

London St Pancras Youth Hostel 1997 to present

79-81 Euston Road, London, NW1 2QE

Historic County: Middlesex

GR: TQ 300827

YHA's current stock of modern city hostels dates from the opening of Bristol youth hostel in July 1989. In a bold move, YHA transformed a derelict wharfside warehouse in an unwelcoming landscape into a thriving modern hostel, helping transform the prospects for the neighbourhood too. From that time there was large-scale civic renewal in Britain's major cities and ports. For a period of about twenty years YHA was able to take advantage of various regional enterprise zones and funding sources to help pay for new-build hostels in Rotherhithe (1991), Manchester (1995), Liverpool (1998), Oxford (2001) and Lee Valley, on the north-east fringe of London (2003). Additionally, newly-purposed large London hostels were created to great effect from redundant tall office blocks at Oxford Street (1990), St Pancras (1997) and London Central (2008) while, in another twist, former hotels and hostels in Brighton, Cardiff, Newcastle and Liverpool (again) were transformed into further YHA premises between 2014 and 2019.



A view of YHA London St Pancras in its first year of operation, 1997 (YHA Archive)

The acquisition of the St Pancras premises was both timely and opportune. It was to be housed in the former office block known as *Great Northern House*, once the headquarters of the British Rail Property Board and in 1980, for instance, home of British Transport Police. A new youth hostel here was first anticipated in the Summer 1996 edition of *YHA News* as the promised Channel Tunnel rail connection to Europe seemed to be edging closer:

Next Stop St Pancras

By the year 2002, St Pancras is destined to be London's new gateway to Europe as the terminus for the high speed Channel Tunnel Rail Link. With services to Scotland, the Midlands and the North, together with an expanded Thameslink and the hub of the capital's underground system, Kings Cross–St Pancras will be the country's largest transport interchange – and YHA will be there with a brand new 150-bed youth hostel on Euston Road, immediately opposite St Pancras and the new British Library.

This unique opportunity has come our way thanks to a partnership with University College London, which has acquired a former office block known as *Great Northern House* for conversion as student accommodation. The

complete building exceeds the College's needs and they have offered YHA a 57-year lease on part of it, fully converted and equipped as a youth hostel to our best London standards. To keep YHA on board the project had to be agreed in a short time frame that precluded the usual decision making process, but the project gained the support of the City Hostels Executive, the Chairman's Committee and the National Finance Committee, before going to a postal ballot of the Board of Trustees. In the event, the location is so attractive to the young foreign travellers who flock to Britain that the Trustees had no difficulty in agreeing that YHA should enter into the proposed agreement with UCL. Not only will the new hostel strengthen enormously our London network and help us to stay ahead of the commercial operators who are snapping at our heels, but the terms are such that it is expected to make a significant financial contribution.

Subject to the final legal details being sorted out, we expect work to start shortly and the new hostel should be open for business in the summer of 1997. When the doors open we are confident that those who stay there will find that the number of small rooms, the facilities, the sound-proofing, the ventilation and heating systems etc, all set new standards for an inner city youth hostel.

It would be 2007 before the European rail link was at last diverted to St Pancras from Waterloo, by which time YHA had been established opposite Sir George Gilbert Scott's magnificent St Pancras Station Hotel for ten years.

The building was leased by University College London from the owners for 150 years from 1996, and sub-let to YHA for 57 years from that year. The December 1996 edition of *YHA News* added:

The new British Library has started to take possession of its books. This building is significant, not only because of its massive overspend, but because it is directly opposite the new YHA St Pancras International Youth Hostel which is being constructed in Great Northern House.

During the summer it is hoped that UCL's 150 single-study bedrooms, all with en suite bedrooms, will be available to youth hostel members. The hostel itself will provide a range of 2, 4 and 6 bedded rooms all with en suite facilities, together with a range of central shower and WC areas. There will be the usual range of facilities at a city hostel including a members' kitchen [later removed], lounge, games area and restaurant. The hostel is expected to open mid-summer 1997 and will provide an ideal stay for those wishing to be close by St Pancras, Kings Cross and Euston Stations.

Somewhat delayed, St Pancras International Hostel opened on 7th September 1997, having been partly handed over just the day before. A mere 58 members took advantage of the new facility on that first night, though before six months were up 16,645 bednights had been recorded. The hostel received an official opening on 15th May 1998.



