

Tanners Hatch area Youth Hostels

Leatherhead Youth Hostel 1943 to 1946

Old Rising Sun, Guildford Road, Leatherhead, Surrey

Historic County: Surrey

YHA Region: London

GR: TQ 160560



Originally a chapel, for centuries an inn, then a brewery, a racing-stable, a restaurant-cum-antique shop, again a public house and, after 600 years, a 70-bed youth hostel: the Old Rising Sun at Leatherhead (postcard, YHA Archive)

The stories of Leatherhead and Tanners Hatch hostels are inextricably linked. Leatherhead came first, a potent example of the will of embattled Londoners during and after the Blitz of 1940-41 to find a haven of peace for rest and recuperation no matter what the difficulties or personal sacrifices to them in setting up a wreck of a place.

YHA London Region News of April-May 1943 set the scene:

New Surrey Hostel for London Region is one of many New Schemes

Reconstruction by Working Parties Begun

Another old hostelry has now become a hostel in the London Region. It is in an area where the Committee have been seeking a hostel to replace others which were requisitioned and closed to members in 1940. Its nearness to London makes its week-end popularity assured; and its position between Chaldon and Ewhurst will bring to it holiday-makers in the summer.

The fact that the old Rising Sun, at the junction of the Guildford and Cobham roads on the western side of Leatherhead, was vacant was brought to the notice of YHA by the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. Investigation discovered it suitable for use as a hostel, and negotiations were entered into with the owner, with the result that a 3½ years' lease has been taken. Unlike Twyssenden Manor, Goudhurst, which has been opened since the last *News* was published, its position is far from isolated; but it will open up to members a fine stretch of the North Downs – including the National Trust's Box Hill properties and Polesden Lacy, also recently given to the Trust, Ranmore Common and Surrey County Councils' open space of Norbury Park.

Once a chapel

The Old Rising Sun has a long history, for before it was an inn there was a chapel, established in 1358, on the site. In that year the owner, Robert de Ledrede obtained a licence from the Bishop of Winchester for 'making a Chapel in his House at Fetcham, Leatherhead.' Later we read in an old book: 'Near Leatherhead Bridge is an old Chapel now turned into an Ale House, which may, however, supply in Excise more than it ever paid in tenths.' We hope it will receive more in bednights than it ever sold in ale!

More help still wanted

Working parties are already engaged on alterations and repairs, and the hostel should be ready for use by the beginning of May. The work to be carried out is extensive, as the old pub is in a bad condition. Already great improvements have been made. Partitions have been torn down and re-erected, the house has been re-wired for electricity; plumbing, and gas installations for members' washing and cooking is finished. But there is still a lot to do, and further volunteers are wanted. Bookings for any dates after 1st May can now be sent to the hostel, addressed YHA Warden, Old Rising Sun, Leatherhead, Surrey. If requesting beds for a date before the hostel is opened they will, of course, be returned.

The hostel opened slightly behind schedule on 29th May 1943. It was able to function every year until the lease ended after the 1946 season.

Leatherhead.

The repairs referred to above were a testimony to the efforts of numerous relays and parties of ordinary YHA members taking control of their own leisure provision under the most exacting of circumstances and shortages. The efforts put in at Leatherhead, which was always to be a temporary base only, were not wasted, as they served as a training ground for a much more demanding task soon discovered – the resurrection of the ruined cottages at Tanners Hatch, just over four miles to the south-west. Chief among the Tanners Hatch organisers was Noel Vincent, who wrote this fascinating account of his early involvement with YHA and the Leatherhead hostel some 50 years later:

I joined the YHA in 1937, largely by luck; I thought bad luck at the time, but it has got better ever since. As a regular touring cyclist, I had known of the organisation more or less since it started, but rather scorned the sort of places where you had to do your own washing-up, and, as they said, 'sleep on top of one another in iron beds', but two cycling friends persuaded me to come and try it out, using what was called an 'Introductory Voucher' which allowed me to stay a night without having to become a member.

As always in those days before the five-day week was invented, we set off after Saturday dinner, on the long road from London to Oxford in the gathering gloom of a November afternoon. It gathered all right; on the Chilterns we met a heavy snowstorm and got to the hostel in Jack Straw's Lane just before supper-time. The warden told us that my introductory voucher was invalid outside the Region in which it was issued, and as mine came from London, not Oxford, I could either join on the spot or go out in the cold, cold snow. I joined, muttering darkly. Five shillings (25p) was a lot of money then, but as the card was valid for the whole of the next year as well, I thought I might as well use it and get my money's worth. Washing-up, and a few other jobs, weren't as far beneath my dignity as I had feared. After a hostelling holiday in Germany the next summer I quite got to like the idea, so when I saw announcements of the formation of a Kingston Local Group of the YHA I went along to the inaugural meeting and somehow found myself in the chair. I was caught up in the machinery and I had no idea where it was going to take me.

I got married and went hostelling in Southern France just before war broke out in 1939, and that changed everything. It didn't seem to at first. I was in a 'reserved occupation' and couldn't leave it even if I had wanted to. I didn't really want to; I had an interesting job being a boffin in a small back room, even if back rooms weren't bomb-proof, and the YHA was in an interesting state too. In the years preceding the war the membership of the YHA and the number of hostels had grown by leaps and bounds; from 6,439 members and 73 hostels in 1931 to 83,418 members and 297 hostels in 1939. But in 1940 these had dropped to 50,864 members and 236 hostels, and the loss of hostels was to go even further so that by 1941 there were only 170 left. There was gloomy talk of shutting the YHA down for the duration. But the YHA was a resilient organisation and reacted quickly to its losses; publicity campaigns were started and membership began to rise at almost a calamitous rate and by 1943 it had exceeded 100,000. It was understandable, for if you wanted to get away from London or any other good target for a bomber for a week-end there were very few other places left to go. Hotels, pubs with a few rooms to let, the CTC's beloved bed-and-breakfast places, all had disappeared, filled with all the people and businesses that had to move house in wartime.

The YHA's usefulness was recognised by the Government, but that didn't provide new hostels. The number of hostellers per hostel bed available for them, rose from 7.2 in 1939 to 17 in 1944! Then came an invitation to join the Regional Executive Committee, which in those days before the professionals moved in used to run the Region. I was drawn yet further into the machinery, then came the membership boom.

It rapidly became a case of finding anything with a roof into which the members could pack some beds and a warden. No problem for equipment, as the kindly Government allocated it from supplies at the Ministry of Works, but for building work it was quite another matter as there was just no labour available, and there was an immense shortage of timber.

So it became a question of 'Do-it-yourself' and I found myself, with the Kingston Group, running week-end working parties here and there maintaining and extending the existing hostel network. Time passed, then in 1942 came the news that we were negotiating for a property in Leatherhead. We got it on a lease 'for the duration'; it had been a pub, fallen on evil days and replaced by a new one across the road. So early in 1943 the first working parties descended on the 'Old Rising Sun'. It was in a fairly bad state, but most of the roof was watertight, and we weren't too fussy about the rest of it. We appealed for volunteers and I was amazed by the response and the number of people who on Sundays arrived out of the blue to say 'what can I do?' With so much help we were ready to open in May. It had occurred to me that when at Leatherhead I was within an hour's cycle ride of my job, so I volunteered my wife for the warden's position and surprise, surprise, the YHA accepted. It was an interesting, if busy, life and occasionally it was possible to go for a cycle ride on Sunday afternoon, as long as one got back for opening time at five o'clock.

It was during one of these rides, early in the life of Leatherhead hostel, that Noel made the happy discovery of Tanners Hatch, a story that is taken up in the next chapter. Leatherhead was to be the base for the conversion of the cottages, and *YHA London Region News* announced as early as December 1943:

'Black Sail' for London

National Trust lets two remote cottages to YHA – their approach will be Rough Stuff for Cyclists
The YHA has long cast covetous eyes on Tanners Hatch, a remote and deserted cottage near Ranmore Common which, year by year, has been falling into decay, while permission to use it as a hostel was refused. Last year the Polesden Lacey estate, on which the cottage stands, was left to the National Trust, and now not Tanners Hatch alone but another nearby cottage also are to be leased to the Region for a peppercorn rent. Ranmore Lodge, the second of these, is in a passable condition, and it will soon serve as an advanced base for the attack on Tanners Hatch, which is about half a mile east of it. Attack is the right word; weather and vandalism have done much towards ruining a magnificently situated half-timbered cottage, and commando tactics by every available member will be needed to cover the gaping holes in its moss-grown roof before winter rains play more havoc with it.

