

## Walsingham and Wells-next-the-Sea Youth Hostels

### Walsingham [Edgar House] Youth Hostel 1937 to 1938

Edgar House, Walsingham, Norfolk

Historic County: Norfolk

YHA Region: East Anglia

GR: TF 916381

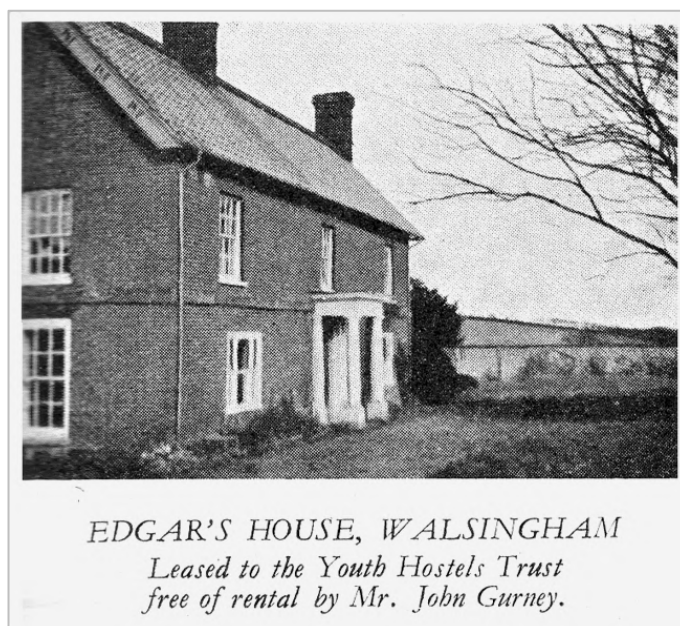
YHA's early East Anglia Region was one of the smallest of the 19 areas operating in the first 30 or so years of the Association, and one of the most impoverished in both the number of visitors it received and the stock of its hostels. It was therefore something of a coup for the region to announce its first fully controlled hostel at Edgar House Farm, Walsingham, a large red brick farmhouse with glazed tile roof. There were extensive outbuildings. The other hostels in the region were all accommodation premises, small privately run affairs within the YHA network.

The 1937 Handbook advertised the opening, but gave few details. The hostel opened on 24th June 1937, and the next day the Scotsman journal, always at the forefront of British hostel developments, heralded the opening:

#### YOUTH HOSTEL OPENED IN NORFOLK – Named After Late King George V

The first Youth Hostel to be named after the late King George V was opened yesterday afternoon at Edgar, near Walsingham, Norfolk, by Commander the Hon Roger Coke, chairman of the Norfolk County Playing Fields Association. The hostel, to be known as the King George V Memorial Youth Hostel, formerly Edgar House Farm, will accommodate ramblers and cyclists, members of the Youth Hostels Association, for 1s a night. Situated about two miles from Walsingham and the old Walsingham Pilgrim Way, it has been equipped by means of a grant received from the King George V Jubilee Trust by the East Anglia Regional Youth Hostels Group. It will accommodate twelve men and eight women, and be open all the year round.

The premises were leased, free of rent, and vested in the YHA Trust on 21st June 1937. As the first King George V Memorial Hostel it attracted a grant, and had been placed at YHA's disposal by the Walsingham Estate Co. The regional council must have been disappointed with results; the hostel could only draw 171 bednights in its first year.



*An illustration of the short-lived hostel in the Midsummer Rucksack magazine, 1937*

However, it had to close; a condition of the lease was that it would have to be given up if required to be let. YHA withdrew by the autumn of that year, and moved down the road to the old schoolhouse at Great Walsingham.

