



YHA (England and Wales)

Youth Hostel Profile

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

## Manchester Youth Hostels

including a note on two temporary hostels in the city

### Manchester [Castlefield] Youth Hostel 1995 to present

Potato Wharf, Castlefield, Manchester M3 4NB

Historic County: Lancashire

GR: SJ 830976

The final decade or so of the twentieth century was a good time for the opening of new youth hostels in England's larger industrial cities. New establishments were opened in Bristol (1989), Rotherhithe (1991), Manchester (1995) and Liverpool (1997), taking good advantage of the generous deals from contemporary Regional Development Funds and the welcoming arms of city councils keen to establish cultural, educational and tourism enterprises to replace faded industrial and dockside eyesores. Bristol was an extensively repurposed grain warehouse while Rotherhithe, Manchester and Liverpool were complete new-builds. All four were dockland redevelopments. Rival cities, Birmingham, Cardiff and Leeds especially, were unfortunate not to be successful at that time after considerable preparation work by them and YHA, though Cardiff was a later achievement. Other newly-constructed hostels opened at the turn of the century at Lea Valley and Oxford, both on brown-field sites. Ironically, YHA was to lose many of its former traditional hostels in smaller 'Baedeker Guide' cities either side of the new millennium, such as Plymouth, Exeter, Salisbury, Southampton, Portsmouth, Lincoln, Chester and Carlisle – old and expensive-to-run hostels in premises difficult to adapt to modern hostelling. Most had been bought as relatively cheap run-down properties in the 20 years immediately post-war, but had now come to the end of their useful lives.

The first mention in YHA literature of a new youth hostel for Manchester was published in *YHA News*, November 1992:

£804,000 is coming from a public sector grant via the Central Manchester Development Corporation and a private developer will construct and own the youth hostel. YHA has not had to find any capital for this project. However, an appeal to members is soon to be launched by the Association for members to contribute to the Manchester Youth Hostel Fund. Every pound we can raise will go towards new bunk beds, carpets, kitchen equipment and all the fixtures and fittings necessary to furnish the building.



*This artist's impression of the forthcoming youth hostel was published as a promotional poster (YHA Archive)*

The June 1994 issue of *YHA News* described progress with construction. Building work was underway and completion was expected in December 1994, with the official opening to be in March 1995. The first booking had already been taken from a school from North Wales, for a group of 100 children. The November 1994 issue continued in confident mood:

The new youth hostel due to open in Manchester's Castlefield area in March 1995 is proceeding to plan. Under the terms of the lease, the Association is entitled to put up a sum of £250,000 by way of a premium on the lease, which will reduce the initial rental. The impact of doing so was recognised as having benefits to the long-term financial position and the Trustees agreed that this should be done, subject to legal advice being taken.

It is not clear whether the planned March 1995 'soft' opening was achieved, or postponed until the official opening, now moved back to June. In July *YHA News* described those proceedings:

Stephen Dorrell, then Secretary of State for National Heritage, performed the official opening of YHA Manchester hostel before invited guests in perfect weather on Friday June 23rd. The occasion marked the culmination of a project which has taken over two years to turn a dream into a reality. Many people can justifiably take pride in a job well done, giving us a finished hostel that is a flagship of the YHA.

The Minister was clearly impressed by the facilities, seeing the presence of YHA in Manchester as an asset to the city and its drive for more tourism. The international usage of the hostel could not have been better illustrated than by the presence, in the hostel, of a troupe of young Italian dancers in Manchester for a week-long Italian Festival. Mr Dorrell had not previously appreciated the extent of YHA presence in cities, but was quick to realise that we were offering good quality, economically priced accommodation. After touring the building and meeting many of our guests Mr Dorrell was welcomed by our National Chairman, Derek Hanson, and invited to unveil a plaque.

In his speech the Minister spoke of the pride the YHA must have to a project completed to such a high standard. He recalled the manner in which the project had come to fruition through a combination of public and private finance and made brief mention of possible future funding for YHA projects via an application to the Millennium Fund of which he is the responsible Minister.

