



YHA (England and Wales)

Youth Hostel Profile

compiled by the Association's volunteer archivist, John Martin, 2022-12-05

Newtown district (Montgomeryshire) Youth Hostels

Newtown [Montgomeryshire, Broad Street] Youth Hostel 1936 to 1940

26 Broad Street (33 Broad Street), Newtown, Montgomeryshire

Historic County: Montgomeryshire

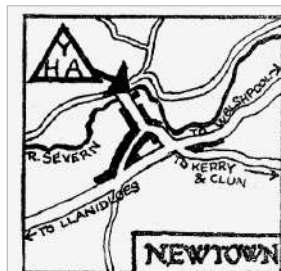
YHA Region: Birmingham & Mid
Wales

GR: SO 107918

The hostel was in a former woollen mill, a little distance down river from Broad Street, on the south bank; previous to YHA use it had been an occupational centre for unemployed men. Hostellers were directed to a point opposite the Post Office, adjoining the river bridge. The address given in 1939-40, 23 Broad Street, was the warden's address, but 26 and 33 Broad Street were also quoted.

The Birmingham Region opened the hostel on 30th May 1936. Working party volunteer Marguerite Reynolds, later the celebrated warden of Kings Hostel, told how volunteers worked to eradicate the stench from the stables beneath the hostel. There were beds for 12 men and 8 women.

It led a quiet existence until it was requisitioned during 1940, then temporarily released, but too late for the season; a memo stated that it would probably remain closed until permanently released. Nevertheless, there were 280 YHA bednights in 1940. A notice of 14th October 1940 stated that the hostel was certainly withdrawn by then and it stayed out of use through 1941-43. As late as 1943 the region anticipated its return after the war, but this did not happen.



NEWTOWN.—Broad St., Newtown, Mont. Open March 25th—September 29th. Warden, 23 Broad Street. O.S. 70 (B.1), Bart. 16.

The hostel adjoins the bridge at the N. end of the main street. The building was formerly a woollen mill, in the days when Newtown was an important centre of the flannel industry. The Old Church is an interesting ruin in the Gothic style, and in the churchyard may be seen the grave of Robert Owen, social reformer. The town is pleasantly situated in the upper Severn valley, and the adjacent Kerry hills open up the way to the "forest" country of Radnor and Clun. Newtown is an excellent centre either for walking or for cycling expeditions. Some 5 miles to the W. is Caersws, once an important Roman station, and vestiges of Roman roads may still be traced in the vicinity.

1: the old woollen mill on the River Severn at Newtown that formed the early youth hostel. This postcard view dates from about that era (author's collection); 2: extract from YHA's regional guide of 1939 (YHA Archive)

The building survives in 2022.



These recent images of the 1936 Newtown hostel are reproduced by kind permission of the Newtown Local History Group

Abermule Youth Hostel 1949 to 1952

Castell Forwyn, Abermule, Montgomeryshire

Historic County: Montgomeryshire

YHA Region: Birmingham & Mid
Wales

GR: SO 152945



1: YHA postcard from about the time of opening; 2: photograph by YHA champion Laurie Lee, dated March 1951 (YHA Archive)

ABERMULE

Castell Forwyn was built in 1867 for the Reverend John Lloyd and sold to YHA by his grandson, the Mayor of Montgomery. It was a substantial house, built with unusual yellow Ruabon brick, standing on higher ground in over five acres. There was once a shop at the bottom of the drive to serve barges on the adjacent canal.

YHA made an ambitious gambit to expand into the Welsh Severn Valley after the modest pre-war Newtown premises. This development mirrored another house of similar ambition, size and fate (at Bryn Aber Hall, Llanrhaeadr-ym-Mochnant, North Montgomeryshire) that the Birmingham Region operated from 1945 to 1951.

