



## YHA (England and Wales) Youth Hostel Profile

compiled by the Association's volunteer archivist, John Martin, 2022-12-23

### Ravenstor Youth Hostel 1938 to present

Ravenstor, Millers Dale, Buxton, Derbyshire SK17 8SS

Historic County: Derbyshire

YHA Region:  
North Midlands, Peak, Central

GR: SK 152732

In 1893 Mr Matthew Dickie expanded his Stockport spinning business by taking over Litton Mill in Derbyshire. He set up the Litton and Cressbrook Mills Company, improved circumstances for workers and rebuilt roads.

Framed information sheets in the hostel describe how his family came to acquire Ravenstor:

The Dickies originally lived in a cottage in Litton Mill village, but Mrs Dickie demanded a larger home for herself. Matthew Dickie called an architect to build a family home on Ravenstor, asking for a good sized (but not too large or grand) house. However, the architect soon had other ideas when he realised the house would be seen from the railway (now the Monsal Trail) and took the opportunity to build the beautiful, and not at all small, house which now greets so many guests each year as a youth hostel.

The dining room is much the same as it was but what now serves as a self-catering kitchen was then the library with 'walls of books'. The room which is now the hostel classroom was a family room which housed the organ. Matthew Dickie would entertain the family daily while a worker from the village worked the bellows in the cellar.

The hostel grounds now bear little resemblance to the magnificent drives and gardens of Matthew Dickie's day. Gone are the rose garden, the tennis and badminton courts and the charming summer house. The monkey puzzle trees are now fine specimens, however, and the holly trees a necessity to keep young visitors away from the cliffs leading down to Tideswell Dale. The Head Gardener, Mr Tibbles, would not be disappointed by our carefully tended flower beds, however.

Matthew Dickie died in 1937 and is buried at Wormhill.

Ravenstor was built as his family residence in 1906-07, a country house with many rooms, a sweeping staircase and stained-glass windows adorned with personal motifs, along with 64 acres of land, including a looped carriage drive and a one-mile stretch of the River Wye and Tideswell Dale.



*Early days: Head Gardener Mr Tibbles (extreme right), with three gardeners, Ben the Chauffeur and Prince the horse. Paul Dickie is sitting on the horse, with his sister holding the reins (YHA Archive)*

With the social and political turmoil of the early twentieth century, estates such as this were difficult to staff and costly to maintain, and it is often asserted that the heirs of such industrialists wanted neither the upkeep nor the trappings of such extravagance in the new era. The ownership of Ravenstor thus passed from Matthew Dickie, on his death in the 1930s, to JG Graves (1866-1945) a noted industrialist and philanthropist.

Graves started work in Sheffield as an apprentice watchmaker. He set up an early and successful mail order firm, and became the city's mayor and an alderman. He developed and generously donated to the city's fine arts collections, and

contributed much parkland for public use in Sheffield. By 1937 his sphere of ownership extended to Ravenstor, which he presented to the National Trust for YHA to have in perpetuity. The house and grounds were vested in the YHA Trust on 29th September 1937, leased from the National Trust for £2. The YHA Trust Property Book describes the extent of the land as over 66 acres. The lease was renewed in 1958, when it was increased to £50 per year plus insurance, and has been extended generally every 21 years. A further extension in 2012 carried the arrangement forward to 2031.

The Autumn 1937 issue of YHA's *Rucksack* magazine article gave details of the acquisition:

#### North Midlands Group

The chain of magnificent hostels in the Peak District of Derbyshire is further enhanced by the gift from Alderman JG Graves, of Sheffield, of the fine property of Ravenstor, Millers Dale.

Ravenstor, a modern building, standing on glorious limestone heights overlooking the River Wye, was built by the late Mr Matthew Dickie, a local cotton manufacturer, 30 years ago. Together with surrounding grounds of 52 acres, it is presented to the National Trust to hold, with a condition that it shall be available as a Youth Hostel. Further gifts from the WA Cadbury Trust and Sir Robert McDougall will enable alterations and equipment to be provided free of cost to the Association. The hostel will accommodate 80 beds and will be specially suitable for School Journey parties in view of its close proximity to Millers Dale station on the London-Manchester main line.

