



YHA (England and Wales)
Youth Hostel Profile

compiled by the Association's volunteer archivist, John Martin, rev2020-01-01

Capstone, 16 High Street, Thurlby, Bourne, Lincolnshire PE10 0EE

Historic County: Lincolnshire

YHA Regions: Peak, Central

GR: TF 097168

In 1979 Harry Garwood Sneath made a generous offer to YHA: he wished to bequeath his 15th-century forge in the village of Thurlby, near Bourne in Lincolnshire.

The substantial gift consisted of a valley-roofed two-storey brick house on High Street, named *Capstone*, and described in YHA literature as Victorian and Edwardian. It lies at right angles to High Street, on the south side, with the twin gables against the road. Running to the east behind the house is a stone cottage, of lower profile and apparently much greater age, patched with brick. Behind this, in line, is a lower cottage in brick. The bequest included a number of functional outbuildings to the rear. The grounds covered 1½ acres, with ornamental trees, plants and orchards, though the area around the green hut in picture 6 below was sold off for new housing in 1990.



These undated and uncaptioned photographs of Capstone have recently been unearthed for the YHA Archive. They appear to show the property just before or about the time of the transfer to YHA.

1-3: from High Street.

1: the stone cottage is of considerable age. The old brick patching suggests a repair or raising of the roofline. Nearest the camera is the lower brick and stone outbuilding. It may correspond with one particular description of Capstone, namely, a 15th-century forge, before later extensions westward; 2: the point where the older cottage abuts the newer house. An emergency exit door was later fitted next to the main downpipe; 3: the valley-roofed house seen from the road;

4-6: from the grounds.

4: the main house suggests two phases of building, the part to the right being of older brick, outline and floor levels;

5: the stone cottage, with large external tank or similar. Right of the door was originally the dairy, pigsty and workshops;

6: outhouses at the back of the yard. The foreground area with its greenhouse was later sold off for new housing (YHA Archive)

Dave Allison was running YHA Peak Region when Thurlby hostel was first proposed. Recounting the story in 2017, he remembered the detail of the acquisition with his usual forensic eye and good humour:

Thurlby was probably the most bizarre acquisition I dealt with. In the late 1970s, I got a phone call from National Office asking could I go and see a Mr Sneath, living near Bourne, who wanted to know whether YHA would be interested in having his house. I phoned Mr Sneath and was invited to lunch, next time I was in the area.

Mr Henry Garwood Sneath and his wife turned out to be in their mid 90s. He was the dominant character in the local Methodist community. Lunch was a pleasant but plain affair, served by a lady living in the thatched cottage, next door. Roast chicken dinner, with plain water to accompany it. Mr Sneath explained that as strict Methodists they were confirmed teetotal. They had celebrated their Golden Wedding Anniversary in the 1950s. His idea was that he would leave the property to YHA, in his will, for us to run as a Youth Hostel.

I asked what they knew about YHA. Mrs Sneath told me that as a girl she had stayed in one, before they got married (I never found out where she had really stayed). He asked whether we had dancing and singing in YHs, and not wanting to get caught out, I said yes, on occasions. He thought this was great, because he had recently allowed the local church to organise a dance, which he felt all the young people had enjoyed.

Second visit – I arrived mid-morning. Mr S took me on tour of the grounds and outbuildings; these included a 3-room office complex, store for the local hearses (one horse drawn, one hand pulled) and a large store for apples from the orchard. He explained that his children wouldn't need the property as they all had their own bungalows. His fear was that, if he didn't secure the future use of the building, the land would be sold after his death and turned into a housing estate.

I knew we couldn't accept a gift on condition that we would have to keep it in perpetuity, so I explained that his solicitor would have to use a wording that would allow us to sell the property, if it wasn't viable to run it in perpetuity, and explained that YHA had to invest in equipment etc and cover running costs. He said that as a businessman he understood, and would not expect us to continue to run it if it became uneconomical. He then asked what sort of equipment, so I explained about bunk beds etc. 'How much will the equipment cost?'

Thinking his question was just out of interest, I did a quick calculation, based on the equipment at other small hostels and said around £8,000. His immediate response was: 'I'll tell my solicitor to add £8,000 to the bequest.' I knew immediately that if I'd said the cost of setting up the hostel would be 'around £30,000', he'd have added that to the bequest, but it was impossible to go back.