Castell Forwyn was a freehold purchase for £3,500, Ministry of Education grant-aided, and vested in the YHA Trust on 17th January 1949. Working parties moved in in February and the hostel opened on 1st April 1949, with an official opening a little later on 28th May. As was usually the case in this period of great anticipated demand, the hostel started before arrangements were fully complete. After a short period with Mr and Mrs H Peters in charge, the premises were fortunate to attract wardens Jock and Joey Hemmings, who had such a glowing reputation at Winchester (1932), Ludlow (Corve Street) (1937), Canterbury (Waysmeet) (1937) and elsewhere before the war. There were 60 beds, though no electricity. The Hemmings left in 1951, moving for a short spell to Cowes hostel on the Isle of Wight.



Castell Forwyn, resplendent in April sunshine in 2015, more than 60 years after YHA withdrew. The images show the front and rear of the house and the substantial outbuildings that would have proved useful during the hostel's brief existence – at the time of the sale by YHA the two large bedrooms in the house had had beds roughly removed, but the considerable stable buildings still contained dormitory beds. YHA's Birmingham Region might be forgiven for imagining that such an attractive building as Castell Forwyn, standing close to main road and railway and in such appealing countryside, might gain more custom than it did (author's photographs, by permission of the owner)

The hostel never met its targets, however. 2,000 overnights a year were not enough to sustain a country house. In 1951 Birmingham Region was admitting that low usage made the hostel's future precarious.

Abermule hostel therefore closed on 30th September 1952, to be replaced by far more unassuming (and more remote) premises at the old school, Cefn-y-Coed. The property was sold on 26th May 1953, at a considerable loss to YHA.

Cefn-y-Coed Youth Hostel 1953 to 1957

The School, Cefn-y-Coed, Llandyssul, Montgomeryshire

Historic County: Montgomeryshire

YHA Region: Birmingham & Mid
Wales

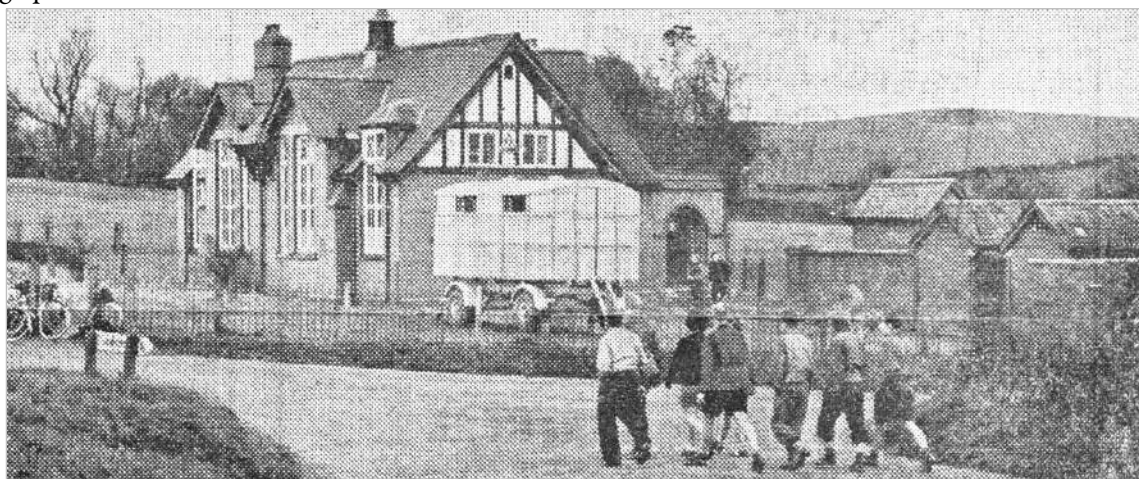
GR: SO 184934

CEFN-Y-COED Abermule's replacement was a former small Montgomery County Council rural school, redbrick with huge windows and timbered gable ends, at an isolated crossroads in the hills to the south of Abermule. There was one large high-ceilinged classroom, divided by a folding partition, probably making the two hostel dormitories. To the rear of this were two cloakrooms (probably the hostel kitchen and common room), while the toilets were in outbuildings. The school had closed in 1950 or 1951, when three small local establishments were merged into new premises in Abermule.



