

Tanners Hatch 50th Anniversary Booklet

By Julian Ross (1996)



(pictures by Steve Poole)



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This is a story about people. It begins with ordinary people far back in the fourteenth century. The story leads to the early members of the Youth Hostels Association, who grasped opportunities in adversity, and of what these pioneers achieved and left for us, their successors. This account is dedicated to all those who helped restore Tanners Hatch between 1944 and 1946, and to those who have helped maintain the hostel in the half century since. Most particularly this is dedicated to Noel Vincent, the visionary whose enthusiasm underpinned the restoration of Tanners Hatch.

Introduction

Sometime during the fourteenth century, overshadowed by the Hundred Years War, a man we know nothing about built a cottage on the north slope of the Downs, between Dorking and Polesden. The nearest guess we have for construction stands at the 1330s, a few years after Marco Polo died, contemporary with the Byzantine Empire in its last century, Edward III of England and John Baliol of Scotland, and the founding of Queen's College, Oxford. Whilst that unknown peasant put up Tanners, Giotto began to build the famous campanile at Florence. A few years later the Plague swept Europe, leaving dead in its wake a third of the population of Britain.

Six and a half centuries later parts of that peasant's humble dwelling still stand, incorporated by successive rebuilding into the cottage we know as Tanners Hatch. After six centuries of peaceful existence, partly as a dwelling and partly as a barn, it began the busiest time of its long life. In the guise of a youth hostel it has seen several hundred thousand visitors, from nearby and from the ends of the Earth. This is the account of the history of that cottage.

Where? Why? When?

In the Middle Ages the most difficult and unproductive land was frequently enclosed as "wastes" or "commons", used by villages together for grazing, gathering firewood and turf as fuel, and generally used as much as established custom and the Lord of the Manor permitted. On the Downs lay the "Upper or South Common", now Ranmore Common. Then it would have been open grassland, perhaps with bracken, gorse and scattered trees.

Commons needed to be well-fenced or hedged, and Ranmore was no exception. There were five gates or "hatches" - Snooks Hatch, Wallow Hatch, Hoggs Hatch, Trespass Hatch and Tanners Hatch. Just outside the common by the last of these gates someone built a timbered and thatched cottage.

We do not know why the cottage was built. None of the other four Hatches are associated with buildings. It lies on a north facing hillside and must have been cold and damp. The soil is heavy, flint-ridden clay and must have been difficult to cultivate. There is no natural water supply. Perhaps the residents at Tanners Hatch earned an income from the plentiful passers-by: flocks of sheep and goats, herds of cows, loads of wood, pack-horses, and their keepers. And past it lay a route used by Leatherhead's tanners.

Nor does anybody know exactly when Tanners Hatch cottage was built. It must have been old when it was first mentioned in records, a Thomas Wood of Bagden being granted a licence on 6th October 1614 to take down the west end of "his tenement called Tanners" and to rebuild the same at "his tenement called Bagden". One doesn't dismantle a new house. And timber was in

short supply owing to shipbuilding, charcoal-burning, and house-building. A map of Bookham Parish surveyed in 1614 shows Tanners.

What's in a name?

The origin of the name is shrouded in mystery too. Notes, possibly 15th century, record the ownership of an acre of land in the name of a John Tanner. Other references dating between 1340 and 1530 record local land ownership by the Tanner or le Tannere families.

And then there were the leather tanners at Leatherhead. They needed oak bark for their tanning processes, and the shortest route for pack horses to reach the oak woodlands of Ranmore would have been up through Westhumble, past Bagden Farm, and then through Tanners Hatch. There is a local precedent for naming hatches after their users: Hoggs Hatch, leading via Hogden Lane to Bookham, is likely to have seen the passage of many herds of hogs (yearling sheep or pigs).

So it is a case of "case not proven" and the visitor can take his or her pick of what theory to believe.

How was Tanners built?

Tanners was a poor man's house, built in days when only the rich could afford to hire labourers. So the first occupier would have built much of Tanners himself. Economy in the cost of materials would have been important. Every effort had to be made to avoid the expense of transport, so very local materials would have been used.