**WALSINGHAM.** *Edgar House, Walsingham, Norfolk. Mr. H. Howes.* This hostel stands in one of the most interesting parts of Norfolk. Walsingham itself was famous in the Middle Ages for the shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham, to which pilgrims from all parts of Europe flocked. The public is admitted to Walsingham Abbey on Wednesdays from 10 to 5. Three miles away are the ruins of another once famous monastic house, Binham Priory. Six miles north-east of the hostel is the famous Blakeney Point and bird sanctuary, and Cley with its grand old church. Nearby is the delightful valley and village of Stiffkey—pronounced “Stewkey”—the inhabitants of which gather cockles for a livelihood. Two miles west of the hostel is Holkham Hall, seat of the Earl of Leicester, standing in the midst of a large and beautiful park, well stocked with deer and cattle. In it is a large artificial lake, dug by “Coke of Holkham.” This lake is visited by large numbers of wild fowl, and between October and March large numbers of wild geese also frequent the Holkham and Burnham marshes. Holkham Park is open to the public once a week. West of Holkham is Burnham Thorpe, the birthplace of Nelson.

*M<sub>10</sub>, W<sub>10</sub> : PROVISIONS Hostel \*\*\* : MEALS—B. 1/3, L. 6d., S. 1/3 : STATION L.N.E.R. 1m : CAMPING : BATHING Sea 3½m : DISTANCES North Pickenham 24m, Kelling 13m, Norwich 29m.*



*Extract from the 1937 YHA Regional Guide, followed by two images of August 2014 (author's photographs). Edgar Farm is a large collection of historic farm buildings and lies about two miles north-west of Little Walsingham, in delightful open rolling country. The farmhouse is extensive and sports the local black glazed roof tiles.*



## Great Walsingham [old schoolhouse] Youth Hostel 1939 to 1940

The Old Schoolhouse, Great Walsingham, Norfolk

Historic County: Norfolk

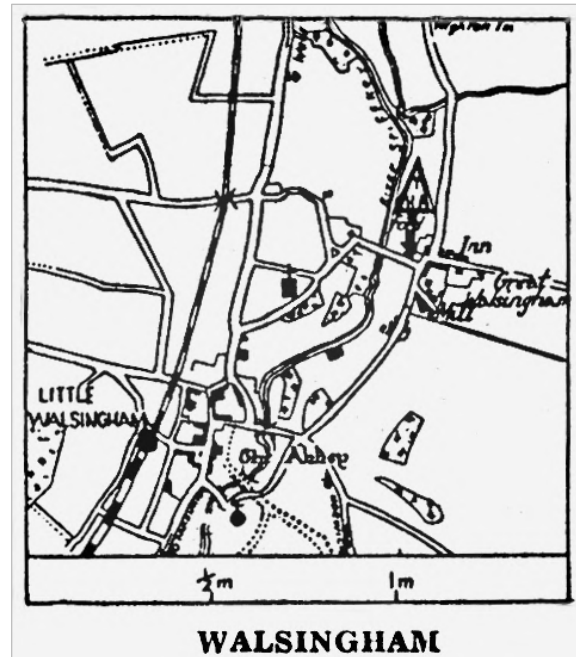
YHA Region: East Anglia

GR: TF 943376

The second hostel in the area was a simpler and less publicised affair, *a well-built schoolhouse* in Great Walsingham. It was constructed in 1875 from the handsome local flint cobbles with redbrick coins and surrounds. The schoolhouse lies to the left and the school to the right, with toilet block in the yard behind it, but all may have been regarded as an entity when YHA took possession. The premises were converted at short notice; some of the alterations, including signs of room division, are thought to be still in evidence in the schoolhouse. As at Edgar Farm, the first year's business would have suffered through a lack of adequate publicity, being too late for the 1939 Handbook issue. The hostel opened at Easter 1939, but gained only 171 bednights by the end of September, the conclusion of the YHA's financial year.

The hostel barely had a chance. It may have operated in the first months of the war: a London Region News bulletin suggested that it was open in February 1940, but by June provision of accommodation was uncertain because of the restriction of movement along the East Anglian seaboard. Great Walsingham hostel closed on 21st June 1940, along with four others in the region, because of these regulations. It had attracted only 94 overnights after September 1939. The inclusion of this hostel in a 1941-42 Regional Guide suggests that it remained in the region's plans for a little while, but it was not to reopen.