Work Already Started but More Help Wanted

Working parties will be going out every Sunday from Leatherhead hostel at about 10.30, as it is not possible to sleep at either building yet – they don't own a square inch of window pane between them. If you can help, telephone Leatherhead 3548 any evening, stay at Leatherhead any Saturday night, or turn up there early on Sunday morning. Take your oldest, warmest clothes, food and a bike – Tanners Hatch is four miles from Leatherhead – and if you miss the party call at the hostel for directions, as either cottage is approachable only by footpaths through thick woods. All members must come and help with the biggest working-party job that London Region has tackled yet!

London Region News concluded in September 1946:

Time called at 'Old Rising Sun'

What a pity that one's gains are so often offset by losses! Had it not been for the success of the work done by members in rescuing the 'Old Rising Sun' at Leatherhead from ruin, there would probably never have been a hostel called 'Tanners Hatch'. Leatherhead hostel was taken on a 3½ years' lease at a low wartime rental, which probably took the very poor condition of the building into consideration. A great deal of work was necessary before it was possible to open and the many members who assisted in its reconstruction will view its loss with deep regret. [One reason for the hostel's uncertain future was that war-time projections for new roads in the area threatened to necessitate the building's removal. Instead, Leatherhead's southern by-pass was built by Canadian forces in 1942 and the demolition averted].

It has now had a period as a youth hostel. What next? Prospective purchasers are said to be considering it as Ye Olde Englishe Cake Shoppe, a fish and chip bar and a dogs' home, but in view of the rapid prospect of road-widening, it would seem likely that the final chapter in the history of the building will soon be written. So much for the future of the building. The wardens, Bert and Ann Waters, hope to move into Hannington as soon as this hostel is available, and most of the equipment from Leatherhead is to be transferred there also.

The hostel closed on dates variously given as 7th or 25th September 1946, at the end of its lease; it may therefore have overlapped with Tanners by a few days. Wardens were Mrs Vincent, Miss Marian Rands, and Mr and Mrs Waters. During its brief reign, it was remarkably popular and almost topped 7,000 overnights twice in succession. Subsequent to YHA use it has served as a restaurant (in the 1950s and from 2001) and an antique shop. Despite earlier threats of the building's demise, it has mercifully survived, whereas a 1940s newly-built inn nearby has been demolished.

Tanners Hatch Youth Hostel (initially with Ranmore Lodge) 1946 to the present day

Off Ranmore Common Road, Polesden Lacey, Dorking, Surrey RH5 6BE

Historic County: Surrey

YHA Regions:
London, South-East, South

GR: TQ 140515 (Tanners Hatch)

TQ 134514 (Ranmore Lodge)

Tanners Hatch cottage was in a deplorable condition when taken on in Autumn 1943. The choice of the abandoned and near-roofless wreck by a search-party of YHA adventurers from London Region came to epitomise the spirit of determined amateur expansion within the organisation in the later years of the war, and for some time after that. Noel Vincent discovered the property by accident and YHA members rescued it. The 1944 handbook innocently advised that the hostel might open in that year, but working parties had to labour for nearly three years, often battling with near-insuperable wartime and post-war supply and labour regulations.



1: Tanners Hatch, a seemingly hopeless case, as photographed on 19th December 1943 by Noel Vincent;

2&3: YHA London Region News article of September 1946 –

2: photograph 'as it was' of the north side of the building, ladders at the ready, and 3: 'Tanners Hatch now' (all YHA Archive)

On the Downs lay the 'Upper or South Common', now Ranmore Common, given for centuries to subsistence farming. Tracks crossed the Common, entered upon by gates or 'hatches'. In the seventeenth century there were five here – Snooks Hatch, Wallow Hatch, Hoggs Hatch, Trespass Hatch and Tanners Hatch. In a little patch of ground just outside the common and beside that hatch was a timbered and thatched cottage (or two), which over three centuries later became the youth hostel, though the original need for a cottage there on a problematic site is obscure. The building date of Tanners Hatch is unknown, though it was probably well established in 1614, when the first records appear, and possibly dates from the previous century. The origin of the name is also unknown, though notes from about the 15th century refer to 'land of John Tanner'. Other sources between 1340 and 1530 mention lands at Bookham held by Tanner or le Tannere.

In his own descriptive article, mercifully saved in the YHA Archive, Noel Vincent provided an accurate, revealing and amusing account of the very long and painful birth of Tanners hostel, one which is worth including almost in full, as it so encapsulates the pioneering spirit of sacrifice and make-do-and-mend of YHA in the war years:

One fateful Sunday afternoon towards the end of the year (1943) we were cycling up a muddy lane towards Ranmore Common when we saw an apple tree, with apples on, in what seemed to be an abandoned garden. This required investigation so we negotiated a mass of head-high nettles (in shorts!) and found not only a fruitful apple tree but an abandoned cottage. It really was a mess – roof full of holes, bushes growing in the fallen plaster inside, glassless and occasionally frameless windows, wide cracks in the walls – it was indeed a hosteller's dream, though for a bit it was rather more of a nightmare.

Back at Leatherhead with our load of apples we checked the name on the map then got on the phone to the Regional Secretary, Sunday or not. He didn't sound pleased. 'Have you too found Tanner's Hatch? People have been reporting it for years, but the Hon Mrs Greville won't have a hosteller on the place'. Then his tone changed. 'But she's died and left the estate to the National Trust!' A lot of high-level discussions then took place quite quickly, and the Regional Executive Committee met the National Trust on site to discuss possibilities. It became obvious that there was little room at Tanners for hostellers and a warden, so the Trust said 'Do you want another one?' and led us half a mile through the woods to find Prospect Lodge, where we said yes, and agreed a rent of one pound a year for each building. I think that the Trust thought that they had the best of the bargain.

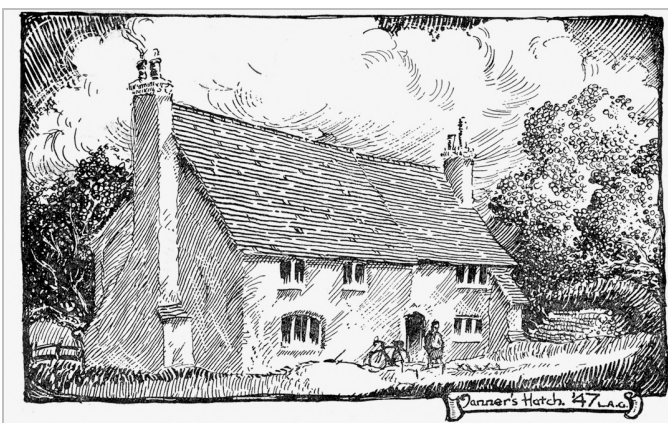
I have just been looking at the lease that was eventually signed between the National Trust and the YHA. It says that '... we may peaceably and quietly hold and enjoy the said premises...' After we had made our preliminary survey of things to be done it didn't look as if we were going to get a great deal of peaceable enjoyment out of the place for some time to come. It actually took about two and a half years to get it ready to open.

On our list of jobs the first and most urgent was 'Take the roof off!' To see why you have to consider how the original building was constructed, some time in the 1500s, with subsequently a subtraction at the west end and an addition at the east end. In the construction of a fairly poor man's house, for that is what it was, economy in the cost of materials was important. As transport was expensive every effort had to be made to use local materials, and these were what was available on or under the site and in nearby woodland.

They dug out a fairly shallow trench on the line of the walls-to-be and removed the top-soil, then laid out a layer of big flints on top of the clay. This was the foundation for a flint and lime mortar wall about eighteen inches high, the lime being made by burning chalk dug nearby in an extemporised wood-burning kiln. Sand would have to be brought in, probably from Dorking – we searched everywhere on the Common for sand and gravel and failed. Then came the oak framework, it wasn't a question of just going out and cutting down a few trees that you fancied, though I feel I can now admit, forty-five years later, that we did a small amount of that ourselves. Trees would have to be bought or dues paid to the Lord of the Manor, then felled, trimmed, barked, squared with an axe or adze or pitsawn, hauled to the site, seasoned (hopefully), then the joints cut to fit all the vertical and horizontal pieces together. Positively no nails were used; though they were probably made locally at Abinger Hammer they weren't cheap! The initial jointing was probably all done with the beams laying on the ground, then disassembled for erection. Those beams were heavy! I'm sure, too that every effort was made to find every available piece of timber from existing buildings, (part of Tanners had been taken down and removed to Bagden Farm in 1614). If one includes this part the original Tanners would have been one room longer to the west, making it a three-up, three-down cottage, though one or more of the rooms could have been used for animals.



