

Streatley Youth Hostel 1936 to present

Hill House, Reading Road, Streatley, Reading, Berkshire RG8 9JJ

Historic County: Berkshire

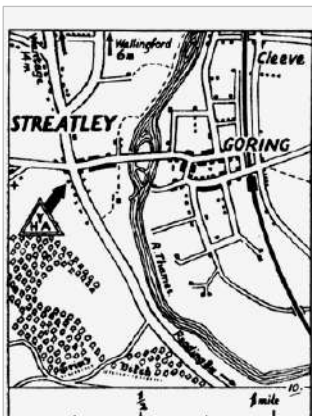
YHA Regions: London, Oxford,
South-East, South

GR: SU 591806

Streatley youth hostel has welcomed visitors for over 80 years. It is a large Victorian house near the village cross-roads, built probably about 1830. The rear garden originally extended right up onto the Downs. The original owners, Captain LR and Mrs FL Reiss, offered Hill House to YHA as a gift in the Association's early days. A plaque in the lounge reads:

Mrs FL Reiss gave this house to the YHA in 1935 that others might enjoy this beautiful area.

It is said that Mrs Reiss was influential in the preparatory formation of YHA and that Barclay Baron attended a meeting hosted at Hill House about 1930.



STREATLEY. *Hill House, Streatley, nr. Reading, Berks. Mrs. H. C. White. TEL. Goring 278.* The Hostel is on the main Reading—Oxford road, a few doors E. of the Bull Inn. It is beautifully situated in the Goring Gap and in close proximity to the Ridgeway. There is a large garden leading up to the top of the Downs. A magnificent centre for walks and canoeing along the Thames, and for rambles and rides in the Chilterns and the Berkshire Downs. Wide stretches of quite unspoilt country, ancient churches, villages and farms of great beauty are within a day's circular ramble.

*M30, W20; PROVISIONS Store *** at Hostel; MEALS 1/3; BUS Oxford—Reading infrequent. BATHING River: DISTANCES Bucklebury 10m, Henley 13m, Twyford 15m, Watlington 12m.*

- 1: an early postcard of the youth hostel at Streatley (author's collection);
2: extract from the 1937 Regional Guide, Youth Hostels in South-East England (YHA Archive)

A display at the hostel tells the story of how Mrs F Reiss, came to give Hill House to the YHA. It is undated, but the final sentence suggests that it was written in the 1930s:

Hill House has always been a happy house where people could come on holiday. It is entirely in keeping with this that its owner gave it to the YHA for young people and families to enjoy when she moved into the cottage behind Stow House in Goring, where her daughter was married to the local GP, Dr Bourdillon.

Florence Reiss was a remarkable person. She was born in 1857, the second daughter of Sir Richard Baggallay, Attorney General in Disraeli's government. She was one of twelve children and often had to accompany her father on official functions, as her mother was busy with the family. She also helped with the teaching of her younger brothers and sisters. She came to Hill House in 1892 after her marriage in 1882 to Charles Reiss, a partner in a London firm with tea estates in India and Ceylon. She was widowed in 1907 when the children were still young but lived to see them grow up and give enjoyment to her grandchildren. She died in 1947, aged 91.

From the start the house was a happy and lively place with parties of family friends coming to stay and enjoy the advantages of the house, walking and the river – which they shared with the less fortunate to whom the family felt a deep social concern. Both Mr and Mrs Reiss were governors of a London orphanage whose boys used to camp in the meadow behind the house.

All three sons were actively involved as undergraduates with the Oxford and Bermondsey Mission which enabled them to work in the most deprived area in London and which brought together some of the most notable pioneers in social and prison reform. Among the OBM members were two future Archbishops of Canterbury – William Temple and Geoffrey Fisher, and the noted prison reformer Sir Alexander Patterson, as well as many others. All were frequent visitors to the house for holidays or conferences but sadly many were killed in the First World War.

Even more remarkable were the visits of girls from Lambeth, where Sylvia – Mrs Reiss' daughter – ran a club for them. At a time when it was unheard of for working girls or boys to travel more than half a mile from where they lived or to have a holiday anywhere, Hill House offered them this and the opportunity to see beyond the streets of Lambeth and London to the beautiful countryside. It was surrounded by large gardens with a meadow where cowslips grew in profusion and where Racer the donkey grazed, a tennis court and glasshouses. The view in one direction – up Streatley Hill and across the meadows to the beech trees which crowned the hill; in the other, to distant views of the Downs and across the river to the church and the weir-views, which must have contrasted strikingly with the streets of London. The quiet of the countryside was undisturbed by noise of traffic – the Reading road was so little frequented that Sylvia was a familiar figure driving along it in her donkey cart; the only noise was of birds and rooks in the trees. On the right of the house were two cottages – the old coach houses above which lived the gardener and cook. One of these is still retained by the family for the elderly.