Two views (the first kindly provided by the present owners) of the redundant simple village school at Cefn-y-Coed that was in use for a short period in the 1950s. The inscription on the gable wall read: Cefn-y-Coed School, 1910, Montgomeryshire County Council (YHA archive)

An article by *MUJ* in the *Birmingham Mail*, 8th May 1953, described the new hostel and provided the three associated photographs:



Home-making 800 feet up – your idea of a holiday?

Travelling nearly 80 miles from Birmingham just to spend a weekend doing domestic chores may not be everyone's idea of a holiday. But setting up a new home above the 800ft contour on the Welsh border gives spice even to such commonplace tasks as digging a neglected garden, weeding and making paths, cleaning silted drains, washing floors and fixing hooks. So, evidently, thought the seven members of the Youth Hostels Association who formed a working party at Birmingham group's new hostel at Cefn-y-Coed.

Until recently this well-built though unlovely red brick building, with incongruous sham black and white gable ends, was a school. Now the children of this upland district are taken by bus to schools in Abermule and Newtown in the nearby upper Severn Valley. Except for occasional winter social gatherings the place has been unused.

Ironical symbol

On 1st March it opened again, with the familiar YHA triangle, now hanging over the 'Cefn-y-Coed School 1910, Montgomeryshire County Council' inscription. Surely an ironical symbol this of our topsy-turvy town and country values. Out go the country children for their new town education; in come the youth of the cities, who find in the countryside a contentment their town life fails to give.

Lots of hard work had already been put in there by the hostel's steward, Mr Bill Brierley, of Bearwood, who had organised three previous working parties there to get things shipshape.

The first hostel in this neighbourhood, one at Abermule, opened four years ago, with 60 beds available throughout the year, had to be closed last autumn owing to insufficient use. So furniture and equipment was brought over from the old hostel.

Apart from plumbing and some building, all the work of adapting Cefn-y-Coed School has been done by members. They have partitioned the lofty classroom into dormitories, cleaned ceilings, walls and floors, while the warden, Mr FS Wright, has been busy with paint and distemper. This last working party was mainly to clear up outside. Day-to-day cleaning, until the autumn packing-up when the hostel closes on September 30, is done by those staying at hostels.

One of 300

So another of the 300 hostels, which during the past 23 years have offered 'simple accommodation' to all who aspire to 'a greater knowledge, love and care of the countryside', has begun its life.

It can put up 14 men and 10 women, provide meals cooked by the warden, or facilities for those wishing to cook their own. It has a combined common room-dining room, outside washrooms in the old school shelter (with icy-cold water, which is fortunately piped, though must be carried), and there is the original school sanitation.

These are just the bare bones of hostelling. How Cefn-y-Coed develops is up to those who use it. Many things are in its favour: it is a small place remote from town or village (the nearest – Llandyssil – is one and a half miles away); 'simple accommodation' is all it pretends to offer; the building belongs to the countryside and will still be used by local people; while the warden hopes that people and family groups who prefer to potter about enjoying birds, plants, rocks and other country pleasures will stay there.

This great movement has developed many strange post-war characteristics. I have talked to members who deplore the 'suitcase' types, the seekers after cheap holiday accommodation, the hitch-hikers, the town hostels (which apparently often pay better than country ones), the wardens who are scarcely more than caterers.