1 2



1: a work party tackles the gable wall. Despite some entrenched views from men from time to time, particularly regarding kitchen work, women volunteers very often proved themselves indefatigable labourers with variety in their work, as here. This was no doubt a reflection of the new circumstances of war work;
2: an idyllic sketch postcard by LAG of the newly opened Tanners Hatch hostel (both YHA Archive)

When the framework was up consideration would have to be given to stopping the walls from spreading apart when the weight of the roof came on. As it was a pitched roof it would naturally try to force the longer sides apart, so the top beams of each side, the wall plates, had to be tied together by transverse beams. In modern housing this job is done by the ceiling joists, which tie together the feet of each pair of rafters and are nailed to the wall plates. Even if they could have afforded nails at Tanners, they couldn't have done that as it would have made the ceilings impossibly low, so the two ties were embedded in the walls separating the bedrooms, and were fastened to the wall-plates by immense 'dovetails'.

The rafters were made in pairs and fastened together at the ridge by a mortise and tenon joint with a wooden dowel. There was no longitudinal ridge board and I suppose they relied on the tiling battens – or rather 'thatching battens' – to keep them from moving sideways. The tiling battens, or what was left of them, were nailed on, but I don't think that these were the original ones! The feet of the rafters rested in diagonal mortises in the outer edge of the top of the wall plate, with enough material left to overhang the walls. The panels between the beams in the walls were filled with woven hazel hurdles, plastered with what seemed to be cow-dung and cow-hair (wattle and daub). The ground floors were made from oak planks nailed to beams laid directly on the earth, not a very good idea. The roof would have been thatched with local straw.

Like any house, it needed constant maintenance and modernising. The cow-dung panels would need lime-washing every year or two to keep the wet out, but the main beams were unprotected. Summer sun dried out the partly-seasoned timber and shrinkage cracks opened; winter rains drove in, and even in good English oak, rot began. It spread comparatively slowly, and of course in beams ten to twelve inches square cross-section there is a high 'factor of safety', and evidence of this is that on the northern and eastern sides of the original house the beams are still there after perhaps four hundred years of weathering.

As with many ancient cottages, the south and west sides, more exposed to sun and rain, have had to be entirely rebuilt, rather badly, in brick and flint at an unknown date or dates. Some parts of the wall were only one flint thick. The original wattle and daub panels had gone from the north wall and been replaced by bricks, but on the east wall, now an internal wall and thus protected by the newer building, they were still there. We replaced them with breeze blocks, which now seem to be outdated by more sophisticated lightweight concrete, and will no doubt themselves become of antiquarian interest. Anyway they won't get woodworm as those ancient and malodorous hurdles had. At an unknown date a new cottage, rather wider, was built on the east end, and the thatched roof was tiled, possibly at the same time; the tiles seemed similar. Might it have been in Sheridan's time; was he trying hard to be a good landlord?

But slowly life at Tanners, relative to that in the villages, grew harder and harder. The villagers got hard roads, running water, gaslight, even trains, while at Tanners the mud was as deep as ever, they had to haul up water from a well that almost every year had to be deepened (until they gave up and subsisted on whatever rainwater they could collect from the roof), and lighting was limited to candles and colza oil or paraffin lamps. I don't think that the coalman ever called, and it was a long walk to the nearest shop. Those last years must have been a battle against poor living conditions and a neglected cottage – or pair of cottages. So about 1939 Tanners fell vacant and neglect very rapidly took its toll.

I think that for many years there had been missing tiles and minor roof leaks, and nobody had done anything more than put a bucket under the drips, but in fact a great deal of water was finding its way down the rafters and on to the top of the wall plates. Here it made a series of little puddles in the neat diagonal mortises, one at the foot of each rafter, and soon some of them had no feet. It soaked into and around the great dovetails where the cross-beams held the wall-plates together and they just rotted off. So the weight of the roof took charge and the rafters which had any feet left started pushing the walls outward. This strained the walls on the four corners of the building and they all cracked, in one case right down to ground level; when we came you could put your arm in some of the cracks.

All this had not been helped by the usual fate of an abandoned isolated cottage, it became an easy prey to all comers, even to those only looking for apples. There were vandals even in those days, and about everything breakable had been broken and everything burnable had been burnt. The local Home Guard were said to have shot holes in the roof during war games – maybe a new anti-aircraft weapon – and the jungle had started to take over, indoors. Fallen ceiling plaster mixed with rotting wood and ashes made a nice compost and we had a thriving colony of elder-bushes, including one in the bedroom. Fungi hung like inverted umbrellas from the ceiling. We couldn't make it much worse by taking the roof off, so we did, quickly, before the whole thing burst open.

Perhaps I should say how we organised it. I was nominally in charge, not because I knew much about building when we started, but because I lived at Leatherhead, and I could be there every week-end. An appeal for volunteers went out round London Region and we got an amazing response from YHA local groups, CTC sections and individuals. What we didn't get was a big response from building workers and this was hardly

surprising; most of them were in the forces, and those who weren't were very busy indeed repairing bomb damage, and were disinclined to spend their little free time doing the same job for nothing. But we had enough to be able to run a working party every week-end for two and a half years; sometimes the response was embarrassing and we had to find worth-while jobs and tools for forty enthusiastic volunteers, two-thirds of them girls. Though I was nominally in charge, a group of regulars soon formed and one could count on having competent 'foremen', or should I say 'forepersons', there every week-end who formed a sort of permanent ad hoc planning committee. Among them were our only two professional building tradesmen; George the plasterer and Tom the carpenter.

Both were fine workmen, and, most importantly in our situation, both were excellent teachers with a great capacity for suffering fools gladly – they even put up with me. Tom came every other week-end for the two-and-a-half years by an early train to Leatherhead on Sunday morning, walked up to Tanners with a rucksack full of tools, did a non-stop day's work, and back to Bermondsey and the bombs in the evening. He was well over sixty at the time. He designed and made the spiral staircase up to the men's dormitory; he designed and made the front door from the ancient boards of blackened oak which were all that could be rescued from the old floors. George's visits were more irregular, but he showed us how to plaster and render, how to lay bricks and flints and drains, how to make quite unexpected things from concrete and reinforcing rod and expanded metal.

Usually the volunteers came to stay the Saturday night at Leatherhead Hostel, then after breakfast cycled or walked up to Tanners loaded with tools, food and materials. We worked all day with lunch supplied on the job (the only freebie we got), then cycled or walked and trained home in the evening. If we needed heavy supplies – sand, gravel, cement, bricks, etc – a group who could get there early on Saturday afternoon would take a three-ton lorry hired with driver, load it at the local builder's yard and try to see how near they could get to Tanners before it bogged down and could go no more. No FWD in those days! Sometimes we actually got there, but too often the mud won and Sunday's gang spent their day ferrying a ton or two of sand in rucksacks and wheelbarrows from wherever we had to unload.

