



YHA (England and Wales) Youth Hostel Profile

compiled by the Association's volunteer archivist, John Martin, rev2020-01-01

Boscastle Youth Hostel 1962 to present

Palace Stables, Boscastle, Cornwall PL35 OHD

Historic County: Cornwall

YHA Regions: South-West, South

GR: SX 097913



In the small river-cleft village of Boscastle on the wild and beautiful North Cornwall coast, in the early 1960s, a rugged old stone quayside building called Palace Stables was lying near-derelict. At the time it was usually described as stables with a hayloft; Boscastle harbour had been a busy place, shipping out local agricultural produce, slate and china clay, while many horses would be needed to haul heavy imports up the steep hills out of the village. Some

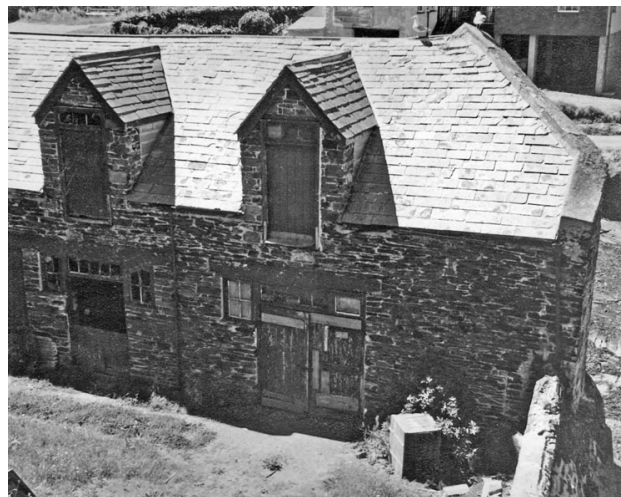
historians have disputed the stables description however; they state that the building was a Pilchard Palace, a common term locally for a fish processing plant; it was also used for boat storage, and later, as a potato loft. Perhaps it was all of these things. The breakwater had been more than half destroyed in 1941 by a rogue mine drifting into the harbour and exploding. By the mid-20th century sea trade was waning and the harbour was run down.

Charles Allen was Regional Secretary of the YHA Devon and Cornwall Regional Group from 1933 until 1965. During this seminal period for the organisation, it was he who sought to establish new hostels through diligent search, enquiry, a great many days travelling around attending meetings and not a few flukes: he was D&C's 'fixer'. An invaluable document describing these processes has recently been added to the YHA Archive: his YHA Memoirs of 1977. In it he writes at length about the joys and problems of taking on the Palace Stables as a new youth hostel to serve an increasingly popular area. Though his memoirs are not always accurately dated, his first awareness of the possibilities at Boscastle would have been several years before a fateful letter arrived early in 1960:

During my visits to Tintagel hostel and the North Coast Area, the derelict building standing on the quayside at Boscastle used to fascinate me, and I would say to myself: that would make a good hostel, just right to be in conjunction with Tintagel...

...I could hardly believe my eyes upon reading the office post that morning, it included a letter from the National Trust, Bodmin, stating that they, the National Trust, had now completed the purchase of the Boscastle Harbour and quayside properties, which included the derelict building that I had been looking at for some years.

The National Trust were asking in their letter if the association were at all interested in making use of the Palace Stable buildings for hostel purposes. I was delighted to hear the news, and contacted the regional chairman immediately, who in turn agreed that I contact the National Office.



Palace Stables, before conversion by YHA into its new youth hostel. The tiny windows and simple roofline of the frontage and the run-down industrial nature of the rear part show the extent of rebuilding required to youth hostel standards [YHA Archive]

Allen continued:

This brought about a meeting, on site, along with the National Trust Representative, YHA's National Surveyor John Parkes and the YHA Regional Officers. I arranged for Parkes to meet me at Boscastle, to have a good idea as to the condition of the premises prior to the meeting with the officials concerned.