The official opening of the St Pancras International Youth Hostel, held on 15th May 1998. The term 'International' was in vogue for large establishments showpiece by Hostelling International in the late 1990s, though its influence seems to have waned.
1: YHA Chairman Derek Hanson greets the Rt Hon Frank Dobson, Secretary of State for Health, at the entrance. Nearer the camera are key YHA officers Terry Rollinson and Arthur Meaby; 2: the occasion was recorded with a plaque (YHA Archive)

The Autumn 1997 edition of *YHA News* was quick to confirm the advantages of the new hostel:

The opening of YHA St Pancras International has raised the standard of budget accommodation for the individual traveller to new heights. YHA has added a further 150 beds which provide a choice of accommodation to suit a wide range of needs.

Situated on Euston Road, YHA St Pancras occupies the front part of the building, whilst the rear has been developed into a 150-bedroom hall of residence for University College London. R & M Developments, who had been retained by the University to develop the property, needed a partner to occupy the Euston Road part of the building which, for architectural reasons, could not be turned into single study bedrooms. For their part UCL were prepared to fund the new hostel and to provide YHA with a 57-year lease. The whole process, from initial approach, through negotiation, design and build has been achieved in an amazing 18 months, something never before achieved on a project of this scale.

The location, a mere stone's throw from three of the capital's mainline rail stations, and on the busy Euston Road, was obviously advantageous for the traveller, especially as St Pancras will be the International Terminus for Channel Tunnel trains from 1999 [sic]. The lack of any parking or dropping off facility meant that the design brief was to cater for the needs of the individual international traveller and families. The nine storey building which had largely been open plan office space presented some interesting design and constructional problems, not least how to reduce the noise of the traffic on Euston Road. The solution was to provide triple glazing to all windows, but this in turn led to problems of ventilation, which has been overcome by providing comfort cooling to all bedrooms, another YHA 'first'!

As has been the trend in recent International City Division hostels, St Pancras provides small rooms with between two and six beds at prices to suit the particular needs and pockets of customers. The economy traveller is catered for in bedrooms with shared toilet and shower facilities whilst for a higher price en suite facilities are also available and even some premium rooms with TV and coffee making facilities.

As you'd expect the hostel provides a wide range of services including a restaurant which runs the full width of the building on the first floor, serving English and continental breakfasts and evening meals. There's a self-catering kitchen [in the basement, and subsequently abandoned], laundry, bureau de change and a cycle store. The hostel provides full 24-hour access with night security staff and closed circuit TV monitoring. Since YHA St Pancras is seen as a 'gateway hostel' to the rest of the network staff are keen to provide onward booking for customers and provide YHA information. With an eye both to the domestic visitor as well the overseas, the hostel provides comprehensive ticketing for theatres, London Underground and National Express.

YHA has been lucky to secure the services of Jenny Bancroft as manager and John Broom as deputy. Already the hostel is proving to be busy, not least because of the acute shortage of student accommodation at the start of the new academic year. As for the future, YHA St Pancras International will be flying the flag for YHA and the IYHF, providing budget accommodation at its best for the domestic and international traveller.

Ollie Whitebrook, current manager of YHA Manchester, was an early recruit to the hostel team at St Pancras, arriving at the opening. He recalls:

In the first weeks there was a constant procession of news cameras getting footage of the new hostel and its guests.

There was a slow opening – made especially difficult, as the self-catering area was not ready when the hostel opened.

Meals – these were contracted to a company called Compass Catering. Meals were served on the first floor, with a big servery for breakfasts and evening meals (though these were less successful), up to about the year 2000.

The housekeepers were contracted.

Extraordinary! At the beginning there was an experimental partnership with Microsoft to gauge the usefulness of its website – volunteers stayed in three sealed rooms within the hostel and were not allowed out – to test the dependability of internet services to provide a complete at-door service of meals, etc.

The overflow into the Halls of Residence increased capacity from 150 to 300 beds. On the right of the ground floor was a smoking area, barely separated from non-smoking and always awkward to control.

Top floor. Staff lived in: 3 bedrooms for the hostel manager, one for the deputy manager, two bedsits for duty managers, and a VIP room. Later, floor 7 had the CEO office and meeting rooms and now has some bedrooms.