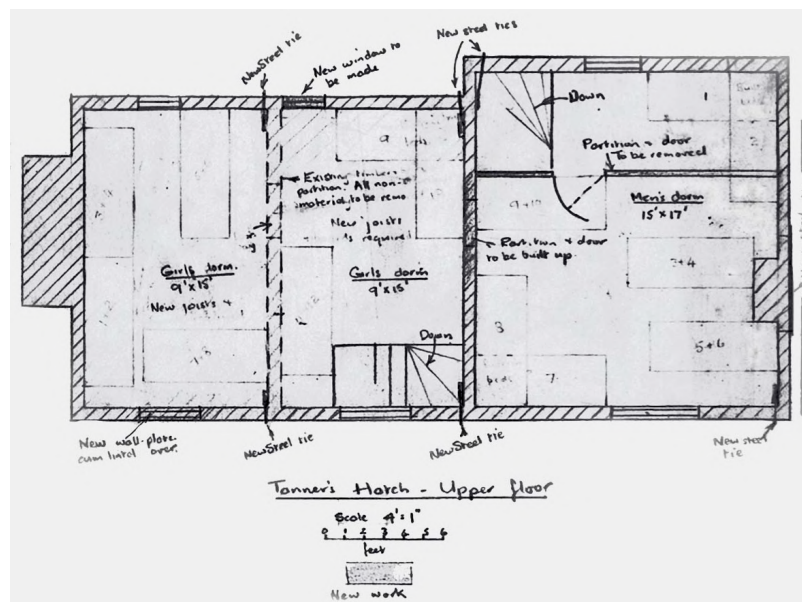
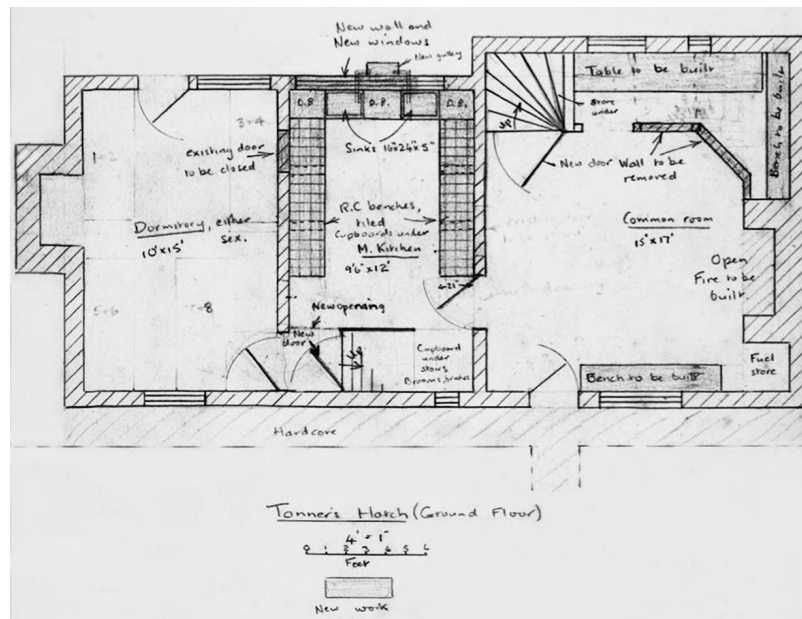
The second building, Prospect Lodge, was a typical Victorian gamekeeper's cottage of flint and brick set just at the Trespass Hatch entry to the common to discourage anyone from using that point to enter the Polesden Lacey estate. It too, had been untenanted for some time, but it was in much better condition than Tanners, so that when we had made it safe by boarding up broken windows and repairing the door we could use it as a store for tools and cement and anything else that had to be kept dry, or approximately dry, as the roof leaked. It was fairly inaccessible by road as it lay about half-way up the disused track from Polesden Farm to the Ranmore Common road. The hatch gate just by the Lodge was firmly closed and locked, so that if one approached it downhill from the common, the return was uphill and you risked leaving the lorry behind. The uphill track to the Lodge was completely blocked by overgrown hedges, but with some luck you could zig-zag up the pasture beside it, which involved avoiding a thousand rabbit-burrows, as this was in pre-myxomatosis days; if you got a wheel down in one you just had to unload in the spot and retreat. If conditions were too bad we could sometimes get Mr Flux's carter who lived in the farm to get out his two immense horses and haul our load up.



1: work party assembled at Ranmore Lodge (or Prospect Lodge) on some unknown task – photo by Wilf Rendell;
2: Tom Smith at work – a London Region News feature article (both YHA Archive)

At Tanners there was a lot of roof activity. The remaining tiles had to be carefully removed and taken down to be stacked for re-use, as they were beautiful old peg-tiles and we, and the National Trust, wanted to preserve the looks of the place. Peg-tiles have no 'nibs' at the top like modern tiles, just two holes through which hand-made wooden pegs were pushed to hook over the longitudinal tiling battens. They stayed up until the pegs rotted or got woodworm or dried and shrunk and fell through; all these had happened at Tanners, and a lot of tiles on the roof were only held in position by moss and dirt, so some care was needed when working on or near the roof.

At the same time we had to consider how to hold up the cracked and leaning walls before they fell over in the next gale. We built solid brick buttresses at the worst points on both longitudinal walls, and we bored holes through the wall plates to take steel bolts to attach them again to the cross beams. I made the bolts while taking my turn at nocturnal 'fire-watching' where I worked, as I then had access to a deserted workshop. To engineers I can recommend cutting 9-foot of 1-inch Whitworth thread by hand as a good way of keeping warm. A local garage then welded them to pieces of angle-iron which were then screwed to the cross-beam with the bolt protruding through the wall-plate. A nut and washer were placed on the end and with a big spanner screwed up as far as we dared. They seemed to be still holding in 1989.



The Leatherhead and District Local History Society possesses a set of eight undated plan drawings of Tanners Hatch and Ranmore Cottage and has kindly agreed to the inclusion of two here, for the ground floor and first floor.

They seem to indicate the arrangements that would have pertained in the earliest YHA years, and show some interesting differences from later arrangements; there were planned changes indicated on them such as the projected removal of a wall in the common room and of a partition and door in the men's (easternmost) dorm.

The two smaller dorms were for women and the westernmost room downstairs a switch dorm for either sex

The other cross-beam and the partition beneath it had both been cut through to make a doorway, so it was no use fastening to that. We devise a primitive roof-truss, with steel water-piping hanging from our new ridge-board and a length of steel cable intended for anti-torpedo nets stretched between the wall plates and tightened with bolts in the same way. If it was good enough for the Navy it was good enough for us. I should comment, with a slight sense of shame, that a proportion of small but essential fittings at both Leatherhead and Tanners

originated allegedly from the scrap-heaps of a number of firms in the London area who trustingly employed YHA members. Someone said 'I don't know how we won the war and did Tanners at the same time!'

In war-time we could buy all the usual heavy building materials without much difficulty; the hard part was getting them there. Timber, however, was just not available for civilian purposes without licences; all of it except for a small proportion of home-grown had to be imported at a heavy cost in lives and shipping and its use had therefore to be strictly controlled. We worked out our needs with great parsimony and put in a request for a licence. I was summoned to go to, I think, Tunbridge Wells to put our case. The official who heard me out seemed to be so stunned by the fact that we were going to do all this with no paid labour at all that he gave us a licence at once. Later on we wished desperately that we had asked for more but we hadn't got the nerve to go back. When we placed the order with a timber company we discovered that there was no picking and choosing of nice bits without cracks and knots, or even of any particular sort of timber. It was all just wood. To fill that modest order we got larch, spruce, hemlock, Parana pine, Columbian pine, Quebec spruce, and something that in my battered working notebook is called 'Reb. spruce'. And some of it looked and felt as if they had only just scraped the leaves off. But in it had to go, camouflaged with a hopeful lick of creosote, and out the ruins of the old roof rose the skeleton of the new. When we had finally felted and battened it ready for tiling we felt that we were getting somewhere.

All the time people were working inside, laying concrete floors to replace the old timber ones, scraping rotting wood off the outside of massive timbers to find out how much sound wood was left (and this was often a surprisingly large amount on an apparently hopeless beam) and then splicing in bits from a beam that really was hopeless to mend the worst holes, cutting away all the loose brick and flint work that bordered the great cracks in the walls so that we could rebuild from a sound(?) base, and then building in with brick and flint right up to roof level again.

We had, however, to face up to the problem of water supply and drains. The underground cisterns at both Tanners and Prospect Lodge had water in when we arrived and we used it. As we had taken the roof off at Tanners it was not replenished, and as the guttering at Prospect Lodge was in a sad state this was little better. We had to start on the endless task of carrying water up from Polesden farm to the two buildings. At the farm they found an old timber yoke to fit over the shoulders to carry two buckets, probably once used by milkmaids, and some unlucky chap or girl would spend Sunday as a watermaid, staggering half a mile uphill with two galvanised buckets, each with twenty pounds of water in, to feed teams of concrete mixers and plasterers and bricklayers, who all need a lot of water.

Our predecessors at Tanners must have had the normal needs of humanity, but we found no trace of an outdoor lavatory or privy and we could only suppose that they did what we did, fled into the woods. What we did find among all the deposits of rubbish surrounding the building was large numbers of little enamel potties, all rusted through. So we had one archaeological fact; numerous children had lived at Tanners since the invention of stove-enamelling. We had to do better, and as there was no room inside either building we had to construct new buildings, away from the main building, as no-one could accept the idea of building an extension, however tasteful.