The day for the joint meeting came, and we got down to the basic point as to whether the YHA would take on the building or not. Of course the National Trust knew what they were about: if the YHA took on the lease of the place, it would be on the basis of the YHA undertaking all the work of refurbishment of the building to make it suitable for hostel purposes. The meeting was a long drawn out affair, all parties finally agreeing to meet again after consulting their elders. John Parkes had a most difficult job in the early stages by the drawing up of a number of plans showing different layouts for the building to be considered by all the committees, ie, the National Trust, the YHA National Committee, and the YHA Regional Committee. All had a different idea as to the development. The plans went to and fro just like a tennis match; I visited the property so many times that I lost count and almost gave up that the building would ever become a youth hostel. But in the end Parkes produced a plan that was acceptable by all, and the tennis match was over.

How happy I was when John notified me that the works specifications had been completed and sent out for estimates; before long the contracts were signed and work began in earnest, finally bringing about another splendid small hostel on the North Cornish Coast.

YHA leased the property from the National Trust, initially for 60 years from 25th March 1960, though a solicitor's letter to YHA from one Ambrose Appelbe Esq of Lincoln's Inn, dated September 1960, suggests a dispute: it made clear that the rent for Palace Court [sic] Stables should run from Michaelmas 1959. The leasehold was vested in the YHA Trust, and in common with most YHA acquisitions at the time, there was grant-aid for setting up the hostel from the Department of Education. The ground area of 0.135 acres was one of the smallest in the Association. The contractor was Edward Dennis of Camelford. After two years of preparations and extensive rebuilding, Boscastle youth hostel opened on 1st April 1962.

Allen described the official ceremony that followed on 21st July 1962:

Arrangements for the official opening were of great interest to the local residents, in that the derelict building in the harbour had now become a living thing and also that the opening ceremony was to be performed by Her Highness Princess Charabonski, wife of the Prince of Thailand. It caused quite a stir in the village. All the County officials, along with the parish councillors, the vicar and even the village folks that I had had dealings with during my visits to Boscastle, contacted me to say that they would be bringing buns, cakes and sponges for the tea-party that was to take place after the opening. The locals could not believe that this derelict building could have been made to look so attractive in the harbour setting.

The hostel was built with 24 beds. At first it was established as seasonal, overseen by a summer warden. Accounts of the early wardens differ, some naming Pat Day as the first, in 1962, while others start with Mrs I Timms and Miss M Evans, then Mrs L Symons (*an elderly, motherly warden*, said Charles Allen) before Miss Day in 1964. In any event, wardens came and went on almost annual basis until the mid-1970s: Miss Marion Dyer, D Scoones, Jim Midgley, Miss Marion Williams, Mr D Nuttall, Charles Allen himself, and perhaps others.



Early YHA photographs by South Walian cyclist JD Thomas. Compare these with the pre-YHA images shown earlier. 1: JD Thomas snapped the hostel from the breakwater in 1968. There are several differences visible: note especially the tall ground floor windows, added chimneys and the dormer structures in the roof; 2: the rear of the property, reroofed and much rebuilt; note the original arrangement of hostel entrance, facing upstream. This area was prone to flooding (author's collection)

Charles Allen's Memoirs soon raised a regular issue in the case of Palace Stables – the effects of storms and flooding:

Problems, of course, only reveal themselves when one moves into a property, and so the comment made to me by some of the old timers at Boscastle came to roost. They had told me that we would have to watch out for the spring tides, which could flood the building if we were not careful. When we took over the building the partly destroyed breakwater nearby left the harbour open to the full force of the winter gales that occur on this coast. And so it was that during the first winter of our occupation, we experienced a full force-ten storm battering, that the locals considered the worst they had for a very long time; this resulted in the hostel being flooded to the depth of one foot or more, and all the hostel windows on the quayside of the building being smashed by the large stones that the sea hurled against the building.