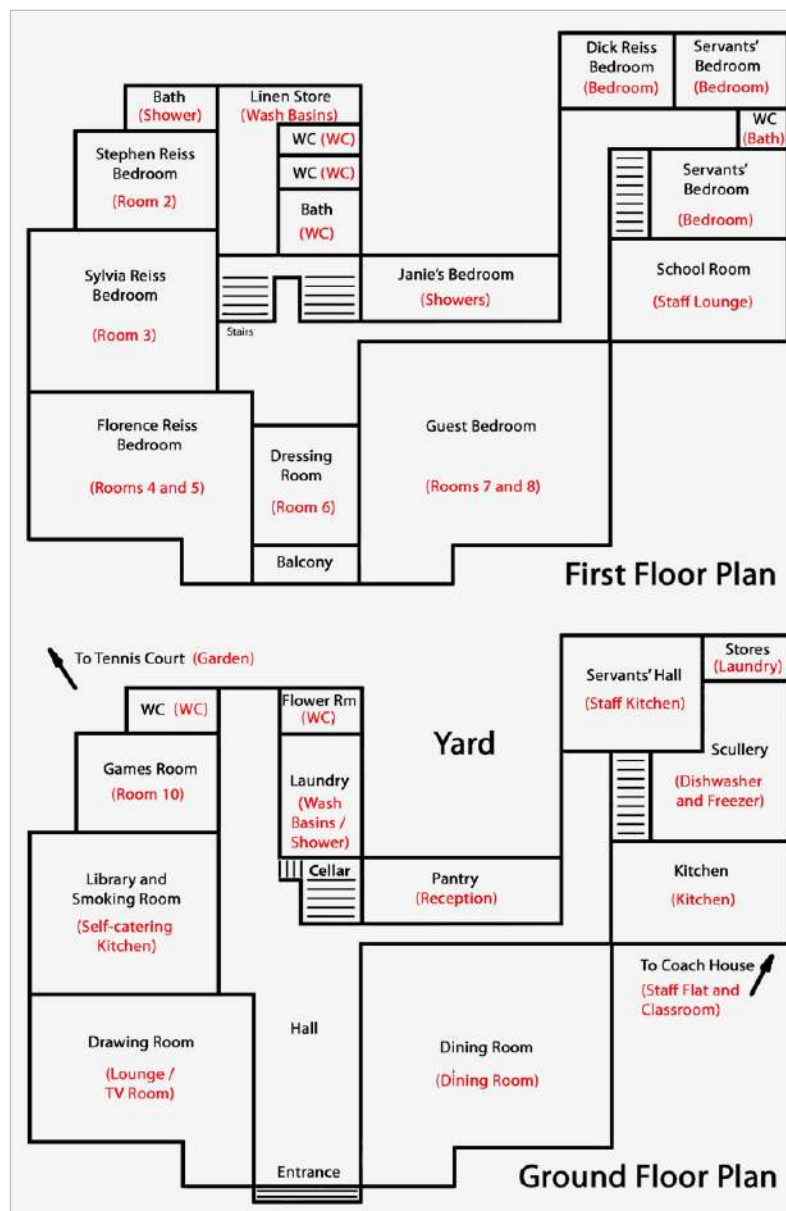
If some of the features were strange and frightening to the Lambeth girls such as cows and trees, their noisy good humour and quick repartee, their dress and no doubt their picturesque language must have been equally startling to the conservative local residents. In the same way in which she made the friends of her sons at home and gave them the chance to use the tennis court and go boating on the river, Mrs Reiss welcomed her daughter's club girls. Her invariable correctness and efficiency, which might have been daunting to anyone who did not know her, was always tempered however by her practical good sense and her thoroughness and kindness in seeing that they were enjoying themselves. Children were always first and foremost people to her – not just someone else's child or even later her own grandchildren – they were always people whose funny sayings she recounted with relish and enjoyment.

Of her immediate family, Dick (1883-1959) became a pioneer in what was later called the New Town Movement, which set out to provide good housing for families moving out of city areas. As Director of the Garden City Movement he was responsible for the development of Welwyn Garden City, of which many of the design features were to influence housing developments here and abroad. Horace (1886-1952) served in the first war as army padre and was subsequently a vicar in London and Essex. Stephen (1889-1915) was killed in the war. Sylvia (1893-1958), whose Lambeth girls were so much a part of her life, moved to Goring after her marriage to the local GP. Her husband had a distinguished war record as a medical officer and was a much-loved family doctor in Goring, where he is remembered by the Bourdillon playing field in Cleeve, bought by his patients.

It seems entirely appropriate that the house, which has such strong associations with giving pleasure to so many people, should now be available to extend this to others through the YHA.

The hostel opened on the 15th or the 18th July 1936. It took YHA some five years, until 4th December 1941, to register Mrs Reiss's gift with the YHA Trust. The reasons for this are unclear, but perhaps show some complications with the legal side of the transfer to freehold ownership.

The warden in the first year is not known, but in 1937 Mrs HC White was in charge. There were beds for 50: 30 men and 20 women, changing slightly to 25 men and 25 women in 1938. Mrs White remained in post until 1939.



A pencil sketch exists at Hill House that shows the original uses of the various rooms in the main house, with 21st-century patterns of hostel usage added. It has been redrawn here in simplified form by the author, black print indicating the room layout in 1930 and red print the layout in about 2000. There have been very few structural alterations and extensions during this span of time (except for some subdivisions of hostel dormitories into smaller guest bedrooms), or indeed since



There are white sign plates above some doorways indicating what each room was used for when the house was a private home before being donated to YHA. Manager Nick Crivich explains: They were installed at the suggestion of Sylvia Blampey, one of the Reiss family descendants (Horace's daughter) who was very keen on family history and often brought extended family members to visit the youth hostel. Her brother Richard Reiss sat on the YHA Council

Left: another early postcard of Streatley youth hostel

In those first four years the numbers who stayed at Hill House were perhaps surprisingly modest, given the great surge in hostelling near the cities in the second half of the 1930s. 1938 was the best record, though with fewer than 2,000 overnights. Indeed, there were queries about the future of the hostel as war approached. At the beginning of 1939 YHA's *London Region News* announced that a number of Czech refugees were to be temporarily housed here. The adaptability of YHA at this time was later replicated at Surrey's Holmbury St Mary's hostel, prompting the regional council to explain on 31st Oct 1939:

14 Czech refugees are being provided with board and lodging at Holmbury at 12s.6d per week, the same basis as at Streatley earlier in the year, but it is now obvious that this figure is too low.