The beds and equipment were sent to assist the 1945 opening of the new hostel in Norwich at 9 Earlham Road.



Right: extract from the YHA Regional Guide, ca 1941



No contemporary illustration of Great Walsingham hostel has been found to date. The schoolhouse (left) and school (right) are probably little changed externally today (author's photograph, with the residents' permission, August 2014)



## Walsingham [Almonry Lane] Youth Hostel 1969 to 1982 or 1983

c/o The Roman Catholic Pilgrim Bureau, Friday Market, Little Walsingham, Norfolk NR22 6DB

Historic County: Norfolk

YHA Region: Eastern

GR: TF 933368



Almost 30 years after its predecessor in the area, a new accommodation hostel was opened in the large village of Little Walsingham, a mile to the south of Great Walsingham, on 1st July 1969. Walsingham is England's foremost centre of Catholic pilgrimage and a group of mediaeval buildings in Almonry Lane, a cul-de-sac off the High Street, was made available to YHA by the Catholic Pilgrim Bureau, who ran the hostel from an office on the High Street.



1: when YHA regular volunteer George Miller photographed Walsingham's Almonry Lane hostel in 1971 it was in its third season, and sported both the traditional YHA triangle and a specially prepared hanging sign on a wrought iron stand.

All was neat and tidy. The little lane ended symbolically with a crucifix;

2: cyclist Ron Sant stayed here a decade later, in July 1981. His photograph shows an altered signage;

3: Walsingham hostel, perhaps towards the end, as the crucifix, hanging sign and vegetation have been removed, though the YHA triangle is still in place (1&2: author's collection; 3: YHA Archive)



The hostel accommodated 30 members. The buildings here were constructed from the vernacular Norfolk flint cobbles.



*The old Almonry Lane hostel photographed over 30 years after closure. The buildings are empty, but the sign bracket remains (author's photographs, August 2014)*

## Walsingham [Aelred House] Youth Hostel 1983 only

c/o The Roman Catholic Pilgrim Bureau, Friday Market, Little Walsingham, Norfolk NR22 6DB

Historic County: Norfolk

YHA Region: Eastern

GR: TF 933367

In the final year of a hostel in Walsingham (by 26th July 1983), and anticipating closure, the manager of the Pilgrim Bureau wrote to YHA explaining the decision to close and the temporary transfer of the hostel to Aelred House, a listed building on the north side of Friday Market. The hostel in this final guise registered 1,559 overnights but closed after a few months, by 13th November.



*Aelred House was another venerable building under the control of the Roman Catholic Pilgrim Bureau in 1983. It provided, very briefly, one of YHA's least known youth hostels (author's photograph, August 2014)*

## Wells-next-the-Sea Youth Hostel 2002 to present

Church Plain, Wells-next-the-Sea, Norfolk NR23 1EQ

Historic County: Norfolk

GR: TF 917431

Wells-next-the-Sea youth hostel was a development for the new millennium, the conversion of the former St Nicholas Church Room on the south side of the town, built in 1914. Pat McKenna of Norwich, YHA chairman of Central Region and stalwart volunteer, was with her husband Brian the driving force behind the scheme and there was assistance from Clothworkers' Company. YHA bought the property freehold.

A framed historical information sheet entitled *A Short History of St Nicholas Church Room, with thanks to W Tipler*, is hanging in the hostel. A paraphrase of the text is included here, by permission of Mr Tipler:

The Church Room was the brainchild of the Rev GHN Ingle, Rector of the Church 1893-1929, and fund raising began in 1907 by means of penny cards which ultimately raised about £40, about £10,000 pennies; bazaars were major contributors.