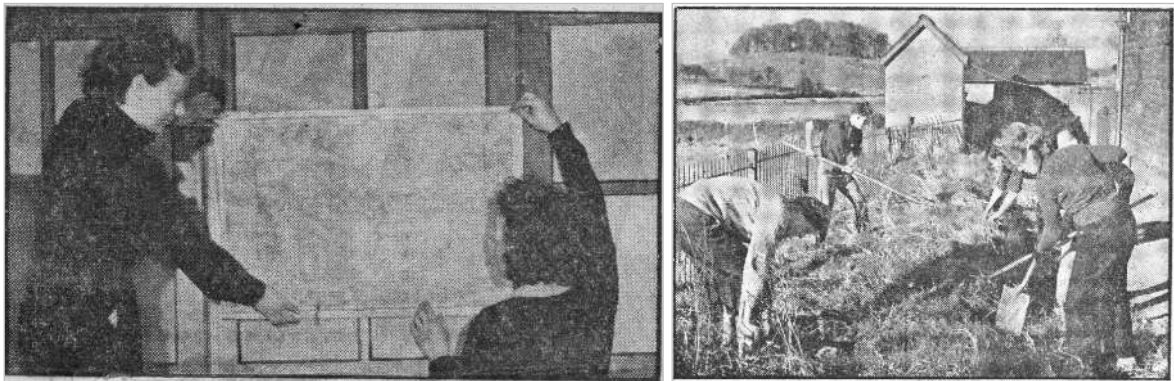
Rough pastures

I am amazed, too, at the extent to which wheels have invaded the hostels; and at those little gangs of cyclists who cover extraordinary mileages by pedalling furiously from hostel to hostel, rarely dismounting, and are so quaintly addicted to labelling their neat uniforms with little badges. Why this odd love of speed and queer dislike of individuality?

The real delights of these rolling Montgomeryshire uplands on the margin of cultivation will reward only the leisurely Rambler.

This is new country to me, but what I saw on this weekend made my feet long to walk through the State forests of the Kerry Hills, over the rough pastures of Clun Forest, and along the watersheds of Teme and Ithon. East of the hostel is that fascinating earthwork boundary of Offa's Dyke, indicating the abrupt change from English to Welsh place-names on the map near Montgomery, which it would be fun to follow.

All this is within walking reach of Cefn-y-Coed. Owing largely to the enthusiastic labours of a few members who have the real ideals of the YHA at heart, this new hostel holds out the key to this lovely stretch of the Welsh border.



Young hostelling volunteers pin up the Vale of Severn map on the old classroom partition in what became the hostel common room and helped clear the old school playground into a garden bed

There were beds for 12 men and 10 women. The warden, Mr Stret Wright, left at the end of the year 1956; the 1957 Handbook described the hostel as closed, but with the possibility of reopening, or a replacement might be found. The hostel continued for one more year, opening late in 1957, though a committee was already investigating other possibilities. It closed permanently at the end of that year, when just 673 bednights were registered. Birmingham Region considered that a less isolated hostel back in Newtown would be a greater success.

John Hamer, the resident, recounted the following in 2015:

My siblings attended the school. A stone barn at the neighbouring farm was occasionally used as an overflow for male hostellers. I remember grand Christmas parties held at the school for the local people, possibly even when the place was a hostel, as it was mainly used as such during the summer. I remember cyclists complaining that from whichever direction the hostel was approached, it was always uphill.



Some features of the original school layout have been retained, for instance the children's brick latrines to the rear, where YHA-style 'Men' and 'Women' painted signs are still to be found (author's photograph, April 2015)

The school has been rebuilt significantly and is now a private residence, *the Gables*.

Newtown [Montgomeryshire, Llanllwchaiarn Road] Youth Hostel 1958 to 1967

Old Llanllwchaiarn Church School, Llanllwchaiarn Road, Newtown, Montgomeryshire

Historic County: Montgomeryshire

YHA Region: Birmingham & Mid

GR: SO 109919

Wales, South Wales

NEWTOWN

An old school (or in one source, a parish hall) in Newtown was leased from the Church Parish from 15th May 1958 for 5 years, though the opening date was given as 1st March in that year. Equipment was transferred from Cefn-y-Coed hostel. The address given in 1958 was 27 Commercial Street, opposite the hostel, where the warden, Mrs O Owen, lived. Long-time Birmingham area workers Don and Sylvia Errington helped set up the hostel. Sylvia recalls:

Bob Powell painted the railings a shade so distinctive that it was always known in YHA circles as Newtown Green.

The *Youth Hosteller* Magazine of March 1958 welcomed the new arrival:

Newtown – New Hostel

On March 1st the new hostel at Newtown will welcome its first hostellers. It is situated in the old Llanllwchaiarn Church School, which has lent itself to hostel use. In fact, the only alterations necessary were to the plumbing and gas installations. Working parties, drawn from the Newtown committee and the North East Worcestershire local group, have carried out interior decoration and erected cooking benches, partitioning and shelving. They transferred the equipment from Cefn-y-Coed (the hostel that Newtown replaces) and generally made the hostel ship-shape.