Agriculture had shrunk the Wealden woodland from around 70% of land area when the Domesday Book was compiled in 1086 to around the present extent by 1349, when the Black Death reduced the population's demand for farmland. The remaining woodland was a valuable commodity, managed for two renewable activities, timber and coppicing. The builder of Tanners could not simply take timber or underwood (the coppice crop of rods and poles), but had to buy them.

First of all shallow trenches would have been dug on the lines of the walls-to-be, and a layer of large flints spread out 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 in a wood-burning kiln nearby. Sand might have been dug locally, or brought from Dorking. Then came an oak framework. Timber was in short supply even then - remember that the common was largely open land in those days - and the necessary trees would have had to be bought or dues paid to the Lord of the Manor. They would have been felled, trimmed, barked, squared with an axe, adze or pit-saw, hauled to the site, seasoned, and the joints cut to fit. And as much timber as possible would have been salvaged, a fate later to befall part of Tanners. Then the framework was assembled, entirely by hand. No nails were used. The original beams remain in the northern and eastern sides of the original house.

Two ties were embedded in the walls separating the bedrooms, secured by large dovetail joints, to prevent the framework from spreading once the weight of the pitched roof was added. Ceiling joists would have made the headroom impossibly low. The rafters were made in pairs and fastened together at the ridge by a mortice and tenon joint with a wooden dowel. There was no longitudinal ridge board and the thatching (and later tiling) battens would have prevented them from moving sideways. The feet of the rafters rested in diagonal mortises in the outer walls on top of the wall plate, with enough material left to overhang the walls. The roof was then thatched. The panels between the timbers in the walls were filled with woven hazel hurdles, apparently plastered with cow dung and cow hair (wattle and daub). Every few years

this would have been lime-washed to keep them waterproof. The ground floors were made from oak planks fitted to beams laid directly on the earth.

The western part of the original Tanners was taken down in 1614, and an eastern part later added, possibly by a new owner of Polesden Lacey as late as the 1840s. The distinctive joint between the two sections is clearly visible in the tiled roof. A stable used to exist just north of the present annexe, and was only removed in 1944.

The price of oak timber rose by roughly 50% above inflation between 1510 and 1690, and the price of underwood rose roughly 75% above inflation between 1540 and 1553. The former was probably due to volume of building and the latter might have been due to colder winters (the "Little Ice Age"), rising population, and rising standards of domestic heating. Together these price rises might account for the demolition and re-use of the western end of Tanners, including the timber and underwood used.

Originally Tanners probably had no chimney. A hearth stone on the ground would have provided the base for a fire in a room extending the full height of the building. A baffle may have separated off a smoke bay in the roof, and a hole or louvres would have allowed smoke to escape. All rather primitive, but at the same time more efficient in use of wood for cooking and heating than a fireplace. Above the hearth stone might have been suspended a hook for a pot. No traces remain, so perhaps this was the section taken down in 1614.

In fact quite a few other changes have been made over the years. These include small alterations, such as adding fireplaces and chimneys and later bricking up the sides of the fireplace in the common room to reduce the grate area and so reduce wood consumption. The gas cylinder shed on the west end of the building was added too. On a larger scale construction of the annexe and wood shed took place to the west of the main building. First floor joists were renewed a few years ago. And virtually all of the work has been carried out in a distinctly vernacular manner, often by the occupiers, a rarity compared to most old listed buildings (Tanners is Grade 2 listed) which have been restored by contractors at often great expense. Tanners remains a truly hand-built, living building.

New settlers and other changes

The 1614 map shows the land around Tanners almost entirely owned or tenanted by the yeoman peasantry. The only "incomer" was Sir Francis Vincent, of Stoke d'Abernon just across the Mole, whose estate extended into Bookham Parish. By the time another map had been prepared in 1797 his descendants had been joined by the Earl of Effingham, who created a large park by Effingham village, by Lady Downe to his south, and by the playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan, who had just bought the Polesden Lacey estate from Sir Francis Geary, Admiral of the Fleet. After the death of Sheridan, the estate was bought by Joseph Bonsor, who built the first part of the present house and incidentally planted 20,000 trees. It appears that he took over Tanners in 1838, and may have been responsible for having the well dug, perhaps to revitalise a tenancy relegated to the status of barn on account of the lack of water. He may also have added the eastern end of the building, now the common room.