We worked out the design of a building, incorporating a cycle-shed, essential at a hostel in those days, and two WCs, and built one at Tanners and one at Prospect Lodge. Our supplies of timber had started to run out and we had to rely on judicious 'thinning' of the neglected woodland which surrounded us – at least that is what we called it to salve our consciences. And having designed the WCs and the kitchens we also had to design the drains, and consider what happened at the other end of them. We discovered a hosteller who was a student surveyor and he came along with his office's level to lay them out, ending way out in the woods. To our horror we discovered that some of the trenches would have to be nearly six feet deep.

For our sewage disposal I copied the design of a modern septic tank from a building text book and proudly took it along to the local surveyor for approval. He said 'You know what septic means, my boy? It means poison. You put it in cess-pits!' So we did, one at each building.

I have carefully avoided saying where the water was going to come from for this grandiose project, because that is what we did, adopting a 'God will provide' attitude. And, lo, He did, in the form of information from the National Trust that they were going to lay a water main all round the estate and we could connect to it if we wanted to. If we wanted to! But our enthusiasm was rather damped down when we found that we should have to buy and lay half a mile of pipe to do it; when digging our drains we had learned to dread Tanners' peculiar blend of a thick layer of tenacious clay, amply reinforced with mighty flints and tree-roots, overlaying chalk which had to be quarried rather than dug.

Well, we bought the water-pipe, steel, 1-inch bore, and had all 2½ tons of it delivered to the bottom of the valley. Then fortune smiled again, or maybe it was God; the Trust were having their pipes laid by a mole drainer and not

in dug trenches. We rapidly made friends with the drainage team and came to an arrangement by which they could pull them in if we screwed them together.

For those who, like me, are not on familiar terms with mole drainers, they consist of a wheeled chariot beneath which protrudes a vertical steel blade penetrating perhaps three feet into the ground below. If the caterpillar tractor attached to the chariot pulls hard enough a deep slit is cut in the soil by the blade and more or less closes behind it. At the tip of the blade is a streamlined blob which leaves behind it an open tunnel to be the drain, but if you attach a length of tubing by a chain to the blob it is drawn into the tunnel, and as you feverishly screw them on, another and another. As the French would say had any been present 'Ç'est brutal mais ça marche!' And marche it did until nothing was left to show our pipelines but the scars on the grass. Then we connected up the supply, turned on the tap and rushed up the hill to see the water come out. We had almost stopped panting by the time it did at Prospect Lodge, as there was very little difference in level between the Estate water tower and the Lodge, and until the water got there we weren't quite sure that the difference was on our side.

Then we had to start plumbing, and as it all had to be done in screwed steel, the only system then practicable, a call went out for screwed plumbing fittings, new or second-hand, and they arrived at Leatherhead in rucksacks and cycle-bags. We heard the story of one hosteller who rode past the guardians of a works gate with his baggy cycling plus-fours clanking slightly. We ran our pipes to all the lavatories and kitchens and tried to make provision for draining them to avoid the inevitable freezing-up. At Prospect Lodge, where the warden was going to live and serve meals, it was somewhat more complicated as we wanted to install a coke-fired boiler in the cycle-shed to provide hot water for the resulting mountain of washing-up. We had an Aga cooker installed, and fitted a French window in the dining room so that hostellers could enter directly without depositing a thick layer of mud from their boots in the warden's kitchen, the only other entrance.

During the war years it had become an unusual event for a hosteller to cook his or her own meal, even though the self-cooker's kitchens were there. Special rations were issued to registered catering establishments, which could then serve meals without asking their customers for ration coupons, so that every sensible person took every opportunity to eat out and save coupons for meals at home. The rations to catering establishments were of exactly the same quantity per meal for a Youth Hostel or, say, the Savoy Hotel, though I believe that unsuccessful attempts were made to convince the Minister that Hostellers were likely to be a lot hungrier than customers of the Savoy. So at Prospect Lodge we had to make arrangements to feed all the hostellers we could find beds for at Tanners, made additionally hungry by the walk across.

The French window I mentioned, quite a nice metal framed one, came to us by courtesy of Herr Hitler. As bomb damage increased, so did the work of the Heavy Rescue squads who went out during and after a night's raid to clear up the mess and either to make ruins safe or to pull them down. They rapidly acquired large stocks of more or less damaged building materials, and sold these off at very reasonable prices to all the people who were doing-it-themselves. So after a noisy night at Leatherhead it was round to the Heavy Rescue to see what was coming in that could be of use to us. We bought large numbers of wooden window frames and sashes of various shapes and sizes; none fitted of course (except, miraculously, the French window), so all of them had to be stripped of glass and putty, two corner joints dismantled and the mortises and tenons re-cut to suit the new dimensions, and then all put together again and glazed. We occasionally had such shortages of usable timber that one exasperated carpenter said 'Not only do you want me to make the blooming window frame – you want me to make the wood as well!'

A lot of roof tiles were blown off round Leatherhead, and some of them matched the old ones. During the war new tiles were being made, but they looked like pink plastic, and we couldn't use them at Tanners, so again news of our needs was circulated and we got some surprising lots of old tiles; some we were told came from old houses in Fleet Street. News came from somewhere in west London of a row of dilapidated and untenanted cottages with suitable roof tiles – even now I hesitate to give the exact address. Next Saturday we arrived with our lorry to find that our information was not quite correct, as one still had a tenant. We approached him and asked if we could buy a load of tiles from the other cottages. Suspiciously quickly he named a very reasonable price. We paid him, got the ladder up and got working, fast, helped by the occasional flying bomb droning over. As we were driving home with our loot we wondered who really owned those cottages.

As work went on we had offers of help from other sources. The International Voluntary Service for Peace (now the IVS) sent us a group of volunteers who bivouacked in the ruins at an early stage and did a fine pick-and-shovel job clearing the rubbish of centuries which had piled against Tanner's southern side, and laid a concrete path. A lecturer at the Architectural Association brought some groups of young architects to learn about handling the materials, the hard way. A group came from the London School of Building.

But the backbone of the work-force was just hostellers who needed another hostel and saw this as a way to get it. Probably two-thirds of them were girls – fit young men were otherwise engaged – and we couldn't hope to divide jobs into those suitable for men or women. Women dug and laid drains, mixed and laid concrete, laid bricks and

flints, tiled roofs, carpentered, plumbed (if that's the right word), alongside and often as well as men, perhaps because in wartime a lot of women were doing hard and skilled jobs in industry. But I heard one say one Sunday evening 'Damn good job they only have a one-day working week here!'

We got Tanners so that it was watertight and its doors and windows closed and fastened (the fine new front door with a lock blown off a London Town Hall and all the way to Tanners in Tom Smith's rucksack), and we had to think about furnishing. Double-decker beds were in short supply, but round the hostels were discovered a mysterious supply of orphaned bedsprings which had somehow lost their legs. These were transported to Tanners and built-in beds made using round timber from the woods, usually slightly sinuous. In an excess of 'pack-'em-in' enthusiasm we even put two bunks above the frame, admittedly low, of the door inter-connecting bedrooms. When we wanted banister rails to fit the curly stairs we bent a stiff piece of iron wire to the shape we wanted, and walked through the woods offering it up to likely-looking and very sinuous branches.

All this was approaching the original construction methods which were probably used at Tanners and we needed tools now little used. We had drawknives for barking timber, and Tom produced and used a wicked-looking adze for squaring it up. There was a certain interest among others for 'having a go' with it, but when it was clear that until you were good at it you were very likely to 'be-foot' yourself, we left it to him.

We had no power tools at all; and by hindsight we could certainly have done a number of things a great deal quicker if they, and the power for them, had been available, though it might have led to a heavier usage of the first-aid box. But they were then in their infancy for the amateur, and we had no electricity; even could we have found a generator, it would have been impossible to get petrol. And we had to do without hardboard or chipboard or plasterboard or plastics or wonder glues or emulsion paint or stainless steel sinks because they just hadn't been invented. But in spite of it all, woman- and man-power won through, and also the war ended.

At Easter 1946 after two and a half years of steady work we took the first paying customers (which included one from France), though the hostel was not officially opened until 7th September.

The 'we' now becomes the London Region of the YHA and the hostel warden rather than the working parties, though I don't suppose that they will ever end – at least I hope not if the present working parties get as much fun out of it as we did. There's always something to do at Tanners! Other changes had come that had affected me; my wife had decided to leave me and the wardenship of Leatherhead, and I had decided that I had had enough of being a boffin in a windowless laboratory, so from April 1945 I had been able to devote a great deal more time to Tanners, though other interesting things were happening.

