

## Poppit Sands Youth Hostel 1950 to present

Sea View, Poppit, St Dogmaels, Cardigan SA43 3LP

Historic County: Pembrokeshire

YHA Regions: South Wales, Wales

GR: SN 144488

Few YHA youth hostels can have started as modestly and slowly as Sea View Cottage, Poppit Sands, to be developed so patiently over time that it now constitutes one of the Association's most attractive coastal properties.

A plaque by the rear entrance advises that the hostel was dedicated Flt Lieut Robin Hugh Thomas, killed in action on 30th September 1944. Sea View Cottage was presented by Mr and Mrs CE Thomas, along with five acres of land to the sea, in memory of their son.



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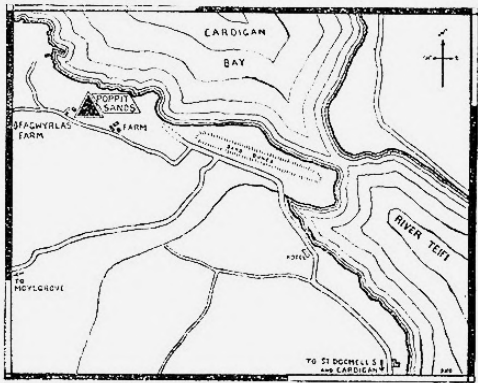
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- 1: Mr and Mrs Thomas's generous gift to YHA is recorded in this plaque at the hostel (author's photograph, August 2015);  
 2: in the second season, on 18th June 1951, much-travelled hosteller Fred Blampied recorded Poppit Sands in its simplest form;  
 3: a working party is under way at Sea View in the early years. Pat Packham captured the scene, probably during her 1953 tour of Welsh hostels by bike and Rail Holiday Runabout ticket, an attractive method still possible by similar means 60 years later (2&3: YHA Archive)

The hostel opened at Easter 1950 (though one report suggested it would be Whitsun). It was a simple affair, a two-storey cottage resembling a small Welsh farmhouse; it had once been an inn. There was a single storey extension to the left. The first warden was recorded as non-resident, Miss M Jones. She may have been just the keyholder, as Ray Morley is known to have wardened at or near the outset.

**POPPIT SANDS.**  
*Postal Address.*—Poppit Sands Youth Hostel, St. Dogmaels, Pembs.  
 A cottage, magnificently situated on a hillside sloping steeply down to the sea near the mouth of the River Teifi. Grand views covering the estuary, Cardigan Island and a large part of Cardigan Bay. 20 beds (to be increased), Members' kitchen with calor gas. Easiest approach is from St. Dogmaels. Follow the coast road (sign-posted "Poppit Sands") for nearly three miles. Turn left at telephone box.

O.S. 139 ; G.R. 145488 ; Bart. 11.



**The hostel is a further half-mile, on the right just below a small "rocket house."**

*Entry in the 1951 South Wales Regional Handbook (YHA Archive)*

Immediately there were plans to extend from 20 to 30 beds (though the 1950 handbook wildly suggested 50) and the hostel soon settled on 22. A considerable rebuild was recorded after 1951. Volunteer work parties made structural alterations to provide improved common room facilities and a members' kitchen in 1952. The work parties were still operating in 1953.

Pat Packham knew the early hostel well from her cycling tours. She stayed at the hostel on 9th August 1953 and later added this entry to her wonderful logbook, *A Holiday in West Wales by Bicycle and Rail Runabout Ticket*:

Six of us arrived together but no warden appeared until 5.30pm. He was a funny little Irishman and had gone for a ride with two other hostellers. No meals were provided at this hostel and just as my kettle was boiling for a drink of lemonade the warden took it.

[Next morning...] all the girls got up at 6.45 this morning. All the water had to be pumped and as I could not work the pump I washed in about an inch of water. I was given the most unusual duty of sweeping the path just outside the front door. Poppit Sands was a small cottage overlooking the Teifi Estuary; it had been given to the YHA by the parents of a pilot killed in the Battle of Britain and was only open for 6 weeks each year. Water had to be obtained from a spring by a pump and was very limited.

Later in the trip, on reaching the far-from-glamorous Pentre Cwrt hostel, near Newcastle Emlyn, she observed:

This hostel was quite luxurious after Poppit Sands, with running water and a box beside each bed.