After several more changes of ownership Polesden Lacey came into the ownership of Captain the Honourable Ronald Greville in 1906, along with its estates which included Tanners. Two years later he died, and his wife the Honourable Mrs Margaret Greville embarked on a career as society hostess, funded by the family fortunes from McEwan's brewery. She must have had varied tastes as her guests included King Edward VII, King George VI, Queen Elizabeth (now the Queen Mother) and Herr Ribentrop, the Foreign Minister of Nazi Germany! And she was reputed to call the Fire Brigade to mythical conflagrations at three in the morning simply to test their reaction time. What a neighbour!

Cyclists

Cyclists were the earliest regular visitors to the countryside. Perhaps they were like the groups described by Flora Thompson in "Lark Rise to Candleford", witnessed from the vantage point of a village post office: "...*the call of a bugle would be heard, followed by the scuffling of dismounting feet, and a stream of laughing, jostling young men would press into the tiny office to send facetious telegrams. These members of the earliest cycling clubs had a great sense of their own importance, and dressed up to their part in a uniform composed of a tight navy knickerbocker suit with red or yellow braided coat and a small navy pill-box cap embroidered with their club badge. The leader carried a bugle suspended on a coloured cord from his shoulder. Cycling was considered such a dangerous pastime that they telegraphed home news of their safe arrival at the farthest point on their journey*".

But they were not to retain their position as bold pioneer adventurers long. Soon every man, boy and youth whose families were above the poverty line was riding a bicycle.

And all that was thirty or forty years before the first youth hostel opened.

The decline of Tanners Hatch

Nineteenth century improvements to the roads and then the coming of the railways both encouraged the development of built-up suburbs. Meanwhile the rural economy deteriorated. Children who might have shepherded on the common or guarded geese instead learned to be maids or footmen in the big houses such as Polesden Lacey. Other boys might have joined the army or sought employment in the growing towns. Industry developed. In the end the villagers had no choice but to abandon the common lands, and nature took over again. Without pigs to eat the acorns and other livestock to control the vegetation, up grew rose bushes and then groves of oaks and beeches. The development of London had, as it were, made the common obsolete.

The second development, according to Noel Vincent, was more subtle. London, Noel considers, stole the water supply from Tanners. By the early 1800s boring machines made water extraction from the great chalk reservoir below London possible. At first the water came up naturally as artesian wells, and then steam pumps were needed. At first the supply was considered inexhaustible - a mistake man has made enough times before and after - but soon the error became clear. At Richmond the water level had fallen to 1,444 feet by 1884; and it was still falling.

The effect of all this water extraction is startling. I have travelled across Poland and Romania in recent years, relying on wells for much of the water that I drank, and rarely had to haul it up more than ten or twenty feet. Sometimes one could simply lean over the well parapet and scoop up water. Even high in the Carpathian Mountains water was freely available.

When YHA members, Noel amongst them, took Tanners over towards the end of the Second World War they found a well just inside the cottage garden. In 1874 it was measured as 206 feet 7 inches deep, containing 13 feet 8 inches of water. Sounding it out with rope in 1944, YHA members discovered that it was still over 200 feet deep - rubbish had not significantly reduced its depth - but dry. Tanners being only 65 feet above the level of the valley bottom where there might once have been a winterbourne stream (and about 230 feet above the river Mole), the effect of water extraction is clear.

That wasn't the first water supply. A depression, rather like a dew pond, was still discernible in 1943 at the bottom of the track from the common where rainwater would collect. But it could not have been a very reliable supply and would not have tasted very pleasant. So a well was dug,

eventually excavating an estimated 250 tons of chalk, a tremendous task for a no-doubt desperate smallholder working with primitive hand tools and a candle. Presumably it was deepened in stages from perhaps 60 feet to reach its final depth as the water level fell. And the spoil must have been carted away, as there is no tell-tale mound of chalk nearby.