Our guest list showed just how much the business and commercial world of Manchester was involved: Dr James Grigor, Chairman of the Central Manchester Development Corporation; Robert Hough, Chairman of the Manchester Ship Canal Company (our landlords and builders of the hostel) and Sir Robert Scott, a Board Member of the Development Corporation, but better known for having led Manchester's highly creditable Olympic bid, and representatives of our contractors and of Manchester's thriving tourist attractions.



*The dedicatory plaque at Manchester youth hostel (author's photograph, July 2011)*

Gordon Hood, former Director of Development at the Central Manchester Development Corporation, described in the same July 1995 issue of *YHA News* how the Corporation had recognised the contribution that a large, international youth hostel could make to the regeneration of the Castlefield area of the City. He gave an account of how this £2 million project had come to fruition through a three way partnership in which a private developer constructed and owned the hostel, the Development Corporation provided a grant to contain the amount of capital

employed by the developer and the YHA took the completed property on a long-term economic rent. Curiously, he stated that the hostel had opened two *years* beforehand and its performance had exceeded the planned targets (the error was surely for two *months* beforehand). The hostel had made a significant contribution to attractions in and around the city by providing budget accommodation for both groups and individuals where none existed previously.

YHA's Publicity Department was inspired to create a special Manchester issue of *YHA News*, which gave further insight into the planning, development and operation of the new hostel:

The conversion of a derelict piece of ground into a modern youth hostel involves a story covering four years, many organisations and dozens of people. Everyone involved deserves praise but perhaps The Central Manchester Development Corporation (CMDC) should be thanked the most. Without their encouragement and grant aid the project would never have started. Charged with the regeneration of Central Manchester the CMDC area already had the well established Granada Studios Tour site, the Industrial and Aeronautical Museum and the YMCA Castlefield Hotel. They knew that to help in bringing the area to life with young people they needed a low cost accommodation provider such as the YHA. The Manchester Ship Canal Company (MSCC), as the major landowners in the area, were asked to provide a site and act as Developers for the new building making it ready to lease to us. A building fund of £1.9 million was needed and the CMDC came to our aid by providing a very substantial grant towards the cost of building. Final approval came from YHA National Executive. In all it took 3 years before the appointment of the Architects, Halliday Meecham and the professional team needed to design and build the new youth hostel. At this point YHA handed the project over to the City Hostels Division of the YHA, who would provide the Management Team responsible for the completed building. The MSCC retained the well-known, Manchester based, Dew Group Ltd to act as contractors and undertake the construction. Building commenced in January 1994 and the building was handed to YHA in February 1995.

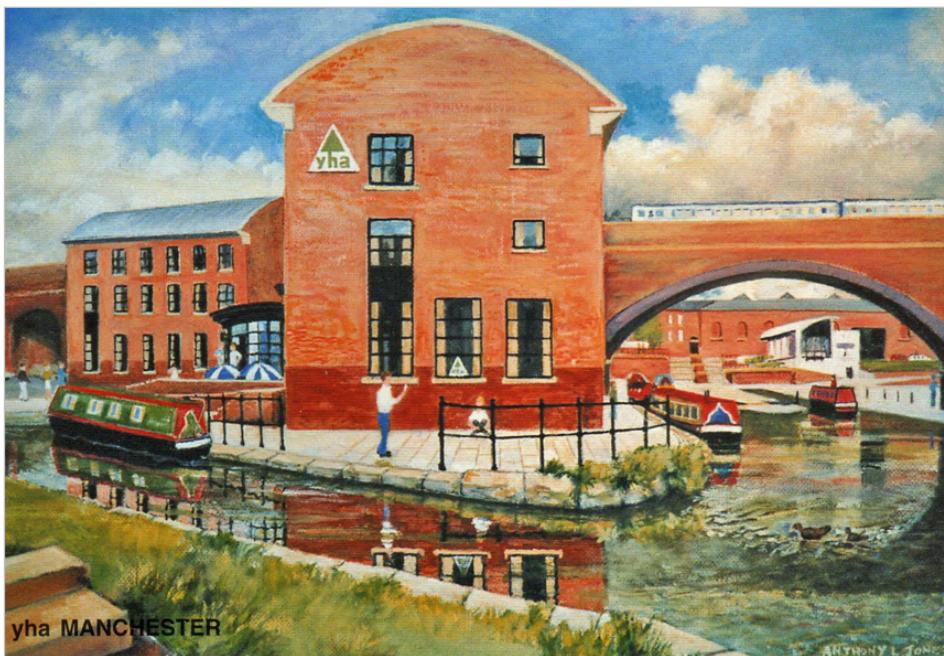
The YHA Team, with the help of the City Hostels Executive Committee (CHE), had to decide how the hostel would be operated. They had to design the interior fittings, furnishings and operational systems that would be needed to breathe life into the new building. Demands made on the YHA by its modern customers called for some original thinking resulting in a number of changes to the traditional ways of working. There were simple-sounding problems like 'should we use traditional sheet sleeping bags? or sheets and pillowcases?' We would use sheets and pillowcases. All bedrooms would have en suite bathrooms and security lockers. The Hostel would be open 24 hours a day. A full catering service would be offered. Meeting those needs had a cost implication and we needed to be able to offer very low prices to those customers who needed them. Yet we had customers who wanted, and were prepared to pay for, higher quality. This led to a major decision. The Hostel would offer economy, standard and premium beds. In addition two rooms would be designed for disabled visitors and their helpers. So the bedroom design had to be very adaptable indeed to enable easy conversion. The beds were to offer great adaptability, changing from twin bunk beds to a convertible sofa and back again in minutes.