She visited again, in 1960, and noted:

'A' told me that Poppit Sands was in rather a mess. The temporary warden, a member of the Swansea Group, had taken over for a week [Pat Packham, 1960].

The volunteer wardens were many and varied, and quite a few long-serving workers for the Association seem to have cut their teeth on a summer stint at Poppit Sands. It seems that the idea of employing a local person, Miss M Jones, at the outset, was not continued. Recorded temporary wardens were the well-known Keith Mascetti (1952), Trevor Holtom (1953), D Hind (1954), Miss R Ayres (1955 and 1956), Mrs M Crowe (1957), G Davies (1958), JD Streeton (1961), A Jones (1964), 'several' (1965) and Herr & Frau Fritz Hippe (1966).





The 1958 regional annual report affirmed that extensive repairs were being carried out at the hostel; it also carried the first expression of a wish to extend the capacity with a view to opening this hostel for longer periods. There was a blithe hope that a new dormitory hut would be erected in 1959, only to be 'scaled down' (effectively long postponed until the late 1960s) by YHA's National Finance Committee in 1960. Until that distant date all use remained limited to high summer, wardening was always on a short-term voluntary basis and all accommodation restricted to the original Sea View Cottage, as shown right in a sketch from 1961. However, there would be improvements in the form of redecoration in 1961 and the provision of mains electricity in 1962.



Dave Matthews, so long associated with the South Wales Region through his work as General Secretary, volunteer and hosteller, remembers the early layout of the hostel:

Poppit Sands I knew firstly in 1961 when it was as the sketch. Oil lamps in those days, and only open for three months in the Summer. We were able to arrange to go off-season as a Group.

The members' kitchen was at the back of the main house, quite a narrow area without much daylight. Of the four rooms at the front of the house part, if my memory is correct, one was the volunteer warden's room with the other three being small dormitories. The single storey building, as I recall, housed a small common room near, and accessed from, the house end, and a store at the other, for all and sundry including bikes. There were two Ty Bach toilets outside.

The kitchen referred to would have been in the space where toilets and showers are now placed, behind the current lateral corridor, and must have been very small indeed.

At last, in 1966, things started to progress. The main building was re-roofed and a new pump provided an adequate supply of water. Two rooms were given new wooden floors, ceilings renovated and work was well-advanced on foundations for a new dormitory building, as shown below. By the time of the 1967 annual report, the foundations were complete and awaiting delivery of the superstructure. Work would continue throughout the winter and spring with anticipated completion by Easter 1968, by which time accommodation had at last grown, to 32.



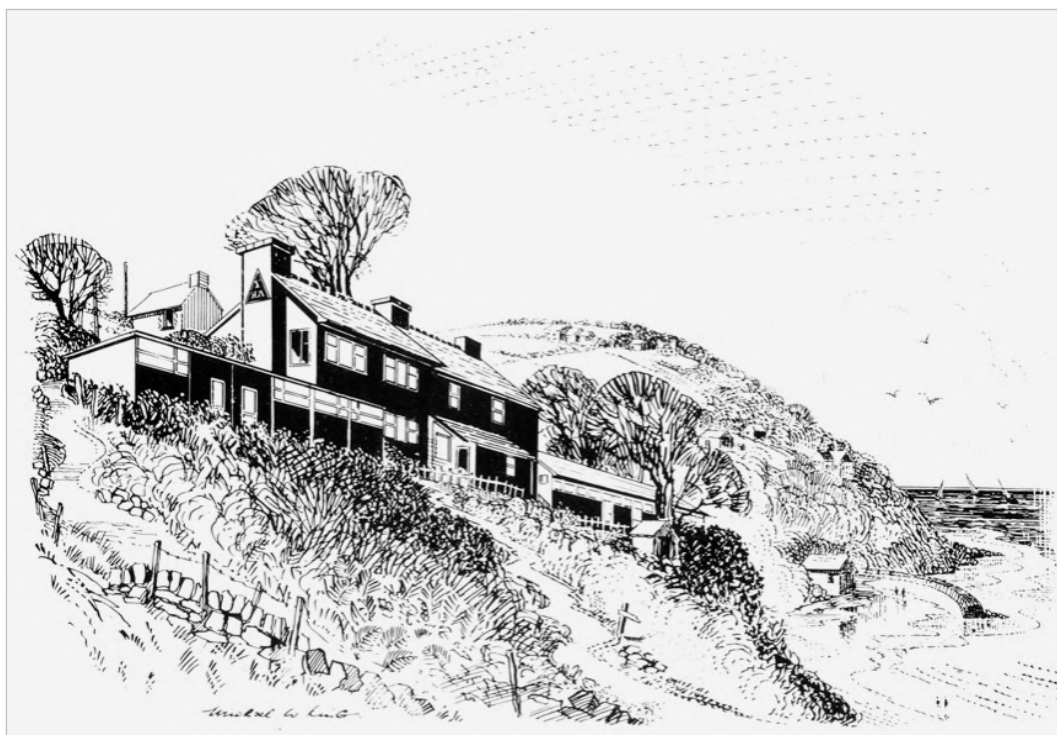
*Digging the foundations for the new cedarwood annexe. Dave Matthews comments that the design followed that of the successful new timber hostel at St Athan – picture from the 1967 South Wales annual report (YHA Archive), framed by the attractive one-inch pin badge from that period and a recent hostel stamp (author's collection)*

