



YHA (England and Wales) Youth Hostel Profile

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

A note on the development of London's Youth Hostels over 90 years

The history of YHA in London is one of a startling increase in demand and capacity, from the tiny beginnings of the 6-bed Trinity Square hostel for men only in 1931, through the pre-war and war years, when permanent hostels in Highgate and Great Ormond Street had a total capacity of about 150 beds. Highgate continued and was supplemented by the new Earl's Court and Holland House hostels in the 1950s, but they were insufficient in the concentrated summer peak. Thousands of young people from Britain, Europe, the Americas and the Antipodes would descend on the overbooked three hostels only to be turned away, or more fortuitously be given a slip of paper with a map and directed to a temporary hostel. Each year between 1950 and 1970 there were usually three of these modest substitutes – rented London County Council schools, public buildings or church halls – where a hundred or more camp beds were set up in large spaces by teams of devoted students and volunteers for a span of two months. (A separate profile has been prepared for this series that deals with YHA's 35+ London temporary youth hostels).

The numbers of youth hostel visitors continued to rise exponentially. In 1960 there were almost 90,000 overnights in the capital, spread between the regular hostels and three temporary facilities. In 1968, to cope with greater and greater demand, the redundant Choir School at St Paul's was rented to provide 300 beds, a much greater back-up to the conventional trio of London hostels. Still this was insufficient, and Hampstead Heath joined as a fourth regular hostel in 1980, as did large summer hostels in student accommodation at White Hart Lane and Wood Green later in the decade. By 1986, 285,000 YHA overnights were spent in London. St Paul's was outstripping all the others, but was essentially still underdeveloped as a modern youth hostel. A decision was taken to modernise it, a major undertaking as it involved closure for almost two years to gut the premises and effect a complete refurbishment. Two further substitute hostels in central London were rented to cope with the closure, one at Victoria in 1989, lasting two years, and the other in Soho, close to Oxford Street, in 1990. The Oxford Street hostel was instantly popular and was soon regarded as a useful permanent fixture.

Since the acquisition of Oxford Street, four further new premises have been procured, all large, at St Pancras, Rotherhithe (Thameside), London Central and Lee Valley (at Cheshunt), though at the expense of Hampstead Heath and Holland House, now relinquished. One of the new acquisitions, London Central, now accommodates more guests on its own – over 100,000 per year – than all the combined London hostels of 1960. By 2014 YHA was offering 1,500 beds and almost half a million annual overnights in the capital.

London Oxford Street Youth Hostel 1990 to present

14-18 Noel Street, London, W1F 8JG

Historic County: Middlesex

GR: TQ 293811

Oxford Street hostel opened in 1990 and is housed in a 6-storey former office block. As late as 1989 there were redevelopment plans to demolish the property and provide showrooms at No. 14 Noel Street and offices and six flats at Nos. 16-18. The application was withdrawn and the building survived. It occupies the site in Noel Street where the 1897 French Protestant School originally stood. The school lasted until at least 1963.

The lower three storeys of the modern block (ground, first and second floors) have remained in commercial use, with YHA renting the upper three, served by a lift. Basement space also is rented by YHA for utility purposes. There were over 10,000 bednights in Oxford Street's first year. The hostel manager was none other than Ken Lester, the long-serving and pioneering manager of YHA's Carter Lane / City of London /St Paul's hostel, who took on the new challenge before retirement. Soon the hostel was accommodating over 20,000 per annum.

The hostel was subject to a fierce Sunday newspaper review during the 1990s; YHA responded with a thorough refurbishment to each floor in 1997. This helped provide a much improved, more spacious hostel.

Though the known list of managers here is incomplete, it is established that Sarah Knox took on the role in 2002 and Becky Hudgell in 2009. After 20 years of intensive use the hostel was ready for a £1.4m overhaul. It closed for refurbishment from October 2010 to March 2011, during which the layout of the public spaces on the third floor was revised. 16 beds were provided in small rooms on this floor and a further 44 beds on each of floors 4 and 5, giving 104 in 36 rooms, an increase of about a dozen on previous years. The improvements helped establish Oxford Street as a popular and successful West End hostel, attracting 50% more overnights than previously. In 2012 it gained the accolade of one of the top ten hostels in the world by HostelWorld.



Left: hostel stamp, 2013

Becky Hudgell remained in charge until moving to the new YHA Brighton in 2014 and was replaced by Marissa Casadei. Jo Fisher was appointed in 2018.



London's YHA premises on Noel Street, very close to bustling Oxford Street. The hostel occupies the uppermost three floors, serviced by a lift from the entrance (author's photograph, August 2012)

Overnights – inclusive periods each year as follows
1990-1991: previous Oct to Sept; 1992: Oct 1991 to Feb 1993; 1993-present: Mar to following Feb
 *: 17 month period; •: closed for 5 months for refurbishment

1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
10744	24096	35397*	25382	29282	29764	30169	25021	26901	27181
2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
27388	23235	25959	25581	24400	23202	20597	25613	25020	25174
2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
15306•	31928	32650	36003	35968	36085	35526	35181	34435	33889



YHA London Oxford Street, 2019: a cheerful, comfortable and colourful stay (YHA images)

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