In the spring of 1946 I was spending so much time at Tanners that I decided that I might as well be warden, so I moved up there and was duly appointed. Almost immediately came an invitation from the Union Française des Auberges de Jeunesse to join their staff in order to take charge of a series of international working parties to help to restore their shattered hostel network. I yielded, and after what was probably the shortest wardenship in history, I handed over to my very competent successor (Wilf Rendell), and on 2nd May boarded a train at Victoria station bound for another lot of excitement.



Prospect Lodge (or Ranmore Lodge) was a Victorian cottage leased from the National Trust, in order to provide wardens' accommodation and for a few years a hostel meals service, no doubt even more appetising after a ½ mile trek from Tanners Hatch. In the second photograph Wilf and Joan Rendell and, it is thought, Marian Rand pose with their families at the Lodge. Rumours persist of hostellers staying here from time to time in the early years and membership cards stamped Ranmore Lodge have been seen. The 1944 to 1948 issues of the national handbook called the hostel 'Tanners Hatch and Ranmore Lodge' (both images YHA Archive)

Tanners Hatch, by Wilf Rendell

1946 found me working for the YHA National Office based at Welwyn Garden City. I was a general dogsbody, helping out at the office or at Central London Hostel (Great Ormond St), or as relief warden wherever I was required. A weekend at Leatherhead Hostel with girl friend Joan was our introduction to Tanners. We carried up the food for the working party on the Sunday and by the end of the day I was hooked. Tanners Hatch was definitely for me.

It was with considerable trepidation that I applied for the job as warden. After all, Vincent was a hard act to follow (almost impossible). George Nixon and Tom Smith were still the only two tradesmen around, but there was still a fair number of seasoned campaigners who made me feel very green. They must have felt that they were having a stranger foisted upon them, but everyone was so kind and I was never made to feel the 'Johnny-come-lately' that I am sure that some of them felt I was.

The drains still had to be finished and passed. After a lot of work on the part of me and others I finally got the Dorking Council to pass them. One long stretch of drains went down to the cess-pit in the woods. Stinging nettles grew shoulder high on both sides of the drain trench; the Council official took one look at the nettles and chickened out. We got a clean bill of health for our drains.

Telephonic communication between Tanners and Prospect Lodge was obviously highly desirable. Deserted and derelict army camps on Ranmore Common and Leith Hill yielded up their 'army surplus' rather earlier than was officially intended. About a mile of telephone cable and a couple of telephone sets did the job, and by some freak of performance, without a radio set at either end it was possible to listen to 'Much Binding in the Marsh' on the telephone!

After the hostel was opened, working parties continued and were still doing their stuff about four years later when I left for so different surroundings at Bath [Batheaston hostel in 1952]. By then the emphasis had changed to working for the National Trust on forestry, but the working party theme persisted. The regular visitors to Tanners persisted too, whether as individuals or as local groups, they came back and back again. If my memory serves me right we had one year of over 4,000 bednights and that in a hostel of 36 beds and very little in the way of camping facilities.

To run a hostel and provide meals for numbers at Tanners presented considerable difficulties. Prospect Lodge was ¾ mile off the road and deliveries of supplies were not to be had. We obtained a second-hand motorcycle and side-car, and brought supplies in from Dorking and Bookham that way. We got through two motor-bikes and four side-car chassis in four years.

As I remember I opened the hostel in the summer of 1946 and in January 1947 I married Joan and we set up home at Prospect Lodge, whereupon we became snowbound for almost three months. Still our week-end regulars continued to get down to us and it was a tough but happy start to married life. We kept poultry and goats and were self-sufficient for eggs and milk.

The country of course was wonderful and it was often difficult to realise that we were less than 25 miles from Charing Cross. It was possible to listen to a vixen screaming on a summer night, a sound which scared the daylights out of people until they knew what it was. Early summers found me seeing everyone to bed at Tanners and listening to a nightingale in the scrub between Tanners and Prospect Lodge on the way home. Often on the same walk a badger would blunder across the path in front of me. For a while a little owl became quite friendly and even roosted in the womens' dormitory on more than one occasion.

Joan reminds me of the Prospect Lodge end. She remembers how Stewart Foulds (our area convenor) and I put in the hot water system the wrong way round, but we finally got it right. Women do have unfortunate memories, don't they? At the same time we moved our fuel store and changed it into a bathroom – a great improvement. She also remembers trying to grow strawberries and chasing squirrels off them, endless washing of sleeping bags, wonderful log fires, glow-worms on the path to Tanners and lights of torches and voices in the woods of people who managed to get lost en route to us.

Tom Smith also deserves more than a passing mention. It was Tom who made benches out of split and adzed tree trunks. It was Tom who made gates for Prospect Lodge from oak from the woods. It was Tom who did a hundred and one things in wood for us and remained a good friend to us until his death several years later.

Finally, and with two children, we decided that we had to leave. We ran the youth hostel at Batheaston, and later at Bath. We enjoyed doing both, but we have nothing but fond memories of our time at Tanners.

With the Rendell's move came an announcement, in *Rucksack Magazine* of May-June 1952, that the hostel would no longer provide meals, except for bookings already received.



1 2



3 4



5 6



1&2: London Region Secretary David Buxton provided these rare colour transparencies of Tanners in the early 1950s.

The pile of bricks by the back door suggests one of the many improvement schemes was under way;

3&4: The Harrow and Wembley YHA Group reaches back to the 1930s and has generously gifted its considerable Archive to the YHA. These two photographs of Group activities date from a snowy day in 1956 and a sunnier one in June 1959, when the members included Kath and Trevor Key (2nd left, top row and 3rd left, second row), later long serving wardens of Jordans YH;

5: packed lunches for the day – open air duties at Tanners about 1950 – unknown photographer;

6: undated photograph by Noel Vincent of hostellers leaving Tanners (all YHA Archive)

Meanwhile, the greater emphasis on forestry work referred to above had been outlined in the following article in *London Region News*, September 1950:

Forestry Scheme at Tanners

A forestry scheme has been worked out with the National Trust at Tanners Hatch. It will be the making of a plantation from scrub woodland, the whole process of clearing, fencing and planting to be carried out entirely by members. It is proposed to start work at the beginning of October, and to have working parties of 6 to 8 each week-end throughout the winter, the whole job to be completed by mid-March. The warden, who will be working with members each week-end, will be glad to receive bookings from individuals or groups. It is emphasised that from start to finish this is a job which will show results and will be a job complete in itself.

Len Clark knew the Tanners Hatch story very well, especially in terms of that special air of self-sacrifice and keen co-operation so indicative of the YHA in and around the war years. In his autobiographical sketch *the Passing of a Dream* he recollects:

It always seemed to me that the austerity was readily embraced as part of the greater package of discovery and not virtue handed down from above. There was the bonus of course that the privations were valuable to embellish tales of adventure subsequently magnified in the telling.

The simple fact emerged that this 'deal' paid off handsomely in the early decades as YHA membership grew rapidly, carried forward by an irrepressible enthusiasm amongst groups and individuals alike. At the same time there emerged a sense of part ownership – what a later generation would call 'stakeholders' I suppose – and a natural democracy in the regions. Keen members were in the driving seat. Weekend expeditions by members found new buildings for hostels and patched up existing ones. Occasionally these adventures developed almost a life of their own. Perhaps an outstanding case was at Tanners Hatch, with its magnum opus of converting two derelict cottages belonging to the National Trust on the North Downs. Here the weekend working parties lasted for years and there grew up a reluctance that they should ever be allowed to finish.

Once established, Tanners settled into a routine that could hardly be called easy, but was compulsive. Overnights generally hit the 3,000 to 4,000 mark in the 20-year period up to the late 1960s, though there had been a substantial dip in the early 1950s, possibly a reflection of the Rendell's move and hostellers getting used to self-catering. The bed capacity was reduced from 36 to 30 in 1953, probably reflecting changes in the use of Ranmore Lodge. Hostellers were reminded in 1959 that the only phone was at the warden's cottage, not at the hostel. Furthermore, campers had to take their own cooking stoves and utensils, as hostel facilities were adequate only for those staying in the building.

