



## YHA (England and Wales) Youth Hostel Profile

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

*Special thanks are owed to Tylden Reed and the Charing Local History Society for supplementary information.*

### Charing Youth Hostels

#### Charing Old Barn Youth Hostel 1931 and perhaps a little later

Charing Old Barn, Charing, Kent

Historic County: Kent

YHA Region: London

GR: TQ 952494 and adjoining

The first group of youth hostels in Britain opened in England and Wales early in 1931 (if one discounts a lone short-lived experiment of December 1930). Over a dozen were ready for Easter, and 46 properties were named in the first YHA Handbook published a month or two later. Amongst the pioneer youth hostels were some laid out along the length of the Pilgrims' Way, for example at Winchester, Four Marks, Thursley, Albury, Box Hill, Kemsing and Canterbury. A further example was at the Old Barn, Charing. It was due to open at Whitsun; 181 overnights were spent here during the middle part of 1931, and possibly constituted the total usage in that year.



*The Old Barn youth hostel of 1931. 1: identification of the location is helped by the ancient elongated chimney of the building behind (from a lantern slide loaned by Trevor Key); 2: a sketch by Gregory Chase, dated 15th December 1931, by which time the hostel had possibly become redundant. The early squashed triangle YHA sign is in evidence on a rustic pole (Hiker and Camper magazine, SYHA Archive)*

Illustrations show that it was an antiquated wooden structure, with an exaggerated steeply-pitched and low-slung tiled roof and a tall heavy wooden entrance gate with porch, all in the vernacular style. The London Region annual report of 1931 described it as a 16th-century tithe barn (15th-century in another source), most generously restored and equipped by a local friend of the Association. An early minute explained that *all the responsibility was in local hands, the shilling being held* (ie, with the YHA taking no 'cut' of the overnight fee). The interior was furnished in simple rustic style. There were beds for 12 men and 12 women.

The exact location of the Old Barn hostel has proved difficult to determine over the years, but a number of results have now been forthcoming, thanks to research within the village historical society and the YHA archive, and the clinching discovery of a church-tower view postcard. This places the barn behind and slightly to the south-west of Peirce House or Peirce Farm, the large house with two white gable-ends facing east onto the High Street. The Old Barn and Peirce House can be seen at the left middle-distance in the postcard view below. The barn is standing on

the old Picquets or Pickets meadow, with the school and its playing field beyond. *Charing – a Pictorial Past* published by the Charing and District Local History Society in 2005, has another view of the barn, also shown below, with a comment that it was the youth hostel and once Peirce Farm barn. Further evidence that this was the position of the first hostel comes from local memories relayed by the Society and two pictorial clues – one, that the very tall chimney seen behind Peirce House’s roofline (actually belonging to the farm’s laundry house), can also be seen in the first picture of this profile, and two, the postcard and the *Pictorial Past* photograph shown below both have an irregular sharp angle at the south end of the barn’s roofline.



These two views have helped in sleuthing the location of the first youth hostel at Charing.

- 1: postcard published by J Moody of a view looking west from the church tower. The Old Barn’s distinctive high roofline stands out on the left of the postcard, against the playing fields beyond. Tylden Reed advises that the course of Charing’s projected southern by-pass, completed by 1930, can be traced by the line of white markers above the Old Barn’s roof and helps to confirm the date of the postcard as just before the youth hostel (author’s collection);
- 2: this view of the Old Barn bears a great similarity to that on the previous page, and may well have been taken in the same session. It is interesting to speculate on who the posed characters might be – they perhaps include DH Headley (image by kind permission of Charing and District Local History Society)

There were four editions of the handbook in 1931. All show that Mr DH Headley, of *the Forstal*, Little Chart, was in charge. He was to have a strong influence on both hostels in the village, right up to 1937, and was also seeking improvements to hostel provision in Canterbury late in 1931. He may well have been the local friend of the YHA referred to above. Minutes of 29th October 1931 report a letter from Mr Headley stating that the Old Barn hostel had been closed down for winter, but that alternative accommodation had been provided for four or five persons at a time of one sex. Possibly already overtaken by events, a sketch of the Barn hostel by Chase is dated December 1931, and one of the interior by Willis appeared in the February 1932 edition of *Hiker and Camper Magazine*. Nevertheless, the Old Barn was due to be replaced for the 1932 season, though it may have lingered a little.



1



The Interior

Beautiful Old Barn Hostel at Charing, Kent, not far from Canterbury

2



3

1: a rare postcard of the first Charing hostel, sketched by Willis (author's collection); 2&3: the Old Barn hostel's bucolic interior, shown in a sketch by Willis (*Hiker and Camper magazine*, SYHA Archive) and a lantern slide (author's collection)

## Charing [Picquets] Youth Hostel 1932 to 1937

Picquets, Charing, Kent

Historic County: Kent

YHA Region: London

GR: TQ 952494 and adjoining

A new hostel on the Picquets opened in 1932 and closed after the 1937 season. It was described as a *modern* wooden building with double the number of beds of The Old Barn, though the illustration below suggests it was more likely a cluster of wooden buildings. There were now beds for 25 men and 25 women. This was an accommodation hostel, that is, one not run or staffed by YHA, but privately owned and operated as part of the Association's network.



Postcard of the Picquets hostel. The local spelling is usually Pickets or Picketts (YHA Archive)

In October 1932 Ronald John Hay and Irene Phyllis Murgitroyd were on a walking tour of Kent and stayed at the new Charing hostel. They wrote about the experience in a holiday log, provided here by kind permission of their daughter Mrs Ann Chaplin:

We took the road into the centre of the village of Charing. We did not like the look of the address given in the NCU [National Cyclists' Union] Book but we had noticed a Youth Hostel on the way in, so we went back and asked the lady if she could take us in, although we weren't members. She seemed very agreeable to do so and first showed us over the place – the Ladies' dormitory being attached to the main building, in which was the Common Room, Kitchen and the Warden's quarters and the Men's dormitory in a barn at the top of the garden.

