

### The early years

In an article in the Spring 2013 Newsletter, information was given about the six former MBA maintained bothies which are now only memories and occasionally a mark on a map. One other former bothy might well have made it into the Newsletter article but for some unfortunate events over 40 years ago. The building, Wholehope, pronounced Woll-op, in remotest Northumberland is now, sadly, nothing more than a pile of stones with little indication of its varied past. Wholehope sits at the wilderness end of Clennell Street, a green lane running from Alwinton towards the border, an area largely described as typically beautiful Northern England country, but spoilt for some by the coniferous forestry plantations in the area.

Little is known about Wholehope before WW2, but I have found an entry for the house in the 1911 census, when it was occupied by a shepherd James Cowans, his wife Mary Elizabeth, and family, James, aged 14, also a shepherd, Mathew Ridley, 10, Thomas Edward 8, Andrew, 6, all scholars (that is school pupils although goodness knows on what basis and where they received their education) and Elizabeth Annie, 2. A 14 year old servant, Ellen Young, also lives with the family. Wholehope is detailed as having three main rooms, so it must have been a fairly crowded house with little privacy. Only Elizabeth Annie is noted as having been born at Alwinton, the others all being born further afield in Northumberland. I cannot find census entries in 1901 or 1891, and Wholehope was built of stone walls with a felt and tar roof, so this is indicative, if not conclusive, that Wholehope was built between 1901 and 1911, perhaps the Cowans were the first occupants. Each successive census (they are taken every 10 years) is more informative than the last, and we can read in the 1911 census that James and Mary Elizabeth had lost one child, and three others had left home. Further searching of the 1901 census returns identifies the three to be Mary Armstrong, born 1890, Robert John, 1892 and Mary Kirk, 1894

### Since 1945

By the end of World War 2, Wholehope seems to have been unoccupied, it's availability as a property seeking alternative use came to the notice of a number of live-wires involved in the infant youth hostel movement in Northumberland and by 1949 it was being operated by the YHA(E&W) as a week-ends only simple hostel with volunteer wardens. As a hostel, it may have caused a few frowns amongst the volunteer officials of the Northumberland and Tyneside YHA, and the occasional deep intake of breath at the YHA's distant National Headquarters, but to its regular users from the North East, it was a successful hostel and a much loved, delightful place to spend a weekend. (The many enthusiastic accounts of goings-on on the website referenced below are testimony to this).

And so it continued for in excess of 15 years but by 1967, the recently formed MBA had the property on its radar as a potential bothy in need of renovation. But it was not to be, and when I walked Clennell Street in the late 70s, Wholehope Cottage was a set of waist to chest high ruinous walls with little to indicate its previous use. And even these have not survived, recent photographs on the internet site *Geograph* show that Wholehope is now no more than a heap of stones, although the supporting text clearly acknowledges its past.

Amongst the correspondence I inherited with the MBA records in 1989 were notes and letters relating to Wholehope and I wrote an article for MBA Journal 100, December 1991 with the title Wholehope Hostel-cum-Bothy, based on information supplied by Bob Jewitt, whose son Keith was an MBA member, and the correspondence in the MBA's records. Some correspondence ensued from those who knew Wholehope better than I did, and years later I was pointed at the website <http://www.hipkin.net/wholehope/history.html> which presents a considerable volume of information on the YHA Wholehope Hostel. This article is very much an amalgam of information from the four sources: Census returns, my original article, correspondence from MBA members and the internet.

## Wholehope as a simple hostel

As in my 1991 article, I can do no better than to quote from Bob Jewitt's tale:

'During the period after the war, I was an enthusiastic member of the YHA and with a few friends, I made regular visits to Alnham Youth Hostel. This was used as a base for exploring the eastern Cheviots and on long weekends the walks to and from Kirk Yetholm. What Alnham did not do was to allow us to explore upper Coquetdale and those glorious stretches of hill country on either side of the Border.

By 1948 I was an established member of the Northumberland and Tyneside YHA Council. I looked hard for a suitable building to convert to a basic youth hostel in upper Coquetdale. The only place worth trying for, in my opinion, was a shepherd's house, completely derelict, three miles from Alwinton up Clennell Street and called Wholehope. The Council considered that it was a wild scheme but they agreed to my proposal that a weekend hostel should be established at Wholehope under the following conditions:

1. No more than £50 would be spent on refurbishment;
2. It would be run by voluntary supervisors (i.e. wardens);
3. The repaired building would last for four years.

I called for volunteers to help with the work and had a marvellous response. Bearing in mind that we had to accommodate workers as well as giving them jobs, I had an embarrassment of riches. One weekend there were forty people working and sleeping in a building supposed to hold 12. Anyway the work was done in less time than I thought possible. Its success was a tribute to the idealism of youth.



