Cockermouth Youth Hostel  1933 to 2016

Double Mills, Cockermouth, Cumbria CA13 ODS
Historic County: Cumberland          YHA Regions: Lakeland, Lakes, North
GR: NY 118298

The Cockermouth town website has an extended historical description of the town’s many mills. These were built on the two converging rivers, the Cocker and the Derwent, over many centuries, for a variety of corn milling and manufacturing purposes. It gives this account of the likely origins and the development of Double Mills:

> The mill currently known as Double Mills lies on the Cocker, opposite the site of Wood Mill. As Wood Mill was noted to have been situated opposite the corn mill in 1478, Double Mills is therefore identified as the town’s 15th-century corn mill, and may even date back as far as the 13th century.

> Double Mills was probably constructed in the early 19th century, although it is believed that there was a water corn mill on the site in the 15th century and may even have been as early as the 13th century. For most of its life Double Mills appears to have operated as a corn mill and by 1900 it is marked on maps as ‘Disused’. A few years later the Urban District Council bought the building with the intention of using it either as an isolation hospital, to obtain electricity by water power or as the basis for a recreation ground. None of these plans materialised and it was leased to the Youth Hostels Associations (YHA), opening in 1933 and still in use as a Youth Hostel today. The building which stands had two waterwheels in parallel races. Each could be operated independently and were powered by water diverted from the River Cocker. Two large French Burr stones which stand against the bank by the mill were used in the mill for splitting open and shelling the grain being ground from the husks. The hard sections of French Burr were bound together with iron hoops, and sections of these heavy millstones can often be found on or around mill sites.

> Some mills had more than one waterwheel. This was often the case when mechanical processes changed so much that it was easier to install another waterwheel rather than take out old workings and rebuild. This often happened in corn mills as wheat became more popular as a grain in the mid-18th century, with wheat mill machinery being installed to work from a second wheel. An example of the use of two waterwheels can be seen at Double Mills to the south of the town [http://www.cockermouth.org.uk/watermills2012.pdf].

An early view of Cockermouth youth hostel – postcard by Abraham, Keswick.
The greenhouse disappeared some years ago – it stood on a curving sweep of the River Cocker on ground subject to flooding.
Two redundant millstones are propped up on the right (YHA Archive)
Double Mills at Cockermouth therefore became the first youth hostel tenancy to be facilitated by a Local District Council; though commonplace in continental Europe, such arrangements have been rare in Britain.

The hostel opened on 13 April 1933, during a frantic three-day session for local dignitaries and YHA officers alike, which marked the opening of Keswick youth hostel the day before and Black Sail the day after – up to the time of writing, the three hostels together have amassed a staggering 245 years of YHA service. The YHA Lakes Region Annual Report of 1933 marked the occasion:

By a special arrangement with the Cockermouth Urban District Council, the Double Mill, so delightfully situated on the banks of the River Cocker, was converted into a Hostel. It is interesting to record that this is the first Hostel in Britain on which Public Money has been spent on adaptation, and in which a Local Authority has a financial interest. It is of additional interest to mention that, owing to the Urban District Council sharing in the revenue, the Housebook is subject to Government Audit along with the other books of the Urban Council.

To the Chairman and Members of the UDC we extend our congratulations on the distinction of being the first Local Authority to identify itself with the Youth Movement; and also our warm thanks and appreciation for their interest in the Members using the Hostel. Particular mention should be made of Councillor Denwood, and Mr Roberts, Surveyor.

Local YHA publicity gave details in its 1933 Lakeland and the North-East Regional Guide:

Cockermouth: Mrs Ridley, The Double Mill, Cockermouth. (10, 10).

- Distances: Rockcliffe 30 miles, Gretna 32, Caldbeck 16, Keswick 12, Black Sail Hut 14 (walkers only), Pardshaw 4, Ennerdale Hall 13.

Mrs Ridley remained in charge throughout the pre-war period. The 1934 annual report mentioned improved facilities at the hostel, including gas cookers. The capacity of the hostel increased from 20 beds to 28 in 1935 (16 men, 12 women), and has stayed within two of that total ever since.

In the pre-war years, the hostel generally attracted an annual overnight haul of a little over 1,000, about average for a facility of this size. Along with over a hundred of its fellow YHA premises, it was closed in late 1939. The fate of these was as varied in the Lake District as elsewhere. Fully controlled hostels such as Cockermouth had a good chance of returning to YHA during or after the war, while adopted hostels tended to disappear from the network for good. Cockermouth stayed closed for the duration of the war, turned over to bush-hush purposes, according to the 1940 annual report.

