

Hope, Douglas G. (2009) The outdoor pursuits phenomenon and accommodation provision in the English Lake District c.1930-1997. In: Research FEST 2009, July 2009, University of Cumbria. (Unpublished)

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The outdoor pursuits phenomenon and accommodation provision in the English Lake District c. 1930-1997

A Hundred years ago, mountaineering was the preserve of the upper classes, Oxford and Cambridge graduates, diplomats and professionals. The working classes were more attracted to the seaside holiday resort, as expertly described in John Walton's 'The British Seaside: Holidays and Resorts in the twentieth Century' (MUP, 2000). However, from the middle of the nineteenth century, there was an explosion of interest in botanical societies (to study the area's natural history) and rambling clubs, particularly in the industrial areas of Lancashire and Yorkshire. In the main, the members of these societies were self-educated manual workers, textile operatives and craftsmen.

The so-called founder of the people's holiday movement was a congregational minister Thomas Arthur Leonard, who sought to dissuade the young workers of Colne, Lancashire from going in droves during 'Wakes week' to Blackpool, Morecambe or the Isle of Man and introduce them to the pleasures of the wilds of Pendle Hill, Ribblesdale and the Lake District. In June 1891, he took members of the rambling club connected with his chapel for a four days' holiday to Ambleside at a cost of 21s (£1.05), including the rail fare. The success of this and subsequent holidays led to the founding of the Co-operative Holidays Association (CHA) in 1897. However, he resigned in 1913 to form a new organisation, the Holiday Fellowship, feeling that the CHA was becoming too middle class in spirit and conservative in ideas. After World War I, the increasing pressure for access to the countryside led to the demand for more, cheap holiday accommodation in the countryside. In response, representatives of the CHA, HF, Cyclists Touring Club, YMCA and the Workers Travel Association came together to form the Youth Hostels Association in 1930.

A great deal has been written about the origins of the outdoor movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and there are histories of the early years of the CHA, the HF and the YHA. However, there has been little definitive research into how and why accommodation provision for outdoor recreation has changed during the twentieth century, particularly since World War II.

This research project is therefore looking at how the outdoor pursuits phenomenon has evolved, particularly in the Lake District, during the twentieth century and how accommodation provision has responded to increasing affluence and consumer choice, the changing pattern of demand, changing cultural attitudes and expectations and changes in funding and regulation. It is also examining the extent to which the particular circumstances prevailing in the Lake District National Park have influenced accommodation provision. A detailed analysis is being carried out of: (1) the social, economic and cultural influences on tourism, leisure and recreation during the twentieth century; (2) the impact of the outdoor movement in the UK generally and in the Lake District in particular; and (3) the role and influence of the providers of accommodation for outdoor recreation.

In analysing the role and influence of the accommodation providers, the research is investigating the activities of organisations such as the CHA, HF and YHA, climbing and walking clubs and their use of climbing huts, local authorities and other organisations in the provision of outdoor education centres and the more recent involvement of private enterprise in the operation of outdoor activity centres.

The research project is in its early stages. I don't have any answers, just questions. This paper, therefore, provides an over-view of the subject matter of this research project.

Newlands Mill at Stair, outside Keswick, was the CHA's first acquisition in the Lake District (in 1905). It was Spartan. Early customers were Lancashire Mill Workers but as time went by and a succession of country houses was purchased (there were many redundant and decaying houses available in the 1920s and 30s, and the CHA had 37 centres by 1937), they were joined by country lovers from all classes and from all parts of the country. Following World War II, new centres were acquired and older ones disposed of. However, as the twentieth century wore on the CHA found it more difficult to attract customers, particularly from the 1970s onwards, and centres began to be disposed of. There were five centres in the Lake District: Bassenfell House, near Bassenthwaite Lake; Stanley Ghyll House in Eskdale; Forest Side outside Grasmere, Glaramara in Borrowdale; and Loughrigg Brow outside Ambleside. Four of these centres; Stanley Ghyll, Forest Side, Glaramara and Loughrigg Brow, were still operative in 1999 when the CHA ceased its holiday operation. These properties are now in use, respectively, as a guest house, hotel, outdoor centre and apartments. Bassenfell House was sold off in 1964 and subsequently became a hotel. It is now a Christian Centre.

When Leonard founded the Holiday Fellowship in 1913, Newlands became one of its first centres. The HF developed after 1913 along similar lines and had 42 centres by 1936. In addition to Newlands Mill, the HF has had, and still does run, two centres in the Lake District: Derwent Bank, near Portinscale and Monk Coniston on Coniston Water. Like the CHA, its popularity peaked in the 1960s and began to drop away in the late 1970s. Also, like the CHA, its customers have aged and it has moved away from its origins of providing holidays for working class young men. It now has some 20 centres (incidentally, over half of which are in seaside locations). The majority of its members (customers) are middle class, over 50 and either retired or semi-retired.