And eventually the smallholder gave up. The thatched cottage roof was replaced with tiles, gutters and drain pipes put up, and an underground cistern installed, probably all paid for by the estate. (The cistern stood to the north of the main building, in what is now the garden, by the fence, and had a hand pump which was still in place in 1944-46). Finally, around 1939, the cottage was abandoned by the last tenant and left to the elements. Decay set in and accelerated.

During 1941 Mrs Greville was asked to release the building for conversion to a youth hostel, but refused on the grounds that it might one day be needed again for estate workers' accommodation. It never was.

Curiously enough, with the decline of industry in London, the water table has risen again. The present warden, Graham Peddie, recalls that a few years ago the top of the well was opened and that stones dropped produced distant splashes. And a patch of ground muddier and damper than the rest of the lawn in wet weather sometimes reveals the position of the old cistern in the back garden too.

The first youth hostels

"There is the will to walk, the will to cycle. But for so many there is not the means. In so many districts, on so many routes, the accommodation is not available save for the relatively well-to-do. Our Youth Hostel movement aims at the remedy of this want. Our object is that the young should walk or cycle. Our method is to supply them with simple accommodation." Thus wrote Dr. Trevelyan in the foreword of the first National Handbook issued by the Youth Hostels Association in 1931.

The youth hostel movement began in Germany, the first ever hostel opening in a small castle at Altena in 1910, the work of Richard Schirrmann. However increasing leisure time and a growing awareness of the countryside were common factors throughout Europe, particularly in the years following the First World War.

It may come as a surprise that the first youth hostels opened in Britain as late as 1931, although we might be envious of the 2s. 6d. annual subscription and the overnight charge of 1s. 0d. On the other hand the YHA would appreciate the chance to obtain new hostels as cheaply again, Maeshafn in Flintshire costing a mere £900 to build. Even that proved a bit steep, and it was resolved to rent existing buildings "providing the cost of renovating does not exceed £50." And the warden's lot could be a hard one on a salary of £50 a year plus profit on the catering. They were tough times, but the first hostellers were tougher: at Winchester "the welcome was warmer in the spiritual than the calorific sense". But by 1939 there were 297 youth hostels open in England and Wales, there being separate associations in Scotland with 64 hostels), Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, and membership approached 800,000.

Youth hostels were not just for the young, at least not in Britain. In November 1941 YHA News quoted a letter in the *Manchester Guardian Weekly* as saying "*Might not even an octogenarian scrape in provided that he was not too skittish, went to bed early, and omitted to sing rude songs?*".

Several hostels preceded Tanners in the area. First was the 49 bed National Demonstration Hostel at Holmbury St. Mary, the first example of modern hostel architecture in England,

opening in July 1935 and remaining a YHA hostel today. The 32 bed Ewhurst Green hostel opened shortly afterwards in May 1936, a gift of the author Sir Philip Gibbs, but sadly closed during the 1980s.

The Second World War briefly reversed the fortunes of the YHA, many hostels being closed or requisitioned and members being conscripted, but there were bright spots. One event significant to our story was the opening in 1943 of a new hostel in the old Rising Sun inn at Leatherhead, just a few miles north-east of Tanners. That brings us back to our story.

Restoration 1944-46

Tanners was built in the shadow of the fall of the Byzantine Empire, though the original builders, now lost in the mists of time, might not have been aware of those portentous events. However restoration took place as Nazi Germany was crushed only a few hundred miles eastward, a struggle with a much more immediate impact on most of the British population.

The first warden of Leatherhead hostel was Noel Vincent's wife, and it was Noel who discovered a derelict Tanners in 1943. I shall let him describe his discovery.

"One fateful Sunday afternoon towards the end of the war 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 Tanners 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 negotiations then took place rather quickly. 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 they had the best of the bargain."

The first job, as Noel recalls, was to take the roof off. Years of penetration by rainwater had rotted the cross-beams until their great dove-tails fell off, and then the roof pushed out until the walls threatened to topple. Cracks had already opened at the four corners, in one case right down to the ground. The remaining tiles were removed and stored, rare old peg tiles each secured by two wooden pegs, and the timbers taken down. Solid brick buttresses were erected to support the worst corners. The longitudinal walls were secured together by a novel method. Holes were bored through the walls to take 1" steel bolts and 9" long bolts welded to pieces of angle iron. These were inserted through the holes, nuts and washers screwed over the ends, and the assemblies tightened with a very large spanner as far as the volunteers dared. Noel still recommends cutting 9" of 1" Whitworth thread by hand as a good way of keeping warm at night!