A triangular piece of land, the new National Trust property is bounded by the Millers Dale-Tideswell main road, the picturesque Tideswell gorge, and one mile stretch of the famous River Wye in one of its most beautiful sections. Wonderful limestone cliffs are included and some of the finest dale and river country in Derbyshire.

The West Derbyshire chain of hostels now runs from Farley Hall, Oakamoor, Ilam Hall, Hartington Hall, Ravenstor, thence to Derwent Hall or to Bennetson Hall or to Overton Hall, with an alternative to Rudyard Lake. The total gift in this case exceeds £3,000 and is the largest single hostel gift yet made to the YHA.

The North Midlands Region annual report for 1937, dated September of that year, enthused:

The magnificent property at Ravenstor, Millers Dale, was presented to the National Trust for the YHA and will be opened as another large fully controlled hostel shortly.



*Pre-war postcards of Ravenstor hostel's Entrance Hall, Quiet Room, Common Room and Dining Room, all areas easily recognised if visiting today. The cards were published by the Yorkshire firm of Lilywhite (YHA Archive)*

It may be that the hostel was already functioning basically by the time of the official opening on 26th March 1938. After the official opening, the Derbyshire Times described Ravenstor as *the most up-to-date hostel in the country*.

The first wardens were Mr and Mrs Gregory, and from the outset the hostel was a great success, drawing large numbers of hostellers, especially from Sheffield and Manchester.

In 1938 and 1939 many Czech refugees found welcome temporary lodging in youth hostels at a variety of sites, including Highgate in London, Batheaston, Stratford-upon-Avon and Ilam Hall. Male refugees were housed at Ravenstor early in 1939, no doubt figuring in the 5,000 hostel overnights registered in that year,

At the beginning of the war, 80 Manchester schoolchildren were evacuated here. Then in June 1940 the Ministry of Health sequestered Ravenstor for the London County Council to use as a special school, and a national notice of 20th June 1940 was issued to state that the hostel was closed. Yet 3,000 overnights were somehow registered in that year, probably an indication that there were several interim periods of youth hostel usage. The hostel remained closed in 1941 and 1942. In 1943 YHA successfully appealed to the LCC to regain use of the building, and it reopened in that year, with a stop-press footnote in the annual handbook. An indication of the usefulness of youth hostelling as an outlet for weary war workers from the cities is shown in the huge overnight figures for 1944: over 9,000.

An invaluable account of YHA's place in the nation's social fabric relates to a young married couple from Sheffield during the war: *Good Evening Sweetheart* is an extensive collection of letters between newly-married couple Olga and Cyril Mowforth, compiled by their daughter Susan Mowforth and graciously donated to the archive in hardback book and digital forms.

They met through the volunteer, work party and local committee arms of youth hostelling. Olga remained in Sheffield, continuing Cyril's volunteering work for Sheffield Sub-region of YHA, but he was conscripted abroad. Their lives and their thoughts and memories were connected through six years of tender letters. The couple often referred to Ravenstor, for instance Olga's letter of 13th August 1941, when she wrote about a temporary wartime replacement for the hostel in a school in neighbouring Tideswell, though with continuing connections to the original hostel:

We have had the use of [Bishop]Purseglove School in Tideswell given to us by the education authorities for the month, school vacation, chiefly for the purpose of industrial parties under the YHA scheme. It is a lovely school and was very handy for Ravenstor equipment. Grace Cartwright and Dot are joint wardens there for the month.

Spent a nice weekend at Tideswell; you would have enjoyed it. We had very good weather, a good job too for we had to take beds, bedding etc back to Ravenstor on an open lorry. It was good fun, the lorry packed high with bedding and me perched on the top holding things down. Ravenstor looked very well and though the children there are very happy and the place is being well cared for, I could not help but feel a sharp pang of jealousy. I took a quick walk round the grounds and kitchen garden while the boys were unpacking the heavier things... I knew as I looked at the house from down near the tennis courts why you worked so untiringly to open that place in good style. The inside was spotless and the hall and woodwork everywhere shone.

There was only a small crowd of us there Saturday night, so we decided to celebrate. We went down to the King's Head and spent a jolly evening – the last time I was there was the opening of Ravenstor.