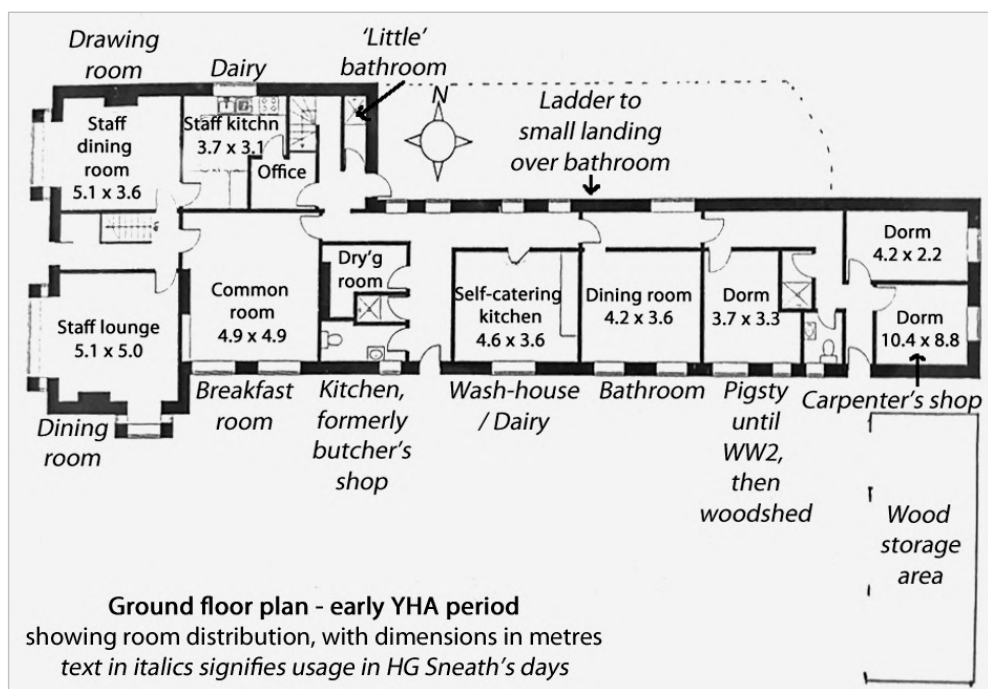
Over the next couple of years, I called in for lunch, to stay in touch. Henry used to excuse himself after lunch and go for a nap on the sofa. Mrs Sneath invited me to sit in the kitchen with her, for a cup of tea. It was a very old-fashioned farmhouse style kitchen, she settled back in her rocking chair, waiting for the kettle to boil on the Aga. She then asked me did I want something a bit stronger? Being well aware of their temperance commitments, I said: just a cup of tea. When the tea was ready she got out two china cups and saucers, poured out my tea and then produced a bottle of sherry, hidden behind the meat safe. She filled her cup with sherry, settled back, rummaged in the pocket of her old-fashioned apron, pulled out a packet of fags and lit up. Suddenly a look of panic spread across her face, she leaned forward put her hand on my knee and said: 'You won't tell him, will you?' And this after around 70 years of marriage!

Clearly a very rich man, Mr Sneath had very serious work ethic. In his nineties his still worked four hours a day, either in his office managing his stocks and shares, etc, or running his orchard and his apple store.

The house had 17 rooms, including toilets and bathrooms. There was a grandfather clock in every one, including the toilets. Why so many?

He explained that the site had originally been the site of his grandfather's blacksmith's forge. Early in the 20th century, Henry's father decide to emigrate to USA. Henry told me that he left his father in the States and returned to Thurlby, as he thought prospects for business were better here! He set up as a hay and corn dealer, trading at local markets. Six days a week he stood on a market somewhere. In those days market traders could deduct the cost of their lunch, from their tax returns. He admitted to cheating – each day he took bread and cheese from home and drank water for his lunch. The cash he took out of his takings was put in bag, which he kept in case the Inland Revenue caught up with him. When it accumulated he went to an auction and bought an old grandfather clock. He then bought another, then another, until there was one in every room. After that, it was antique silver, window ledges around the house were cluttered with silver objects of all kinds, baby rattles, helmet jugs, jewellery items etc. The IR never did query his tax returns, so it all stayed.

One day he commented that the grass needed cutting and said he'd have to get Mears to come around. He referred to this person like some young lad. I was there one day when a guy in a smart suit turned up in a Daimler. He got the motor mower out ready to cut the grass. Chatting to him, I asked him how come he was working as a gardener? He told me how as a young lad he'd been taken on by Henry, working on the horses and carts moving around the hay etc that they were trading in from farm to farm. In the 1930s as lorries started to take over from horses, Henry didn't want anything to do with them, so he told Mears to get some. Acting as Henry's contractor he became a rich man. He explained that Mr Sneath still expected him to do odd jobs around the place and as he'd effectively made him a millionaire, how could he refuse!



