



YHA (England and Wales)

Youth Hostel Profile

compiled by the Association's volunteer archivist, John Martin, 2023-12-29

## Ennerdale Youth Hostels at Eskett, Gillerthwaite and Cat Crag

(see separate Profile in this series for Black Sail youth hostel, 1933 to present)

### Eskett [Ennerdale Hall] Youth Hostel 1932 to 1950 or 1951

Ennerdale Hall, Eskett, Frizington, Cumberland

Historic County: Cumberland

YHA Region: Lakeland

GR: NY 052171

#### ENNERDALE HALL

The first YHA presence in the Ennerdale area was an adopted hostel in a rambling mansion in the vicinity of the old Eskett Limestone Quarry, south-east of Windermere. A mineral railway line ran next to the hostel grounds to serve the quarry. The house is now demolished and the grounds overgrown. The greatly expanded quarry and a newer road to serve it dominate the area.



*A postcard of Ennerdale Hall that possibly predates the youth hostel (author's collection)*

Ennerdale Hall youth hostel opened in April 1932. The Lakeland regional hostel guide that was issued about a year later had this information:

Ennerdale (Eskett)  
Mrs Shepherd, Ennerdale Hall, Heskett, near Frizington, Cumberland  
Beds: 10 men, 10 women  
Store: 1 mile. Bathing: none. Bus: 1 mile. Station: none. OS Map: 8  
Next hostels: Pardshaw 9 miles, Cockermouth 13, Black Sail Hut (work parties only) 11

The house was in very poor repair, and Lakeland region resolved, in a minute as early as March 1933, not to spend any further money on it. Nevertheless, Mrs Shepherd kept the hostel going for almost 20 years.

Annual overnight figures were very modest, generally in the higher hundreds only, yet the hostel was able to operate during each year of the war. An internal circular of 18th May 1941 stressed the need to keep it from requisition, as it was important to members from South Lancashire and West Yorkshire towns. In 1945 regional minutes reported on the general dinginess of the hostel. A work party was recommended.

The last overnights were recorded in 1950. A YHA internal file gave April 1951 as the closure date and *YHA Bulletin* did not withdraw the hostel from listings until June 1951, suggesting a lengthy abandonment.

The hostel was variously called Ennerdale (1932-34) and Ennerdale Hall (1935-44), though the 'Dale' description was somewhat loose. Greater clarity was required in its later years, as Gillerthwaite Farm hostel opened in 1942.



*Hostellers' images of Ennerdale Hall (YHA Archive).*

*1: the hostel's gated entrance from a lane leading from Frizington village; 2: faded splendour in the common room; 3: back to the road. The snap is captioned 'Leaving Ennerdale – we left with a sigh of relief'*

## Ennerdale [Gillerthwaite Farm] Youth Hostel 1942 to 1966 or 1967

Gillerthwaite Farm, Ennerdale Bridge, Cleator, Cumberland

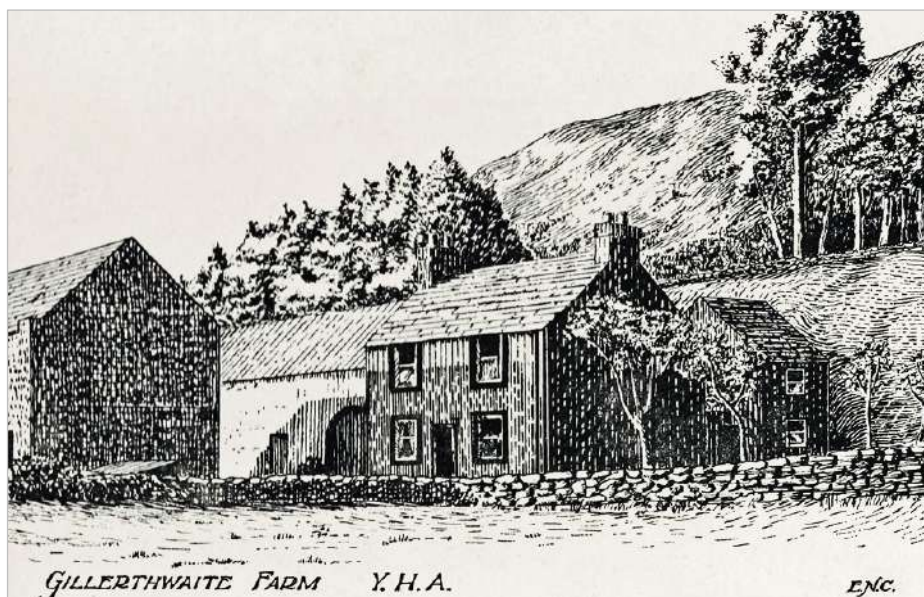
Historic County: Cumberland

YHA Regions: Lakeland, Lakes

GR: NY 139141

The Lakeland annual report for 1942 described the opening of a new 30-bed hostel at Low Gillerthwaite, eight miles to the east of Ennerdale Hall, upstream beyond Ennerdale Bridge. It opened early in that year, probably at Easter. The Forestry Commission offered the farm buildings leasehold at £40pa, though £43 and £50pa are recorded in the YHA

Trust's ledger, where the first entry is dated 20th September 1943. The farmstead covered a little over two acres of ground. YHA described it as traditional Lakeland 17th century farm buildings, though another report, shown later, dated the farmhouse to 1515.



*Early images of Gillerthwaite youth hostel.*

*1: an early sketched postcard by ENC of the farm buildings at Gillerthwaite (author's collection);*

*2: from the opposite angle, looking over the farmstead towards Pillar Rock. The later Cat Crag youth hostel sits behind the taller building (YHA Archive)*

After opening, the hostel operated during each year of the war.