At Streatley, one mother and child are at the hostel and there are no other evacuees in the village at the present time, although a number of school-children are expected and 40 of these will be billeted at the hostel.

In addition there is a resident member and a refugee, payment in respect of the latter being received at the rate of 20s per week for board and lodging. We are no longer employing a gardener at this hostel.

The hostel was under the control of London Region at the beginning, but it seems to have been something of a hot potato. There were talks with neighbouring Oxford Region about ceding the hostel to them, though London Region controlled hostels further afield.

The outbreak of war made the continuation of the hostel at Hill House difficult. In November 1939 the secretary of the London Region Executive Committee noted that it was preparing to:

Close the hostel and vacate the premises if no parties of evacuated school-children were received or if no other way of covering the expenses was available. Correspondence continues with the Oxford Region regarding the proposed transfer of this hostel. I have written to the treasurer asking his opinion on a suggestion to keep the hostel under our own control, and I will deal with this matter at the meeting.

Late in 1939 the London Secretary recorded trouble with the Streatley arrangements:

I visited Oxford on 12th December and had a long conversation with Messrs Joseph and Yates [of Oxford Region]. They found that they cannot undertake the financial responsibility and risks involved in connection with the administration of Streatley hostel.

On 15th December I received a letter dated 12th December from the wardens. They stated that difficulties had arisen between themselves and an evacuee at the hostel and that Mrs Reiss and her daughter had taken the side of the evacuee.

I hurried to Streatley on 16th December to find that the wardens had left early that morning. I had already been in touch with [YHA General Secretary] Catchpool, who also came to Streatley, and he introduced a member whom he installed as a volunteer warden. I found that the wardens had made some arrangements with Mrs Reiss for a party of evacuees to be accommodated at the hostel for about four weeks from Christmas onwards. I have not yet been able to ascertain the terms which have been agreed upon.

One evacuated mother with two children is at the hostel and also three employees (two of them refugees) of a local farmer and some arrangements had apparently been made for the accommodation of certain other evacuees during January. The income to the Region from these sources is £1.6s.0d per week. The main difficulty, apart from that of finance, is the maintenance of the house and garden and attendance to the sewage.

Mr Catchpool is willing to organise a working party to redecorate the interior of the hostel. I hope to have a conversation with Captain Reiss regarding Streatley before the meeting of the Committee.

On 28th December 1939 London Region Executive Committee minutes stated:

The Committee decided that the hostel should be closed and the equipment removed forthwith to Winchester hostel.

The Secretary was authorised to allow equipment to remain temporarily at the hostel for use by evacuees provided that the persons to whom it was lent would arrange to pay for its transfer at a later date.

It was further agreed that no claim for refund should be made in respect of the rates, which had been paid up to the end of March 1940.

However, all was not lost. In a late-stage rescue, control of Streatley hostel indeed moved from London Region to Oxford late in 1939 and hostel use continued into 1940. Between 1st October 1939 and 30th September 1940 London Region recorded 152 overnights and then Oxford Region 2,084, though the proportion of traditional hostellers vis-à-vis evacuees and military personnel is not mentioned, a common feature of YHA in 1940. The hostel

was requisitioned by 14th October and did not operate in 1941, being required at the time by Bradfield Rural District Council. In its 1940 annual report Oxford Region stated that Streatley hostel's fate was undecided.

The hostel was able to rejoin the YHA ranks in 1942, and it was in good hands, with new warden Mrs Nix taking it forward to 1945. She had gained a fine reputation running a small adopted YHA hostel at Weston near Newbury from 1936 to 1941. It was now that Streatley experienced its first period of significant growth, to over 6,000 overnights in 1944. Len Clark knew her, and recounted in 2008 with typical wit:

Mrs Nix took over Streatley Hostel, after Weston YH, where her high standards were famous, and once the last hosteller had left in the morning, she undertook all the cleaning duties the hostellers had half done.

The Autumn 1945 edition of *Rucksack Magazine* also had fond memories of Mrs Nix:

We were very fortunate to secure her as warden from Weston YH. When Streatley hostel [re-]started she did all the cleaning up after the occupation by the evacuees, and since then had done a good deal of the repainting of the house. Sad as we are to lose her, we cannot begrudge her a well-earned rest.

Cynthia Spoliar, who helped out around the Oxfordshire hostel during the war, wrote a response to an article about Hill House in an unknown publication of about 1999:

The article on Hill House youth hostel in your May issue held particular interest for me, owing to my wartime involvement with it. This came about in the Hilary term [January to March] of 1942 when, as Oxford University's YHA representative, I was approached with a view to assembling a volunteer working party to restore Hill House to hostelling after two and a half years of use by mothers and children from the East End of London, who had been evacuated to Streatley.

Accordingly, half a dozen of us cycled over from Oxford at the start of our Easter vacation and spent the next ten days stripping wallpaper, removing clothes-lines from inside the rooms, preparing window frames, scrubbing, cleaning and fumigating. I remember one particularly attractive chaise longue so infested and insanitary that it could not be saved and so went on the bonfire behind the house.

We camped in the house and the warden, Mrs Nix, prepared meals for us – no mean feat in those days. Easter was chilly that year and we huddled in the evening round the one coal fire. We were not there long enough to see the finished result. However, the following summer when I was acting warden of the Oxford hostel, hostellers would occasionally pass through having spent the previous night at Streatley. Crude and inexpert DIY-ers though we undoubtedly were, this gave us the satisfaction of knowing that we had made a contribution to the restoration of Hill House to the purpose for which it had been donated.