Reopening came at Whitsun 1946, with little publicity. A new danger to the hostel came with the opening of several large Lakeland hostels late in the war or just afterwards, including Hawkshead, the Queen’s Hotel at Ambleside, High Close near Grasmere, Penrith and Carlisle. Especially threatening was a grand scheme for a 100-bed hostel at Higham Hall, Bassenthwaite Lake, a freehold gift from the National Land Fund promoted by National YHA despite resistance on strategic grounds by Lakeland Region. (The other National Land Scheme hostels were at Alfriston, Port Eynon and Treyarnon Bay). Bassenthwaite’s opening to great acclaim in 1951 coincided with a downturn in YHA’s fortunes after the heady late forties. It consistently made a loss, and was closed after just four years early in 1954, but not before Regional Council had considered closing Cockermouth permanently when Bassenthwaite, barely five miles to the east, was being set up.

Cockermouth hostel continued to run as a modestly-sized, basically equipped hostel for thirty years after the war. The lease with Cockermouth Town Council was renewed, typically every ten years, such as in October 1972. Annual overnights grew gradually to over 2,000. Some records of wardens of this thirty-year period have survived: John Roland Clark took on the reopened hostel in 1946, for a few years, and a new, unnamed, warden followed in 1949. Records are then missing up to 1966, when Mr Farrell Breakwell arrived, followed by Mike Jackson in 1968–70.

In 1969 Mr Jackson recorded the hostel in great detail with a series of photographs and a set of descriptive captions, shown on the next page.
1969 photographs and captions by manager Mike Jackson. The layout had probably changed little since opening in 1933.

1: path to the old hostel entrance on the right – the porch led into the cellar-cum-bike-storage;
2: the three hostel toilets – 'on a stormy day an adventure in itself'. The one at the end was for the warden;
3: the only entrance into the hostel, via a flight of steps (this was later the manager’s private entrance);
4: immediate view inside the front door – steps up to the large (men's) dormitory, with broom cupboard beneath – turn left to wardens kitchen and common room;
5: members’ and warden’s kitchens and wash-up, door into common room, warden’s serving-cum-signing-in tables, and pay phone on wall. Warden’s Icelandic flag on wall. Meters etc behind curtain above door.

Photo taken from standing on cooker table of members kitchen. All walls painted white (later, the manager’s private bathroom, near, and volunteers’ bedroom 1, far);

6: the cavernous roof of the warden’s and members’ kitchen area. The hanging object was a fishing net float found at Maryport. The ceiling was painted mushroom. Later, this area was divided into two separate floors, with the manager’s bedroom above;

7: the common room from the entrance, with ladies’ dormitory on the right. Murals on wall, old church pews for seating.

There was a this time no flight of stairs at the window, though a slightly later photograph shows the lower one;

8: the huge men’s dormitory on the top floor from left of the door. Later, the men’s dorm was reduced in size to make dorm 3, with a flat ceiling under the beams, a corridor was built to run the length of the near beam, and the window on the left lit the new women’s dorm 2, while that on the right lit the top flight of stairs (YHA Archive)
A short article in the February 1972 *Youth Hosteller* confirmed the layout just before major rebuilding:

The hostel is a building with outside toilets, a visit to which on a stormy day is an adventure in itself. Steps take you to the front door which leads immediately into the large, oak-beamed kitchen shared jointly by warden and members. A flight of stairs leads from the kitchen into the large dormitory with 18 beds. Another door leads to the common / dining room, a long comfortable room that has pews from the local funerary chapel to provide seating.; there are also armchairs. The smaller dormitory leads off the common room, has 12 beds and also a fine view of the river.

*Photograph by keen cyclist / hosteller Ron Sant, probably shortly after the 1973 refurbishment, to judge by the new paintwork and added windows for the improved basement. However, the side porch roof had not yet been added (author’s collection)*

At last, significant improvements were undertaken during the winter of 1973–74. In its Autumn 1974 issue, *Hostelling News* enthused:

> Although some primitive facilities could give a place a certain amount of character, the Region felt that outside toilets separated from the hostel by a footpath were perhaps too much of a good thing, especially on wet and windy nights. The basement room of the old mill was made into a toilet block incorporating hot showers, and there were some alterations to the dormitories to allow for a more flexible allocation of beds. To encourage exploration of relatively traffic-free byways nearby Lakeland Region is providing two bicycles for hire at the hostel.

The next known wardens were Colin Harman and Phil Revill, in the later 1970s and 1980s. In the following decade, Ian Cartwright came in 1993, Martin Allen took over in 1994–96, and a succession of managers followed up to 1999 – David Bridgwood, Andy Mayall and Rachel Mayik – by which time YHA was revising its management policy at a number of its smaller hostels, and sought to run Cockermouth with a site supervisor in the town and an entirely volunteer warden workforce. To cope with the changes at the turn of the millennium a new volunteers’ suite was created at the western entrance to the hostel, the old main entrance. Meal provision was suspended and the self-catering kitchen refitted.