A local history book, *Around and About Ennerdale*, by Bob Orrell, explains that for some years Mr and Mrs Stan Hughes had been tenants of the farmhouse and some land and from 1942 had also used some of the buildings as a youth hostel on behalf of the Youth Hostels Association. Their kindness and hospitality became a legend.

There is, however, a little mystery about the wardens at Gillerthwaite between 1942 and 1946. Bob Orrell suggests that the Hughes were wardens, but Lakeland Region minutes of November 1945 reported a severe case of wardens' musical chairs: a Mr and Mrs Robertson were leaving Thorney How youth hostel, Grasmere, on 31st December, 1945 and in the usual round of job swaps, Mr and Mrs Pernetta had applied for the post from Gillerthwaite. The Committee

agreed that if after further enquiry Mr and Mrs Hughes proved satisfactory, the officers would arrange for the Pernetts to take over at Grasmere and for Mr and Mrs Hughes to warden Gillerthwaite Farm. It is possible that they had sublet the farm buildings to YHA, with the Pernetts as wardens, in those first four years.

Some time after 1944 a Mr Hinde was offering a cartage service to Black Sail hostel from nearby Gillerthwaite hostel. It was noted in a YHA Lake District Region memo of February 1945 that the Forestry Commission had not yet approved the scheme of the installation of a second hand Esse Cooker, but there was better news two months later when the Chairman reported that the new van had been sent to the hostel. In June it was agreed that a deeper washing-up-sink be provided as soon as cash became easier.

Mr and Mrs UED Pernetta (or Pinetta) left Gillerthwaite in 1946, moving to Thorney How and later High Close (Langdale) wardenship. Pernetta was an unusual, fiery character. Len Clark (who spelled the name the second way) used the soubriquet 'the Boy Pinetta' and remembered his time running Gillerthwaite:

He was something of a martinet (ex-Palestine Policeman) – if five minutes late for supper you had 'had it', which caused us to race down Ennerdale.

After the war, the tenancy seems to have been extended yearly.

June Thurston stayed in 1946, and recalled in fine detail the experience some 60 years later for the YHA Archive:

Ennerdale [Gillerthwaite] 60 years ago

In September 1946, I walked past Black Sail and then stayed at Gillerthwaite hostel. This was an old 1515 farmhouse, still kept as a farm, and the warden supplied milk by donkey-cart to Black Sail.

Another hosteller warned us against mice. So we hung our rucksacks up on our canvas-slung beds as we snuggled into four fluffy brown blankets. The next morning whole armies of mice must have been active during the night, and all showed the greatest initiative. Some had crept into a fastened rucksack pocket and chewed pieces off bits of blended chocolate. Some had rummaged into my belonging to find semolina, biting neat holes to get at the satisfying grain. We were lucky that they did not find our bread or cake.

The next morning, for once, the sun shone. Ennerdale Water is a very smooth, clear lake. It is very colourful and untouched. The side of the good, dry track was like a rock-garden with yellow gorse, heather, bell heather and bracken all intermingled.

We were three 20-year old female students who had cycled (with some lifts on lorries) from Greater London up to Troutbeck, walked round the Lakes and cycled back to London. It took 24 days. We passed through 16 counties of England, cycling 535 miles, walking 83 miles and having lifts on lorries or buses for 170 miles. Oh, for such traffic-free roads.

Two anonymous young lads wrote in their logbook of a stay in 1949:

Now press on to Ennerdale [Gillerthwaite] and the YH, past the lake but – no hostel. Soon to meet some hikers coming down the other way, they too had not passed the hostel. We had met at the hostel gate! We washed in a stream that night, with hurricane lamps to guide us to our beds; fir poles and a canvas hammock, but we slept well.



*The Gillerthwaite pin badge, framed by hostel stamps from 1943 and 1952*

Joan Chapman was acting as relief warden at neighbouring Black Sail youth hostel in 1952, and remembered the close relationship between the two hostels, especially the reliance of Black Sail on Gillerthwaite for some essential services:

Shopping day was Thursday, when one got down to Gillerthwaite as soon as one could (I had my bike there) and went to Whitehaven with the warden from there in his 4-wheel drive vehicle. When we got back, he signed in his members while his wife cooked their supper, and I belted back up the valley to sign my members in. After supper, Stan (Gillerthwaite warden) brought my shopping up to me. Officially, he only brought it as far as the bin which was at the bottom of the Scarth Gap track, and I should have got members to carry it up for me – but actually, he risked his vehicle (the last bit of 'road' was – and is – atrocious) and never failed to get right up.

An unknown female hosteller supplied this warm account of Gillerthwaite in her 1957 holiday log:

This was the first of our 'farm' type hostels and we did not know what to expect. At 5 o'clock, the farmer, who was also the warden, unbolted the door and led us into a small room with a bare stone-flagged floor and a large log fire burning. He signed us in and directed us gruffly to the stone staircase and our dormitory for the night. We pushed open the door and tip-toed into the little room. There was a deathly stillness all around us. The bunks were the most extra-ordinary contraptions made of wooden frames with canvas hung limply across them and looked for all the world like stretchers. On a small table with a little oilskin cloth cover on it was a large china bowl and a china jug full of cold water – that was the washroom! There was an electric light here, which was surprising, though it was very faint.

The farmer's wife was a great improvement over the farmer – a jolly country woman with kind eyes and rosy pink cheeks. She took us to the front door to point out the earth closet. To get to it you had to go to the far end of the cobbled farmyard, which was wet and slippery, leaping over dung-pats and kittens. We could take hot water from the kitchen for our washes. The men's dormitory was in a sort of loft arrangement over one of the outbuildings.