The hostel opened for business in April 1949 and in mid-summer was officially opened by a local MP who stayed there over night. Most weekends it was full and occasionally it overflowed but nobody complained. We considered it to be a place where 'real' hostellers went and indeed it was more akin to a bothy than a regular YHA establishment. It operated successfully because people were tolerant and helpful. The washing and toilet arrangements were generally those provided by nature and because of its isolation did not offend anyone.

The hostel succeeded in opening up a whole new area of hill country to weekend walkers in all seasons. I will always be proud of my part in that. In 1953, however, I married and left Tyneside for a number of years.

Wholehope was in operation and waterproof when we left but when we returned it was a decrepit place posing as a bothy'.

With other regulars I am grateful to have enjoyed that area before it was suffocated by the Forestry Commission and before the days of mass private transport. Let me take care to say that last remark does not imply resentment against other people owning their own cars but we all know how hill areas and tracks are being degraded by over use. You who are young now have missed a golden age by a narrow margin so enjoy and care for what is left as long as you can.'

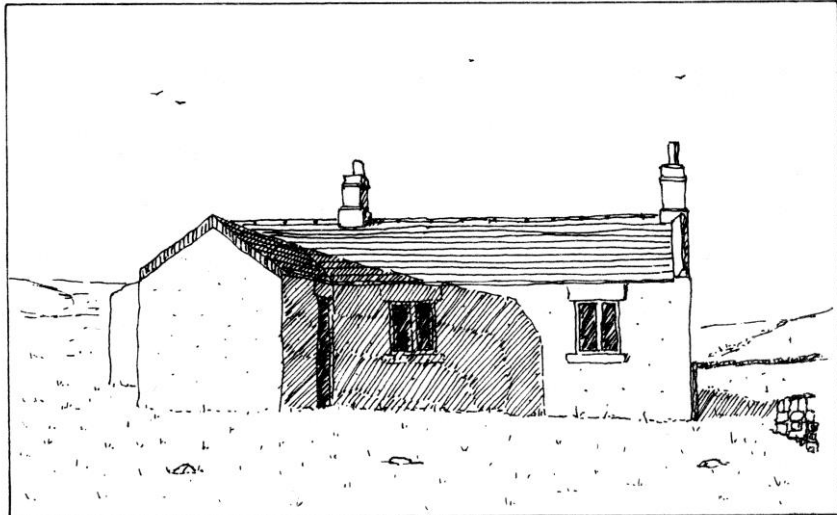
My 1991 article went on to state that Wholehope was used as a hostel for ten years after Bob's departure from Tyneside, but George Brooks wrote to say 'the hostel appears in my YHA handbook of 1957 and appears every year up to 1965. By 1967 it was gone, but so was the Northumberland and Tyneside Region to which it belonged, having been merged into Borders & Dales Region.'

George continues to provide the perspective of the ordinary user: 'I stayed there in those days, although the barn at the Rose & Thistle in Alwinton provided a more comfortable and convenient doss. Hostel details remain constant: open Saturdays, Bank Holidays and Mid-summer only, bookings to Mr Lucas in North Shields. No meals provided, no sleeping bag hire and take your own K.F.S. Kirk Yetholm (SYHA) was a good walk of 17 miles in 1957 but by 1965 this had been reduced to 15 over a Clennell Street by then despoiled by forestry operation. Ferniehurst Castle (SYHA) remained a daunting 21 miles throughout!'

### **Wholehope's short life as an open bothy**

The picture is not clear. It seems that over the last ten years, Wholehope slid from organised hostel status to more of an open bothy.

It is known that some locals dug into their own pockets and paid for some minor repairs under the guidance of Mr Alan Thompson of Wooler. Perhaps disinterest from the enlarged Borders & Dales YHA Region led to a lack of accurate information to YHA Headquarters who continued to list its availability although Wholehope was really no longer a viable hostel.



Wholehope cottage by Stephen Dean, as illustrated the 1991 article

In 1967 the MBA had become established and many of the locals that often stayed at Wholehope, Alan Thompson included, had joined the Association. Major repairs were needed to the building, as many people reported. In February and March 1967 Bernard Heath wrote to the owner, Mr F.T. Walton of Flotterton, seeking permission for the MBA to repair and care for the building. (18 or so months earlier, in the dying days of 1965, Bernard had been instrumental in the creation of the MBA, and he was effectively the MBA's first General Secretary).