A long ladder was found able to reach the highest point on the roof. Eventually this was stolen, being recovered by the Police at the site of a burglary in Epsom. Crime, like hostelling, was evidently a simple matter in those days. The other cross-beam, the one separating the dormitories, had been cut to make a doorway. So a primitive roof truss was derived, made with steel water piping hanging from the new ridge board and a piece of steel cable intended for anti-torpedo nets stretched between the wall plates and again tightened with bolts. Quite a few

small but essential items were apparently made from war materials, and someone is supposed to have said at the time "I don't know how we won the war and did Tanners at the same time!".

The more exposed south and west walls had at some point been rather badly rebuilt with brick and flint, some parts only one flint thick, and needed to be restored. Meanwhile the original wattle and daub panels remained on the original east wall, now an internal wall protected by the newer eastern section of the building, and were replaced by breeze blocks (this is now the wall between the common room and the kitchen). Panels in the north wall had already been replaced by brick.

Noel took charge of working parties and put out an appeal for volunteers. There was an amazing response, and a working party was run every weekend for two and a half years. Many men being in the armed forces or employed repairing bombed-out buildings (by then the Doodlebugs were falling), few volunteers were building workers and often two-thirds were women. Sometimes as many as forty turned up on Sundays, eager to help. Most volunteers travelled to Leatherhead on Saturday night, stayed in the hostel, and next morning after breakfast cycled or walked to Tanners. Heavy supplies came on Saturdays in a three ton lorry hired with driver from the local builder's yard - it didn't always make it all the way before bogging down and there was much heavy portage in rucksacks on bad days.

There were only two professional building tradesmen, both working as volunteers. George Nixon the plasterer and Tom Smith the carpenter were both fine workman and excellent, tolerant teachers. Tom's memorials are above all the spiral staircases to the dormitories and the front door, made of blackened oak rescued from the original floors. He was over sixty at the time, and travelled every Sunday from Bermondsey, walking from Leatherhead station.

Tools differed little from those used on the original building. There were draw knives for barking timber, and Tom had a wicked-looking adze. Had an airman had to abandon his warplane above and descended to earth by parachute at Tanners, he might have wondered what age he had descended into.

Prospect Lodge, the warden's home, was in much better condition but still needed renovation. To begin with it became a store for tools and materials. Finally it was restored as the warden's house. The French Windows came from a Leatherhead bomb-site!

A water supply was urgently needed, and drains too. To begin with water was carried up from Polesden Farm, two tin buckets carried on a wooden milkmaids yoke across the shoulders of a luckless hosteller. But the National Trust needed to relay its water pipes, and their contractors were persuaded by Noel and his team to mole-plough into the ground the pipes for Tanners too. In the end 2½ tons of 1" steel pipe were buried, and remain in use to this day. Tanners and Prospect Lodge were plumbed too, and a pair of toilet cubicles built at Tanners. In those days there were only two, and the space in-between (where a line of four cubicles now stand) was the cycle shed. The rest of the annexe came later. A septic tank and drains were built too, and passed by the Council, their location amidst deep nettle banks helping to prevent detailed inspection.

Oddly enough there was originally no toilet at Tanners. Presumably the woods sufficed, as the lawn has done on dark nights since prior to the recent installation of electricity. But, as Noel recalls "we did find amongst the deposits of rubbish surrounding the building 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".

Finally the hostel had to be fitted out. Bunks were needed, but the only spares held by the YHA were orphaned bases devoid of their legs. Never short of ingenuity the volunteers cut round

and often slightly sinuous timber from the woods - commercial timber was rationed - and used the bases to make built-in beds. Two beds were even fitted above doorways in order not to waste space. And all these beds remain in use to this day, making Tanners one of the last hostels to retain three-tier bunk beds. Perhaps it is the very last. And even nowadays someone occasionally turns up at Tanners and tells us how they helped bark the timbers to make the bunk beds.