In 1912 a piece of land was conveyed to the Rector and churchwardens of St Nicholas for the express purpose of building a Church Room which was finally declared open by the Bishop of Norwich on the 14th April 1914. Final cost of the project, including furnishings, was £1,000, the building alone being £735.

A committee, usually chaired by the Rector, with up to eight other members, administered the Church Room. In 1948 an executive committee with full decision making powers was elected. Its main pre-occupation seems to have been the cleanliness of the hall and the hiring and firing of caretakers who in 1934 received £15 a year-all in, rising to 25/- a week from 1956-1970 and rising steadily to £30 a week, due to inflation, over the next 16 years.

The Hall had two main purposes, to give the Church a place for activities other than worship and for hiring out for social activities. The Room provided a home for the Sunday School, Girls' Friendly Society, Mothers' Union, Guides, etc. The Free Masons used it for their meetings, for dances, whist drives, meetings and weddings. It was also used for some commercial purposes, eg auction sales and by the local Badminton Club from 1937 almost without interruption until the Hall's disposal in 1997. The reason for its long association was that it was the only room available in Wells with sufficient height for badminton. In 1966, bingo became a major source of income until 1970.



*These photographs of the Church Room in its early days are extracted from W Tipler's article, by permission*

The fees for use of the Room were set at a level meant to make the Room just self-supporting; financially, it was not a profit-making venture. Use of the room fell during the late 50s and early 60s, largely due to the improving TV signal strength over that period, plus the advent of ITV and colour. Resurgence in use 1971-1977 prompted major improvements to the Room during 1978. In all about £3,700 was spent. Unfortunately, this major investment was not justified by the results obtained.

The economics of the room was raised at the Annual Parish Meeting in 1988 where a conclusion was reached that it should be sold. Despite the earlier investment, basic maintenance had been ignored and it was estimated that £20,000 would be needed to make the Room competitive with the new Community Centre at the Maltings, opened in 1985, the Centre being better placed geographically and having all new facilities and a bar and also having the advantage of noise not being such a sensitive issue as for the Room in a residential area. The Room had just two advantages, its height for badminton and easier access for the disabled, which prompted the Nelson Club to use it until ramps were improved at the Maltings in 1995.



Sale was deferred as some locals objected on moral grounds as the Hall had been bought by public donation and they did not feel that the Church was entitled to sell. In 1996 there was an approach by Trent Antiques of Newark to lease the building. The Trust Deed debarred such change of use but a relaxation was obtained from the Charity Commission and it was approved by North Norfolk District Council in June 1997. The Badminton Club were given notice; this was not a severe blow to the men's club as their treasurer revealed that their numbers were falling and amalgamation with the Fakenham Club would soon be inevitable. The ladies' group, small but very keen, were deeply disappointed.

The lease deal suddenly ceased and in 1997 the Rector received an approach from the YHA. The Church Council expressed a strong preference for the YHA proposal and despite a petition signed by 88 people, both Wells Town Council and North Norfolk District Council approved the scheme by the end of 1998. The £50,000 sale was completed in October 1999. While there was regret at the closing of this church facility, it was recognised by the overwhelming majority of people that the new use of the building was the most appropriate.

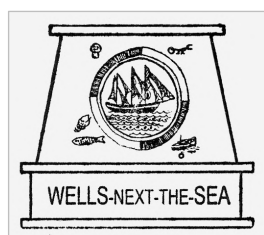


*The early-20th-century brick façade of Wells-next-the-Sea youth hostel (author's photographs, August 2014)*

The 2001 Handbook led with advice that, subject to appeal, the hostel would be ready the following year, and it opened on 1st May 2002. The compact design by architects Martin Hall Associates of Fakenham required the fitting of a second floor to the original high-roofed layout. A manager's flat, 8 small bedrooms, 4 showers and 3 WCs are provided on the upper level, while a further bedroom and WC and shower facilities suited to disabled guests are provided on the ground floor. Access to the first floor is designed as a standard staircase to the rear and a spiral stair at the front that leads off the reception and office area. Public rooms include a general seating area with games and notices, leading to a TV lounge and a small snug. A well-kitted-out self-caterers' kitchen and dining area are positioned at the rear, there being no meals provision by YHA here. A car park is located at the rear of the hostel.