Now: Ground floor has reception with bar and café; Floors 1 to 7: bedrooms. A mix of en suite and non en suite, mostly 4-bed. For some time bedrooms had three-way 'coffin' beds specially developed by YHA for London and other busy city hostels. They served a purpose but were generally unpopular and phased out. There was a largely similar room arrangement on each of these floors, with minor variations of bed numbers and layouts.



1 2



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YHA London St Pancras is a tricky building to photograph because of the heavy traffic flows on Euston Road.

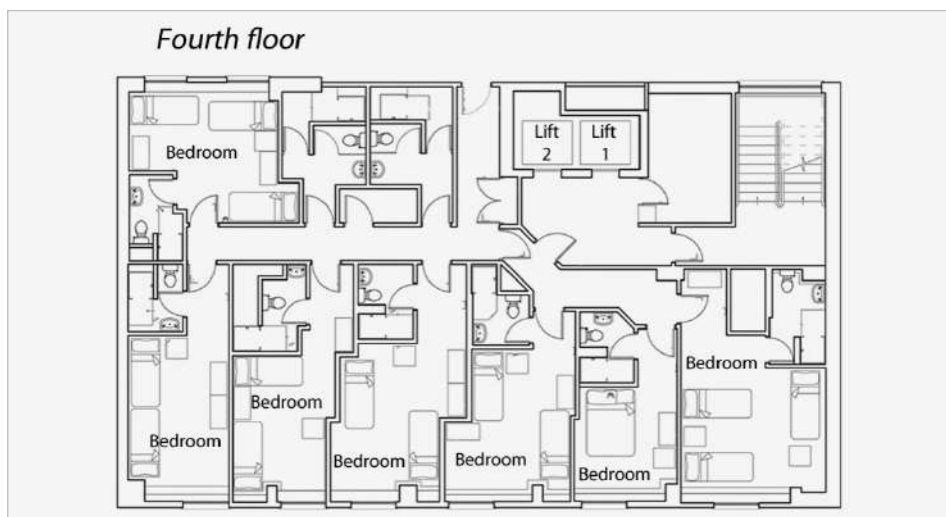
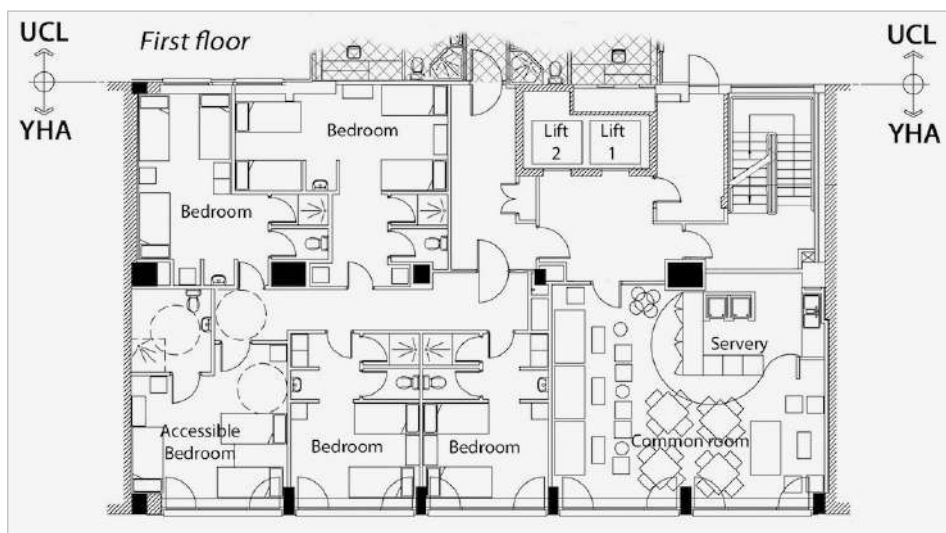
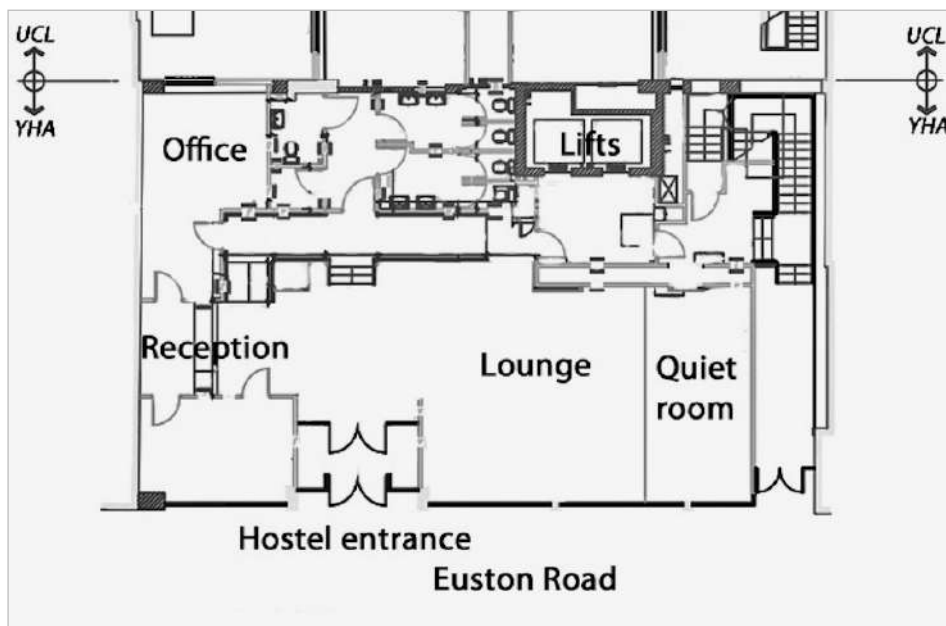
These images were taken over an eight-year span and display some of the minor external changes that have been applied.