The hostel was closed for the winter months, but the office phone was soon red hot with informants telling me of the damage the hostel had sustained and the urgency of my doing something about repairs before the high tide. I contacted a builder to carry out the necessary repairs by fixing storm boards at the yard entrances to the hostel, and boarding up the windows. Now we had defences ready against the next likely storm, which thankfully were needed, but not to the extent of flooding the hostel, only the yard area that still does get flooded during the spring high tides. During the following year, the builder provided portable shutters for the windows that could be put into position each winter as a safety precaution.

In the meantime the National Trust had arranged to have the breakwater rebuilt [in 1962, with huge granite blocks taken from the old Laira Bridge in Plymouth]; this is the main factor that has kept the seawater from flooding the hostel. A storm raging into Boscastle harbour is a sight worth seeing; one wonders how the tramp steamers that used to ply in and out of the harbour ever managed to get alongside and unload on the quay on which the hostel stands.

Pat Packham included Boscastle and Tintagel hostels in a cycling tour in July 1964. She observed that the dormitory here was very comfortable, with single beds. She had the job of cleaning the nice, modern members' kitchen.

After the short-term season-by-season appointment of wardens in the first dozen or so years, Mike Pelham and Brian Wood brought rather more stability of wardening to the hostel in the 1970s and 1980s. Through the first 30 years, the annual usage figures hovered at 3,000, or just under, a fair reflection of a very busy seasonal hostel with a barely changing bed capacity – always 24 or 25 until recent years. For five weeks at the height of the season in 1983, to avoid turning hostellers away, *Hostelling News* announced that the village hall some distance away was being hired to make a 16-bed annexe. Ironically, the final figures for that year were lower than the previous two.



1: the Village Hall used in 1983, photographed in April 2016 by the author; 2: an attractive publicity image from 1996 (YHA)

In the years up to the 1990s the layout of the hostel is thought to have been as follows: the entrance was as always at the rear, but at first in a semi-open porch facing upstream. The warden's quarters were at the eastern end of the building, downstairs, next to the hostel gate. In here was not only private bedroom, bathroom and lounge but an Aga and kitchen arrangements for the hostel meals. The common room-cum-dining room featured trestle tables and was narrower than at present, with a fireplace at its western end, a door on the left of that leading to a corridor and, at the west end of the building, a staircase. The member's kitchen was tucked into a corner to the right of the fireplace, at the back of the building, and between that and the corridor, the men's and women's washrooms. Until the late

1980s the doorless stairs mentioned led direct into the single women's dorm, while the one men's dorm at the east end was served by another stairway near the hostel entrance. An attractive feature of the dormitories was that they had an airy, spacious character, as most of the beds had to be single under the low sloping roof.

Linda Masters recalls how, just before she arrived as manager in 1990, the two large dorms had been converted to four. One men's dorm remained at the eastern end. Next came a four-bed family room and two smaller women's dorms; access to one of these was by necessity from the staircase via the other. All the upper floor was laid with linoleum. The single beds were iron-framed, and were said to have been obtained from Dartmoor Prison, no doubt an act of fiscal stringency led by Charles Allen or Ken Tyler, the regional secretaries.



Photographs from the 1990s kindly provided by the manager of the time, Linda Masters.

- 1: the west end of the hostel dining-room, with its trestle tables, open fireplace and door leading to the men's washroom and staircase. That corridor has more recently been replaced by the self-catering kitchen. Note the tall windows, later altered;*
- 2: the main women's dorm at the west end, with the open stair flight entering on the right, against the angled corner;*
- 3: the men's dormitory at the east end. No doubt the warden below didn't appreciate leaden-footed males (YHA Archive)*

The period in YHA's history around the year 1990 was marked by the organisation's first real attempt at professional analysis to determine the way it should face the modern world. It planned to renew key hostels, largely to be paid for by the sale of less remunerative examples. The Product Development Marketing Plan nominated Boscastle for early improvement. New wooden beds were supplied, and carpeting was laid upstairs. Other, more radical improvements to the layout would have to wait until other forces – namely YHA's financial stringency and the brute strength of nature – were to dictate more than ten years later.