This management arrangement was not successful however and the policy was partially reversed in 2002 when Ray Milner was appointed as resident volunteer and site manager. Keswick acted as the parent hostel and Ray was assisted by a team of volunteers. This necessitated further layout changes to the newly-created volunteer suite, partly to provide permanent quarters on two floors for the site manager and partly to carve out one small four-bed room, room 1, for the peripatetic assistants. Through all this period of volunteering the hostel’s capacity has been reduced to 26, to allow for staffing quarters.
The town of Cockermouth was very badly affected by flooding in November 2009, and again in December 2015. Writing in the Jolly Miller (the YHA Cockermouth Newsletter) in New Year 2010, manager Ray Milner described the devastation of the hostel after the earlier flood and the work necessary to fix it:

**Flood recovery**

It has been a long, slow crawl back from the events of 19th November, but by the time you get this, the hostel will be back up and available, for use. After the professional cleaners and sterilising had been done in November, we had a long period of drying out. The good news was that as the majority of downstairs was painted concrete walls and lino floors, there was none of the chipping plaster off, ripping up floor boards and carpets, and the several months worth of drying out that many premises are still facing in Cockermouth.

In mid January a team of decorators, joiners and floor layers descended on the building and did what would have taken me months to do, in about a week.

All toilet and shower doors have been replaced, there is new lino (well, that special non-slip stuff that slightly glistens) on the corridors and washrooms, and all walls repainted. Also all the window frames outside and in are much better. It is all very clean and fresh, although I’m afraid I have to say it looks a little stark and cold. Once I’m able to do so, I guess a few fish will start to re-appear. At least that long standing problem of the sticky washroom floors has been solved.

Outside – well, it will take many years before that looks anywhere near as good as it did.

One decided improvement has been the step into the showers. You may recall they have been painted concrete – red for visibility, which needed repainting frequently. Any one who stayed here beyond about May will know that the paint flaked off quite quickly, and by late summer it always looked a bit tatty. Well, they are now covered, and look much, much better.

The historical mill workings – the stone work for the wheel sluices – was mostly demolished, and I doubt if that ever will be restored. The race channel is also damaged. That neat division with white painted stones between lawn and wilderness has all gone.

What probably escaped without too much damage was the 'Hosta Hill' patch – started and maintained by Joan [Lambton]. Whilst it is too soon to be sure, I suspect most of the plants survived, and having had fine river silt deposited on top (rather than suffered erosion), may even benefit. The environmental Agency were quite good, in that all the trees that had been deposited in the grounds – about 5 or 6 seriously big ones – were regarded as a risk to things (bridges etc) downstream if there was another flood, and they came and cleared most of them. A start has however been made on re-claiming at least some lawn. A huge amount of river stone and gravel had been dumped all across the grassed area. By far the hardest job has been clearing that. I’m afraid I made the task a lot harder than the minimum by wheel barrowing dozens of loads up the track to fill in the more serious ruts. At the moment, you can really tell the difference in places where some of the worst holes are a lot less tricky.

These staffing arrangements stayed in place until 2016.

In 2015 YHA’s Board of Trustees made the decision that after December 2016 YHA would not be renewing the lease on the hostel that it had held with Cockermouth Town Council for 83 years. YHA Cockermouth was to stay open until the end of the summer season 2016. It closed at the end of September 2016 for ordinary overnights and was completely closed by the end of October 2016.
1: the scene in May 2004. By then the main hostel entrance had been sited on the eastern side for about 30 years;
2: an idyllic photograph across the River Cocker by YHA Northern Ireland President Paddy McAteer (author’s photographs);
3: manager Ray Milner was for many years a keen recorder of YHA’s abundant history, and put on display at the hostel a considerable collection of photographs, postcards, badges, historical publications and other materials relating to the Association.
Here is the scene in the lounge; 4: a recent YHA postcard of Cockermouth, with Ray Milner at the hostel door (YHA Archive)
Two views from the summer of 2016 (author’s photographs).

1: the ‘business end’ of Double Mills, Cockermouth, showing the remains of the ancient water wheels. Much damage was done to the shingle beach area during the floods of 2015, with large rocks deposited and now predominating. The door with overhead light, extreme left, was the one-time sole entrance to the youth hostel. The men’s dorm was the highest window, while below that was the hostel office window and to its right that of the self-catering kitchen, once the women’s dorm;

2: the final hostel entrance, at basement level. New stairs to all floors from this door were built in the early 1970s. In the foreground is ‘Hosta Hill’, a fine display of greenery by long-time volunteer Joan Lambton

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