1: May 2008. The hostel is decorated in a light shade and carries an illuminated hanging sign, perhaps unique, that advertises the YHA and the Hostelling International logos together. Signage above the entrance refers to St Pancras International Hostel.

Duncan Simpson writes that the relatively short-lived vogue for naming city hostels 'International' resulted from the Kingsley report's recommendation to introduce segmentation into YHA's hostel portfolio in order to appeal to different market segments;

2: July 2009. The hostel is in a darker purple-grey shade, with another unusual illuminated sign. The HI roundel is above the entrance, but the International reference is gone from the hostel name. An eye-catching information board is on display;

3: A wider view, May 2016. YHA's green house colours have been applied, and a new illuminated triangle fitted. The seven-storey block is now YHA's freehold property, while University College London occupies the building hidden from view to the rear (author's photographs)



Sample floor plans from different eras.

- 1: Ground floor, undated but probably about 2000, with the reception on left. Note the 'quiet room', used as the non-smokers' area. The layout of this floor has been much altered since the plan shown;
- 2: First floor, July 2008. Bedrooms 101-105 replaced the full-width dining area at this time;
- 3: Fourth floor, December 2006. It is built to a seven-room pattern generally followed on floors two to four. Currently floors five and six have nine rooms each, floor seven three rooms. Most bedrooms are at the front, only a few to the rear. Lifts serve all floors (YHA Archive)

St Pancras hostel started with 150 beds in 39 bedrooms, though in the earlier years the capacity could be doubled during UCL's vacations. As late as 2009 a YHA memo stated that University College had made available 34 student bedrooms until the end of August in that year, *twice as long as the previous year*. In 1999 there were 16 5-bedded rooms, 12 4-bedded and 11 2-bedded, mostly en suite. Some more expensive rooms were labelled 'premium' and had television and other services. There was some alteration the following year, with seven 6-bedded, three 5-bedded, eighteen 4-bedded, one 3-bedded and ten 2-bedded rooms provided for 152 guests.

In 2002 UCL offered YHA a conversion of its sub-let tenancy into a freehold purchase, something YHA was keen to do early in the twenty-first century at a number of city properties. The freehold was successfully negotiated.

Between 1998 and 2007 the hostel achieved at least 40,000 overnights a year. There was further expansion and renovation in 2008-09, with an official reopening on 15th June 2009. The work necessarily involved closure and a reduced overnights total, just 29,000 registering in 2008, but it allowed the hostel capacity to be raised at this time to 185 in 45 rooms with the creation of new bedrooms to the left hand side of the first floor. This was achieved by reducing the restaurant's scope to a smaller breakfast and TV room on the right side of the floor. As a consequence the annual guest totals rose to over 51,000 in 2009 and from 2013 have exceeded 60,000 each year.