Mrs Nix was followed by Mrs Murray in 1946-47. Mr H Howe followed in 1948, but died during the year. Mrs Howe agreed to take on the hostel in 1949.

Mabel Pratt from Oxford was a keen cyclist and hosteller in the late 1940s. She clearly loved visiting Hill House:

Streatley Hostel is the shiniest, cleanest and best furnished we have been in so far – no shabbiness and no disorder. Our supper was cooked in the attractive and adequate members' kitchen. A party of Austrians... got locked out and effected an entrance by putting one of the girls through a window of the men's dorm.



1: Ron Day took this photograph about 1950, before the removal of the handsome glazed porch

The YHA national annual report of 1951 told how stables had been converted into a members' kitchen. This is the current classroom. Meanwhile, Mr and Mrs Siggs had taken on the hostel in 1950, having started with YHA at the new Ystradfellte hostel near Brecon two years earlier. They stayed here for only two years, however; their successors, Mr and Mrs Jones, were in post a little longer, from 1952 to 1956. This was the period of post-war readjustment when so many families moved through different employment possibilities.

Mr and Mrs G Cock came to Streatley in 1956, having run the hostel at Hanwell, also in Oxford Region, from 1951. There are then gaps in records however; the trail of wardens goes cold after that date right through to 1976, except that Mr and Mrs Evans were in post here some time before 1965.

YHA ran a regular series of 'Hostel Close-Up' short illustrated articles in its *Rucksack* and later *Youth Hosteller* magazines. In November 1959 it was the turn of Streatley. The text ran:

This charming double-fronted mansion, accommodating 70 members, stands high above the main Reading road, with a spacious lawn before it and the chalk slopes of the Berkshire Downs rising steeply immediately to the rear. It commands wide views of one of the loveliest stretches of the Thames Valley, where the plain narrows and the river flows through the famous Goring Gap, with distant slopes of the Chiltern Hills sweeping up to the sky beyond.

Placed as it is, in the picturesque twin villages of Goring and Streatley, linked by a bridge over the splashing weir, the hostel provides unlimited facilities for boating and swimming or exploring the enchanting river scenery, while the open down country and wooded slopes nearby give plenty of opportunity for those who like to get off the beaten track. This hostel is an essential link in the through route to North Wales and the West Country; the ancient long-distance trade route, the Icknield Way, which crossed the river here, may be followed along the breezy hilltops, west to Marlborough or east to Ivinghoe hostel. For canoeists it is one of a chain of hostels within easy reach of the river Henley, Streatley, Long Wittenham and Oxford.



Hill House in May 1968 – four photographs of or by Colin Poland, kindly gifted by him to the YHA Archive.

1: the hostel from the gate, with hostellers on the steps. The sloping borders are well-tended

2: the entrance has by now lost its glazed porch. Among the hostellers is Bob Barwick – 'just got his Ridgeway Marathon certificate', adds Colin; 3: a youth hostel work party in the garden, 'George Swain and self';

4: the common room, with the regulation Richard Schirrmann portrait and piano for that era

After the heady days of 6,000 overnights in 1944 Streatley reverted to about 4,000 through the 1950s and 1960s. The capacity of the hostel was reduced from 70 to 60 in 1961. Field Study facilities were provided from 3rd May 1967.



These two postcards are probably from the 1960s to 1970s period (YHA Archive)

Laurence Garvin was the warden in 1976 (perhaps earlier) to 1978 before moving on to Southampton hostel and then a long career at Winchester. John and Jane Corcoran were in post from 1978 to about 1982 and Trevor Stevens from then to 1990.



*Crowds of hostellers congregate on the steps in the time-honoured tradition. Maybe they were waiting for 5pm opening.
1: photograph from an anonymous source; 2: a postcard from about 1970 (YHA Archive)*

Hostelling News of Winter 1983-84 gave a reminder of the international dimension to youth hostelling:

Kibbutz-style meals will be served at a special Kibbutz Reunion Weekend to be held at Streatley-on-Thames hostel, Berkshire, March 2-4 1984. Warden Trevor Stevens, who himself has spent hot and humid days on an Israeli kibbutz, is organising the weekend for members who remember similar days on a kibbutz with affection.

In 1985 Streatley hostel benefited from a modest scheme of washroom improvement.

A 1980s magazine article of unknown origin showcased a reporter's visit to the hostel:

Basic but convenient

Like most youth hostels, Streatley has seen many an amusing visitor over the years, some more eccentric than others.

Warden Trevor Stevens said: 'There was one occasion last year when I was expecting a group of Dutch rugby players. They came – nearly all 50 of them staggering up the drive in wooden clogs! They stomped in and piled their clogs all the way along the hall.'

Streatley's visitors include a wide variety of groups, from walkers to cyclists, foreign students to London lads seeking a country break. Last year there were 5,500 overnight stays. It appeals to its guests because not only is it at the middle of the Ridgeway and near the Thames Footpath, but it also provides access to the Downs and many other short walks. The hostel wouldn't suit everyone, however – it has changed little over the years and offers very basic facilities. But to some that proves an added attraction.

Trevor said: 'People like it. They are saying – This is nice, it's like hostels we used to go to. There's a type of nostalgia.'

Flora van Grinsven, a Dutch psychologist exploring the area with nurse Anita de Snoo, said: 'We like staying in hostels because they are cheap and we can cook our own food. This is a very good hostel – it has good beds and a shower. There's also a good atmosphere here and it's in a great position. The only drawback is you sleep with a few people in one room - and if anyone snores you can't sleep!'