She wrote again in March 1943 with welcome news of Ravenstor's reopening amid hardships:

Ravenstor it seems is definitely opening for Easter. I shall be working Sat and Mon night at Easter and if I cycled I could go Sunday and come back Monday but I suppose it's hopeless any other way, transport is so bad...

...There is a Leam Hall YH meeting tomorrow [Olga was also Leam Hall's 'representative'] so I shall get all the news then. Mr and Mrs Gregory are to be wardens at Ravenstor as Mrs G is available at weekends.

The following month Olga wrote of her walk out from Sheffield to Ravenstor in dire weather, and bemoaned the lack of public transport. She took another weekend trip in May:

Everything's working grand – the meals are excellent. I always buy supper and breakfast these days. It's a welcome change and helps rations. There is only one tragedy there – the blankets and mattresses have been borrowed for other hostels and they haven't come back. Consequently, Ravenstor has a fairly bad mixture. Saturday was the coldest night I've ever spent in a hostel and the weather was warm at that – I had 3 very small blankets – 2 cotton and 1 wool.

Cyril replied by Airmail:

You seem to be just as daft as I used to be. You talked of giving up YHA and then find yourself accepting even more work than before. Still it will need someone with a bit of balance to keep Ravenstor on the ground...

...So you'll be at Ravenstor for Xmas, I'll be in Jerusalem.

How welcome must have been the entertainment served up at Ravenstor in the 1940s, as remembered by Russell Parsons:

Ravenstor and Ely were venues for the Wilfred Pickles radio programme 'Have a Go' – prizes of two shillings and sixpence (12.5p), five shillings (25p), ten shillings (50p) and a guinea (£1.05) for answering four questions correctly – the only cash prizes on the BBC at that time. Ravenstor functioned at some point as an RAF hospital.



Above: sketchmap to show the location of Ravenstor, YHA Regional Guide, 1946 (YHA Archive)  
below: 1955 membership card stamp of YHA stalwart CW Maitland, framed by hostel pin badges from the 1950s and 1960s (author's collection)

By 1959 Mr and Mrs Gregory had been wardens at Ravenstor for 21 years; they were to stay until retirement in 1970. To celebrate the occasion, Bill Gregory wrote this article in *Youth Hosteller*, June 1959:

#### Ravenstor Comes of Age – by Bill Gregory

In March [1959], Ravenstor Youth Hostel came of age. Bought in 1937 when the Youth Hostels Movement was only six years old, it was handed over to the National Trust for safekeeping. Standing in its own grounds of 52 acres, surrounded by limestone country, the house is modern and built of machined grit stone.

Matthew Dickie, owner of the Litton cotton mill, built the house in 1907; planted 1,500 trees and carved the estate from the Ravenstor Rock, which is bounded on one side by the deep Tideswell Dale and on the other by the gorge through which flows the River Wye.

Ravenstor is in the heart of the Peak District; sixty per cent of the population of England lives within a radius of sixty miles. The ten years between 1928 and 1938 saw people from Manchester, Sheffield, Chesterfield and Derby swarming into the Peak District. They were sleeping in barns and on the top of haystacks much to the annoyance of farmers. These were lean years and there was little money to buy hostels. At that time the North Midlands Region owned no hostels. All our 'Baronial Halls' were rented at £1 per week.



Ravenstor, which lies on the boundary line of Manchester and the North Midlands Regions, was for sale. The former declined the offer to try and raise the necessary money. Sheffield decided to make the attempt. The horizon was bleak. But there is a saying that the Yorkshireman 'will attack owt, dead, or alive.' They did. A target of £5,000. A grant of £400 from the Cadbury Trust, a few donations; and then someone got the bright idea of approaching JG Graves, a Sheffield philanthropist. The Youth Hostels were new to him; but when he saw the idea, he was interested and bought the house.

Hostels were pretty bleak in those days – a candle to light you to bed and a paraffin stove to cook on. But the hostellers had a very high regard for the 'spirit of self-cooking.' JG Graves knew nothing of this and immediately gave orders to furnish the hostel at his expense. To prevent dust from coming through the floorboards, he ordered 360 square yards of linoleum to be put down; a hair carpet for the stairs, a carpet for the quiet room, a piano for the common room, chairs to assist the girls to reach the top bunks, polished floors – and all must change to slippers before they enter the hostel. This was a shock to the simple hosteller. He resented it, and so Ravenstor was nicknamed 'step on the mat hostel.'