Memories from Zimbabwe

One of the extended group who restored Tanners, David Shaw, wrote from his home in Zimbabwe to record his memories. He had worked on the project with Noel Vincent.

"The first time I went to Tanners Hatch was on a wet Saturday afternoon. Only Noel and I were present, and the job of the afternoon was to fasten a vertical wall timber to a horizontal roof tie beam. The idea was to prevent the wall bulging further outwards and to enable the remaining rafters and purlins to be fixed and roof tiles put in place. It was important to keep the rain out. Noel produces a length of steel angle with a threaded rod and huge washer - was that courtesy of the NPL? Is that tie bolt still in place?"

[Yes, the rod did come from the National Physical Laboratory, and the bolt is still there. They made things to last in those days!]

"I remember George. First at the Old Rising Sun. He had a technique which could easily be misunderstood until you knew George. 'Who's going to knock up some mortar' says George. So willing chaps start assembling sand and cement. When you thought you had enough George would order twice as much. Those were the days when I could lift and carry a bag of cement without too much strain. Then mix, twice over wet, twice dry - heavy work for office types. Meanwhile George is sitting, fag on lip, watching and giving orders, the novice mixers thinking 'who's he think he is.....slave driver'. George then shrugged on his overalls, finished his fag, picked up his hawk and trowel. Then action, the craftsman doing his thing. The stuff would stick for him; if plaster stayed on a wall for me it was luck. Pipework, woodwork, maybe brick we could have had a passable bash at, but where would we have been without George at Tanners and other jobs too. It was more admirable because he did the same thing during the week.

"Remember the carpenter, Tom Smith? We, the chicken house chippies, got on with certain jobs if and when timber was available, but Tom would sometimes say 'Please leave that to me'. To the left of the common room fireplace was a steep spiralling staircase. Several people said to Tom 'Shouldn't we have a handrail there? Someone will fall!' Nothing got done; until we were one day walking through the beech woods when Tom said 'Stop'. He had his tools with him and sawed off part of a Beech branch, took it back to Tanners, and offered it up.....Voila! The perfect banister rail. I hope it has lasted fifty-one years. [It has.]

"For heavy jobs Cliff Holland and some others could be called up. Cliff revelled in jobs which needed muscle. Don't forget that there was no electric power, and even if there had been there were no readily available electric sanders, planers, saws - things that we are now so used to. A concrete mixer would have been useful too. Food rationing continued after the war and, looking back, I marvel at how we stayed fit on two ounces of meat and one egg a week.

"Lorna Joseph worked on a mosaic YHA triangle on the steps down to the hostel but since it was done in brick pieces I doubt whether it survived under those walkers' size elevens.

"Draining boards, kitchen surfaces and the like were made of mortar over expanded metal. Noel coined the phrase 'the woodmakers'. We used old hostel beds cut up for various purposes

including brackets for WC cisterns. It was a great event in the early days when we got a water pipe across the dip from Polesden Lacey.

"The Tanners Hatch project provided me with bits of knowledge on bricklaying, plastering, tiling, woodwork, plumbing and estimating which have stood me in good stead over the years; not only in the YHA London Region Buildings Committee and other hostel jobs. We have just built a retirement cottage. It is very similar to our cottage in the mountains in eastern Zimbabwe which has now had over 4,000 bednights with family and friends. From what I learned at Tanners and other DIY, various builders have assumed that I was in the building trade.

"In the rebuilding of that place in the North Downs there was a synthesis of leadership, fellowship, resourcefulness, creativity and delight in the beauty of that area. It met the need to turn away from the war. That, and the exuberance and enthusiasm of youth. Noel Vincent brought them together.

Meals cooked by the warden

Nowadays Tanners is one of the few hostels where meals are not prepared by the warden. But it was not always so. During and after the Second World War rationing was in place, and coupons were needed to buy food. Except that is when one ate at a registered catering establishment, which received special rations. Tanners in due course gained the necessary registration, or rather Prospect Lodge did as that was where meals were prepared, on an Aga cooker. All establishments gained the same rations per person, so Tanners and the Savoy Hotel were able to serve the same amount of food per person. This did not prevent enterprising hostellers from attempting to convince the Minister that hostellers were likely to be a lot hungrier than customers at the Savoy. Alas, they were not successful.