Floor plans of Thurlby youth hostel, aligned west to east. High Street lies along the top edges.

1: this ground-floor plan is a copy of one now framed in the hostel, with the orientation adapted and clearer text. The information given in italics indicates usage before 1980 and shows to how great an extent the layout was adapted for YHA use;
2: the present-day schematic plan shows both floors, and how the staff area has migrated from the Victorian house at the west end to the forge cottage at the east. Sneath is the six-bedded ground floor room with washroom and toilet suitable for the disabled adjacent. All other bedrooms are on the first floor. Burghley is the sole en-suite room. This and Willoughby, opposite, have beds for three and are located in the newer Victorian part of the red-brick house. Newton (five beds), Digby and Herewood (two beds each) are in the older second section of the house, and conclude the guest accommodation. Both sections at the west end fit under valley roofs, but that to the east is of older brick construction, with steps down to lower floor and ceiling levels. The spelling of the bedroom names, eg Hereward, Herewood and Harewood, differs considerably (YHA Archive)

Henry Garfield Sneath was born in 1887 and survived until 1979; Dave Allison's account suggests that his house had been offered as early as about 1977. Thurlby hostel was acquired freehold on 5th July 1979, when it was vested in the YHA Trust. At the time, it established a third hostel in Lincolnshire, the others being at Lincoln and Woody's Top. The triangle of hostels, each distant by considerable miles, would play out in a survival game reminiscent of musical chairs some 20 years later.



1 2



3 4

Another important source of early images of the hostel have come from the camera of George Miller. George, with his wife Nora (pictured in the first photograph) and their young family, were indefatigable volunteer workers for YHA from their home base in Lincoln for many years, and wardened most regularly at Woody's Top. They hostelled extensively and recorded their travels in hundreds of invaluable colour transparencies of the network in the 1970s and 1980s. They were probably on a scouting expedition for YHA when they recorded these colourful photographs in 1979, a year or more before the hostel opened.

1&2: the house, Capstone, as photographed from the drive off High Street. Photograph 2 shows the older properties behind. A plaque above the front door reads – HAS (presumably a Sneath) 1913, HGS (Henry Garfield Sneath) 1932, while one above the bay on the south flank reads – JAG, 1866 – FMS (perhaps another Sneath) These examples firmly suggest a Victorian build date for the westernmost section of the house, though the older brick section behind is of undetermined date;

3: the pretty garden viewed from the south, towards the older part of the house and the stone cottage;

4: the collection of outbuildings that in Sneath's time housed hearses and apple stores and in YHA's era a joiner's workshop used in the manufacture of hostel beds (author's collection)

It is not clear whether the hostel opened for business late in 1980 (some time after September) or early in 1981 – 1281 overnights were recorded in the 12-month period after 1st October 1980. One newspaper reference displayed in the hostel refers to a 1980 opening, as does Lindsey Porter in *Eighty Years of Youth Hostelling*. Thurlby hostel was officially opened on 4th May 1981.



1 2



The Millers went back to Capstone for the official opening on 4th May 1981, and recorded these colourful scenes.

1: amongst the presiding officers and dignitaries were Hedley Alcock, National Treasurer and soon-to-be YHA Chairman (at the door) and Rene Wild, Chairman of Peak Region (extreme right); 2: a cheerful view of the assembled crowd (author's collection)

Pat and Fred Seymour were the first wardens, staying in charge until 1984, and presiding over a hostel with 30 beds. *Hostelling News* number 13, of February 1985, announced:

Josephine Brown is the new warden of Thurlby. Her husband Neil is a joiner and they are locals, previously living just down the road from the hostel.

During their custodianship, overnights rose steadily, from 1,800 or so in the hostel's first years, to 3,063 in 1995, which stood as a record until the largely group-based figures achieved very recently. Neil diversified his business, developing and manufacturing in the outbuildings a modern style of wooden bunk bed for YHA that became a widespread feature for many years.

YHA's annual handbook for 1997 described the beds configuration, now at an all-time high of 34: one 4-bed, two 5-bed and two 10-bed rooms. Peter Ingle was manager in 1999 and took the hostel into the new century.