Then things changed, fortuitously and very quickly. The 1968 report described a disastrous gale at Poppit Sands, seriously damaging the common room (still, presumably, in the little extension) and the roof. This provided YHA with the opportunity for the almost complete rebuilding of the hostel, including an entirely new two-storey masonry wing to the left of Sea View Cottage. The new outside dormitory to the right was also brought into use. Poppit Sands was now a meals-provided hostel of 40 beds, though the meals provision did not last long.

As so often with new construction, YHA took a little time to decide the best fit for its use. A memo from about late 1969 shows that the top floor of the new extension had been given entirely to house a permanent warden, but on reflection this was too generous for a single appointment, and plans were put in place for one of the two allotted bedrooms to become family accommodation (two double bunks and one cot), while sharing the warden's bathroom and small kitchen. Understandably, this arrangement did not last long. The 1971 annual report described a further, and final extension:

Family accommodation is being greatly improved by the erection of an additional building which will provide a double unit family annexe. This has been accomplished by dismantling and moving to Poppit the former dormitory building at Cilibion. Work on this project is well-advanced and it is anticipated the building will be ready for occupation by Easter 1972. An unsatisfactory feature has at last been removed by the provision of mains water although not without problems as a result of the increased pressure. The older part of the building at Poppit Sands has been completely re-rendered externally to match the new extension and has been made more congenial internally by the provision of new windows throughout.

The story of the Cilibion hut is interesting. Mr & Mrs John and Ray Owen, two local enthusiasts, operated the little accommodation hostel in the centre of Gower at their home from 1950 to 1969. In 1960 old rustic huts there made way for a newly constructed substantial timber dormitory. When the Owens decided to retire, they offered the building to YHA, just in time to resolve the family accommodation issue at Poppit Sands; two Family Units were incorporated into it.



*This postcard, the only known issue for Poppit Sands hostel, shows the final stage of construction development, and probably dates from about 1972. The two-storey buildings (the original Sea View Cottage to the right and the 1968 block to the left) are framed by the 1968 dormitory annexe, extreme right, and the family accommodation hut from Cilibion, 1972, far left (author's collection)*

With all these improvements and additions, and especially with a permanent warden and a longer season, overnights at the hostel showed a meteoric rise between 1966 (1,076) and 1976 (6,450). Wardens during this decade of change included David Wilson (1967-70), R Andrews (1970), Peter and Mavis Korbel (1971-74) and Graham and Jill Singleton (1974).



Two frank inspectors' visits were recorded, the first in 1972:

The writer has known Poppit for over 10 years and has seen a simple hostel gradually evolve with careful planning to the small standard hostel of today. The 'new' annexe pays adequate tribute to the thought and careful planning of the Region. Bed spacing is slightly tight to a standard of 34sq ft per bed but the other facilities, beds and bedding of a very high standard, furnishing, floor coverings, curtains, decoration and cleanliness well outweigh this deficiency. Showers, toilets and washbasins built into the annexe show a care in planning. The beds and bedding in the house fall short of the standard set in the annexe and this should be looked into.