Darren Gates, 17, from London, who was staying at the hostel with some friends while they worked towards their Duke of Edinburgh awards, added: 'This is the best hostel we've been to – it's got everything, although a pool table would be nice. The washing facilities aren't perfect, but washing isn't high up on the priority list!'

The hostel's doors open at 5pm every night. Prices vary, but no-one can grumble. Under-15s who come armed with their own bedsheet pay a mere £2.90 while over-21s pay £4.20. The most expensive stay is £11.35. This, for visitors over 21, includes bed, breakfast, packed lunch and a clean bedsheet.

It's a youth hostel tradition that everyone is given a chore to complete – perhaps a spot of washing-up or 10 minutes' gardening. Trevor believes it helps guests feel at home, although there is the occasional moan. The hostel closes at 11pm, and lights-out is 11.30pm.

The accommodation consists of four larger dormitories, three four-bed rooms and one double. As in true youth hostel tradition, sexes are separated – apart from married couples. The largest dormitory sleeps 11, the smallest six. A maximum of 56 people can stay each night.



Top row, centre: the steep driveway during a brief period when it was fenced off from the front lawn, perhaps as a safety measure – a transparency from the camera of the much-travelled Miller family from Lincoln; remainder: YHA ephemera from a span of years stretching from about 1960 to 1990 (author's collection)

Since its opening there had been relatively little change made to the general layout of the hostel or organisation of the hostel. Overnights that were attaining annual figures of 7,000-plus in the late 1970s were 2,000 down ten years later. Columnist Joanna Gibbon reflected anxieties about the future of Streatley hostel when she wrote in *the Observer Magazine* on 12th August 1990;

YHA to Sell Out in Hostel Sacrifice

News that Hill House Youth Hostel, a large Victorian house in the Berkshire village of Streatley, may be sold has been greeted with outrage and dismay. Its fate, along with that of nine other hostels which the Youth Hostels Association has identified as being 'old and of high value', will be decided in October.

Protesters say it is too important to sell because of its key position for walking holidays, midway along the ancient and very beautiful Ridgeway path which runs from Avebury, Wiltshire, to Ivinghoe Beacon in Buckinghamshire.

Colin Logan, YHA Director of Operations, says there is no option but to sell: 'The Association needs £20 million to modernise hostels, to attract the 16-to 24-year-olds for whom the YHA was envisaged - they are the future.' So far, only valuable and under-used properties from Devon to Yorkshire are on the hit list. 'Streatley is used to 32 per cent of its capacity, which is poor,' says Mr Logan. Its sale might make £250,000. The YHA needs £3.5 million to redevelop Carter Lane Hostel in London.

Mrs Annette Steed, whose grandmother gave Hill House unconditionally to the YHA in 1933, is horrified.

'My grandparents gave holidays to those less well-off than themselves. The house was given in that spirit, as a forward-looking act.' Mr Logan sees no problem. 'Hill House was given to enhance the YHA. If, to ensure the future, it is necessary to make the best use of that gift, then, as a charity, we must do so. I see that as a moral issue.' Duncan Mackay, Senior Officer at the Countryside Commission, thinks the YHA should study the alternatives: 'It could organise an appeal. The Commission has given grants towards upgrading youth hostels, but this time the YHA has not asked for help.' Frances Ellis, of the Reading YHA Group, is concerned that 'too much money is being spent on London hostels, which are turning into hotels with carpets, duvets and Space Invaders.'

Colin Logan's response is brisk. 'A continued policy of low-level comfort would simply satisfy a dwindling band of activists who don't want change.'

A further unattributed article of 1990, entitled *Youth Hostel Faces Uncertain Future*, noted:

WHEN, in 1933, an elderly Streatley widow donated her home to the Youth Hostels Association, no-one could have predicted the cloud which would hang over it 57 years on.

For although the YHA celebrates its diamond jubilee this year, nobody at Hill House is in the party mood. Instead they are anxiously waiting to hear whether the area will lose its only remaining youth hostel to pay for renovation work elsewhere.

Streatley is on a hit list of nine high-value hostels across the country. National executives are currently deciding which four or five to sell. If Streatley is sold, the only youth hostel left in the whole of Berkshire will be Windsor.

The YHA, which hopes the sales will raise £4 million, badly needs money to pay for the first stage of a £15 million renovation project. Before the work is completed another 25 'low usage' hostels across the country look set to be sold to finance it.

YHA managers say the scheme is necessary in order to attract the walkers and travellers of today. But many of its long-standing members believe it's a disgrace. They say Streatley was given as a gift, and to sell it would be morally wrong.

As Streatley's doors open at 5pm sharp, 68-year-old Ernest Stone staggers in. He's just cycled 22 miles from Basingstoke and wants a bed for one night and says: 'I was going to cycle all the way to Southampton, but it got windy. It's about 18 miles to Oxford from here, so I'll go there tomorrow.'

'I stay in hostels because I find the prices are reasonable and there is a better atmosphere than in hotels or guest houses. I hear they plan to sell 30 hostels over the next few years, which is a heck of a lot. It may make it difficult to get from one to another – I can't afford a car and trains are expensive.'

'I've been in the revamped ones and I don't like them. I think by doing this the YHA is losing the spirit of hostelling.'

But YHA sales and marketing manager Rosie Sumner said the policy decision is necessary to help other youth hostels survive in a changing market. She pointed out the number of youth hostels has fluctuated throughout the YHA's 60-year history. She said: 'We are looking at bringing all youth hostels up to standards which our surveys show members expect – smaller bedrooms, smaller dormitories and more washing facilities.'