After its tenth season Wells-next-the-Sea hostel received a significant refurbishment, ready for reopening on 22nd December 2011. An urgently needed change was the refitting of the upper storey floorboards. Showers were renewed at this time.

Wells-next-the-Sea is a consistently popular youth hostel, with a high level of repeat business and web-site satisfaction. Managers have included the long-serving Jerad Butcher; Piotr Lyjak succeeded him late in 2012, and Mark Brown early in 2014. The facility is now managed by staff based at Sheringham hostel.



*Hostel stamp, 2014*





1 2



3



4



5



6



7 8



Conversion work, 2000-2002.

1&2: the original Church Room, and roof work;

3: the gutted interior; 4,5&6: progress on the upper floor;

7: steel support beams for the new floor, and the special pierced opening for the spiral stair;

8: final touches (all photographs from a framed display at the hostel, with thanks to Mark Brown)



| Overnights – inclusive periods each year as follows  |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
|--|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| 1937-1983: previous Oct to Sept; 2002-present: Mar to following Feb                                  |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| §: Walsingham Edgar House Hostel; ¶: Great Walsingham Old Schoolhouse Hostel;                        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| •: possibly in the last months of 1939; π: Walsingham Catholic Pilgrim Bureau Hostel (Almonry Lane); |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| €: Walsingham Catholic Pilgrim Bureau Hostel (Aelred House); Δ: Wells-next-the-Sea Hostel            |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| +: notional figure included for exclusive hire and/or camping  |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| 1930   | 1931   | 1932   | 1933   | 1934   | 1935   | 1936   | 1937   | 1938   | 1939   |
| ...  | ...    | ...    | ...    | ...    | ...    | ...    | 171§   | 446§   | 159¶   |
| 1940   | 1941   | 1942   | 1943   | 1944   | 1945   | 1946   | 1947   | 1948   | 1949   |
| 94•  | ...    | ...    | ...    | ...    | ...    | ...    | ...    | ...    | ...    |
| 1960   | 1961   | 1962   | 1963   | 1964   | 1965   | 1966   | 1967   | 1968   | 1969   |
| ...  | ...    | ...    | ...    | ...    | ...    | ...    | ...    | ...    | 132π   |
| 1970   | 1971   | 1972   | 1973   | 1974   | 1975   | 1976   | 1977   | 1978   | 1979   |
| 827 π  | 914 π  | 1962 π | 1656 π | 2788 π | 2499 π | 2162 π | 2413 π | 3070 π | 3020 π |
| 1980   | 1981   | 1982   | 1983   | 1984   | 1985   | 1986   | 1987   | 1988   | 1989   |
| 2673 π   | 2325 π | 1985 π | 1559 € | ...    | ...    | ...    | ...    | ...    | ...    |
| 2000   | 2001   | 2002   | 2003   | 2004   | 2005   | 2006   | 2007   | 2008   | 2009   |
| ...  | ...    | 3836Δ  | 5594Δ  | 5944Δ  | 6231Δ  | 6423Δ  | 5398Δ  | 4527Δ  | 4816Δ  |
| 2010   | 2011   | 2012   | 2013   | 2014   | 2015   | 2016   | 2017   | 2018   | 2019   |
| 5248Δ  | 5810+Δ | 5740+Δ | 6545+Δ | 6029+Δ | 6168+Δ | 6161+Δ | 6300+Δ | 5967+Δ | 6280+Δ |



A beautifully worked framed tapestry that surely epitomises a lifetime of YHA commitment and adventure by Irene Mainwaring, 1935-2001, and presented as a memorial at Wells-next-the-Sea hostel (photo Mark Brown, August 2014)

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