The supper arrangement here was very interesting. We were led into the kitchen, where there was an amazing assortment of food. We were each handed a bowl of soup that we carried up some rickety stairs to the loft, which was set out as a dining room with rough wooden tables and dim lights. All communication regarding second helpings was conducted by shouting to the farmer's wife down the stairs.

Later, we settled down for the night, the moonlight streaming in at the window, and all at peace. At midnight, with the scene so brilliantly lit by the full moon, the cockerel decided it was time to get up. He heralded the dawn several times before he realised his mistake [from 1957 holiday log, anonymous female member].

Lakeland region minutes of August 1958 reported that the self-catering arrangements were non-existent and members had to use the warden's stove and equipment in the private living room, with mutual inconvenience. It was recommended that the hostel be advertised as lacking self-catering.

In 1962 15-year-old Carol Fraser wrote an essay for a YHA competition, and said of Gillerthwaite hostel:

A quaint old farmhouse. The dining room was raised on a separate floor so that to eat meals everybody stood in a line and passed plates up the stairs. We were able to watch the cows being milked in the evening and slept soundly with farmyard sounds lulling us to sleep. Breakfast was later than usual, as in the warden's estimation, the feeding of his cows came before the feeding of his hostellers.

Pat Packham cycled the length and breadth of the YHA network. She may well have been one of the final members to stay at Gillerthwaite when she wrote in her notebook '*a Cycling Tour in the Peaks and Lakes, July 1966*':

I entered the hostel at 5pm and was delighted with it. We heard cows coming into the yard. The dining room was above the wardens' room and the food was conveyed upstairs by a 'chain gang'



1 2



Hostellers at Gillerthwaite youth hostel.

1: an unknown hosteller at the hostel door; 2: Pat Packham (right) and fellow hostellers in 1966 (author's collection and YHA Archive)

YHA was issued with a notice to quit at Gillerthwaite, dated 17th September 1963, but was allowed to extend the lease up to 1967, and actually renamed the hostel Ennerdale in 1963, confusingly for youth hostel historians. The last overnights were recorded in 1966, though one YHA file suggested that closure did not take place until May 1967. A plaque on the property shows that since 1966 the property has been run as the 40-bed Low Gillerthwaite Field Centre allied to the City of Leeds College of Education. It continues in this role in 2023.

## Ennerdale [Cat Crag] Youth Hostel 1969 to present

Cat Crag, Ennerdale, Cleator, Cumbria CA23 3AX

Historic County: Cumberland

YHA Regions: Lakes, North

GR: NY 142140



*An early postcard of Cat Crag youth hostel, Ennerdale. Tree planting protected the building from extremes of weather. The flat-roofed extension appears to be a brand-new YHA creation (author's collection)*

Bob Orrell's book *Around and About Ennerdale*, is a rich source of information about the development of Low and High Gillerthwaite. His story of the Forestry Commission's 20th-century housing for workers in High Gillerthwaite is paraphrased here.

The Commission arrived in 1920, intending at first to build a small workers' settlement of some seven houses on land around High Gillerthwaite Farm. This plan was soon reduced to a twin terraced block of *superior* forestry houses just behind the original Gillerthwaite hostel and a pair of attached bungalows between the block and High Gillerthwaite farmhouse, a building of much greater age. Cat Crag was on the right-hand side of the *superior* block in the postcard view above and Starling Dodd (or Gill) on the left. The chief forester lived in Starling Dodd and the foreman in Cat Crag. Of the pair of workers' bungalows, Lingmell, nearer Starling Dodd, was the home of worker Joe Garbutt and Dodgill of John Wren and his family. The Wrens also provided bed and breakfast accommodation, and Mrs Wren baked bread for Black Sail youth hostel, delivering it by pony and trap. They left Gillerthwaite in 1939 and various tenants occupied the settlement for another 20 years.

The dwellings were rendered less important when new forestry houses were provided in the village of Ennerdale Bridge in the 1950s; for a time the bungalows stood empty. They were later let as holiday homes. The *superior* houses had a spell of use by a mountaineering club.

Bob Orrel further describes his attachment to the area. In 1977 he took on the lease of Dodgill Cottage and ten acres of land, with the intention of operating a small farm. When Lingmell became vacant he leased that too and converted the two cottages into one house. He extended his land. The farmhouse had become derelict and he renovated it as a bunkhouse for climbers and walkers. During the renovation, a metal box time capsule with items of local interest was concealed within the walls.

All these locations have found use with YHA; the forester's *superior* houses as the youth hostel and, from the new century, the bungalows for the hostel manager and staff. The old High Gillerthwaite farmhouse is now the camping barn.

It is not known whether the Lakes Region had it in mind to relocate the hostel the very small distance to Cat Crag while still in the final years at Low Gillerthwaite Farm, but it must have acted with all speed to secure the lease with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food once it was without a hostel in this middle part of Ennerdale. In 1969 YHA took Starling Dodd and Cat Bell on a long lease and reconfigured the buildings to make a hostel. The lease was initially for a term of 42 years for Cat Crag and Starling Gill (so named), from 26th June 1968. An initial annual lease charge of £90 (rising to £130 in 1989) is recorded in the YHA Trust ledger.

The 1968 and 1969 Handbooks had advised of a new hostel here, but there were no details until a 1969 supplement was issued. The hostel opened on 17th March 1969, with 26 beds and Jennie Hill the new warden. The following year she married Mike Jackson of Cockermouth hostel and the couple moved on to manage the much larger Windermere youth hostel. In Jennie's place were, in turn, Mike Parkin in 1970 and the well-known warden Graham Ives in 1973, later of Cambridge and Gradbach Mill hostels. Rather more permanent at the little Lakeland hostel was Miss Margo Pennell, who served at Ennerdale from 1974 to 1990.