In the early 1990s Boscastle hostel was the first to be made available as YHA Rent-a-Hostel accommodation, an imaginative solution to the problem of how to create revenue from buildings out of season. In the mid-1990s Linda Masters also became overseer of volunteers who were brought in and trained by her to run Tintagel hostel. Meanwhile, Boscastle continued to provide meals; the service was advertised in 1992 as meals and snacks, in 1995 as meals and group meals, and in 1998 as meals with a fixed evening serving time. From 2001 for two or three years the meals service was for groups of ten-plus only.

Nationally there was much hostel reorganisation in the years immediately following 2000, and much was to do with increasing some managers' responsibilities, to control more than one site. One suggestion was made for rationalising the running of Boscastle, Tintagel and Elmscott hostels under one manager at Boscastle, but this was impracticable; Boscastle and Tintagel remained paired, and for a short time Elmscott was linked with Steps Bridge, far away.

Events overtook Boscastle on an epic scale on 16th August 2004. YHA member Ben Wassell of Canterbury had experienced a portent some eight years before:

I have stayed in Boscastle many times, and was in the youth hostel when the remains of hurricane Lili hit in 1996 with 90mph winds, partially flooding the harbour up to the lower window sills on the youth hostel, and I thought that was bad enough, but this is devastating! It'll never be the same again.

In 2004 Ben was witnessing the most devastating floods to hit the far South-West since the Lynmouth tragedy of 1952, though Lynmouth claimed 28 lives (more elsewhere), and miraculously, Boscastle none. Linda Masters was present at Boscastle and subsequently gave a thorough account of how the experience affected residents and guests. The following paraphrased extracts of her own words will give some idea of the harrowing nature of events:

August 16th 2004 was an extraordinary day for Boscastle, those of us who live in the area and those who were visiting that day. The YHA building is one of the most spectacularly situated with the sea just outside the window, and just occasionally inside too, when stormy weather and high tides coincide. In those days it was a single person operation with catering and I had ten very happy and fulfilling years there. Then my personal situation changed and so did my role within the YHA.

I had loved living down at the harbour and over the years had become very conscious of the weather and how it affected the building. Even when I no longer lived on site but had responsibility for the building over the winter months I would wake in the early morning hearing the wind and rain batter the farmhouse windows, work out the times and heights of the high tides, jump into my car and drive down to Boscastle, put out sand bags and planks in front of the gates to try and stop the sea coming in and watch in awe.

Since I stopped working full time at Boscastle, the YHA is now [2006] run by trained YHA volunteer staff, who give a week or more of their time to the hostel to look after those who come to visit and my role is to support them and oversee the building and deal with any problems that might arise. On that day in August I had been to the Eden Project and returned in the afternoon in heavy rain, VERY heavy rain. The river was running fast and very dark, which was unusual but it wasn't especially high at first. We watched as it increased in volume and I decided it was time for the flood protection measures. We carried out the sand bags and planks and put them in place. Trixie Webster had already evacuated her shop next door to the hostel. Graham King the coastguard was beginning to look worried. My nephew was the last person to cross the lower bridge from the hostel side to the other before the road flooded. He went to join his wife, who had come out of their cottage to watch from the main road bridge. By the time he got to her they were cut off from their cottage and were to watch their possessions float off in the rush of muddy water.

At least they were together. It was several hours before I was to learn what had happened to them. It being August, the hostel was fully booked and as we offered daytime access to the lower floor of the hostel, several people who were staying there were seeking shelter from the rain and watching events unfold from the apparent safety of the lounge. There were four students on holiday between finishing A-levels and getting the results, a German woman and her teenage daughter and a gentleman from Durham.

Suddenly events seemed to move faster. First beer barrels and picnic tables came bobbing down. Then the first car came down, tossed around like a cork, and wedged under the bridge and the mood changed dramatically.