Ravenstor has a good record of social work. The first party to visit the hostel were a group of 50 Germans who were giving concerts in different parts of the country. They had their own omnibus with trailer attached, which provided many difficulties when the driver turned on the Derbyshire roads.

Then came the refugees. The first of Hitler's victims. They stayed three months. The war clouds had now appeared and on September 4th the hostel was commandeered for evacuation work. Our first batch was 80 schoolchildren from Manchester. They were only there two days, as there was difficulty in finding accommodation for mothers and babies. The 'phoney' war ended, mothers and babies returned to Manchester and the hostel opened once again. But only for a few months, for in June the hostel was taken over by the Ministry of Health and let to the London County Council for use as a special school.

When the war started everybody thought hostelling would end. But the blackout and the bombing of large cities brought much popularity to the youth hostels. Members saw the hostel as a place where rest and sleep could be had. Overnights were composed of ramblers, cyclists, nurses, ARP and works' youth clubs. Under this pressure Ravenstor was restored to the Youth Hostels Movement in 1943 and its bednights in that year totalled 11,000.

Ravenstor is still a popular hostel and one of the best situated. It is easy of access from London, Liverpool, Manchester, Sheffield and Birmingham. As it stands 800 ft above sea level, there is always a gentle breeze round the house even when the air is hot and humid in the valley. The view from the terrace is excellent and footpaths lead in all directions. To the south is the famous Monsal Dale, to the west is Chee Dale, to the north is Tideswell with its parish church, 'The Cathedral of the Peak,' noted for its wood carving and stained-glass windows.

Ravenstor was already supplied with electric power, but in that same 21st year was completely rewired. In the hands of the long-standing wardens it generally achieved 7,000-8,000 overnights per year. The hostel was often overloaded with school parties during the mid-weeks of the summer term; consequently staff lost their days off. When Miller's Dale railway station closed in 1967, however, the hostel was now not so busy on Fridays. The closing night consequently changed from Wednesday to Friday in 1970, under new wardens Frank and Joyce Crimes, an unusual arrangement. At this time Peak Region, successors to the North Midlands, turned their attention to overcrowding and partly solved the difficulty by the release of a small dormitory previously used by an assistant, and even considered using the landing.



*Left: ironically, the local Miller's Dale railway viaduct featured on a hostel stamp celebrating the hostel's 25th anniversary in 1963, though the line would succumb to closure in 1967. The viaduct now carries foot and cycle path rather than railway (YHA Archive)*

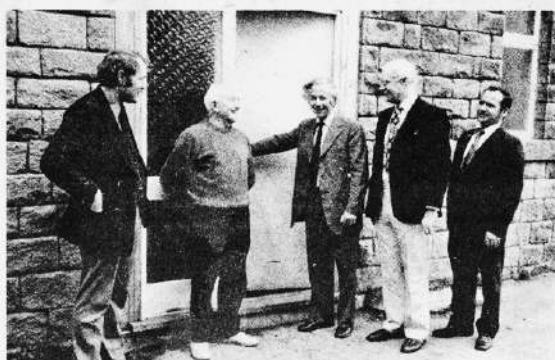
YHA had established its first dedicated Family Annexe in 1957 at Buttermere. The scheme grew through the 1960s and 1970s, before it steered away towards family use in ordinary or converted small rooms within hostels in the 1980s. Ravenstor got its own Family Annexe in 1975, as described in *Hostelling News* that summer. It provided this service until 1993, when it became, for a period, the manager's house and later general staff quarters.

## Ravenstor Family Annexe

The new Family Annexe at Ravenstor was opened by Mr J. H. Parfitt, National Chairman, on Sunday, April 13th. Mr Parfitt and his family spent the previous night in the annexe, and he testified to its comforts in his opening speech.

