



YHA (England and Wales)
Youth Hostel Profile

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

Honister Youth Hostels

Honister House Hostel [Barracks Building] 1942 to 1960

Honister Barracks, Seatoller, Keswick, Cumberland

Historic County: Cumberland

YHA Region: Lakeland

GR: NY 225135



There have been green slate quarry workings at the wild isolated summit of the Honister Pass since Roman times. The site was developed in the mid-17th century, though accommodation for the workers was rudimentary at best. Greater mechanisation and better facilities for the quarrymen came in the late nineteenth-century, under the ownership of Buttermere Green Slate Quarries Ltd, as the demand for slate roofing expanded.

In 1926 an old hut at Honister Hause, or summit, was demolished and replaced by new slate-roofed wooden barracks for thirty men. The barracks were vacated in 1941, as quarrying was not a protected occupation and workers became liable for conscription. A ready alternative for the building was soon found when YHA leased it from the quarry company. The youth hostel, one of YHA's highest at over 1,150ft, opened early in 1942.



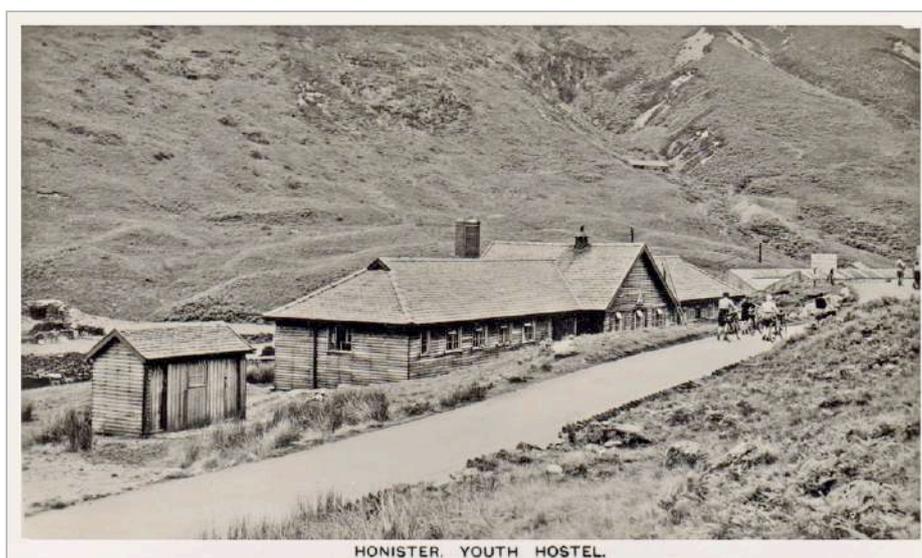
An early miniature postcard of the 1926 quarrymen's barracks at Honister Hause, when first converted to youth hostel use. This was the side of the building facing south, away from the Honister Pass. Large stocks of slate were piled up at what is now the boundary of the National Trust car park. The western end of the building was later extended with a masonry toilet block, the only part of the first hostel to be incorporated into the second. The provision of miniature postcards, sold in sets of six, was probably a response to wartime and early post-war shortages of materials (YHA Archive)

In his *Hostel Close-Up* article in the April 1963 issue of *Youth Hosteller*, "TWT" (regional vice-president Thomas Thompson) celebrated the rebuilding of the old Honister Hause by recalling earlier days:

You will remember the long wooden building on the top of Honister Hause. It was a haven for the hard fell-walker. From there you could reach the Lakeland tops early in the calm morning and because of the high position, you could stay out as long as possible on a summer evening. It was proudly capped with green slates from the nearby Buttermere Green Slate Quarry.

We thought of the drum-house ladder-track soaring to the skies; of clean wind swept slopes; of cavernous, underground vaults where men split slate; of the long, long view across the narrows of Borrowdale; of the birth of the hostel mid-way in the Hitler war; of Lilian, first warden; and Scotty on a work party scratching charred walls with a penknife; of sunbrowned young men and nail-booted young maids and of the pattern of their mountain meanderings.

The opening of the hostel in wartime reflected the growing importance of the YHA in official circles to the war effort, in keeping young war workers from the industrial heartlands healthier and happier.