Value

'If before there was one sink to a whole floor, we are looking to have a wash basin in every dormitory as far as possible.' Colour televisions, carpeted bedrooms and video games are starting to appear – to the annoyance of some traditionalists.

'If we were choosing a site for a hostel and a suitable building, we almost certainly wouldn't choose the Streatley one. It's incredibly expensive and doesn't really serve our customers very well.'

'But there's more optimism in Streatley's case than in others that something will continue in that area as we are in close contact with the Countryside Commission over the hostel. They recognise the problems, but would like a hostel near the crossroads of The Ridgeway and The Thames Footpath. They are looking to see whether there are any properties they might be able to point us in the direction of in that area.'

The YHA said that although it only fills to 30 per cent capacity it still makes a profit. Press officer Lesley Dreyfus said the YHA considered Streatley to be 'substandard' and could not justify the amount of money it would take to improve it.

Hill House was donated to the YHA by Florence Reiss in 1933. She had grown too old to maintain it herself and believed the YHA was a good cause. Her grandson, Richard Reiss, said: 'I would be very sad to see it go because we were very proud of it. But I can see the arguments for selling it and we wouldn't want the YHA to suffer by not doing so. The family has discussed the matter and feel we cannot campaign against it.'



A selection of hostel stamp designs from across the decades (author's collection)

However, Annette Steed, Mrs FL Reiss's grand-daughter, campaigned successfully to keep Hill House for YHA. For the second time in its career, 50 years after the first, Streatley hostel escaped the threat of closure. *YHA News* of November 1992 stated that the National Executive Committee had agreed to include the hostel in its Product Development Marketing Plan with a £50,000 award for essential capital expenditure during 1992-93; this would match the Countryside Commission's grant award.

The development of the hostel in the 1990s, from the threat of closure to firm re-establishment, was neatly summed up in an article by Tony Burton, Business Correspondent for *Goring Gap News*, in May 1999. It is summarised here:

Hill House and the changing face of youth hostelling

'Youth Hostels have changed – for the better' asserts the YHA in its literature. 'There's no list of chores as long as your arm, no old-fashioned rules; you can arrive by public transport, bike, car – however you like. Now there are comfortable bunk-bedded rooms, a warm welcome, good food and affordable prices.'

Certainly all this is true of Hill House, the Streatley Youth Hostel, where the atmosphere is that of a relaxing guest house. The handsome Victorian building near the Streatley crossroads is centrally heated and carpeted, the decor tasteful. There's a comfortable lounge with television, a pleasant dining room, with bright tablecloths, which doubles as a 'quiet' room after meals, and modern kitchens where staff prepare meals. Upstairs, the bunk beds in a variety of room sizes feature attractive duvets and there are ample washbasins and showers with plenty of hot water. Additional facilities include a large drying room, and there is a small shop in reception.

Uncertain future in the early 90s

But life at Hill House has not always been as stable and agreeable as this – in fact, at times it has been decidedly rocky! Ten years ago GGN ran an article based on the theme of 'what went on behind the peeling facade of the Victorian Hill House with the familiar YHA logo outside.' The descriptive words chosen were an indication of the appearance of the property then and prophetic because, despite the enthusiasm of the then warden and the busy turnover of visitors, less than a year later the hostel was threatened with closure. With complete renovation of the hostel overdue and inadequate resources, the YHA wanted to sell it to help make up a shortfall in its overall income.

After much uncertainty over two years, and vigorous campaigning by concerned local groups and individuals, the Association finally reversed its decision and agreed to invest in necessary modernisation. A powerful argument in favour of this course was the fact that the house had actually been donated to the Association in 1935 by a local resident 'so that others might enjoy this beautiful area.' It did seem alien to the spirit of the gift to propose selling it for commercial development. The offer of a £50,000 grant from the Countryside Commission towards the cost of renovation was also a helpful factor in the decision! So some £120,000 was spent on a major refit and update, and the hostel officially re-opened in April 1993.

Visitors from far and wide

Youth hostelling is an international activity through Hostelling International and visitors come from far and wide, not only from European countries but from Canada, USA and elsewhere.

Hostelling has become very popular with families who are able to hire a bunk room for their exclusive use for any number up to six. Family rooms, which are lockable, offer all-day access to hostel facilities. A large part of the visitor turnover at Hill House is also provided by pre-booked school parties. In the last year there have been some 230 such parties to accommodate, many from abroad. Of benefit to large parties, the hostel has a building in the grounds which can be used for class training, group meetings or small conferences.

Good food at modest prices

Youth hostels have been upgrading their catering arrangements to meet modern needs, and home-cooked food at very reasonable prices is a special feature.

Apart from the comradeship and the informality, an obvious appeal of youth hostels is the low cost of accommodation compared to normal hotels and guest houses.

Florence Reiss, the one-time owner who gave the house to the YHA before the last war, died in 1947 at the age of 91. Her wish that it should give pleasure to others and enable them to enjoy the beauty of the area is still being fulfilled after more than sixty years, despite one period of uncertainty.