1-3: these photographs of Thurlby hostel's timber bed frames, including an example for a disabled guest, were almost certainly recording the specially designed and manufactured joinery of Neil Brown on the hostel premises;
 4: the attractive hostel dining room in former days; 5: dormitory at the eastern extremity of the hostel.
 This area is now part of the volunteer manager's private quarters (YHA Archive)

Dave Allison goes on to describe later developments at Thurlby:

Years later Thurlby YHA needed major investment to bring it up to standard. The amount of investment needed couldn't be justified, so we announced it would have to close, and we would sell it. When we'd set up the hostel, we'd had to overcome objections from the locals, to get our change of use planning application through. Perversely, the closure announcement sparked an angry response from locals, which escalated to County and District Council level, with even the local MP getting involved. We stuck to the point that Mr Sneath understood, that YHA would not continue to run the place, if it became unviable; he had made provision for us to sell.

It became such a political issue, that Lincolnshire County and Kirton Lindsey District Councils bought the property from YHA, brought the hostel up to modern standards and leased it back to YHA, for a nominal rent.

The closure of Thurlby had been proposed at the end of the 2002 season. It was a one-star hostel and in need of extensive modernisation, and was one of the hit-list of ten hostels drawn up to recoup the foot and mouth losses of 2001 (though the actual damage to the network was far greater). A strong local campaign against closure was held for more than a year from March 2002. An objection to the closure was registered by interested bodies who, contrary to Dave Allison's reasoning, claimed that it was against the benefactor's wishes. Closure in 2003 was averted when two local councils, South Kesteven District and Lincolnshire County Lincolnshire, stepped in, bought the property from YHA to lease it back to them and so keep the hostel operational. The pattern was repeated at Earby hostel, with purchase from YHA by Pendle Borough Council. Thurlby hostel was fully refurbished and extensively modernised by the new owners, at a cost of £650,000, with additional funding from the Welland Sub-regional Strategic Partnership and YHA. It reopened on 3rd March 2006 as a four-star establishment, after an interim closure during 2004 and 2005. An earlier cost-cutting plan had been to run the hostel, together with Woody's Top, as voluntarily staffed satellites of Lincoln, but the city hostel was itself in difficulties and closed in 2005 before those arrangements could come into force. There was consequently uncertainty for a time about how the two smaller hostels could operate. YHA was in discussion with Lincoln City Council about a replacement hostel for Lincoln for 2007, according to *YHA News*, August 2005. A historic property near the Cathedral was investigated and success seemed possible for a time. However, talks collapsed and attention shifted to saving Thurlby Hostel instead.

For a time, Thurlby became fully managed, with Woody's as Thurlby's distant satellite. The renovations undertaken by the purchasing powers had reckoned on volunteer management, however, not a full-time manager, and domestic arrangements were consequently somewhat cramped. The guest accommodation now consisted of modern smaller, private, rooms, ideal for families, small organised groups or independent travellers. Facilities for people with disabilities were brought up to standard and some of the area around the back of the building was tidied up to provide extra car parking. Eventually, in 2010, Thurlby did become volunteer-wardened; both it and Woody's Top operating as widely scattered satellites of Sherwood Forest hostel, all the sides of the triangle being of exactly 55 miles. Woody's Top youth hostel was closed after 69 years' use early in 2017, leaving Thurlby as Lincolnshire's only YHA property.

Recently Thurlby hostel has been turned over increasingly to exclusive hire, and from 2015 to 2017 the establishment was rarely available for individual hostelling; indeed in 2017 never so. A small reversal of this policy was introduced when the hostel was opened for standard usage during July 2018.

In 2018 YHA Thurlby has 21 beds in both small group dormitories and family rooms. The hostel is self-catering only and is served by a well-equipped kitchen with suitable dining room. There is a cosy quiet lounge and a good-sized outdoor space.



Thurlby cloth badge and hostel stamp (author's collection)



1-4: recent YHA publicity images. 1: hostel entrance on High Street; 2: the spacious grounds; 3: hostel lounge; 4: dining room; 5&6: historic Thurlby. 5: High Street Thurlby. Mr & Mrs H A Sneath ca 1930; 6: a Methodist and Wesleyan gathering ca 1936 (YHA Archive)

<i>Overnights – inclusive periods each year as follows</i>									
1942-1991: 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 and/or camping;									
++: notional figure is entirely for exclusive hire and/or camping									
1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989
open?	1214	1819	1804	1665	2000	2097	2500	2638	2806
1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
2830	2878	2286*	2490	2532	3063	2933	2903	2741	2863
2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
2459	2337	1385	1012	0	0	2319	2225	2245	1694
2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
1166	2286+	2233+	2426+	2615+	3326+	3014+	3211++	2667++	2751++

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