



YHA (England and Wales)
Youth Hostel Profile

compiled by the Association's volunteer archivist, John Martin, 2020-01-01

Heol Senni Youth Hostel 1941 to 1949

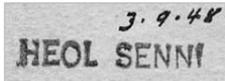
Hostel address: Capel Rhos, Heol Senni, Devynock, Brecon

Warden's address: Birch Grove (or, in 1941: the Stores), Heol Senni, Devynock, Brecon

Historic County: Brecknockshire

YHA Region: South Wales

GR (both addresses): SN 927233



Heol Senni youth hostel opened in 1941. It was housed in a low cottage, *Capel Rhos*, and outbuildings on the south side of the village street. An undated amendment sticker in a 1939 YHA South Wales regional handbook, probably a later emergency issue, has the hostel as *open*, and it appeared continuously as an entry in YHA handbooks from 1941 to 1949, generally labelled Heol Senni (Brecon), a small blessing in mapless and direction sign-free wartime countryside. Throughout its existence, and even in an unconventional form afterwards, it was run by a Mr Clark, and though no record exists of its tenancy agreement, was almost certainly an accommodation hostel, ie, one not owned by YHA but run privately under the Association's banner. *Birch Grove*, a two-storey house opposite, was Mr Clark's private address; he also ran the village shop there. He sold up in 1958, *Capel Rhos* passing to the family of the present owners.

A contemporary hostel diary stated that the men's dorm was a little way up the road. Philip Havard advises that there was once a simple wooden hut, also owned by Mr Clark, opposite the junction of the Devynock road, to the east of the school; this may have been the dormitory referred to. The hut was also used by locals to play quoits, and as a store for the shop. It has now gone and the area is dense with trees. At some stage, possibly after the YHA tenure, the owner put a generator into *Capel Rhos*.



Bristol YHA member Fred Blampied photographed Capel Rhos, Heol Senni's youth hostel, on 4th September 1948; his membership card stamp for the previous night is shown at the top of the page. Birch Grove stands opposite, while the suggested site of the men's dormitory is some distance behind Mr Blampied's left shoulder. The usual paraphernalia of bicycles clutters the front of the building. It is interesting to conjecture where the women might have slept – in the small-windowed loft, perhaps, or Birch Grove, or another of the outbuildings (YHA Archive)

Usage records for 1941-43 are missing; they may not have been published during the exigencies of war. However, RE Hedges' member's card for 1943 is stamped *Heol Senni*. Thereafter, bednight figures were recorded and generally reached about 1,000 each season.

Mr Clark seems to have been at constant odds with YHA for his unconventional hours and disregard for the Association's rules, and of course attracted a number of like-minded dissidents. Part of the tension was that YHA found it difficult to establish here their basic tenet of the provision of simple self-catering facilities as part of their charitable aims to help those of limited means. By 1948, *South Wales Hosteller* was reporting that, at least, Mr Clark was *prepared to instal self-cooking facilities when he can repair the roof*. Reporting in 2007, Len Clark (no relation), future Chairman and Vice-President of YHA, recalled:

...at Heol Senni, near Sennybridge... the warden – another Clark – served large meals late in the evening and this was followed by card games which went on into the early hours. Any attempt by the Region to regulate according to the rules was fiercely resisted and he had a formidable clientele as potential bodyguard.

In the late 1940s Mr Clark's Heol Senni hostel became a kind of renegade *cause célèbre*; letters to the YHA's distant letterpress publication, *London Region News*, pushed it into the limelight, and came down heavily for or against. It closed (or perhaps was closed by YHA) on 31st October 1949. After that date, and as late as 1953, Dennis O'Connell remembers that the premises continued to serve as an independent hostel, perhaps to cock a snook at the national body. In an age when YHA had next to no competition, this was indeed an unusual development.

Capel Rhos is now a private dwelling. *Birch Grove* continues to provide youth accommodation, as part of Hampshire Mountain Centre. After 1949 the YHA continued to be represented by a host of other local hostels, at Forest Lodge (briefly), for many years at Ty'n-y-Caeau near Brecon, at Ystradfellte, at Storey Arms (jointly with Cardiff Corporation until 1971) and from 1972 at the current facility at Llwyn-y-Celyn (Brecon Beacons).



Birch Grove, formerly Mr Clark's address and village shop. This stands opposite the old youth hostel (author's photograph, September 2015)

<i>Overnights – inclusive periods each year as follows</i>									
<i>1941-1950: previous Oct to Sept</i>									
<i>●: overnights in October of the previous year</i>									
<i>1940</i>	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945	1946	1947	1948	1949
...	open	likely use	open	950	1113	1102	849	1022	938
<i>1950</i>	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959
26●