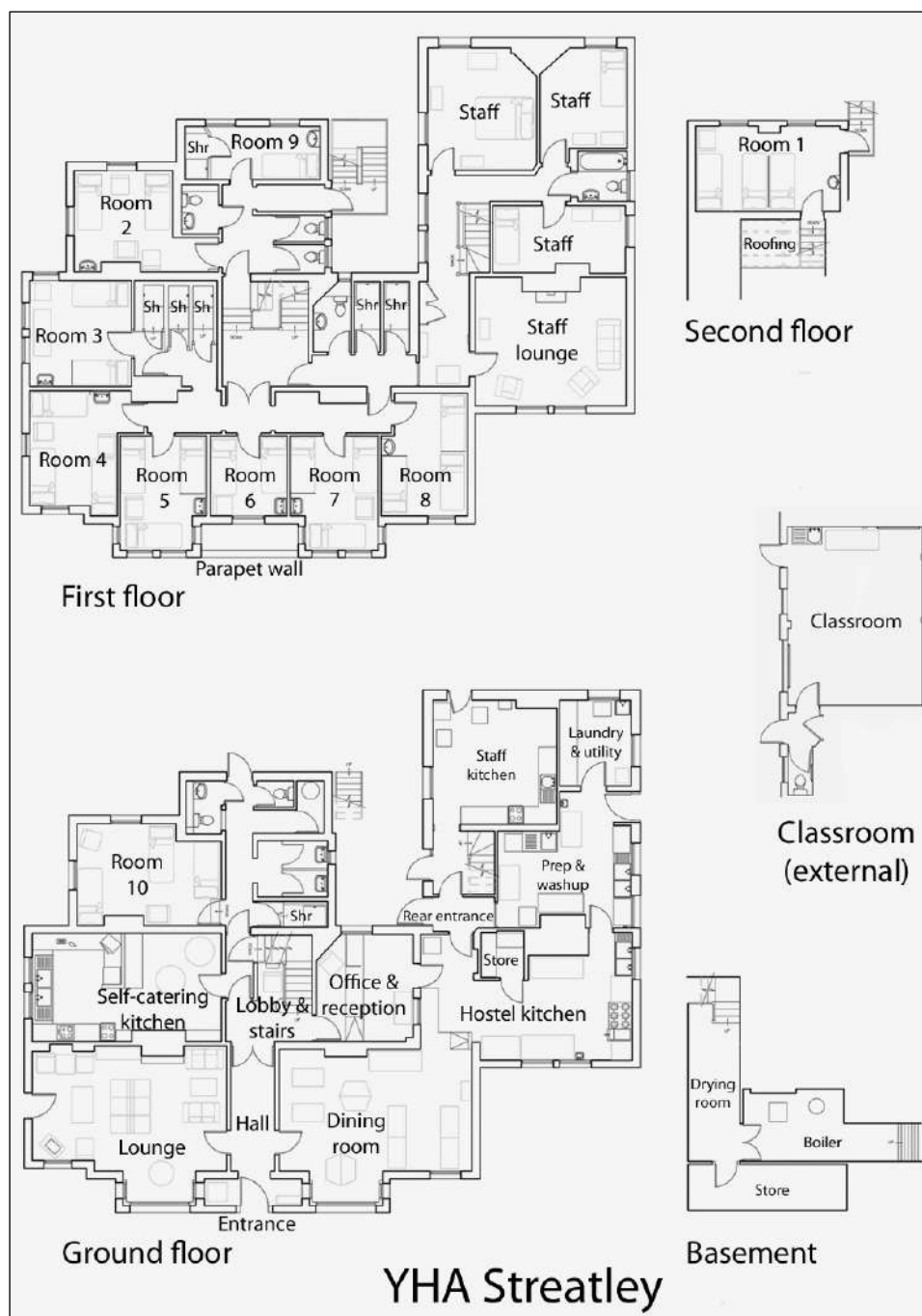
Through this decade there was a steady stream of hostel wardens. After Trevor Stevens, Amelia Johnson was on hand in 1991 and 1992 while the hostel's future was being decided. Dewi Owen would have seen the first of the improvements during his stay from 1992 to 1994, including a reduction in accommodation capacity from 56 to 53, no doubt in connection with the subdivision of larger bedrooms. Alan Wilson was in post on 1994 and 1995, and Ian and Alison Collins took the reins from 1996 to 1999. Ian was at Newquay and Bigbury hostels before he moved to Streatley. During their time hostel capacity reduced further to 51.

A new era for YHA Streatley began in 1999 with the appointment of hostel manager Nick Crivich. Nick moved to Streatley with his wife Sophie, and their one-and-a-half year old son, Tom, after eight years working for YHA in the Lake District and the Yorkshire Dales, where Nick was the manager at Dentdale Youth Hostel. Prior to the YHA, Nick and Sophie worked overseas in the travel industry. The move to Streatley represented a return to their native South of England. In 2023 Nick has been at the hostel for 24 years, and holds the record for longevity of managership at Hill House.



1: an aerial photograph of Hill House, 2005. To the right of the square-form house, set back a little, is the services section, with kitchen and utilities on the ground floor and staff quarters above. The red brick outbuilding is the former stables and houses the hostel's classroom on the ground floor; the rest of that building is private staff quarters; 2: Nick and a YHA colleague take time off at the front of the hostel (YHA Archive)

Following on from YHA's PDMP programme in the early 1990s, the Pathfinder scheme of 2006-07 selected ten hostels for an upgrade programme. Streatley hostel was chosen for work on the basement's supporting walls, the roof and a new wood floor in the dining room.



YHA produced a series of CAD floorplan drawings of most of its hostels in 2007. The layout of YHA Streatley in that year shows relatively little change from the duplex plan shown on page 3 (simplified plan prepared by the author)

In the early 2000s Room 3 had been a 10-bed dormitory, but was subdivided to provide a 4-bedded room and three showers, as shown above. Room 6 had a bunk and a single bed; it now has two doubles. Room 9 was a washroom; it now has two beds and an en suite shower, but no WC.



The complete accommodation scheme in 2023 provides one 4-bedded room on the ground floor, with two steps down. There are two WCs and one shower on this floor.