Where we were there was little panic or hysteria, just a necessary weighing up of options, looking out for others and a good deal of plain old common sense. But then I knew we were in no immediate danger, unlike others. A couple were standing in the road above the YHA building called down to me that the shop next door was filling with water and that I should get out. I went back in and evacuated the building. The front entrance had been impassable for some time with floodwater surging past us. We used a rough track hidden behind the bike shed and helped each other up to the top where we had a grandstand view of what was happening. It was an extraordinary and chilling sight, cars bobbing down in this torrent of water. Early on I had worried about my car outside Clovelly Clothing but after 30 or so had gone down I just thought 'well, that's it'. We were more concerned that there might be people in them. The planks by the gate finally gave way, the windows in the Harbour Light shattered and water poured into the yard. As it first entered the hostel, I can remember thinking 'how on earth am I going to arrange accommodation for 25 people for tonight while we clean this up' still not fully realising the extent of the destruction to come. Soon the Harbour Light collapsed and the hostel took the full brunt of the water. By then we all just worried that there would be fatalities. How could there not be? The level was by then was up to the gutters, the ceiling level in the downstairs room and was flowing over the adjacent bike shed roof.

We were all soaked through. The young people found temporary shelter while I walked up the path to the village trying to understand what had happened beyond our line of vision and to find a phone (all mobile networks having long gone down). As I drew opposite the car park I watched what was, for me, the most frightening moments of the afternoon as I saw most of the visitor centre had been swept away and adults and children were sitting astride the roof.

I met my husband Colin who had come down by tractor, the road from the farm being so flooded that any other vehicle would have been washed off the road. There seemed to be nothing available the hostel side of the river. So we went home and stuffed bags full of towels and assorted dry clothes and returned to the hostel. The man from Durham had found himself somewhere to stay so we piled the other six into Colin's Landrover and drove them back to the farm for the night, picking up fish and chips and my nephew and his wife from a pub where some

kind local person had taken them. Like the rest of Boscastle we had no electricity but managed to find phone time, floor space, bed space or caravan space for all of them.

We were beginning to piece together what we knew of other YHA visitors. Tintagel YHA took in several, including the Boscastle Volunteer wardens, Michael and Pat Douglas, who in their efforts to drive back to the hostel had the terrifying experience of being washed out of their car. I didn't know then that Adrian Richards from Treynon Bay YHA (my line manager) had been deployed by YHA Managers to see if he could 'rescue Linda and YHA guests from Boscastle'. He thoughtfully put his surf board in the car on a sunny afternoon in Treynon Bay but couldn't get anywhere near the village...



Boscastle youth hostel on 17th August 2004, the day after the floods

...[18th August, two days later], entering the building was extraordinary. We slid down over the bank, past the oil tank which had floated down and wedged against the back wall, over trees and in through the fire exit door to the ladies' toilet area. There was a muddy tide mark right up to the ceiling downstairs (and our ceilings weren't low then) and 18 inches of mud and slime on the floor. Furniture, where recognisable, was misplaced. I hurriedly packed up bags in the rooms, labelling all the luggage with a room number and a fireman and I attached it to the end of a rope my resourceful partner had brought with him and he pulled it up.

There are plenty of people around who have more dramatic stories than this to tell. What I will always remember is the generosity of so many people in all of this. I will always remember the generosity of the vast number of donations that suddenly began pouring into Boscastle from all over the country and indeed all over the world.

The YHA had them too, I smile when I remember the first unsolicited donation from 2 German men who had stayed recently at the hostel and wrote requesting that I took a very large sum of money from their credit card towards the refurbishment of the hostel. I was sure they must have made a mistake and so politely emailed translating the pounds into euros to make sure. The reply I got was 'Linda, no joke, no joke!' Other donations started to come in to the YHA so it was decided to run an appeal, hoping to raise £50,000. In the end over £110,000 was raised.