The HF, like the CHA, has strived to return to its original ideals. If one examines the holiday brochures of the 1930s, they are very much aimed at the young (and walking and climbing). Youth camps were established in the 1930s, for instance at Wall End Farm, in Langdale and some were re-established after World War II. Newlands Mill was run as a youth centre until the late 1970s. But the HF has had to respond to customer demands and the market and has diversified away from simply catering for the young and active into family centres, special interest holidays and even coach touring. Until the 1970s, CHA/HF holidays were much organised, based on weekly programmes of walks and talks, sleeping in dormitories and communal eating. Now, HF holidays are much more flexible (go as you please) with individual bedrooms and en-suite facilities. Also, gone are the days of, saying grace before meals, Sunday morning prayers, lights out at 10.30pm and a prohibition on alcohol.

The YHA originated in Germany in 1909 but it was 1930 before it was established in Great Britain. In the 1930s, most hostellers were young single men (and some women) of working age. School trips developed in the 1950s. However, from the 1960s onwards, the users of youth hostels began to broaden in age and class. Changes took place, including allowing the use of the car in the late 1960s and the provision of family accommodation. A large proportion of users are now over 50yrs old, although the YHA continues to attract school groups. It is continuing with initiatives to attract more young people to youth hostelling with summer camps and educational

visits.

Barrow House, on Derwentwater, was one of five Lake District hostels in the first YHA handbook. It only lasted a year. The YHA occupied only part of this large house, reportedly the staff quarters accessed from the tradesman's entrance round the back. It subsequently became a hotel but was re-opened as a youth hostel (now called simply Derwentwater) in 1960. It is one of the Lake District's most popular youth hostels.

By the end of 1932 there were 20 youth hostels in the Lake District varying in size and type of accommodation, from large country houses to small cottages, even outbuildings of inns. The number of hostels, nationally, rose to almost 300 by 1939. Following World War II, when the number dropped below 200, the number remained fairly steady at around 270 until the 1980s when there were considerable changes in the administration of the YHA and the hostel network was rationalised in response to changing customer demands: some older hostels were closed, others refurbished and purpose built accommodation opened with smaller dormitories (6-8 bedded rooms rather than dormitories with 20 bunk beds), family rooms, better washing facilities and improved kitchens and dining rooms. There were less than 230 youth hostels by the end of the century. Now you can hire your own hostel and there are YHA guest houses with en-suite rooms, which offer bed & breakfast. In an attempt to cater for those who want to get back to basics, the YHA also offers bunkhouses and camping barns.

In the Lake District, there have been over 60 different hostels in use since 1930, but never more than 26 or 27 at any one time. The oldest still in use is Thorney How in Grasmere, a so-called demonstration hostel opened in 1932. Although the YHA's rationalisation strategy of the 1980s was the subject of major criticism, it had little effect in the Lake District where there remains a wide diversity of hostel accommodation, ranging from Black Sail Hut (16 beds) to Ambleside (256 beds).

There are almost 250 climbing and walking clubs affiliated to the British Mountaineering Council, which currently has 65,000 members. There are only a handful of clubs based in the Lake District but there are a large number of clubs in the north-west and north-east of England. Climbing clubs vary in their constituency; some are still men only. Some are national or international in their outlook and interests and some serve a local area. A number of clubs date from the end of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century (the Fell and Rock Climbing Club of the English Lake District, the FRCC, originates from 1906). There was a resurgence in the post-war period, when many new clubs were formed, and one of the main reasons for joining a club in the 1950s and 60s was to obtain access to a hut (cheap accommodation). More than 20 clubs have so-called huts in the Lake District. These might be fairly large houses, former shepherd's houses or barns and provide varying standards of accommodation. Most are rented properties but some are owned by the club itself.

Local authority involvement in outdoor education centres is another issue being examined. Many local authorities have run outdoor centres since the 1940s. In the Lake District, as well as the constituent councils, principally Cumberland and Lancashire Education Authorities (then Cumbria CC), other authorities from both the north-west and the north-east of England have run outdoor pursuits centres. Many ceased to exist in the 1980s, following changes in local authority funding.

In 1996 it became a legal requirement for providers of adventure activities to undergo inspection of their safety management systems and become licensed. The Adventure Activities Licensing Authority lists some 30 such centres in the Lake District, including those run by local authorities and other organisations, such as Outward Bound and the Brathay Hall Trust, as well as private companies.

A wide variety of information sources are being examined and this is a reflection of the breadth of the subject being studied. As well as literary sources, including a trawl of relevant magazines, and local and central government statistical data, information is being obtained from the various providers.

The YHA has an extensive archive in Matlock (comprehensive collection of annual handbooks, annual reports and magazines: in fact detailed data is available on the history and use of every hostel). The CHA archive is in Greater Manchester Record Office. The HF archive is at its centre in Conwy, North Wales. The FRCC has an archive of annual journals, annual meetings and accounts at the Cumbria (Kendal) Record Office. Many other climbing clubs publish journals and a number have published histories. Contact is being made with every climbing and walking club that is active and makes use of the Lake District huts and with all the adventure centres, including those run by local authorities as well as private companies. It is also intended to use oral evidence to ascertain changing attitudes to accommodation provision.

There is a long way to go!!!!

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July 2009