For most years leading up to the 21st century numbers staying were modest, often not rising above 2,000 per annum, but there were some busier years, over 3,000, in the mid 1970s and late 1990s, and roughly on a par with or slightly above Black Sail hostel's figures.

YHA Lakes Region minutes were meticulously detailed, often dealing with fascinating minutiae for individual hostels. Ennerdale hostel's entries in the 1970s included these examples:

Lakes Region minutes, September 1973

The storage of dry foodstuffs was still something of a problem at the hostel [maybe this was a recurrence of rodent activity at the Low Gillerthwaite hostel, as detailed by June Thurston on page 4 of this profile].

Lakes Region minutes, June 1974

The bridge over Deep Gill, Ennerdale: the Chairman drew the attention of Council to the opening of the footbridge over Deep Gill at 2.30pm on Saturday 22nd June. The Lakeland [Lakes] Regional Group had made a contribution towards the cost of this bridge and any members of Council who wished to attend the opening would be very welcome.

Lakes Region minutes, September 1974

The Deputy Regional Officer reported that he had written to the Forestry Commission who had confirmed that they did not intend to make further improvements to the forest road, and had asked that we make our members aware that there must be no motor traffic beyond Bowness Knott.

Lakes Region minutes, December 1974

The Regional Officer reported the action he had taken to put in hand repair works at the end of the season which would be fairly expensive. The action was agreed.

Lakes Region minutes, December 1975

The warden had reported a rotten window frame which needed replacing. It was agreed that this should be done and that the architect should survey the hostel at the same time as Black Sail.

Lakes Region minutes, June 1977

[Repairs] completed apart from some small interior maintenance items. It had not been possible to insert a damp course due to the random stone courses.

Until relatively recent times the warden's quarters were squeezed into the ground floor of Cat Crag, where the drying room is now. From time to time this inadequate accommodation was discussed and the YHA Lakes Region architect had been asked to examine the problem. In September 1981 regional minutes reported that preliminary drawings proposing an extension above the flat roof of the common room were tabled. The Committee agreed that the proposals were imaginative although the warden had some criticism regarding the suggested bay windows. The architect commented that these preliminary proposals had been prepared from the existing plans and the Committee agreed that he should attend the site to prepare further drawings. The Chairman said that there would be no finance available to carry out this scheme until at least 1982-83, however, and the new quarters, when they came almost 20 years later, were separate from the hostel.



1 2



3 4



- 1&2: two 1980s images of Ennerdale hostel, probably little changed externally from the time of its opening.  
 1: cyclist Ron Sant's view of April 1980. There appears to be a Mountain Rescue equipment box on the annexe wall;  
 2: John Watts' image of April 1987, with a typical rural youth hostel display of Calor Gas cannisters (author's collection);  
 3&4: for comparison's sake, two further postcards of Cat Crag hostel. Both date from between the 1990s and 2007, and show small alterations before the major refurbishment of 2007, such as the opening at the centre of the property to gain access to the new boiler (images 1, 3 and 4: YHA Archive)

Regional minutes continued to follow the progress of Ennerdale hostel in the 1980s. Indicative of the ups and downs of small hostels in the Lakes, the Committee was appreciative of the consistently good results achieved by this hostel in January 1981, and the following year allowed the warden to take ten of the 'days off in lieu' due to her for working a hectic six-day week, but early in 1983 it noted that the decline in usage at Ennerdale had been greater than the regional average. Nevertheless, it was recognised that the hostel provided an important service to members wishing to visit the western fells, and of course it pump-primed the viability of Black Sail Hut four miles away up the valley.

In October 1983 the question of the warden's accommodation again came before the Committee:

Extension to warden's accommodation: concern was expressed regarding the investment of capital into a hostel where the business appeared to be declining. Investigations to be made regarding the possibility of caravan type accommodation.

Again, in January 1985, the decline in business was noted:

Concern was expressed at the level of business at Ennerdale which really requires an extra 200-300 overnights per annum.

... but a year later, the finances were sounder:

The Committee were pleased to note some financial improvement with virtually the same usage as the previous year.

The Summer 1990 edition of *Triangle* magazine noted that showers were to be installed at Ennerdale thanks to an allocation of money from the Small Hostels Fund. *YHA News* of Spring 1997 reported on a successful programme to provide new mattresses up to modern standards at Northern and Peak District hostels, including Ennerdale. At the end of that year, *YHA News* reported on an urgently-needed improvement, that locks be fitted to dormitory doors at

Black Sail, Byrness, Ellingstring, Ennerdale, Honister and Lockton, following an urgent review of surveillance procedures after the murder of a British schoolgirl in a French youth hostel.

After Margo Pennell, the mid 1990s were characterised by several short-term hostel wardens. Karen Pratt in 1991, Richard Suddaby in 1992-94, Nigel Flemming in 1994, Ella Leibowitz in 1995 and the much-travelled Angela Middleton in 1995-96. Marc Oakley took the hostel forward from 1996 to 2000. Until the new millennium, there had been few major alterations to YHA's property in Ennerdale, but the Summer 2000 edition of *YHA News* gave details of significant changes to the running of both Ennerdale and Black Sail hostels. In the issue, manager Marc provided an article outlining the new acquisitions of the adjacent High Gillerthwaite Farmhouse and the Commission's workers' bungalows at Ennerdale, leased from the Forestry Commission:

#### YHA Expansion in the Ennerdale Valley

For the year 2000 the YHA has expanded its programme at Ennerdale and after much local work with the Forestry Commission, has obtained a lease for an extra 16th Century barn and two Commission cottages. The barn has now been converted, whilst retaining some of its original charm, into a camping barn. This will be run in partnership with the Lake District National Park Authority and the YHA as part of its camping barn network.