It is hoped that Newtown will prove popular, as it is more centrally placed than Cefn-y-Coed, being ringed by seven other hostels. As it is in the centre of the town, cyclists will be spared the last few miles off the beaten track. Although it is a self-cookers hostel there are nearby cafes for those not indulging in the art of food preparation. The new warden is Mrs O Owen, who although new to the YHA, has been most helpful and taken a great interest in the opening. Birmingham Region extend their grateful thanks to the Rev H Willis and the Parochial Church Council for their general co-operation and making the property available.

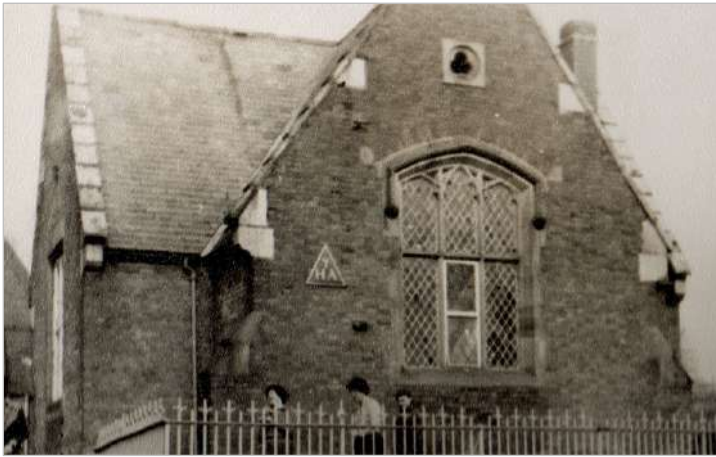


A typical postcard of a mid-Wales hostel from the period about 1960 (author's collection)

Pat Packham visited the old school more than once. She recalls in her diaries:

The hostel which had only just been opened was a chapel hall which it was proposed to use as such in the winter and as a hostel each summer. 'P' and I were the only occupants of a huge dormitory [International Tramping Tours, Holiday for Railway Enthusiasts, 19 August 1958].

I had a huge room to myself and bolted the door and then wedged it with my hostel handbook to stop it rattling [Touring Wales on a bicycle, April 1959].



1 2



1: this anonymous snap of hostellers, or perhaps a working party, is thought to date from the hostel's first years (YHA Archive);
2: author's image of the Powys Theatre, May 2015 (author's collection)

In 1963 the lease was extended, but was to expire on 1st March 1968. By 1965, an enlarged South Wales Region stretching from Gower to Dolgellau was now responsible for the area, and because of difficulties renewing the lease here, it took up the offer of another switch of premises to a more central location in the town; at the end of 1967 therefore, after ten years, the old school closed. The following regional annual report elucidated:

Early in the year the Region closed the old school hostel at Newtown. A few months later a 42-bed hostel was reopened on a more central site. The warden, Mr Lewis, and members of the North Birmingham local group accomplished this feat.

More recently the building has been used as the Powys Theatre, whose address is now given as Canal Road or Cambrian Way.

Newtown [Montgomeryshire, Community House] Youth Hostel 1968 to 1973

Community House, Severn Place, Newtown, Montgomeryshire SY17 2NQ

Historic County: Montgomeryshire

YHA Region: South Wales

GR: SO 107917

On 31st March 1968 YHA opened the final hostel in the Newtown area at *Community House*, Severn Place, in an old commercial area just west of Broad Street. The site, since much altered, is now called Back Lane.



The Severn Place hostel was rarely photographed, but South Wales hosteller JD Thomas could always be relied on for an image. He captured the unpretentious building and his bike on 14th August 1968, during its first season as a youth hostel

A South Wales region memo of 1968 referred to its intention to take on a four to five year lease of three rooms: a boys' dorm on the ground floor, common room etc on the first, and girls' dorm on the second, though this plan appears to have been simplified subsequently to concentrate mainly if not entirely on the first floor. A formal opening was to be held on 14th July 1968, but was beset with problems and cancelled. Correspondence was with 27 the Flats, Canal Road, Newtown, the same warden's address as that of the previous hostel, but by the time of the official opening Mr Lewis was in charge. He died in 1969, and Brian Green was in charge from 1970.