Tanners turned out to be an ideal training ground for very good wardens, or perhaps YHA was just very canny with its appointments. Among the incumbents at the time, briefly, were Mr and Mrs Arthur Cornford, who moved from Goudhurst hostel to Tanners Hatch in 1954 and subsequently set up a very successful accommodation youth hostel specialising in canoeing at Martham in Norfolk. Jim and Jean Chaplin arrived in 1959 before going on to run Ivinghoe hostel so incomparably, according to Duncan Simpson, from 1964 for some 30 years.

As part of its Hostel Close-up series, *Youth Hosteller* magazine for March 1962 outlined the state of affairs at Tanners Hatch, and highlighted some of the special diary events for which the hostel was becoming so famous:

Gradual improvements are still taking place and the erection of a proper cycle shed is one of the later additions. Although mains water and sanitation are now installed, the hostel is still primitive by normal standards yet its atmosphere is electric and its popularity grows and grows. Last year, for only the second time, more than 4,000 bednights were recorded. In recent years Tanners Hatch has been spotlighted as the base for Epsom and Ewell Group's now famous marathon walk and Richmond Group's night rally.

In the same year, 15-year-old schoolgirl Catherine Hannam entered a YHA competition with her holiday log, and enthused:

Tanners is an absolutely glorious place. We used candles, washed in a little stone basin over the stairs, and could, if we wanted to, sleep in 3-tier bunks.

In Julian Ross's *Tanners Hatch 50th Anniversary Booklet*, prepared in 1996, he recounts how the hostel became more Bohemian in the 1960s under wardens John and Avril Slade. Andy Ive recalled his first visit, age 12, in 1966:

The first people we met were a group who seemed to run the place socially whilst John and Avril ran it as a hostel. There was a dimly lit common room with a huge fire in the grate. After John or Avril left in the evening we would get up to talk, smoke, drink or whatever. There was no camp site then, only a rough hedge and a wilderness beyond. Bottles thrown over the hedge ended up landing on bottles.

Working parties were a regular feature, as it got you a free bednight. I have memories of riding a tractor and trailer around the thick woodland logging and collecting for the fire at the hostel. Other jobs included building the calor gas store and fixing the telephone line to Prospect Lodge. It was worked on a dynamo made of an old pencil sharpener that sat on the warden's desk.

Folk evenings started in the mid sixties, when Croydon group would come down and run an evening, with the summer festival being held in a marquee beside the hostel or on the front lawn.

Graham changed the place in many ways from a haven for the 'in' crowd to a hostel for any crowd.

The Slades were popular managers in 1966, but in that year the most significant warden's appointment so far was made when Graham Peddie took over. Such was the appeal of his wardening style and his bright ideas that overnights grew astronomically: between 1968 and 1972 the following astonishing annual figures were registered – 4,115, 5,788, 6,944, 8,043, 8,615. 35 bed spaces gave way to 40 in 1971, but even so, there must have been many a night when the official capacity was just as officially ignored.

Julian Ross continues:

Tanners Hatch took on a subtly different meaning in the 1970s. This was towards the end of the Hippie era, and according to photographs Tanners assumed the aura of a youthful community. There were still folk festivals and folk evenings, and there still are to this day. The monthly folk evenings (a Tanners institution held on the second Saturday of each month from roughly October to May) and the summer folk festivals were events to remember.

As many as two hundred people converged on the tiny building and its campsite. Hostel beds were almost immediately claimed, tents filled the campsite and then the lawn behind the hostel building. Up to twenty slept in the wood shed. People bivouacked. Music began around eight in the evening, but less established performers often had to wait until after midnight before they got a spot. And there were some very good performers; there still are. Guitarists, players of Irish Pipes and drums, banjo players, harmonica players, flautists, an auto-harp player, and many others; once even a bagpiper. On reflection the common room was a little small for bagpipes.

The folk evenings went on late, sometimes until sunrise. Pete Newman, a regular visitor, recalls one such occasion when music and song finished just as the sun ascended above the horizon; the warden was away, he had been left in charge, and as nothing was happening he went to bed. An hour later Pete was awakened by banging on the door. It was a school party. Before going away the warden had reserved them beds in advance and said that the 'temporary warden' would lead a day of outdoor activities. He still remembers staggering through that day, nodding off at each and every opportunity. Pete also remembers waking on another occasion to hear a crowd of hostellers across the valley calling out Pete Newman in harmonies, no doubt a unique experience.



- 1: a grand retirement party was held in 1998 to mark Graham Peddie's work and retirement after 33 years at Tanners;
 2: Graham (on the right) and new incumbent Gordon Nugent were photographed together;
 3: Musicians at Tanners – 'Après Folk', 2001. The inscription above the door reads: 'These cottages were restored and adapted for use as a youth hostel by members of the YHA, 1944-1946' (photos courtesy of Steve and Diane Poole)

Julian then takes his survey of Tanners into the 'modern era' of the 1980s and 1990s:

As for me, I discovered Tanners Hatch in the mid-1980s. Then it seemed a bohemian outpost, a cosmopolitan colony where the ills of the world could not touch us, a place surrounded by beauty, where a welcome was guaranteed. I forget how many times I made my way down from Victoria to Box Hill on Friday evenings, rattling down in the old slam-door trains then in use, more than once in the driver's cab... Then there was the walk or cycle ride... Finally one was there, just over an hour from central London. The kettle always seemed to be on the boil too.

I certainly missed out on the wildest years. Only the stories remain. But what stories! One of the most extravagant concerned something as mundane as rubbish disposal. It is said that way in the past the Council did try to collect the rubbish. That lasted for a little while, and then they stopped. A nameless warden duly lugged a couple of sacks of rubbish into Dorking and deposited them on the steps of the Council offices, with a note reading 'If you can't collect then I can deliver'. A quarter century of deadlock followed, an epoch punctuated by the digging of rubbish pits.

In 1985 the provision of electric lighting was a major project under consideration, in line with a motion passed at the Region's AGM five years before because of the National Executive Council's decision to ban naked flame lights in all hostels. As an interim measure re-chargeable lamps were provided. The Southern annual report of 1985 stated that of the various schemes investigated to provide electric lighting, the best solution seemed to be mains supply at a cost of the order of £30,000. This was being considered together with the Fire Officers' recommendations. But even in 1991 Noel Vincent commented that Tanners had no electricity, the common-room and kitchen were lit by bottled gas, the dormitories had no artificial lighting at all and you would need your torch.

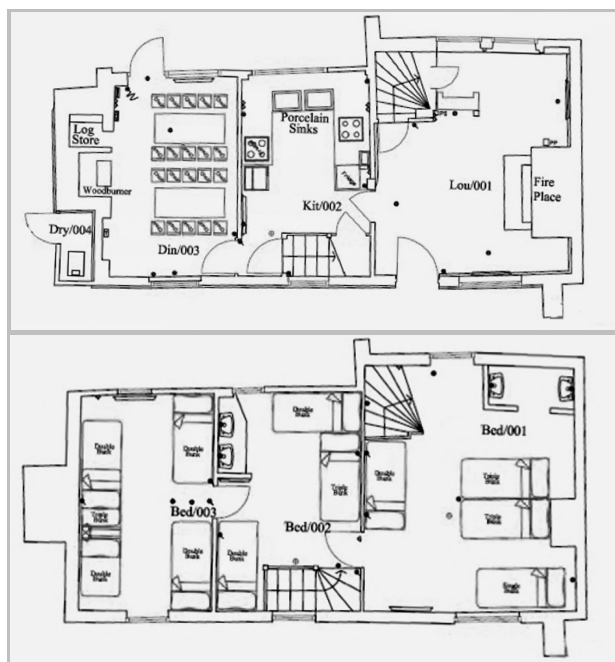
Attention switched to a generator to charge batteries to power the hostel lighting. Low energy light bulbs would need less power. So finally the kit arrived late in 1994, but modernisation created some controversy. Petitions were drawn up to protest, and as a compromise the gas lights in the common room were retained.



*A Tanners Folk badge, a cloth badge and the popular 1960s pin badge.
The Tanners Owl has been a consistent theme throughout the life of the hostel (all author's collection)*

With the YHA's change of emphasis to greater professionalism in the 1980s it might have seemed that a hostel so idiosyncratic and lacking in modernity was out of place. But its charm and uniqueness have guaranteed its progress into the twenty-first century, reinforcing the view that it retains the cherished status of the South of England's Black Sail. In the 1990s a new 21-year lease for both Tanners Hatch and Prospect Lodge was agreed with the National Trust, though Ranmore Lodge was subsequently passed back to that body. In 1995 the capacity was reduced to 28 beds, and in 1999 to 25. Meanwhile, in 1997, a unisex shower was created out of the space for one WC.