It has three rooms with sleeping platforms for a total of 14 persons, a common room with wood burning stove, a kitchen area and bathroom and shower. This has enabled the YHA to offer a basic, self-catering option for both individuals and groups at Ennerdale to add to its existing services. [The barn had been Forest Enterprise's own bunk barn until 1999, when it agreed for YHA to run the property as a camping barn].

The two Commission cottages will house staff from both Ennerdale and Black Sail hostels which allows two extra assistants to be employed, one at each hostel, enabling much more flexibility on opening patterns and services offered. [The chairman of the YHA Lakes Volunteers' Group reported that the provision of staff accommodation in the valley was to comply with working hours legislation. The role of Bob Orrell in developing these adjacent buildings is referred to on page 6].

The Hostel at Ennerdale has recently been awarded the 'Heartbeat Award' for a healthy catering service, all of which is home cooked and large portions for those hill walkers! Also new for this year are the in-house activity courses, evening lectures and National Curriculum linked packages. These are provided through partnerships with local Ennerdale guide/instructor Graham Watson, the Cockermouth Mountain Rescue Team and Forestry Commission Education. Through this expansion in the valley the YHA is now able to offer a wide range of services throughout the whole year in all its properties.

Both Ennerdale and Black Sail Hostels are open from 1st April until 1st November, with a full catering service for both individuals and groups. Throughout the winter months groups can rent either hostel on a sole use, self-catering basis on the Rent-a-Hostel scheme. The Camping Barn is open every day and all year round.

The Foot and Mouth epidemic hit the Lake District hostels particularly hard in 2001, with barely 3,000 overnights recorded at Ennerdale and Black Sail combined. Numbers soon recovered, thanks in part to new funding successfully sought for improvements. In 2002, a new hydro-electric scheme was installed using grants from the Cleator Moor Single Regeneration Budget, the Chris Brasher Trust and the Ecopower Trust, allowing full electric wiring, a fire alarm system and a new LPG boiler to be installed in the hostel. The stairs and bedrooms were carpeted. The Rural Recovery Fund, set up by the government especially to address the epidemic's impact in rural Cumbria, gave grants to support these improvements.



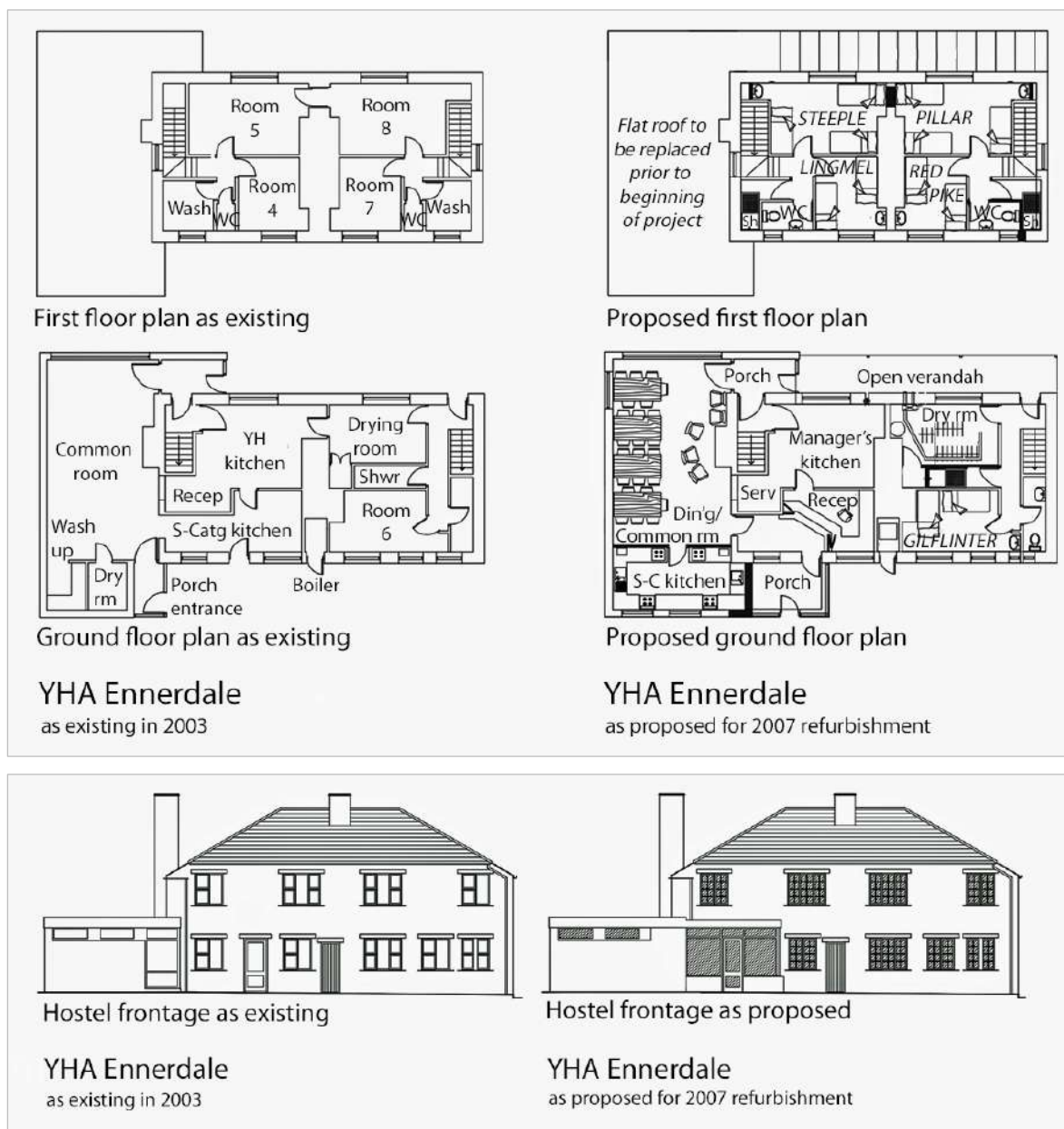
*Right: the old boiler, by 2002 a rarely-used back-up (YHA Ennerdale photograph album)*