The annexe is a detached stone building close to the hostel and provides a large kitchen / dining / sitting room, two bedrooms (four and two beds), a toilet, laundry facilities, drying room and showers. Equipment includes a cot and a bed-settee.

Ravenstor Family Annexe is already heavily booked throughout the summer.



*John Parfitt, National Chairman, opens Ravenstor Family Annexe. Others in the picture are Dave Allison (Peak Regional Secretary) Harry Gilliat (Regional President), Jim Turner (Regional Chairman) and Frank Crimes (Warden). Photo I. Ikioy, ARPS.*



*The 1975 new Family Annexe (YHA Archive), compared with the same building today, used as staff accommodation (author's photograph, July 2022)*



*George Miller's fine colour slide images from about 1980 (author's collection)*

Ray and Ann Hamshaw took over as wardens from Frank and Joyce Crimes in 1985, staying for 6 years. In 1987 the hostel was refurbished. Ravenstor's bed capacity, originally 80, had been reduced a little in stages and now stood at 70. In 1990, YHA published a booklet showing facilities for schools that listed six suitable available dormitories at Ravenstor with the following bed numbers: 20, 16, 12, 10, 8, 4. This was still the era of very large dormitories.

Amelia Johnson and Andy Grant were the new managers in 1992 and were in post until 2001. Central Region's annual report of that year outlined a plan to increase accommodation by leasing alternative accommodation, the former family annexe in the grounds, for the wardens. This move allowed for three additional family bunk rooms in the former wardens' flat in the house by the start of 1993. They offered superb views over Tideswell Dale and the surrounding area, including the 60 acres of National Trust land which form the hostel grounds.

Ravenstor hostel was affected badly by the Foot and Mouth epidemic of 2001; overnights had consistently been reaching 10,000 or 11,000 since the late 1980s, but were down to 7,500 in that year. Rick Smith had a brief stay at the hostel in 2001-02, before taking over at YHA Butharlp How, Grasmere; he oversaw a return to normal usage figures at Ravenstor. Rick was replaced in turn by Oliver Whiteoak from YHA Norwich in 2003. *YHA News* of August 2005 described a continuing programme of work to divide up larger rooms and to cater better for family stays.

*YHA News* of Autumn 2001 outlined a long-term grounds-improvement programme drawn up by Rick Smith, drawing attention to the heritage of diverse wildlife and flora encouraged by Mr Dickie and his army of gardeners and continued somewhat later with the enthusiastic attention here of YHA's President, Dr David Bellamy. Volunteer maintenance weekends were accordingly planned for the beginning of 2002.

Ravenstor has always had catered strongly for training residentials and school groups. From the early years of the 21st century, parallel businesses to regular school trade emerged. In 2010, for instance, the hostel was one of eight that supported the national volunteering programme delivered by the Duke of Edinburgh Award, called vTalent Year. The aim of the programme was to give 1,000 young people the opportunity to enhance public sector services directly by gaining skills to improve their employability. At least 40% of the places were given to young people who were not in employment, education or training.



*Author's simplified version of the Ravenstor hostel layout. The floorplan is dated 2005, but is substantially accurate in 2022. Room 1 has en suite facilities. Staff accommodation is provided on the second floor; two staff are housed in the annexe*



A new scheme emerged with the provision of accommodation, training and course-led activities for youngsters out of school term time. Between 2005 and 2012 these breaks were called Do-It-4-Real Summer Camps, and across YHA they covered a great variety of interests within sports and the arts. Ravenstor was a popular location. In 2012, for instance, there was a course in Performing Arts here for 10- to 16-year-olds, when *The Lion King*, *Mamma Mia* and *Moulin Rouge* were rehearsed and staged. A Do-It-4-Real Easter Camp Site was also provided from time to time.



1 2



3 4



A lively performing arts summer camp at Ravenstor in 2012, a typical Do-It-4-Real experience for young people (YHA Archive)

In 2012 YHA renewed its Ravenstor lease with the National Trust, extending it until 2031. As part of the arrangement, YHA returned to the Trust some of the extensive woodlands surplus to requirement. Also, about this time, YHA relinquished part of Litton Mill that had been converted to a Field Study Centre.