Graham Peddie retired after a generation of wardening in 1998. At the end of that decade there was a major refurbishment, including a modernised kitchen and the replacement of the rustic three-tier bunks. Nevertheless, new triple-tier bunks were provided, two in bedroom 1 and one each in bedrooms 2 and 3.



*Earlier twenty-first century plans of the ground floor public room (upper) and first floor bedroom (lower) plans at Tanners.
The bowed walls and two staircases are testimony to the antiquity of the original pair of cottages; originally there may have been a third stair. The inclusion of triple bunks in the bedrooms will be noted (YHA Archive)*

Graham was followed by Gordon Nugent and Martin (surname unknown). Sarah Hart ran Tanners from 2000 to 2009. During her management Ranmore Cottage had to be given up. Louisa Hall was for two years Tanners' first live-out manager, and when Andy Baillie took the post in 2011, after a brief stay by Rebecca Woodley, it was again as non-resident manager, supported by volunteers.



Tanners Hatch hostel has lost none of its rustic charm and simplicity after 70 years, but features many more creature comforts. Pictured above are mid-2010s YHA publicity images of the lounge, bedroom 1 with triple-tier bunk, self-catering kitchen, the toilet and shower block with solar energy collection, and the side of that block showing the bike store and what was formerly an annexe dormitory and is now the volunteer's accommodation and reception desk. Diane Poole adds that the chairs and sofas as shown above were uncomfortable; better examples were rescued from Hindhead hostel when it closed recently



Three generations of membership card stamps, with more Tanners Owls on display. The third stamp celebrates the 70th anniversary of the hostel in 2014-16 and the last is a 1940s example for a work party (YHA Archive)



1



2



3 4



1 & 2: scenes to get the pulses racing – the south and north elevations of Tanners Hatch.

Who could imagine the wealth and variety of the seventy years of hostel life within these walls?

3: this window on the south side of the hostel, modified after the Noel Vincent photograph on page 13, is a uniquely rustic fire escape with partial fold-down ladder, the instructions for which have been added by a joker to the hostel log-book:

‘Did you know that this is the only building where the authorised fire escape is to jump out of the window?’

The author noted with some trepidation in 2012 that the (smallish) jump would be into a rosebush;

4: if there were a tradesman’s entrance at Tanners, this would be it. The white building in the background is the toilet and shower block and volunteer’s accommodation. It houses a variety of ecologically-sustainable measures to lessen the impact of the hostel on the environment (author’s photographs, August 2012)

In 2015 the National Trust agreed to extend the lease on Tanners Hatch hostel, though at the expense of Hindhead hostel, which was returned to the Trust. Consequently, YHA invested £180,000, partly funded by supporters' donations, in renovations and a considerable recasting of the layout over the winter of 2016-17; the hostel reopened in April 2017 with a refurbished lounge and a refitted and rewired self-catering kitchen. The original bedroom layout – rooms 1 and 2 for nine and seven males and room 3 for nine females – was much reduced in capacity, with room 1 now for six females, room 3 for seven males, and a redesigned bijou double-bed room, room 2, at the centre.

To make up for reduced numbers inside, and in line with its policy of expansion of outdoors accommodation, YHA introduced two very substantial canvas safari tents on wooden bases in the grounds at the east end of the plot. Each provides fully for four to six guests, with a double and two double bunk beds, essential furniture and equipment and a wood-burning stove. Pitches allow for 14 campers. A new outside wash-up station makes recycled use of the old Belfast sink from the kitchen.



1 2



3 4



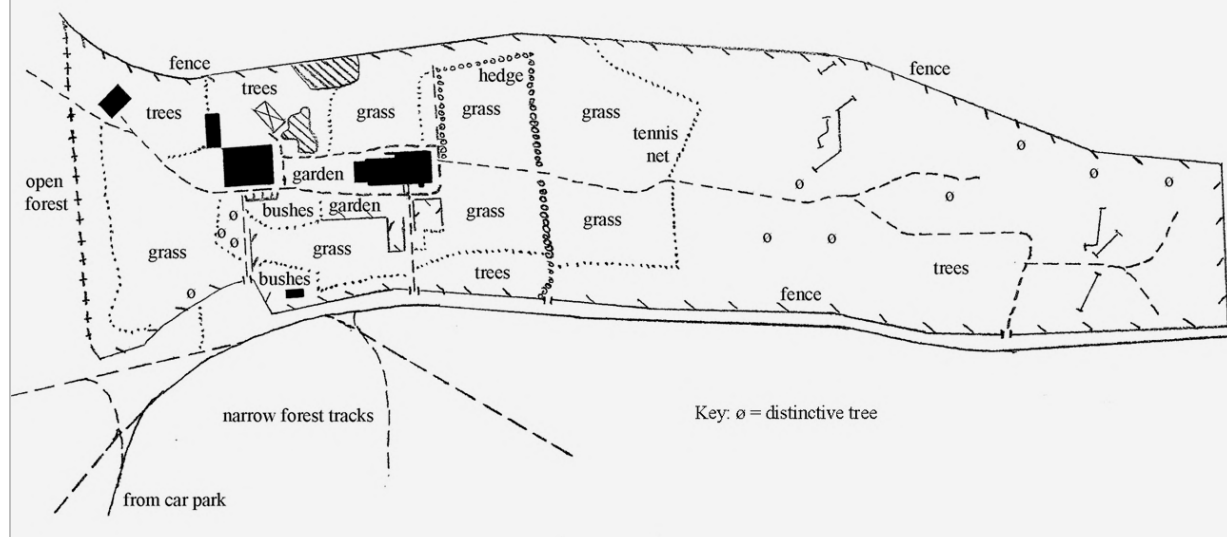
1 & 2: Tanners Hatch's much loved archaic features, such as these carefully restored staircase details, give a constant reminder of the great efforts of local YHA members during and after the war to establish the hostel here. The nation was so short of building materials at the time that the enthusiastic rebuilders resorted to green timber from Ranmore Forest for supports, balustrading and even bed construction. Despite advice to the contrary, it has lasted well;

3: one of the two heated Safari tents, of very substantial build, introduced with the latest hostel redesign;

4: the outdoor wash-up unit, a new feature constructed from recycled materials, including sink and tiles (author's images, taken during a rare bright and sunny spell during a storm-lashed week in the South of England, March 2020)

YHA Tanners Hatch Site Plan

prepared in January 2011 by Clive Allen



Site plan of the Tanners Hatch plot by Clive Allen, dated 2011 (YHA Archive)

Overnights – inclusive periods each year as follows

1943-1991: previous Oct to Sept; 1992: Oct 1991 to Feb 1993; 1993-present: Mar to following Feb

♣: Leatherhead Hostel; Δ: Tanners Hatch Hostel

*: 17 month period; +: notional figure included for exclusive hire and/or camping

1940	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945	1946	1947	1948	1949
...	...	...	2411♣	6365♣	6971♣	6523♣	...	...	...
...	...	...	...	...	...	478Δ	3666Δ	4086Δ	3682Δ
1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959
3395Δ	3627Δ	2664Δ	openΔ	2613Δ	3163Δ	3347Δ	3986Δ	3463Δ	3181Δ
1960	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969
3327Δ	4016Δ	4214Δ	4223Δ	4173Δ	3949Δ	4035Δ	4027Δ	4115Δ	5788Δ
1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979
6944Δ	8043Δ	8615Δ	8362Δ	8261Δ	8603Δ	8956Δ	8193Δ	7884Δ	7517Δ
1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989
6806Δ	5854Δ	5582Δ	5558Δ	7290Δ	5960Δ	6262Δ	7180Δ	6704Δ	6443Δ
1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
6801Δ	5694Δ	6612*Δ	4544Δ	4275Δ	4621Δ	4477Δ	4037Δ	3437Δ	3499Δ
2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
3096Δ	3736Δ	4478Δ	4226Δ	4662Δ	4984Δ	4401Δ	4309Δ	3523Δ	2835Δ
2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
2571Δ	3015Δ	3209+Δ	3496+Δ	3846+Δ	4335+Δ	4052+Δ	3555+Δ	3929+Δ	3951+Δ
2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029
openΔ

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