*YHA News*, Autumn 2002, gave details of the hydro-electric scheme:

The new hydro-electric installation, replacing the old diesel generator, has been providing up to 6kw of electricity to the hostel, the manager's house and adjacent camping barn since April. The £28,000 installation cost was supported by grants, with YHA finding about half the total sum. Apart from that, however, and occasional battery replacement over the years, the installation has no real running costs and requires very little maintenance – just periodic cleaning of the input filter.

On 29th August, the scheme was officially inaugurated. Despite dry spells it has supplied all the necessary power to the hostel since it was turned on, and it looks like the diesel generator, still available as a backup, will rarely be required, something which hostel manager Dan Tunnicliffe will appreciate.

These improvements helped in the modernisation process, but it was recognised that both Ennerdale and Black Sail hostel needed some serious updating. Modernisation was coming to the hostels in the valley, overseen by managers Dan Tunncliffe, 2001-02, Jim Read, 2003-06, and Tony Hume, 2006-10. Tony managed Ennerdale and Black Sail hostels in tandem, with Ennerdale as the main base and a dedicated team to look after Black Sail. Although Black Sail hut had received some modernisation in the late 1990s, its major refurbishment would be delayed until 2013. Ennerdale hostel, however, would benefit quickly with a major rebuilding scheme to be undertaken between New Year and Easter 2007, as the plans below show.



Floorplans of YHA Ennerdale as existing in 2003 (on the left) and as proposed for the 2007 refurbishment (on the right). The rearrangement of the hostel involved significant rebuilding to create a more practical and modern YHA environment. Most noticeable was the extension of the entrance, rerouting it via the front of the house and a new angled reception in the old self-catering space. The former inconveniently sited wash-up, drying room and original porch lobby could now be vacated in favour of a new self-caterers' kitchen, thankfully much more generously glazed than the 2007 plan indicates.

The refurbished downstairs bedroom, 'Gilflinter' was upgraded to include an en suite. Upstairs, two showers were squeezed into little spaces. The lounge received a new flat roof.

Also included in the plans was complete redecoration and enhanced ventilation throughout and extraction from a re-equipped manager's kitchen; new fire doors throughout; sheep's wool insulation in new stud walls and ceiling spaces; a renewed drainage system and septic tank; improved lounge fireplace; new carpets upstairs; decking at the rear to a new patio door; replacement of the slate roof; use of local materials wherever possible, especially wood; improvements to grounds, pathways and access; replacement of the camping barn (farmhouse) roof and interpretation boards relating to environmental features (Plans simplified and redrawn by the author)

In September 2006 YHA published details of the Three Star and Green Beacon Project for YHA Ennerdale:

Ennerdale hostel's main attribute is the setting among trees, looking across the fields of the valley bottom to the increasingly rugged fells to the south and east. It also has a staff house and a camping barn which contains some interesting historical features. It is accessible only by forest track.

The hostel serves the Coast to Coast walk, is a stopping off point for people walking from hostel to hostel round the Lake District and attracts people wanting to explore this quiet and remote valley. It also serves as an overflow for the renowned YHA Black Sail, a further four miles up the valley, which is often full in summer. Increasingly Black Sail will become dependent on the support of YHA Ennerdale and this was recognised in 2005 with the amalgamation of the management of the two hostels. Both hostels are leased from the Forestry Commission.

YHA Ennerdale has fallen behind in the standards it offers its guests and has been awarded only one star under the VisitBritain standards scheme. It needs refurbishment, reorganising downstairs, and bringing up to date on repairs.

In addition, the hostel has several environmental features, notably a small hydro-electric scheme that provides most of the power. It is planned to develop the environmental features in order to permit the achievement of YHA's Green Beacon status, itself based on the European Union Eco Flower Award.

The article went on to outline the aims of the project. It would raise the quality of the hostel to three-star standard and make it fit for purpose. It intended to match the design of the hostel with its forest environment. The entrance, reception and self-catering kitchen areas would be new. The hostel, staff accommodation and camping barn would receive work and repairs to a sustainable standard to bring the building up to YHA's Green Beacon standard. It was proposed to undertake the work between New Year and Easter 2007.

Funding came from Defra's Rural Enterprise Scheme, the Northern Rock Foundation and the Oglesby Charitable Trust.



*Classic hostel stamp (YHA Archive)*

The scheme allowed for the replacement of the flat roof over the common room, a new, extended porch and altered entrance for guests via a newly located reception with office. The self-catering kitchen was relocated to the front of the lounge, with much better natural lighting. There were to be new showers and WCs upstairs and washbasins and storage in all bedrooms. Also included were a refitted drying room and covered walkway at the rear. The front of the hostel would receive replacement windows with double glazed units.