Achieving this within budget looked impossible. In July 1994 The Remploy Furnishing Group submitted a proposal. Their initial design ideas were approved and Remploy was identified as the manufacturer to be used. Could they design a new type of pillow for us too? Their Newport factory design services turned out to be first class. Despite the lack of time to develop and manufacture the furniture they provided five different versions. Each time the YHA Management asked for further changes and at last in November final approval was given for delivery in January. In addition to this Remploy were asked to provide all the meeting room furniture.

Despite this tiny eight week production window, Remploy provided the furniture on the day they said they would and even had time to submit their folding bunk to the Furniture Industry Research Centre for testing and approval. Taplanoes adapted their new en suite 'Ultima' shower pod to YHA's needs. Made in a high grade plastic, easily assembled on site and totally waterproof they proved to be perfect for the job. They were cost effective and very quick to construct on site so the builders and developers liked them. So did we. The YHA Team progressed in other design areas. The kitchen and restaurant design, maintenance systems, closed circuit TV, the provision of power and TV aerials to the premium rooms and the thousand and one other things important to the launch. The team spent hours mulling over the selection for Manchester. They were especially pleased with the Primo Furnishings' Italian chairs which were attractive, comfortable and low cost. The hostel site covers 2880 square meters. The building sits on 35 concrete piles up to 10 meters long. Over 2,000 tons of concrete were used in the structure, and 86,000 bricks clad the outside. There are 97 double glazed windows, 5,000 metres of electric cable, 150 beds, lockers and wardrobes.

Ian Hampson joined the team as hostel manager in November 1994 and was involved with all the hurly-burly of getting the site commissioned. Two Bristol artists, Marion Webb and Graham Keatley, were commissioned to supply works of art for the Canal Restaurant walls. The building is now coming to life as customers arrive.

By the time of the special edition's publication in mid-1995 over 15,000 overnights were already booked.



*Anthony L Jones's colourful painting of Manchester youth hostel, issued as a postcard in the 1990s (YHA Archive)*

Duncan Simpson recalls how many pioneering ideas were tested at Manchester hostel at the outset, though traditionalists sometimes disliked it and there were many teething troubles:

It's worth noting that a lot of the ideas trialled at Manchester are now established parts of YHA, though criticism, costs and operational difficulties forced a lot of retrenchment from the early, revolutionary ideas. The conversion of beds to sofas and back again never really worked. Staff hated the extra effort. The use of sheets and pillowcases was too far ahead of the time, and was cut to reduce costs. A lot of what was done at Manchester looks naïve now, as the systems around the hostel weren't changed. Flexible cafeteria catering was difficult to achieve in an organisation that still thrived on the set three course meal served at a fixed time in most hostels, and over the years Manchester slipped back to being 'just another hostel'.