Boscastle hostel reopened after herculean repair and renovation work just over two years later, in September 2006. The opportunity was taken to rebuild almost completely the hostel's interior within the solid outer walls that had withstood the devastation so well, though the rear wall and roof of the property were considerably redesigned. The work not only benefited the future operation of the hostel, but also increased its resistance to further flooding: the ground floor was raised 30 inches, evidence of this showing in the shallower lounge windows. These would also resist storm damage to a greater extent. The two stair flights were altered, as indicated by new large dormers at the rear. The recessed section of the rear wall was extended outwards to create a flush line and an extra lounge area.

Opportunity was taken also to reorganise the self-catering, which would now assume sole importance, by moving it to a new kitchen at the south-west corner of the building. The old open staircase to the women's dorm was now superfluous, and removed. The former women's washroom area was turned into a volunteer warden suite with kitchenette, at least for a time, while the original warden's quarters downstairs at the eastern end became a large six-

bed family guest suite with two rooms and wet-room en suite facilities suitable for the disabled. Upstairs was redesigned to include small rooms, with three, four, five and six beds, along with new shower and toilet facilities off the central transverse corridor, a great improvement on the previous arrangements.

In 2007 Rachel Pinnock became manager and organiser of the volunteers at the two hostels. The original intention had been to run both hostels with volunteers but on seeing the transformation of Boscastle hostel into a building of such a high standard it was decided to keep a paid member of staff there and oversee Tintagel's running with volunteers. The following year it was Brenda Nagy, who held the post until 2014. A new arrangement was introduced about 2012, with a regular live-out staff team operating at Boscastle and overseeing volunteers running Tintagel. This allowed YHA to convert the volunteers' suite at Boscastle to a 4-bed family room with kitchenette, raising the capacity to 28, mostly 20 single bunk beds. Angie Martelli has been co-ordinator of the Boscastle team and Tintagel volunteers since 2014.



1a&b



2a&b



3a&b



Then and now. Images of Boscastle hostel before the 2004 flood and after reopening in 2006.
 1a – a 1980s colour postcard of the quayside location, & 1b – a similar viewpoint (author's photograph, May 2016): note the shallower front windows (indicating a raised floor level internally), the narrower end-gable window downstairs, the new roof and the absence of chimney stacks in the later image;
 2a – a motor cycle convention meets at the rear of the hostel (1990s image loaned by Linda Masters to the Archive), & 2b – the considerably rebuilt rear elevation (author's photograph, September 2009): a new rear set of stairs is housed in the square two-storey section, while the formerly recessed sections of the ground floor have been extended out to a straight line to create extra social space within the hostel;
 3a Boscastle hostel, west end (1960s postcard, YHA Archive), & 3b – a similar viewpoint (author's photograph, May 2016): note the considerably tidied up quayside walk, the altered gable roofline and the new footbridge in the later view



Magnificent setting: the hairpin approach to Boscastle Harbour from Boscastle Village high above.

The youth hostel sits beside the narrow defile of the River Valency as it flows to the sea. The hostel appears to be shielded from the forces of nature by an archaic white building, the Harbour Light Restaurant, but that is a post-2004 reconstruction of the original Pixie House, formerly a piggery, completely swept away in the flood, leaving the hostel to cope with the full force of the waters. A new footbridge and renovated National Trust buildings complete the scene (author's photograph, May 2016)

Overnights – inclusive periods each year as follows

1962-1991: previous Oct to Sept; 1992: Oct 1991 to Feb 1993; 1993-present: Mar to following Feb

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

1960	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969
...	...	1754	2419	2307	2264	2262	2223	2510	2518
1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979
2980	3277	2652	2687	2676	open	2927	2967	2917	2980
1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989
2771	3065	2949	2730	2811	2886	2731	2577	2545	2676
1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
3141	2966	4404*	3516	3956	3987	4164	4372	4089	4264
2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
3892	3774	3709	4216	2748	0•	1222	3220	3025	2692
2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
2791	3842+	3778+	3680+	4136+	4825+	4395+	4795+	4803+	4736+



Three of the designs for one-inch pin badges available to hostellers over the years (author's collection)

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