The Fifties and Sixties

On a clear day a visitor ascending Leith Hill a few miles south of Ranmore and Tanners, Surrey's highest point, will be struck by the view. To the south the Weald lies, a sea of trees stretching twenty miles to the low wave of the South Downs. Northwards Ranmore forms a solid bulwark topped by Ranmore church's slender spire, pierced only by the Mole Gap, beyond which London is arrayed in a saucer of land spreading to the distant Chilterns. Nowadays tower blocks are spread as stark grey rectangles throughout London; in the past the city would frequently have been hidden beneath a soupy blanket of smog. Ranmore was, and is, the first obstruction to the southward growth of London, a beach of clay and chalk upon which waves of suburbia dash themselves and are broken. Ranmore is the signal that London has ended, that the countryside has begun. Nestled in Ranmore's folds lies Tanners, for half a century the first outpost of rural life for members of the YHA in south London.

Tanners must have presented an idyllic impression to visitors in the 1950s. In those days London suffered smogs and working hours were still long. Few people owned cars, and anyway you couldn't stay in a hostel if you drove there. Even the concession of allowing motorcyclists to stay at hostels had provoked bitter complaints from die-hard members. Tanners was then, the preserve of hikers and cyclists. That's just how it looked in a 1950s photograph. Rucksacks lie about and half a dozen bicycles, all three speed models, are propped up. A vintage canvas tent stands newly-erected on the lawn. It must be a Summer view as most hostellers wear baggy shorts and long socks - even the girls, a change from the 1930s when, as photos show, they were still expected to wear skirts. The countryside looked subtly different in the 1950s too. Nowadays there are more trees and shrubs. Then the land was barer, and the hostel garden was one great rough lawn.

In 1950 and 51 a forestry scheme was worked out with the National Trust and implemented by volunteer YHA members. Scrub woodland totalling 2½ acres was cleared, planted with beech and larch, and fenced to create a new plantation. A screen of trees to the north side and various individual original trees were retained to maintain the view from the Box Hill - Great Bookham Road. YHA News dated December 1951 reassured members that the aim was not "regimenting the countryside in dark square masses of spruce", and noted that larch would act as a nurse crop for the more natural vegetation of the hills. (The same edition also gleefully noted that several members of the National Countryside Commission had got lost on Kinder Scout whilst walking part of the Pennine Way - obviously the countryside was quieter in those days!)

The second warden, Wilf Rendell, did have a motor-cycle and presumably not even traditionalist members objected as supplies of food were brought from Dorking and Bookham in Wilf's sidecar. The rough trackways wore out two motor-cycles and four side-car chassis in four years.

The 1960s became more bohemian. Then a boy of twelve, **Andy Ive**, recalls his first visits during 1966.

"I first visited the hostel in the summer of 1966 with my sister. 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.

"The walk to the hostel was always muddy. Summer or winter, you were in 3 or 4 inches of mud from whichever direction you came. The floor of the hostel was tiled, no matting at all, permanently muddy. The phrase of the day was 'all's fair in love and war, darts, bar billiards, and a seat by the fire at Tanners' - you got a seat and fought to keep it!

"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.

"It was not all such evil treachery. 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.

"We once had a fire building competition in the common room that made it so hot that we all had to stand in the kitchen until it cooled down enough to go back.

"Pit digging was always another working party job, and I can recall at least five pits over the years behind the woodshed where all rubbish was buried - we even used 'black powder' to dig one!

"J---- once made a Bolas of rope and a stone, which he whirled around his head with the rope getting longer, till the stone flew out of the knot, through a glass window, and hit the warden on the head. It was about this time that the group of people got banned and told not to come back. Which they did not do until 1994 and 95.

"Folk evenings started in the mid sixties, when Croydon group would come down and run an evening, Pete Twitchet, Mick Freemantle and Chris Woods, to name a few, 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. Not altogether a bad change, but my life for one was shaped by those early years.

From then on.....

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.