Behind the scenes, very regular essential upkeep of the extensive grounds needs to be maintained. As examples, in April 2012, for instance, a YHA working party replanted flower beds and cleared hostel grounds, while the following November a team from Aggregate Industries battled through the wind and rain to help with ground maintenance as part of their Corporate Volunteering Away Day scheme.

Matt Burton took over the manager's post from Ollie Whiteoak in 2013, and stayed until 2016. Stephen Chapman followed and is the current manager. He has overseen the running of the hostel, steering it through the difficult period of the Covid pandemic, and comments:

At the end of March 2020, when restrictions were announced, we were in the middle of our first weekend of F&I [Families and Individuals] of the season. The evening of the announcement was frantic, with numerous updates of how we were able to operate for the weekend, especially regarding food service. From Sunday 22nd March 2020, Ravenstor closed its doors to guests. Longer serving staff were put onto the furlough scheme, whilst new starters had to be laid off. As Hostel Manager, my main tasks were to ensure the security of the building while it laid empty. All of our face-to-face interactions with the Operations Manager and Peaks and Central hostel managers moved to video conferences.

In late June 2020, we were able to offer Exclusive Hire with limited numbers of guests, which proved to be very popular. Exclusive Hire was operated with a 'contactless' check in, where guests would be given the access instructions and details about the hostel via email, rather than being checked in by a member of the team and shown around the hostel. During October 2020, we re-opened to F&I for the weekends with a limited food offering and many social distancing protocols in place. However, it was great to have some interaction with guests for the first time in a long while.



Once again, the hostel closed to guests at the start of November 2020, due to lockdown. All staff were back on full-time furlough, except myself.

With the exception of one Exclusive Hire booking in February 2021 (during brief lifting of restrictions), Ravenstor could not welcome guests until mid-May 2021. Throughout the summer of 2021, we opened on an Exclusive Hire basis, with the exception of one small school group in June. In September 2021, we saw a move back towards the normal pattern of business at Ravenstor, with many school groups returning.

Operating as a caretaker during lockdowns was a solitary and sometimes eerie proposition, especially during the winter months. As well as carrying out our weekly tasks, such as fire alarm testing, legionella protocols etc, an important task was ensuring the wellbeing of staff who had been on furlough.



1 2



3 4



5 6



7 8



YHA Ravenstor. 1&2: the house and entrance; 3: the spacious entrance hall, reception and main staircase; 4: lounge to the right of the entrance; 5: bright dining room; 6: bedroom (recent publicity images); 7&8: recent hostel stamps (author's collection)





Images of less common angles. 1: south-east face of Ravenstor, where there were once terraces and extensive vegetable beds; 2: Mr Tibbles' flourishing monkey-puzzle tree; 3: view from the north side; 4: former family annexe, now staff accommodation; 5: beautiful stained glass window that bears Matthew Dickie's family insignia and a construction date of 1907; 6: one of several elaborate fireplaces; 7: south-west gate into the house grounds from the extensive National Trust estate; 8: distinctive 1930s YHA drive gate, from the Millers Dale – Tideswell road (author's images, May 2015)

<b>Overnights – inclusive periods each year as follows</b> <b>1938-1991: previous Oct to Sept; 1992: Oct 1991 to Feb 1993; 1993-present: Mar to following Feb</b> W: wartime closure; E: estimate from limited statistics									
...	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938	1939
...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	4225	5452
1940	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945	1946	1947	1948	1949
3127	W	W	3560	9376	8992	7700	7767	8852	open
1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959
7694	7382	7969	6835	7674	7669	7317	7451	7666	7855
1960	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969
7320	8002	8276	8304	8540	7881	7700	7937	7255	7416
1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979
6664	8395	8786	9029	9639	11498	11000E	11555	10721	10271
1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989
10832	9319	8613	8231	open	8336	open	8336	open	11220
1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
11547	10735	11723*	10956	10780	11201	10721	11253	11946	10590
2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
9974	7561	10909	11480	10215	11789	12039	12981	12647	11834
2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
12335	11319	11504	11126	11814	14390	13830	13903	13774	13244
2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029
open	open	open	...	...	...	...	...	...	...

## Endpiece



Ravenstor at the centre of its upland setting, early twentieth century (from a framed photograph at the hostel)

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