



YHA (England and Wales) Youth Hostel Profile

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

Borth Youth Hostel 1952 to present

Morlais and Pen-y-Morfa, Borth, Ceredigion SY24 5JS

Historic County: Cardiganshire

YHA Regions: Birmingham and Mid-Wales, South Wales, Wales

GR: SN 608907

YHA's Birmingham and Mid-Wales Region boasted a strong branch in Aberystwyth before the war, and a hostel in or near the university town was a constant if elusive dream of the local committee. With the general expansion of hostel activity after the war, and especially the proliferation of new hostels, hopes were again raised. The 1951 Handbook gave a hint of a new hostel 2 miles north-east of the town, after the local group had spent several months negotiating with Aberystwyth Council on the possibility of obtaining *Cwmcynfelin*, a large house near Clarach Church, overlooking Clarach Bay, and a decision was eagerly awaited. The plans came to nothing, and the house *Morlais* at Borth was bought instead. *Cwmcynfelin* is now a home for the elderly.



An early postcard of Morlais, Borth's Youth Hostel, published by Pickford, Aberystwyth (author's collection)

Morlais is an Edwardian seaside villa, once a boarding house, on Borth's Esplanade, with an open view of Cardigan Bay. The property was at the right-hand of a pair of substantial semi-detached buildings and was a freehold purchase from John Edwin Corfield, vested in the YHA Trust on 14 March 1952. Unusually for the time, it gained no grant-aid from the Ministry of Education; memos seem to suggest that the option was deliberately refused by the regional council, suggesting that there were too many strings attached. The hostel opened at Easter, though it missed a full entry in the 1952 handbook; the resulting slow take-up of overnights in the first year (1,609) may have been a blessing in disguise as this hostel, like so many at the time, was opened at breakneck speed in an unfinished state. The first warden was Mrs Barlow. When she retired in 1961 the annual report named her husband too as warden. This may well have been one of those unequal married appointments so common at the time in YHA, where the spouse fulfilled various functions on a minor scale of pay, if any.

Borth Hostel soon settled into a busy routine. In the manner of the day, the warden and work parties from the West Birmingham YHA Group carried out a yearly list of improvements to plumbing, wiring, roofing, room layout and decoration over twenty years or more. Winter hostelling was possible from 1954, and a sea wall built by Aberystwyth Rural District Council in 1955 helped eradicate a problem of regular flooding.

Other improvements were to be completed by the start of 1959. Mr and Mrs Munro Taylor took over the wardenship in 1961, and retired some 25 years later in 1990. Their appointment was always recorded as a joint one. During their time at Borth they oversaw considerable development. Major improvements were made to the members' kitchen in 1961, and more generally in 1963, with external and internal decoration and provision of a fire escape. The basement was converted imaginatively by the wardens into a Field Studies room.

In the sixties Borth Hostel topped the Birmingham Region's usage table (it was their only seaside hostel), but with only 42 beds from the outset it could barely cope, and was cramped. In response, the neighbouring semi-detached house, *Pen-y-Morfa*, was added as a further freehold purchase on 6 February 1970, again being vested in the YHA Trust. By this time the hostel had passed to an enlarged region, South Wales. The purchase allowed the two premises to be integrated into a grander 60-bed facility, and usage of about 5,000-6,000 in the 1960s grew to 8,000-9,000 in the 1970s and 1980s.



The enlarged hostel in its middle years, shown in a postcard and a photograph.

1: a Photo Precision postcard from the later 1970s, with the full building now in use.

Note that the right hand side entry door had now gone (author's collection);

2: the sign below the famous green triangle reads: Borth Field Studies Centre (YHA Archive)

School parties were regular users of the hostel, but an internal report of 28 May 1972 showed that there was more work to be done in bringing the hostel up to the best Department of Education and Science specifications, and even YHA's own grading of 'standard' was thought to be generous:

Since the purchase of the adjacent property the hostel is still on the 'tight' side, particularly with its heavy unofficial Field Study use. There have been several schemes put forward for development to current DES standards; at the moment it falls below 'standard' grading.

A slightly later report, on 26 July 1973, shed more light:

Presently Standard – Recommended Standard. Approximately 8,500 bednights. Borth is two semi-detached houses now knocked into one. Although large houses, they were not built to be used as a hostel and generally rooms are not large enough to take the numbers that pass through this hostel.

The largest room is the Dining Room which was the two front rooms in one house. Well decorated and bright, it will almost seat a full hostel complement if all members decided to have hostel meals. Leading from it is a good meals provided washup. Next to it is the Common Room, carpeted and with seven easy chairs but with the disadvantage that the right of way runs through it. There is one small wall heater in this room, surely not sufficient. Continuing on the ground floor is the self cookers' Dining Room (also used as a Field Study Room) and at the back, the Members' Kitchen, which is not very large but the separate dining room eases the pressure. There are insufficient cooking points (at least, three more are needed), but it will be a problem to find room for them. Space is at a premium. The ground floor is vinyl tiled throughout except for the Members' Kitchen dining room.