On 7th December 2006 *Whitehaven News* carried an article outlining an appeal to revamp the two hostels:

#### **Sir Chris's Appeal to Revamp Hostels**

Mountaineer Sir Chris Bonington is heading up a campaign to raise a £100,000 sum still needed to revamp two youth hostels at Ennerdale. The Ennerdale YHA centre and the YHA's Black Sail, a former shepherd's bothy, will both benefit from the £250,000 modernisation scheme, much of the cost of which has already been promised, thanks to grant-making bodies. Almost £150,000 of the £250,000 required funding has been secured but work needs to begin soon to comply with grant terms.

Sir Chris, who is YHA vice president, will launch the appeal today when he visits the two centres.

The unique Black Sail stay 'for hardcore walkers with a sense of adventure' is legendary, a favourite with Sir Chris, lying remote and isolated at the head of Ennerdale, accessible only on foot and providing access to the surrounding Great Gable, Pillar, Steeple and Red Pike. It's also on the Coast to Coast walking route. Ennerdale YHA is an ideal base for a variety of low level walks, upland routes and cycle rides and is also on the Coast to Coast.

The project will run in conjunction with the Wild Ennerdale partnership, a collaboration between the three landowners in the valley: the Forestry Commission, National Trust and United Utilities.

One hoped-for improvement not realised, a common theme in Britain's rural areas, was an intention to promote public transport for access to the valley. In 2023 Ennerdale is served by one bus a week from Cockermouth at Kirkland, 6 miles distant.



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4 5



6 7



*Out with the old – remnants of the old layout of YHA Ennerdale before the changes of early 2007, in accordance with the floorplans shown on the left side of page 10.*

*1: the austere rear walkway; 2: the old hostel entrance. This led via a plain lobby straight into the lounge; 3: the east side of the hostel; 4: the emptied-out lounge, view to the rear. The glazed window on the right was the hostel reception; 5: the lounge, view to the front. The enclosed brick structure ahead was the drying room, with wash-up inconveniently positioned on the right. The door to the left of the entrance lobby led to the old self-catering kitchen; 6: wardens' catering kitchen, with the reception beyond and exits to the rear of the property to the right and to the self-catering kitchen to the left; 7: the old downstairs Room 6, oddly numbered on the plan (images from manager Tony Hume's album kept at the hostel)*



1 2



3 4



Work in progress, early 2007.

1: the flat roof has been renewed and now the new extended entrance porch is under construction. Reroofing is in progress and windows will soon be replaced. Alterations inside the hostel are just as radical; 2: the old farmhouse is receiving similar attention; 3: the ex-Forestry Commission workers' cottages, by now staff quarters, with the farmhouse / camping barn in the distance; 4: manager Tony Hume attaches new signage to the front of the 4-star hostel (images from his album kept at the hostel)

The newly refurbished YHA Ennerdale took six months to complete and reopened to guests in July 2007, with an official reopening three months later on 24th October. Chief guest Sir Chris Bonington outlined the 'greening' of the hostel's presence and the aspirations of the Wild Ennerdale project. The hostel advertised its attractions for stays by school groups, especially Primary and disadvantaged, long and short distance walkers and cyclists, and families and individuals. The hostel is staffed by one manager and one seasonal assistant, and also offers base accommodation for the staff of YHA Black Sail, which is overseen by the YHA Ennerdale manager.



1 2



1: Sir Chris Bonington addresses guests at the official reopening; 2: a party of Dutch guests soon after reopening (images from Tony Hume's album kept at the hostel)

Revamping YHA's camping barn was another feature of the Green Beacon project, here outlined by Tony Hume:

The completion of this upgrade takes us another big step closer to where we want to be with our accommodation offering in the Ennerdale Valley. YHA is striving to provide its guests with facilities that offer the best possible experience whilst having the minimum impact on the local environment. We've already completed an extensive programme of improvements at YHA Ennerdale and the camping barn also falls into that category. Now we are pushing ahead with the final piece in the jigsaw, the upgrade at YHA Black Sail, so we can offer guests a choice of three great places to stay and sample the best valley in the Lakes.'

An information sheet produced by YHA gives a short history of the camping barn, now called Shepherd's Barn:

One of originally two farms juxtaposed on this site at High Gillerthwaite, this is a classic example of a 17th-century Lakeland farm building. Shepherd's Barn is the oldest and most architecturally interesting building in upper Ennerdale. The main room is the living and kitchen quarters for the family. To the left of the multifuel stove is an 18th-century bread oven (the accommodating space for this is visible on the outside wall). Also on the outside wall, the bottom is built one course outward, to prevent damage from horse carriages passing too close.

Adjacent to the main room are the sleeping quarters for the farming family, now fittingly one of our three dormitories.

The open section of the barn was originally the threshing shed. The opening is slightly off centre – this a typical layout: threshed corn in the central area would be exposed to the wind drawn across the floor by a now bricked up window opposite. Chaff blown out the window would leave the grain to be moved to the area on the left. Beautiful beams hold up the roof. Most likely they originating from trees in the valley, not as commonly supposed from old ships' timbers. The open barn now houses our water treatment plant.

Elsewhere, it was noted that around five tonnes of green oak came from Forestry Commission woodland in the nearby Miterdale valley to ensure that the building was sympathetically restored using natural, local materials and transport and traditional craftsmanship. Expert carpenters Brown and Armstrong of Maryport helped to transform the raw oak into the new roof structure. The project also provided traditional carpentry experience for a young apprentice.