Three factors seemed to have sealed the fate of Wholehope:

Firstly, no reply was received from Mr Walton, and then, as now, the MBA would not act without the owner's permission;

Secondly, although from Huddersfield, Bernard had his eyes and heart set on Scotland. In 1967 Bernard was on an extended tour of the Scottish Highlands, taking in such diverse activities as the renovation of Camban bothy, a major undertaking, made even more so by the infant state of the MBA, and the courting of a Miss Elizabeth Taylor, the two soon became the well-known Bernard & Betty at the forefront of MBA activity. There was simply not time in Bernard's life to organise a English bothy renovation project, or even to chase this bothy owner for a response;

The third and final blow came in 1968 when Coquetdale was struck by Foot and Mouth disease. This declared the area out of bound for many months. During this time the winter storms damaged the fragile felt and tar roof beyond repair.

The last known correspondence by the MBA is a letter from Bernard Heath to Alan Thompson.

'Together with three friends returning from the Ben Alder Project over Easter 1969 I visited Wholehope. What a mess! We dug out loads of snow and fallen plaster. We patched up the window in the end room, rebuilt both hearths and spent a barely comfortable and draughty night.

Most of the windows need repairing, both outer doors are missing, and the roof needs refelting. Plenty of visitors have visited have signed the book left there - several have referred to the grand idea of the MBA carried out at Wholehope.'

With that there was no more input from the MBA or YHA at Wholehope. The building fell into disrepair. Mr Walton demolished the building in the 1970s. Not much of the building now remains although you can still make out where the building stood. A pile of stones marks the spot. There is also a series of railway sleepers on end still there, perhaps these where sheep pens. And so Wholehope never became an MBA maintained bothy and so it couldn't be included in my list of lost bothies, although it is clearly, a host of memories to many people.

### **What's the relevance?**

Should this website be about MBA bothies only? If you think so, probably you haven't read this far. Wholehope's fate does underline the role the MBA has played in maintaining the availability of many properties. But these days, bothies do not exist in isolation. One day you can use an MBA maintained bothy and the next a bunkhouse or independent hostel, and the one after that, perhaps an estate maintained bothy. A contrast can be found in Craig bothy on Scotland's North West Coast. It did not suffer Wholehope's fate, it was a home before it was for many years a hostel, and only recently has it become a bothy. I found it interesting to learn that the generation before mine was creating simple accommodation, and to read about it. I hope you too have enjoyed this account.

October 2013.

### **And on an almost personal note**

This is a piece of personal indulgence which I hope the website editors will allow. I was a student at Imperial College 1973 – 1976, and an active member of the Scout & Guide Club. Our 'opposite numbers' in terms of student union activities was the Youth Hostelling Group. And of all the clubs in all the universities, it is remarkable the one that has an account on the internet of a visit to Wholehope Hostel should be the Imperial College Hostelling Group! Please read on if still interested!

From 'Felix', the newspaper of Imperial College Students Union, 19 May 1951

#### **YHA GROUP IN NORTHUMBERLAND - EASTER 1951**

Three exiled Northumbrians, tired of extolling the virtues of their much maligned country, decided to visit the homeland in the Easter Vacations. So after much cajoling, a mixed party of six from Bedford College and IC made the trip, though only on one day were all six members present together.

One young lady, who joined the party a week late arrived wearing an engagement ring, which caused doubts to be expressed about her excuse of having had measles.

The party set off from Alnwick in a blinding snow storm and after a few derisive remarks and aided by some completely unintelligible directions from a local farmer, made their way to Rock Hostel. Fortunately the weather improved and the next two days were fairly dry and were spent exploring the coastline northwards as far as Holy Island. I think we will all remember for a long time the impressiveness of Bamburgh Castle, rising sheer out of the sand dunes, and flanked to the east by a vast expanse of golden sands, left clean and smooth by the falling tide, and the whole mercifully devoid of people.

After dumping the camping gear used in the first two days, the party made its way westwards over the moors to Wooler from where, after a night's rest at the hostel, we set off into the Cheviot Hills. Luckily the weather was fine and clear, but the party was quickly made to realise that distances are vast in the Cheviots and that the lack of conspicuous landmarks makes navigation difficult. The summit of the Cheviot was reached at about 1.30 p.m. and the party lunched by the cairn, completely surrounded by a peat-bog and huge peat-hags.

That evening was spent at **Wholehope Hostel**, one of the smallest and most isolated belonging to the YHA, where the party learnt some of the history and traditions of the Border Country from the Warden.

After the first few days, time seemed to go very quickly and three more days of rough walking, in part along the Pennine Way, brought the party to the Roman Wall, which we then proceeded to patrol in true Roman style, walking along the top in a single file. By now we were in more gentle country and were able to admire some of the lovely scenery along the banks of the North and South Tyne before striking north again across the moors to Rothbury in Coquetdale. From here, those who had not fallen by the wayside departed to their respective homes, feeling perhaps physically tired but all the more able to face the mental rigours of the Summer Term.