On the first floor, there are two 2-bedded rooms, two 4-bedded, two 5-bedded and three 6-bedded. There are four WCs and five showers.

The classroom is located externally in the former stables.

Left: YHA Streatley's classroom (YHA Archive)



1 2



3



4



5



6 7



8 9



An array of photographs of YHA Streatley.

- 1: the hostel looking neat and tidy, photographed from a time-honoured spot on the lawn;
 2: view from the top of the drive; 3: the hostel (staff) kitchen and private entrance;
 4: entrance to the classroom in the old stables. Early in the hostel's career, this was the location of the self-catering kitchen; 5: rear of the old stables;
 6&7: the former redbrick stables and cream-painted services and staff wing pictured from the steep garden to the rear; 8: the steep car park and safety fence enclosing the front garden space. The banner advertises affordable accommodation;
 9: the hostel in its setting just south of Streatley cross-roads
 (author's photographs, March 2016)*



1 2



3



4



5



6 7



8 9



1 & 2: two relatively modern colour postcards of YHA Streatley. Almost all postcards are of necessity photographed from one of two viewpoints – the lawn to the left of the house or the drive to the right (1 & 2: author's collection); 3-9: recent views of the hostel's interior. 3: the entrance hallway, viewed towards the rear of Hill House; 4: reception desk; 5: the self-catering kitchen and breakfast bar; 6 & 7: the cheerful dining room and servery from the hostel kitchen; 7 & 8: the lounge, still displaying the brick fireplace seen in picture 4 on page 6 (3-9: photographs by Nick Crivich)



Recent views of some of the hostel's bedrooms.

1: Room 2, a corner room, at the rear; 2: Room 4, another corner room, at the front; 3: Room 5, a neatly subdivided room to the left of the front balcony; 4: Room 6, with the balcony decorative railings visible; 5: Room 7, partner to Room 5, on the right; 6: Room 9, a small room created out of former washrooms, 7: Room 10 on the ground floor (photographs by Nick Crivich)

Manager Nick Crivich has described some of the turbulence experienced throughout the Covid epidemic, common to all YHA hostels, though the emergence from those hardships has been noteworthy at YHA Streatley:

We were closed from March 2020 when lockdown was announced but once restrictions were eased in July 2020 we were available for Exclusive Hire only. This continued until November 2021 when we fully re-opened (but without shared room beds).

During that time we accommodated a large group of essential agricultural workers for three weeks in October 2020 and staff from the Miller Of Mansfield pub in Goring for 14 weeks from October 2020 to January 2021 whose accommodation had been left uninhabitable by a fire.

Since March 2022 the youth hostel has posted exceptional results leading the YHA's trend to recovery.

In the financial year 2022-23 the youth hostel hit 10,033 overnights, passing the 10,000 mark for the first time ever. Occupancy was up to 62.5% from 55.1% before Covid, probably due to YHA's focus on group and Exclusive Hire stays for which Streatley is very popular and also the increasing trend for staycations.

The financial year 2023-24 is currently tracking at an expected 10,500 overnights and 65% occupancy.

In 2023 YHA Streatley has continued to provide exclusive and group hire and rooms for families and small groups and has maintained its recent growth.

Despite the hardships for YHA and its guests during Covid, plaudits have maintained a standard theme in recent years:

Recent single night at Streatley Youth Hostel – 6 Oct 2018

After cycling the Ridgeway from West Kennett I found Streatley Youth Hostel a very welcome haven. A delicious breakfast the next morning got me going again. Highly recommended!

Great stopover on the Ridgeway – 18 Dec 2018

A great stopover whilst cycling and running the Ridgeway. Friendly and helpful staff. Good drying room and secure bike storage. Warm rooms and hot showers. Streatley and Goring are very pretty villages on the river Thames.

Fantastic hostel – 25 Oct 2018

Had a private room to base ourselves for cycling and visiting pubs. Perfect location for both of these and also had a bike shed so very helpful. Staff were great, very accommodating. Definitely looking at returning next year.

Great location and friendly staff! – 3 Mar 2023

A lovely Victorian building in a great location next to the Thames. Nice comfy lounge to relax in. Perfect for walking, cycling and swimming. Hostel staff were really friendly and helpful. Will definitely stay here again.

Handy overnight stop – 31 May 2023

If you need a clean, cheap, basic place to stay I recommend Streatley. A private room for four cost £60, making our own food helped keep the cost down too. People were friendly and the social spaces good.

Overnights – inclusive periods each year as follows

1931-1991: previous Oct to Sept; **1992:** Oct 1991 to Feb 1993; **1993-present:** Mar to following Feb

•: 152 overnights in London Region then 2,084 in Oxford Region; W: wartime closure

*: 17 month period; +: notional figure included for exclusive hire and /or camping

ø: operation affected by Covid

...	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938	1939
...	168	1230	1935	1798
1940	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945	1946	1947	1948	1949
2236•	W	2600	3470	6002	5119	4377	4487	5529	4877
1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959
4747	4894	5461	5217	4330	4307	4171	4341	3901	3820
1960	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969
3105	3766	4394	4119	3739	3716	4673	4947	5482	5337
1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979
5555	5911	5739	5529	6721	7120	7928	7224	5543	7364
1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989
7314	6302	6040	5573	5124	6051	5626	5497	5613	5084
1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
5302	5439	6884*	5547	6193	6504	6993	7358	6996	6974
2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
6827	6605	7086	7590	7247	7412	7707	6939	7279	8104
2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
8416	8128	8817	9419	9701+	9961+	9869+	9711+	9201+	9269+
2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029
3189ø+	3969ø+	10033ø+	open+

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