1 2



6 7



*The Shepherd's Barn, YHA's newly-named camping barn at YHA Ennerdale.*

*1: view from the south end; 2: small self-catering kitchen; 3: downstairs small bedroom, fitted out with standard single-tier beds;*

*4: steep spiral staircase to the upper storey; 5: one of the two sleeping platforms on the upper level;*

*6&7: the dining room and lounge space combined (author's photographs, March 2022)*

Sue Edwards took over from Tony Hume in December 2010, by which time tandem arrangements for the two hostels were operating with close mutual planning, though the details of the interchange altered from time to time. Sue ran both Ennerdale and Black Sail until December 2013. She writes:

As manager of both, I would be in sole charge of them over the winter, and in the season a Duty Management couple would be hired to take control of the Black Sail operation. In 2011 and 2012 this was Martin Lyne and Suzy Brett, in 2013 it was Maria Barbera Tomas. Black Sail then closed in August 2013 for its major refurbishment. I had a supporting staff member at Ennerdale.

My team members at Ennerdale were Bridget in 2011 and James Gawin in 2012 and 2013. Additionally, Janet Lee worked at weekends and ran the Ennerdale café.

My role for the two hostels under one manager was a lot to do with the paperwork and operational issues around invoices for the refuse collection, laundry, food and alcohol deliveries. Black Sail didn't have satellite broadband in those days and so Ennerdale was responsible for much of the finance, accounting and so on. I lived in the bungalow cottages next door to the hostel, manager on one side and staff member on the other.

Sue left Ennerdale in 2013 to take up the manager's post of YHA Hawkshead and later YHA Skiddaw House. Wouter van der Veen managed both sites in 2014-16. After a difficult year for staffing in 2017, Kirsty George moved from deputy manager at Hawkshead to restore stability at the end of that year for a period of five years, running both Ennerdale and Black Sail again in tandem, and hiring a second team to run Black Sail.

Just as with the Foot-and-Mouth outbreak almost 20 years earlier, the Ennerdale hostels were greatly affected by the Covid pandemic. Hostelling was severely curtailed in 2020, with fewer than 1,000 overnights at YHA Ennerdale, but the hostel operated wherever and whenever it was able. In 2021, the hostel functioned only as an exclusive hire base, but 2022 was exceptionally successful as a traditionally mixed-use hostel once more, and the total of overnights, at 4177, was the fourth highest total ever.



*The modern YHA at High Gillerthwaite.*

*1: the youth hostel from the forest road. Car parking spaces have been increased in recent years; 2: daffodil time; 3: the neatly laid-out rear of the hostel; 4: the camping barn, bungalows and hostel from the forest road (author's photographs, March 2022)*



*The cosy lounge and new reception entrance at Ennerdale (author's photographs, March 2022)*

Stephen Wheatley was appointed manager of both sites early in 2023. Typical of responses from guests at Ennerdale in his first year is this review:

#### Hostelling at its Best – 2nd Nov 2023

This was a delightful overnight stay. The manager and his team of one were friendly, welcoming, cheerful, knowledgeable and very helpful. Breakfast was delivered individually and cooked to order and was of an excellent standard. We hired a four-bed dorm for the two of us and it was comfortable and clean. Outside from the balcony we observed blue tits, great tits, coal tits, nuthatches, a greater spotted woodpecker and a red squirrel feeding from the nearby feeders and bird table. Fortunately, the hostel wasn't full and so the atmosphere was congenial without feeling the need to talk to everyone. The beer was much appreciated, too. This is hostelling at its best: well done.



*A wonderfully atmospheric photograph by Bob Hughes of the hostel with Pillar dominating the landscape (YHA Archive)*

Overnights – inclusive periods each year as follows									
1942-1991: previous Oct to Sept; 1992: Oct 1991 to Feb 1993; 1993-present: Mar to following Feb									
†: Eskett Hall youth hostel; ¶: Gillerthwaite youth hostel; Δ: Ennerdale (Cat Crag) youth hostel									
*: 17 month period; +: notional figure included for exclusive hire and/or camping;									
ø: results affected by Covid									
...	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938	1939
...	...	269†	380†	673†	652†	740†	767†	771†	592†
1940	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945	1946	1947	1948	1949
518†	995†	976†	987†	1114†	1006†	1007†	886†	683†	543†
...	...	1057¶	1863¶	2606¶	2764¶	2870¶	2499¶	2526¶	2285¶
1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959
411<†	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
1816¶	1844¶	1815¶	1492¶	1244¶	1359¶	1360¶	1409¶	1276¶	1540¶
1960	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969
1518¶	1551¶	1470¶	1445¶	1258¶	1414¶	1338¶	...	...	1605Δ
1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979
2091Δ	2075Δ	2042Δ	3211Δ	2619Δ	3253Δ	3451Δ	2526Δ	2350Δ	2343Δ
1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989
2241Δ	2299Δ	1967Δ	1895Δ	1929Δ	2007Δ	1922Δ	1947Δ	2070Δ	1919Δ
1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
2462Δ	2401Δ	2215*Δ	2836Δ	2899Δ	2612Δ	3406Δ	2912Δ	2759Δ	3137Δ
2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
2996Δ	1492Δ	3545Δ	3791Δ	4360Δ	4648Δ	3629Δ	1939Δ	2668Δ	2351Δ
2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
2326Δ	2797+Δ	2926+Δ	2529+Δ	3377+Δ	4485+Δ	3346+Δ	3198+Δ	3508+Δ	3012+Δ
2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029
945+øΔ	2336+øΔ	4177+øΔ	open+Δ	...	...	...	...	...	...



1



2

Memories of YHA Ennerdale.

- 1: a one-inch pin-badge of Ennerdale Youth Hostel, probably from the time of opening (author's collection)  
 2: the manager's lovely personal and homely touch in the self-catering kitchen (author's photograph, March 2022)