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1: this postcard is probably earlier than the second, and shows what appears to be a rudimentary toilet block at the east end – perhaps a throwback to the quarryman’s era – and a well-paved Honister Pass, with cyclists heading for Buttermere;
2: the card shows well the open verandah. It carries the logo of YHA Lakeland Region (all author’s collection)

Young people arriving at this lonely hostel in the war years could find the experience formidable, but not without its kinder moments. Mary Jephcott was a student teacher in 1943, and wrote in her logbook:

Absolutely soaked. ‘J’ told off by warden for not wearing a petticoat under her dress. ‘S’ and ‘D’ both told off because they washed pans in sink and should have done it in bowl – or vice versa. Drying room pretty hopeless and only one central stove in common room. Boys [in an effort to dry clothes] winding ties, handkerchiefs, shirt sleeves round pipes of stove. Climbing rope fixed across room from one door to the other, dripping with clothes. Loo outside – well outside, of course.

[Next morning] Pouring. Warden said we could stay in (all tipped out at 10am at Longthwaite Hostel). At lunch time Assistant Warden made tea at 3d per cup, and we ate sandwiches.

Another hosteller, anonymous, observed the comfort of partitioning of the bedrooms, and the potential to supplement meagre wartime rations, when he wrote in a 1944 holiday logbook:

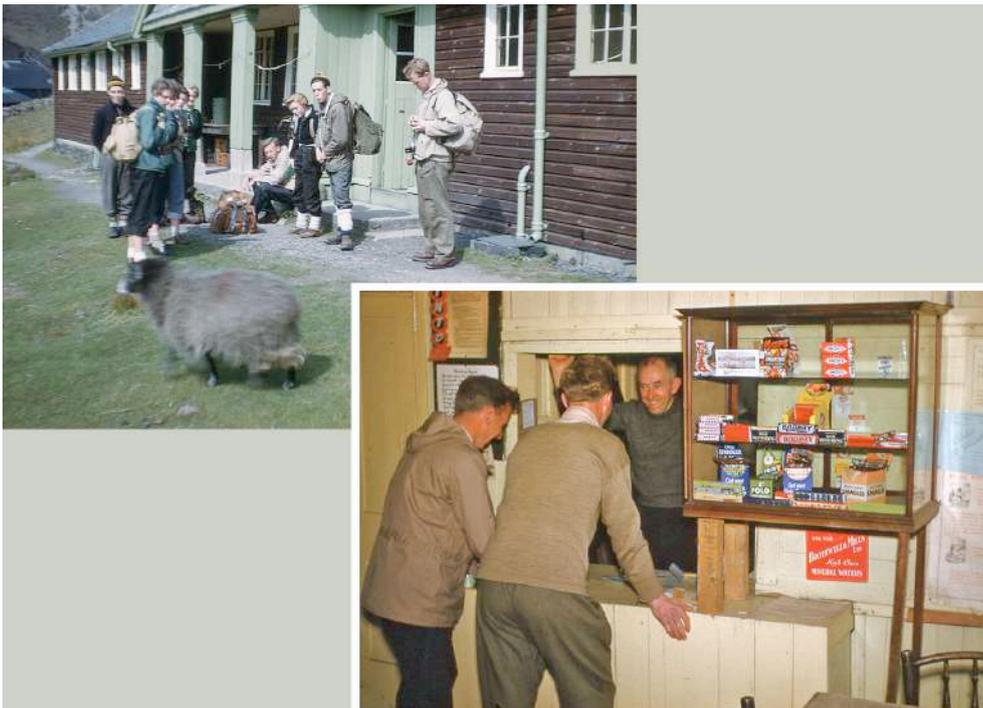
Hostel, 2 bunks per room, washing, OK for pike.

After Lilian (surname unknown) there are gaps in wardens’ records, but Mrs Barker is known to have been in charge in 1945.



Left: an improved toilet facility was tacked on to the west end. It is still in place today. The stocks of slate appeared not to have been depleted much since the wartime postcard. Image by CW Maitland (YHA Archive)

The hostel posed special difficulties for wardens because of its remoteness. The late Joan Chapman, who had spent a season in 1952 as a young female warden at the even more isolated Black Sail hut, found a 1953 posting to Honister House more disturbing, ironically because it was served by a road. The night-time headlights of occasional passing traffic would cast an exaggerated moving shadow across the hostel, to her consternation. She tells of a more light-hearted acquaintance with Honister hostel, however. When she wardened Black Sail, there was no bath and certainly no private quarters, so for her weekly serious wash she would trek over the mountain to Honister. Often, she would get three drenchings in the same evening – out, at the hostel, and back.