Hostel stamp of 31st May 1968, a few weeks after opening

It was recognised from the outset that the arrangement was temporary; the area was due for demolition, though this was drawn out and enabled YHA to stay for six seasons. In 1970 Newtown hostel became the first in South Wales Region to be converted to North Sea Gas.

As part of a frank assessment of the region's hostel network, an internal South Wales Regional Hostel Report of 18th April 1973 gave an accurate view of the level of comfort in some of the smaller premises at the time, though could not hope to reflect the pleasure of many hostellers who stayed at such places. The report is summarised as follows:

Presently Simple – Recommended Simple. Approximately 1,500 bednights.

Newtown hostel is centrally placed in the town. YHA has the use of part of a large building containing a number of offices. The building is soon for demolition and we are likely to lose it in a year.

There are two dormitories some distance apart. The men's dorm contains 20 beds. Mattresses and springs are good but some of the blankets are worn out and need changing. It is about 420sq ft, about 21sq ft per bed, so I suspect overcrowding. The women's dorm contains 16 beds. Beds and mattresses are satisfactory but again many blankets need replacing. All rooms needed redecorating but will see the season out. Both dorms are heated during the day by a central heating system primarily for the offices. This should mean no warm dormitories for at least part of the night.

The men's wash is adjacent to the dorm. It has cold water, plastic bowls and one WC. Facilities are similar in the women's wash but they have an additional loo which is shared by office staff.

Newtown is a 36-bed hostel with no meals provided. However, the Dining Room / Common Room seats a bare 18. With an annual bednight figure of 1,500 there must be some overcrowding at the busy periods. There are 17 easy chairs. General decorations are beginning to show signs of wear and tear. The Members' Kitchen is a trifle small for a no meals provided hostel, but it has 14 gas points, a grill and an oven. There is sufficient space for food storage but only one small sink, certainly insufficient for this hostel. There is no Drying Room. A good cycle shed. With shops within two minutes' walk the food store is sufficient.

To sum up, this is a good Simple hostel but I hope that it would be replaced, if the Region can find suitable premises.



Three interior views from the camera of Pat Packham

A compulsory purchase order was served in 1973 for demolition, leading YHA's South Wales Council to consider as replacement, probably very briefly, a terrace of condemned houses, *Weavers' Cottages*, ¾ mile east of Severn Place. There was even a suggestion early in 1974 that *Community House* might be taken for another year, but YHA's presence in this part of Montgomeryshire ceased at the end of October 1973 after 26 continuous years in four varied premises.

The 1974 Handbook continued to give out a hope that there might be a replacement hostel, but this was not to be.

Eventually *Community House* was demolished for an area improvement scheme.



1 2

1: Newtown Local History Society has kindly provided this image of the Severn Place buildings, probably immediately before demolition; 2: an April 2015 image from about the same spot, on Back Lane. There has been a considerable amount of demolition and reshaping, not only of Severn Place, but of Newtown town centre in general (author's photograph)



Left: the author's one-inch pin badge of the short-lived Severn Place hostel

Overnights – inclusive periods each year as follows									
1936-1974: previous Oct to Sept									
†: Newtown [Broad Street] Hostel; #: Abermule Hostel; §: Cefn-y-Coed Hostel;									
¶: Newtown [Old School] Hostel; Δ: Newtown [Community House] Hostel									
<181: these overnights belonged to the tail-end of 1973									
...	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938	1939
...	...	...	...	...	...	192†	526†	706†	679†
1940	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945	1946	1947	1948	1949
280†	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	1828#
1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959
2570#	2369#	2598#	1123§	1010§	1171§	1575§	673§	1618¶	1658¶
1960	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969
1584¶	1549¶	1425¶	1230¶	1253¶	1360¶	1284¶	1489¶	1574Δ	1111Δ
1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979
1355Δ	1279Δ	1462Δ	1494Δ	<181Δ	...	...	...	...	...

© John Martin, 2022. YHA Profiles are intended to be adaptable in the light of new materials gained by YHA Archive.