Outside the main building are the toilets – two for men and a urinal, three for women. There is also a Drying Room and Cycle Shed. Both are satisfactory.

On the first and second floors are the dormitories. One side for women, the other for men. There is also an inside lavatory on each side for night use. I found four extra beds in dorms 6 and 10. The top floor is fairly spartan with bare floor boards throughout, a lack of stools and waste bins. All rooms have basins with hot and cold running water. This solves the washroom problem but we ought to start allocating a space for handbasins in dormitories. Borth has solved its men's wash problem by this method and also increased the number of beds by turning the women's wash into a dormitory.

Although I am not enthusiastic about handbasins in dormitories (I always seem to get the bed nearest the basin and get awakened with the gently falling dew), I accept this as perhaps the only solution in some cases. Nevertheless we should realise that in a fairly tightly packed dorm, the addition of a basin can turn a barely comfortable situation into an uncomfortable one. I consider that one hand basin should be considered as equal to one bedspace or 25sq ft.

There is no net at any of the dormitory windows. As the front bedrooms on the first floor are overlooked from the sea wall, I would suggest that these at least should have net. Bright decorations throughout the hostel, but the stairs could do with runners. The warden had wisely replaced broken springs with bed boards. These are comfortable over interior spring or foam mattresses. There are a few of the old type mattresses and these should be changed.

In 1974 planning permission was obtained to create extensions to the existing hostel and for the erection of a building at the rear for field studies, later used as a local outreach base for the Centre for Alternative Technology, Machynlleth. Also at this time, the north side of the property became the sole means of access, all other entrances being required to be closed up.

In 1980 Borth was still the most used South Wales region hostel on a bed-per-night basis, and was its only Superior Grade hostel before Broad Haven and St Briavels Castle joined the club.



A brief expansion to 68 beds in the mid-1990s was soon reversed to 60 with the drive to extra comfort and greater privacy. John and Eileen Cotterill, then Dave and Sandra Llewellyn, all much-experienced YHA managers, took the reins in the 1990s.

The 2000 YHA Guide described all accommodation as in 4-6 bedded rooms, with two family rooms fitted out en suite.

Left: the hostel stamp



A cheerful YHA postcard from about the turn of the century. The esplanade frontage had been made much more inviting and a crowd was enjoying the open-air aspect (author's collection)

Recent managers have included Jared Butcher, Stephen Denton, Mathew Teasdale and Ian Wall. In 2013 YHA announced that the hostel was for sale. It passed seamlessly to its new owners John and Jayne Taylor under YHA's Enterprise scheme on July 11th.

Borth hostel continues to provide welcoming accommodation under the Association's banner and there have been many improvements under the new ownership. The hostel has been overhauled with considerable redecoration, new flooring, replacement windows and frames throughout and a new entrance porch on the north side of the building to provide a cosy entrance. Hostel capacity has risen slightly to 61 beds. Outside areas have been remodelled and the erstwhile field studies centre and computer suite extensively refurbished, to provide both classroom facilities and a local meeting room and resource centre. This latter is used regularly by the local a capella choir as its practice room.

A special feature of the Taylors' enterprising approach is the exceptional catering provision.

<i>Overnights – inclusive periods each year as follows</i>									
<i>1952-1991: previous Oct to Sept; 1992: Oct 1991 to Feb 1993; 1993-present: Mar to following Feb</i>									
<i>*: 17 month period; +: notional figure included for exclusive hire; E: YHA / Enterprise hostel</i>									
1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959
...	...	1609	2470	2956	3297	3533	4136	4062	4243
1960	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969
4102	3996	4006	4091	4401	4687	5184	5243	5844	6217
1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979
8379	8277	8511	8606	9173	9732	2381	8731	9328	9875
1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989
9896	8498	7863	8488	9528	8379	8994	9721	9229	8573
1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
7873	8209	8099*	7570	7823	8407	8496	7502	6721	5174
2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
5317	3466	5400	6844	7757	8524	8891	7903	7749	7534
2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
7126	7209+	7553+	6229+	openE	openE	openE	openE	openE	openE



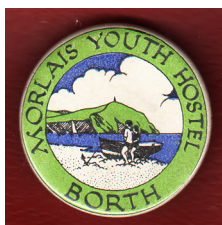
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Impressions, July 2014, immediately before transfer to the Enterprise scheme.

1&2: the building is enhanced by new cream paintwork;

3: rear view of the hostel. Staff quarters extend rearwards on both sides;

4: the Field Studies annexe. At one time this was equipped with computers in collaboration with the Centre for Alternative Technology, Machynlleth;

5&6: views south and north along the stunning Cardiganshire Coast.

The shots were taken from one of the bay-windowed family rooms (author's photographs);

7: the one-inch pin badge collected avidly by hostellers 40 or 50 years ago (author's collection)

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