1 2



3 4



5 6



Interior images. 1: early view of the west end of the ground floor, with cheerful seating; 2: the same as bar / bistro and seating area in 2017; 3: the same as a new all-purpose focal reception area, 2018; 3: the original reception at the east end of the ground floor, 2013; 5: quiet corner, 2016; 6: TV room and breakfast area, first floor, 2014 (YHA publicity photographs)

Toilets and showers were refurbished over the winter of 2015-16, but there was a setback in May 2016, when an extensive flood affected the reception area. Further refurbishment and new furniture followed early in 2017, with a reopening in April.

The hostel expanded again with the creation of new bedrooms 701-703 on the top floor, replacing former staff accommodation, while the CEO's former office on this level is now a meeting room. There are currently 200 beds in 47 bedrooms, most of which are en suite, the exceptions being four rooms on the fifth floor and four on the sixth. Two rooms have YHA's design of family bed, a double bed with a single above.

Jenny Bancroft and Peter Clark ran London St Pancras hostel in the early years. Thereafter manager details are incomplete in the YHA Archive until Texan Tom Jackson took up post about 2008 and Nadia Aoujdad in 2013. Elizabeth Forsey was in post 2015-17, after which Cal Wymann was appointed before moving to Earl's Court. Ali Shamatt arrived in 2018 and Greg Russell has been hostel manager since 2019.

In 2017 the reception was moved from the left to the right side of the ground floor, allowing YHA staff to oversee new arrivals, food and bar orders and queries at a single location, in line with modern hostel design. The old reception has given way to comfortable seating and quiet areas. YHA has redesigned the flow at the entrance to focus on a greater friendliness for visitors. In 2019 St Pancras hostel was the setting for a series of updating experiments with trials of new flooring, more attractive bedrooms with specially designed wallpaper, and in public spaces an enhanced social media presentation and an emphasis on displaying YHA's charitable status, objectives and history.

Well over 1,000,000 guests have stayed at YHA London St Pancras since its opening in 1997. Its footprint is small for a property of this importance and there are consequently restrictions such as limited social space, no traditional dining room (breakfast being served in the first floor TV room and other meals at casual seating in the ground floor social area). There is now no self-catering facility, sacrificed in favour of increased bedroom numbers. Though there is no parking for cars or coaches, St Pancras serves a very distinct and considerable family and individual customer clientele related to its excellent location and unparalleled public transport links within the UK and from Europe.



The YHA publicity images above, of 2020, show the hostel entrance and the area immediately behind, in the latest decorative style. YHA is now adopting a timber fascia for its main hostel signage, to good effect. The interior shot is directed from the old reception area towards the new; the area makes best use of the limited ground floor space with mixed-use seating and tables. The new design of information boards adds a neat touch. The slanting walkway to the lift can be seen on the left. The varying levels here are intriguing, and may be explained by a historical curiosity concerning the building's former use, recently discovered by the author:

I stayed at St Pancras hostel for a night in June 2019 before moving on to YHA New Forest, which was busy with guests, and got into conversation with one of the campers. Learning where I had stayed the previous night, he told me that in 1969 he had applied for a job as a railway fitter at the same address, the former Great Northern House office block operated by British Railways. When he attended his interview, he was surprised by the ground floor layout. It was an empty well, open to the basement below, where a huge array of signalling relays was in place to control the movements of trains from King's Cross Station, almost opposite.

<i>Overnights – inclusive periods each year as follows</i> 1997-present: Mar to following Feb ø: operation affected by Covid									
<i>1990</i>	<i>1991</i>	<i>1992</i>	<i>1993</i>	<i>1994</i>	<i>1995</i>	<i>1996</i>	1997	1998	1999
...	...	...	...	...	...	...	16645	44685	47265
2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
49232	45212	44986	42511	40812	39440	45756	47330	29843	51752
2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
61130	61838	58628	62589	64178	62806	65438	64041	63191	63907
2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029
6626ø	23404ø	54777ø	open	...	...	...	...	...	...



Room with a view – Sir George Gilbert Scott’s magnificent St Pancras Hotel of 1873 and Colin St John Wilson’s modernist new British Library of 1997 stand either side of Midland Road, across Euston Road from YHA London St Pancras. The image was captured in February 2020 from a bedroom on the third floor of the youth hostel (author’s photograph)



John Martin, 2023. YHA Profiles are intended to be adaptable in the light of new materials gained by YHA Archive