Rare colour transparencies of the first hostel at Honister, recorded by London Region secretary David Buxton, and probably taken during his visit to the official opening of Buttermere hostel in May 1956; Right, upper: the cheerful verandah; left, lower: warden's den (YHA Archive)

Jack Lonsdale was in charge during a more settled period from 1954 to 1958. He was a much respected and a dedicated Lancastrian who had served as sole warden at Black Sail, Pateley Bridge and Garsdale hostels – all lonely northern outposts. A further indication of the isolated location of Honister House lay in the special motor-cycle expenses rate negotiated for the hostel in 1955. Tragically, he died in August 1958 in a motor-bike accident in Borrowdale. The next warden was Bill Stout, who probably saw the final years of the barracks building.

In its later years, the building was suffering from exposure to extreme elements, and needed an unusual remedy to compensate for structural weaknesses, as described in his *Hostel Close-Up* by 'TWT':

In recent years, the strong autumn gales produced a creaking of the structure despite the firm wire hawsers secured over the building. Our wise men said that the hostel had become dangerous and should be taken down.

Demolition for subsequent rebuilding was planned for the end of 1960, but this was delayed, according to that year's regional annual report. There was no hostel operation in 1961 or 1962, during the new construction.

Honister Hause Hostel [new construction] 1963 to present

Honister Barracks, Seatoller, Keswick, Cumbria CA12 5XN

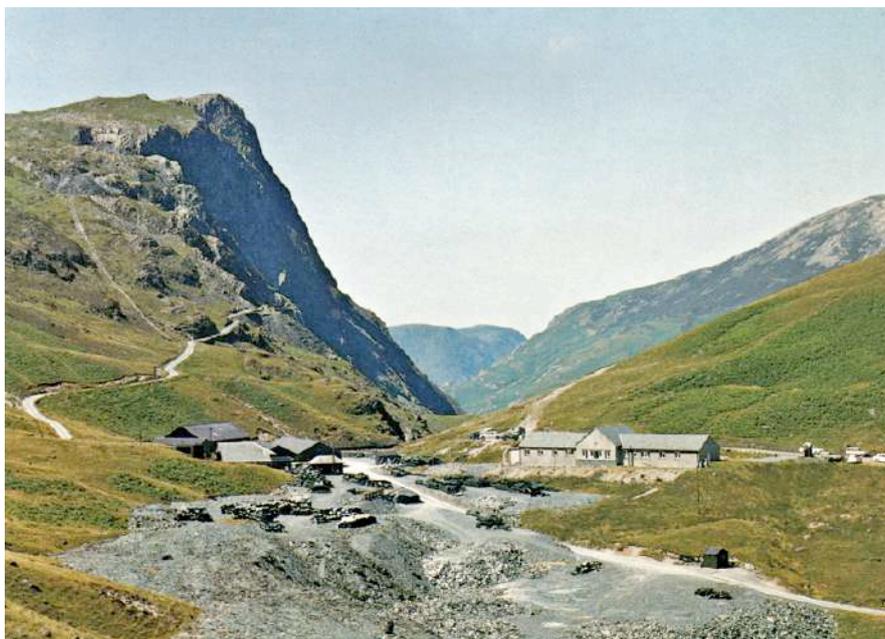
Historic County: Cumberland

YHA Regions: Lakeland, Lakes, North

GR: NY 225135



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4 5



Honister Hause, Youth Hostel

1&2: construction of the new hostel, under way in 1961 or 1962.

Construction is of breeze block, and the retention of the old extension can be seen clearly;

3: Dixon postcard image of the new Honister hostel, taken from the south-east in the 1960s. Honister Pass crests just behind the building, Buttermere lies in the valley beyond and Black Sail over the steep climb to Bell Craggs to the left.

To the right of the hostel is an AA emergency telephone box, while all around are reminders of the location's industrial past. Today, mining here is a heritage legacy industry (1-3: YHA Archive);

4&5: further 1960s postcards showing the hostel from north and south. The open verandah entrance of the original premises had been replaced by an enclosed larger common room, despite the magazine description on page 5 (4&5: author's collection)

Tommy Thompson concluded his April 1963 *Hostel Close-Up* article:

More than fifty thousand fell-walkers had happy memories of Honister Hostel – but what of the future? So we schemed and planned, measuring mind against mind and finally, when the old hostel came down, we built a new thirty-bed mountain hostel.

The basic idea is a central common-dining room, with dormitories off a corridor leading from either side. Most of the best features of a modern hostel have been incorporated skilfully in a neat design, although there is no electricity as the main cable stops at the foot of the pass in both Borrowdale and Buttermere. A special pleasant sun verandah runs along the front of the building.