Sheets, pillow cases and café bars are now universal. En suites are ubiquitous. The flexibility of sofas and bunks hasn't returned but rooms are now flexed for different customers with double beds and differential pricing.

The hostel was immediately successful. 31,000 stayed in its first, incomplete year, and almost 40,000 in 1996, when bed numbers were increased from 154 to 160. Ian Hampson stayed only a few months, followed by Duncan Green until 1997, when he went to Earl's Court hostel for a lengthy spell. He was replaced by Steve Collier in that year. Curiously, camping was advertised, in 1997 only.

In 2000 Stephanie Cutts (later, Dale) was appointed as hostel manager. She brought considerable stability and development to the hostel after its first few years of rapid change of senior personnel. By 2000 the numbers staying annually had reduced to under 30,000, with considerably fewer beds: 144 in 2000 and 136 in 2005. The shortfall was probably calculated, created through the loss of four 4-bedded rooms in the north wing of the first floor, for extra staff accommodation. These rooms were later reinstated for guests.

The City of Manchester hosted the Commonwealth Games in July and August 2002. At this time, YHA was looking at ways to use student accommodation in the summer recess in so-called Campus Hostels based in university halls of residence, and several were experimented with over a period of a dozen years. New Medlock House, at 27-45 Chester Street, Manchester M15 6JX (Grid Reference SJ 839971), was accordingly hired by YHA for a period of four to six weeks in 2002 to assist with the event. The accommodation provided was in modern purpose-built rooms. The numbers taking advantage of the facility are not recorded in that year, but the building was hired again in the summer of 2003, when 993 stayed.

Summer vacation campus hostel accommodation continued in Manchester in 2004 and 2005, though a different venue was advertised on the YHA website. This was at Victoria Halls, 28 Higher Cambridge Street, Manchester M15 6AA (Grid Reference SJ 841968). The student accommodation was in single and double en suite rooms within self-catering flats, for about £25 per night. In 2005 it operated for a brief four weeks, from 31st July to 31st August, though

a substantial total of 2,229 stayed in that peak month, relieving pressure on the Castlefield hostel, from where staff were released to operate the scheme. The YHA Campus experiment was not proceeded with after this in Manchester, however.



1: New Medlock House, a summer temporary overspill youth hostel in 2002 and 2003. The photograph displays the YHA triangle and was taken by YHA regular Geoff Hodkinson; 2: Victoria Halls, another temporary hostel in 2004 and 2005 (both YHA Archive)

In 2005 and 2006, YHA's Do It 4 Real Summer Camp programme used the main Manchester hostel for its activities. The extent of the provision and its impact upon the regular booking pattern is not recorded. A more significant development, however, to the long-term benefit of YHA's presence on the site, was the purchase on October 2005 by the Association of the hostel's freehold, ending the tenancy relationship with the Manchester Ship Canal Company.

After 14 years of intensive use, Manchester hostel was ready for refurbishment and modernisation in 2008. A £500,000 project was carried out as part of YHA's Change Programme, a network-wide refurbishment project aimed to provide guests with the best possible accommodation experience. The scheme was centred on improving the food offering and opening up the bar and restaurant to the public. A brand new professional kitchen and servery were installed and a new bar area was created. All other public areas within the building were given a modern look and new furniture. Improved conference facilities were now on offer.



Left: hostel stamp

There was an official reopening on 20th October 2008, when the Rt Hon Richard Caborn, Member of Parliament for Sheffield Central, was welcomed as YHA's new President. The event was designed to give visitors a first glimpse of the new interior design standard for city hostels.

In 2008, Stephanie Dale moved into YHA's Group Performance Management for the North East and Nik Horobin was appointed manager. Lewis Johnson took the hostel's reigns the following year and stayed until 2012. From 2011 the annual overnights had been rising again, and breached the 1996 record in 2015, when 42,260 were registered, thus topping 40,000 for the first time. These increases were in line with YHA's considerably good results in the mid- 2010s. The number of hostel beds was also back on the rise, to 144 in 2014 and 152 in 2017. Oliver Whiteoak arrived in 2013, having managed previously at Norwich and Ravenstor youth hostels.