Being fairly satisfied we decided to stay and after a wash filled in the book while the Warden got our tea. We sat down at 4pm sharp to a huge pile of bread and butter and honey and cake and then after a smoke the Warden took us to see the old cottages in the village and we left her to go to a farm now partly in ruins which was once a palace of the Archbishop Morton, first Archbishop of Canterbury. We knocked at the farm but the lady who after much difficulty succeeded in opening the great doors of the barn [the Archbishop's barn near the church?] did not seem to know much about its history, but we said if we could see their cowman he would tell us all about it. Just then he appeared wheeling a milkcart. He reopened the doors and explained the history of the place thoroughly even taking us into little alcoves of the ruined walls so that we might see the bricked in windows.

It was while we stood in one of these corners with the evening sun streaming through the gaps which had once been windows that he said the view reminded him somewhat of Suffolk where he said he was born, and lived the poet Bloomfield who wrote the poem the Blind Ploughman and straightway he began to recite a few lines and seeing we were appreciative carried on and completed the whole poem. It was a scene I shall not easily forget. Thanking him and saying goodbye, we left him wheeling away his milkcart and hurried back to the Hostel, as the evening was chilly. The Warden had lit a stove for us, so we sat in the Common Room reading and by way of a change I went into the garden with the shears and cut the grass and rolled it with a big stone lawn roller I found there. When I returned I was healthily warmed and at about 8pm the Warden got our supper – boiled eggs, ham, bread and butter and cheese and bovril and we all had it together.

[Irene] went to bed and the linen sleeping bags were provided by the hostel. The men's dormitory was a large bare room with cracks in the walls which [I] stuffed with paper in case of the rats. In the morning [I] had to run down the garden from the men's dormitory to the house for shaving water. A good breakfast was ready at 7.30.

The story of the replacement of the Old Barn by these huts is complex and not yet fully understood. Though the account above suggests that it may still have been the Old Barn (with its rats) used in parallel with the new hostel in late 1932, at some stage about then the old building was quite remarkably removed in its entirety and rebuilt about half a mile further south, on Pluckley Road, where it was substantially remodelled as Old Barn House, and remains in residential use today. The ladies' dorm of the holiday log may even have been in Peirce Farm cottage.

The various national handbooks between 1932 and 1937 show variable forms of warden's address and custodianship for the Picquets hostel, which is remembered as being located slightly further south of the Old Barn. In the April 1932 handbook the address was Picquets, near the Post Office, with Mr Headley of Little Chart the warden. Correspondence had to be addressed to him at Little Chart. The October 1932 version differed in directing enquiries to the warden at the Picquets, while requests for larger groups had to be addressed to Mr Headley at Little Chart. This advice held in 1933, but in 1934 Mrs Curtis of Peace (sic – for Peirce) Farm Cottage, Picquets, was named as warden. A later edition, October 1934, now showed Mr Headley as warden at Peace Farm Cottage. The 1935 handbook had Mrs Curtis again as acting warden, while correspondence was to be directed to Mr Headley, now at Old Barn House, telephone Charing 68. Mrs Curtis' address was now subtly changed to Peirce Farm Cottage. These arrangements held until closure. One might surmise from these complexities that over the period 1932-35 Mr Headley planned and organised the removal and re-erection of the Barn to be his own home and may indeed have arranged for the provision of the Picquets hostel. A further liberty with guesswork might suggest that the huts used for the Picquets hostel may have come from the construction site of the by-pass.

In 1937 there was a choice of whether to close the Picquets hostel or to purchase it, the former option being taken. Replacements of a rather more solid form came in rapid succession; the old rectory at Stalisfield Green, a few miles to the north, was opened in 1938, itself replaced briefly by Cuckoo Wood Farm, Otterden in the war, and finally the rather more permanent Doddington hostel in connection with the Stansfield Association at Lady Margaret Manor (1947-1980).



**CHARING.** Youth Hostel, Picquets, Charing, Kent. Mrs. Curtis (acting warden and for bookings). For correspondence, H. D. Headley, Old Barn House, Charing. TEL. Charing 68. Charing Hostel, surrounded by meadows and orchards, near the centre of the village, is simple but comfortable, and well equipped. The Pilgrims' Way is best approached in the Canterbury direction by a footpath not marked on the O.S. 1 in. map. Take the road up to the church and continuing the footpath, fork left to the north-west of Pitt Place (crossing two by-roads) and join the Pilgrims' Way near Burnt House. Charing church is interesting, as it is surrounded by the remains of an old palace, once the residence of the Archbishops of Canterbury,

where Henry VIII was entertained on his way to the Field of the Cloth of Gold.

M25, W25 : PROVISIONS, Hostel and Store \*\*\* : E.C.D. Wed. : MEALS 1/-, 1/2 : STATION S.R., Charing : BUS, Maidstone-Ashford frequent, Maidstone-Canterbury infrequent : CAMPING, limited : DISTANCES, Yalding 20m, Dover 30m, Canterbury 15m.

Hostel details from the Youth Hostels in South East England Guide, 1935 (YHA Archive)

*Overnights – inclusive periods each year as follows*

1931-1938: previous Oct to Sept

♣: Old Barn hostel; Δ: Picquets hostel; ●: last three months of 1937

	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938	1939
...	181♣	openΔ	openΔ	openΔ	919Δ	1035Δ	1035Δ	25Δ●	...

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