So, the new Honister Hostel has arisen in time to open for members by Easter. In due course you will find it nestling cosily and unobtrusively into the side of the pass, a re-assuring ‘phoenix’ of the old Barracks.

YHA’s purpose-built replacement for the quarrymen’s barracks carries a datestone of 1962 but it was not opened until Easter 1963. The YHA Trust Property Book describes a new 99-year-term lease from the National Trust taken out on 4th April 1961, then for a peppercorn rent of 1 shilling per annum, for ‘ownership of a severed building’, while other rents dealt with drainage and water easements and rights.

There has never been mains gas, water or electricity at this remote location; indeed, until 1979 there was no electricity. The Lakes Region annual report for that year described how the hostel had been transformed by the installation of a generator, new windows and floor covering. The generator is thought to have been a rather low-output Lister model, installed in a corner of the old masonry toilet block that at some point received a small extension on the south side.

There have been further developments over time. *YHA News* of April 1992 announced:

Honister has been improved over the last two winters. Self-contained accommodation for the warden has been constructed in the Borrowdale end of the building, a considerable improvement over sharing the washroom with members. The showers for both sexes and the men’s washroom have now been revamped, with the ladies’ washroom next.

Up to 1996, the layout had included one large 16-bedded dormitory, but the following year all the accommodation was in two or four bedded rooms and the overall capacity was reduced from 30 beds to 26. Like all Lake District hostels, Honister was very badly affected by the Foot and Mouth epidemic of 2001. A subsequent fund to alleviate its effects gave £6,000 to modernise the toilets and showers, supplemented by a generous donation of £11,000.



Honister hostel in September 2008. 1: the Honister Rambler bus is a lifeline to many staying at the hostel or walking the high fells from here. The number 77 struggles up the last few yards before the summit; 2: the hostel main entrance is tucked into the side of the central section (author’s photographs)

Further modernisation came with YHA’s Fit for Purpose scheme, about 2011, providing for a new reception, food servery and bar in the public spaces. Nowadays water is collected in a large underground tank above the hostel, to the north of the road, and filtered through a UV pump. A modern diesel generator provides power for the hostel.

Mr I Polley, Dave Walker, Doug Moore, Tony Lovelock and Peter Barron were in charge at various times up to 1979. John Booth, Steve Barby, Alex Gibson, Dave Roberts and Mark Leeming brought the hostel up to the new millennium. The hostel has enjoyed a very settled period with present manager Tim Hodgson, who took over in 2001. Staff accommodation has always been provided on site.



1 2

Further images of Honister hostel in September 2008. 1: the summit of the Honister Pass; 2: National Trust owns the land on which the hostel stands and the car park immediately behind it (author's photographs)

Overnights – inclusive periods each year as follows
1942-1991: previous Oct to Sept; 1992: Oct 1991 to Feb 1993; 1993-present: Mar to following Feb
 ¶: original quarrymen's barracks hostel; Δ: new-build hostel
 *: 17 month period; +: notional figure included for exclusive hire and/or camping

1940	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945	1946	1947	1948	1949
...	...	2275¶	2558¶	2893¶	3094¶	3350¶	2740¶	3170¶	2867¶
1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959
2758¶	2672¶	2678¶	2298¶	2451¶	2543¶	2299¶	2776¶	2594¶	2901¶
1960	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969
2892¶	2830Δ	3249Δ	3329Δ	2969Δ	3263Δ	3276Δ	3008Δ
1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979
3162Δ	2864Δ	2773Δ	3070Δ	3123Δ	3221Δ	3095Δ	3031Δ	3000Δ	3250Δ
1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989
3144Δ	4197Δ	2919Δ	3069Δ	3000Δ	3287Δ	2854Δ	3023Δ	3242Δ	3619Δ
1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
4024Δ	3290Δ	3170*Δ	2528Δ	2446Δ	2552Δ	2696Δ	2916Δ	3104Δ	3008Δ
2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
3053Δ	1114Δ	2756Δ	3132Δ	3101Δ	3316Δ	2501Δ	3185Δ	3100Δ	3151Δ
2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
2548Δ	2364Δ	2509Δ+	2532Δ+	2527Δ+	3824Δ+	3928Δ+	3714Δ+	3764Δ+	3788Δ+



One-inch pin badge from the 1950s-1960s period and hostel stamp

John Martin, 2020. YHA Profiles are intended to be adaptable in the light of new materials gained by YHA Archive