In 2019 there was further refurbishment of this busy hostel, with the redesign of the ground floor communal areas to improve the ambience of the café/bar. Other improvements were new furniture and more toilets and showers.

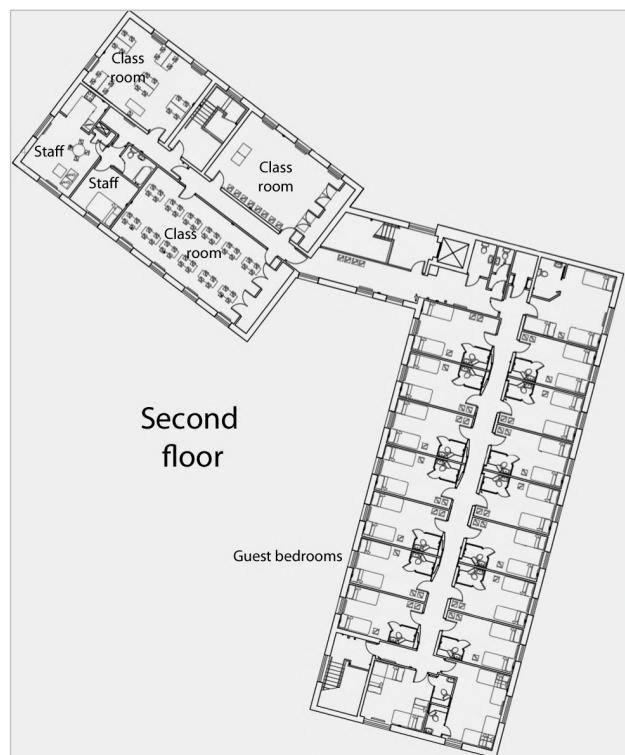
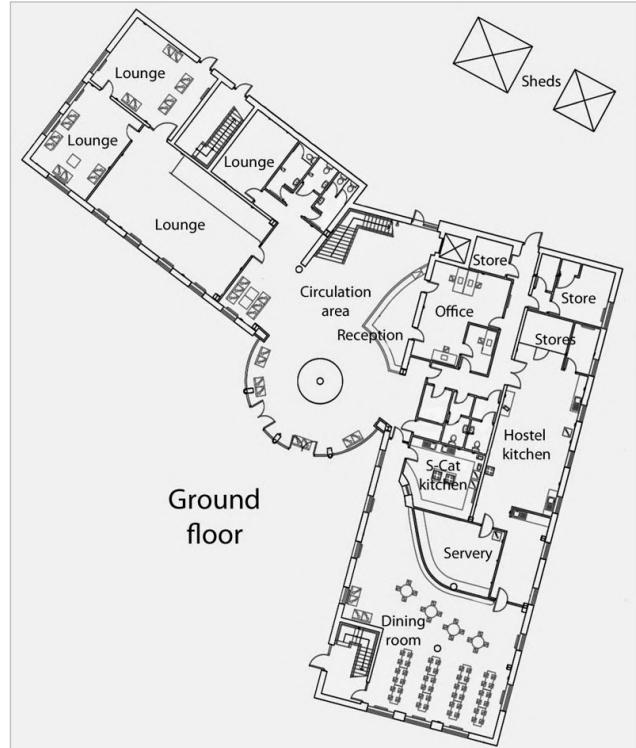
The design of the hostel is simple and uncluttered. YHA's plans on page 6 date from 2007, just before the major alterations the following year. The upper plan shows the original layout of the ground floor. The hostel entrance

within the semi-circular glazed wall leads into a bright central circulation area. The reception is on the right, a lift behind it and the imposing wide stone stair flight to the left of that.

Two wings fan out from this space. The east wing houses the new hostel bar of 2008 and associated seating (occupying the space shown here as toilets) as well as office, stores, hostel kitchen, servery and dining room.

