warden. Local residents tended to be put in without training and with no test of aptitude. Came and went. None stayed too long, None really made a go of it. Then a period when Marion, (later Fowen of Street) worked as assistant to her father. Soon after that I left the scene. In fact the hostel had entered that now familiar desperate fatal downward spiral of insufficient usage, income or expenditure and cheese paring in maintenance and so on – leading to further decrease in usage. We have, I hope, over the years learned that cost cutting is rarely an option. Either you spend what is required to run a decent hostel or you close. (This ignores the continuing argument as to what constitutes 'a decent hostel' in various differing situations). Half measures in the longer term cost more and are counter productive.

Basically it was a good locale and a sound building. Well placed for explorations of the Plynlimmon [Pumlumon] massif before the coming of the reservoirs, afforestation and all that. On the main cycling route to the Cambrian Coast. Popular in its day but by-passed as transport got easier and hostelling patterns changed. My view is that if it had survived into the era of the motor car and the current tourist developments in the area it would not now be under threat. A bad miss not replaced by Ystumtuen, which serves another locale and another customer base.

<i>Overnights – inclusive periods each year as follows</i>									
<i>1936-1956: previous Oct to Sept</i>									
...	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938	1939
...	...	...	...	...	...	855	882	1013	1022
1940	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945	1946	1947	1948	1949
549	1108	1596	1791	2740	2323	1935	2310	2907	2426
1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959
2477	2116	2057	1890	1546	1603	164	...	...	...

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