There is a pleasant common room, which because of the situation of the hostel gets a lot of use. The dining room is adequately furnished. The members' kitchen is adequate, but ought to have the few modest improvements necessary to uplift it to the character of the remaining part of the Hostel.

For a small Standard hostel there is very little wrong and there is every indication that the hostel is in very good hands at the moment.

The 1973 report gave an insight into the family accommodation:

Presently Standard – Recommended Standard. Approximately 4,000 bednights.

It has an energetic warden who is determined to increase its already increasing usage and the hostel shows signs of his efforts. We arrived during a water shortage crisis. Without warning the water had been cut off a few hours before. The water heater attached to the Aga was registering the danger point, the tanks were dry and the old water pump which had been partly dismantled a couple of years ago was being rapidly assembled. Members were expected in an hour's time. Yet when I inspected the hostel, it was clean, tidy with everything in its place. A truly remarkable piece of organisation!

This is a fair Standard hostel. Its improving bednights merit money being spent on it to improve its facilities. Finally, there are two family annexes. These are the first that I have inspected and I make the following notes without comment. Each contained a fridge, cooker, electric kettle, iron and heater in the kitchen cum living room. Each bedroom contained two double beds, a cot, a wardrobe and sideboard. They also have a separate bath, hand basin and WC. The price of accommodation is the usual Standard bednight fee.



1: Poppit Sands hostel captured in 1975 by the camera of George Miller (author's collection);  
2: the dormitory annexe (more recently reception and staff accommodation), about 1980 (YHA Archive)

Capacity rose to an unlikely 50 in 1981, but soon reverted to 40 and was pegged to 30 in 1996. The outbuildings were gradually being taken out of use as members' bedroom space about this time, and accorded with the removal of special family accommodation units throughout YHA in favour of a more flexible arrangement with more small rooms. The former Cilibion hut, later used as a games room, is now disused.

Mike Hennessey had a long spell as warden, from 1979 to 1996, when he died. He was followed by Mark Stanley until 2005. The hostel was refurbished and upgraded with more small bedrooms ready for 1999. The removal of staff quarters to the original 1968 timber annexe seems to have taken place at this time, allowing the capacity to rise again to 36. Late in 2011 YHA completed in a remarkable four week period a £155,000 refurbishment of the hostel, with a brand new kitchen, refurbished toilets and showers, new beds, new soft furnishings and redecoration throughout. The hostel reopened on 1st November 2011. There are two 5-bedded rooms on the ground floor (one en suite), and three 2-bedded and three 6-bedded on the first floor.

Stewart Towe arrived in 2005 and by 2007 had taken responsibility for the triple managership of Poppit Sands, Newport and Pwll Deri, aided by volunteer staff.



Poppit Sands hostel, in its stunning location overlooking Cardigan Island, after the 2011 refurbishment (YHA images)

<i>Overnights – inclusive periods each year as follows</i>									
<b>1950-1991:</b> previous Oct to Sept; <b>1992:</b> Oct 1991 to Feb 1993; <b>1993-present:</b> Mar to following Feb									
●: the second figures are for family accommodation (1970-71 are in addition to the first figures, in 1972-74 – unclear whether in addition to the first figures, 1975 onwards, included in the year figure);									
*: 17 month period; +: notional figure included for exclusive hire and/or camping									
1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959
930	827	1038	821	659	828	956	817	789	1008
1960	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969
984	776	1005	805	784	958	1076	1358	1394	1763
1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979
2805/28●	2444/893●	2776/1108●	3170/1034●	3556/1267●	5943	6450	5608	5097	3689
1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989
3642	2995	3462	3850	3684	4031	4435	4437	4183	5590
1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
5390	5460	4368*	3807	4009	3131	2820	2158	2653	3454
2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
4066	3919	4553	4774	4866	4030	4660	3850	2902	3047
2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
2568	2843+	3361+	3570+	3932+	4402+Δ	4699+Δ	4819+Δ	3902+Δ	3511+Δ





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*1&2: the steep descent, about 70 steps from the car park; 3&4: picture windows and picture views;  
5&6: the 'Cilbion' hut and the 'dormitory' (now reception and staff) annexe;  
7&8: nocturne (author's photographs, August 2015)*