Of the four public spaces shown in the north wing on the plan, the rear left, once the TV room, is now a cinema. Rear right is the relocated self-catering kitchen, with adjacent laundry, and front left is an office. The front right lounge, originally the games room, had the dividing wall removed in 2017 to combine it with the circulation area. It includes dining tables, lounge chairs and a wifi bar.

Outside, two bays of the Bridgewater Canal lie close by, to the east and south sides, and provide pleasant waterside walks. Four historic railway viaducts tower above the hostel and criss-cross the waterways here. Hugging the north side of the building, where sheds are shown, is the viaduct linking Manchester Piccadilly and Oxford Road stations to the historic Liverpool and Manchester line, the new Ordsall Curve and Manchester Victoria. The hostel's car park is found to the west of the north wing.



The first and second floors follow the same general outline as the ground, as shown on these 2007 plans, though the building layout is simplified to exclude the ground floor central circular feature. The wings are linked by a corridor space and stair well on the north side. The first floor has bedrooms 101-117 on the east side, mainly 4-bed, but with the two larger rooms now reduced to 5 beds, the curious and somewhat impractical overlapping 3-tier 'coffin' beds that served city hostels for a time having been confined to history. All rooms are en-suite. On the north side the first

four rooms, 118-121, are once again guest rooms, while remaining rooms, originally the manager's flat, are now used by the deputy manager.

The second floor duplicates the first on the east side, with rooms 201-217. In the north wing there are three meeting / class rooms, as shown. The two remaining staff rooms, once the deputy's flat, are now used by volunteers.



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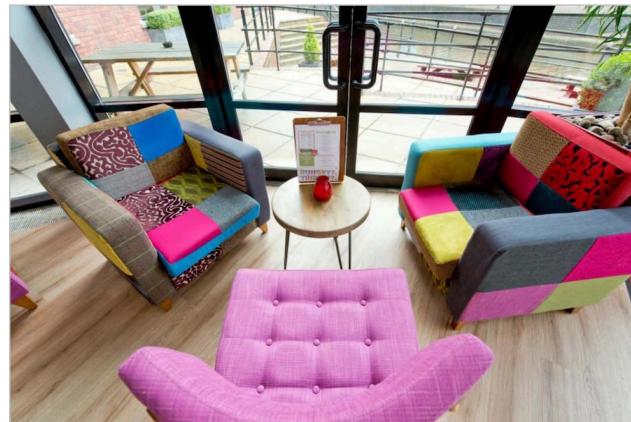
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Manchester's Castlefield youth hostel on the occasion of the YHA Annual General Meeting in the city, July 2011.

1: the hostel entrance, taken from across the Giants' Basin, a historic canal feature as the first cloverleaf weir in Britain. When the hostel was built, there was little modern development to accompany it, save the YMCA hotel nearby. Now much new housing has transformed and gentrified this area considerably; 2: The hostel from the west, in the fork of railway viaducts; 3&4: the splayed wings of YHA Manchester. Solar panels are situated on the barrel roofs of both flanks of the building; 5: these huge viaducts lie to the east of the hostel. The nearer example, on vast pillars, once carried main-line tracks into Manchester Central station. Behind it run the elevated Metrolink trams, and beyond that the railway to Warrington; 6: so many eras of the city's development are captured here. Just behind the viaduct lies Roman Manchester (author's photographs)



Colourful design permeates the interior of Manchester youth hostel after refurbishment in 2017. Changes continue, as the red circular lampshades have since given way to in-vogue bundles of industrial-style glass bulbs (publicity stills, YHA Archive)

*Overnights – inclusive periods each year as follows*

**1995-present: Mar to following Feb**

Δ: Manchester (Castlefield) hostel; ¶: New Medlock House hostel; §: Victoria Halls hostel

1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
...	...	...	...	...	31155Δ	39806Δ	38590Δ	32677Δ	30807Δ
2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
27072Δ	26110Δ	29376Δ	27631Δ	27785Δ	29197Δ	29849Δ	25998Δ	25791Δ	29091Δ
...	...	open¶	993¶	open§	2229§	...	...	...	...
2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
29136Δ	34323Δ	34913Δ	36849Δ	39072Δ	42260Δ	42660Δ	42776Δ	40406Δ	40865Δ

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