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 the sun always shone, and 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. How slowly the speedometers crept up to 60 miles per hour as we bounced along surrounded by solid 1950s technology. Then there was the walk or cycle ride up through Westhumble, past Chapel Farm, along the dry valley in the golden light of early evening, and finally along the bumpy bridleway from Bagden Farm. Sometimes there were poppies in the corn. A thin grey column of smoke showed that there was still life at Tanners. Whitewashed hostel walls showed through verdant foliage, then one passed a row of tents behind rickety timber fencing in the campsite. Finally one was there - just over an hour from central London. The kettle always seemed to be on the boil too.

Once snow had fallen and the only train took me to Bookham. What an eerily beautiful walk it was, bathed in brilliant moonlight, that winter night. Tanners, of course, had no water the instant the weather froze, so we had to melt snow for drinking water. The toilets had frozen too, and we took care not to collect and thaw any snow streaked with yellow.

I think that I must have met people of several dozen nationalities at Tanners over a few years. French, Dutch, Germans, Italians, Czechs, Slovaks, Poles, Hungarians, Romanians, Russians, Americans, Canadians, Australians, New Zealanders, people from African countries, the West Indies, parts of Asia, from Pacific islands.

I certainly missed out on the wildest years. Only the stories remain. But what stories! I shall have to quote a couple of the most extravagant, which concerned something as mundane as rubbish disposal. Back to the older hostellers.

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.

It must have been sometime during the 1960s or 70s when a new rubbish pit was needed. A succession of festering blots within the hostel grounds, these rubbish-filled hollows several yards across stood immediately west of the woodshed in a space now covered with bare earth and occasionally used for fires. There being no vehicular rubbish collection, so with deference to the archaeologists of the future the stuff was buried in a shallow pit. As is the way with pits of limited volume it duly came to be filled. It was time to extend and deepen it. One winter morning the warden asked a group of the regular hostellers to undertake the necessary digging. Or perhaps he told them, for digging in flint-laden Surrey clay is back-breaking work. And then he left them to it as he had business away from the hostel for the day. However the previous generation of hostellers was not without ingenuity. In fact their inventiveness seems to have exceeded their sense of self-preservation, because someone was duly despatched to Dorking to procure a supply of weedkiller and sugar. Icing sugar, because that gives a better explosion. Amazingly the appearance of a dishevelled man with a rucksack seeking to purchase these ingredients did not arouse suspicion. Or if it did the search parties went elsewhere. By the time our intrepid forebear reached Tanners his sapper friends had presumably pickaxed a suitable pilot shaft into the unyielding ground. The charge was prepared, tamped down, fused, and the shaft plugged above it. And then I expect they sat down on a log and enjoyed the anticipation over a cup of tea.

With a flash and a bang the ground erupted and flinty clods ascended in great number, silhouetted blackly against the leaden sky. With a thousand thuds they fell to earth, crashing through foliage. Furtive faces reappeared from behind cover, and figures slunk up to examine the stinking crater. After some hurried tidying it met their expectations. And then, as the late afternoon gloom closed in and they returned to the hostel to light the fire and brew more tea an awful realisation dawned. The hostel roof was spattered with clay, cast far and wide during the formation of their nice neat pit. And it wasn't long before 5 o'clock, and perhaps the warden was on his way already. The first spots of rain fell, fanned by a rising breeze, and the light faded. The warden duly came, and later remarked that the gamekeeper had been up to something, as there had earlier been a loud bang. And it rained heavily that night, softening the outline of the new pit, moderating its starkness. And, more fortunately, washing every trace of clay from the roof.

A number of travellers bivouacked at Tanners over the years. Most recently were Gerard, a South African pilot on walkabout, and a hardy young New Zealander called Sharon. For a while it seemed inevitable to meet one or the other at Tanners, so much so that walking up the track one scanned the leafy campsite for their faded tents. Gerard had made his own tent, and made candles too. He worked at a local farm, and Sharon worked at Ryka's café at Westhumble. That job almost seemed tied to Tanners resident antipodeans for a time. For one reason or another Sharon got her leg pulled a good deal. One night someone filled her tent with logs, and she soon discovered who. In due course the culprit's bicycle disappeared. Three days later he found it - twenty feet above his head, tied to a bough of a tree.

Voices from the past

The hostel log book gives a telling insight into the thoughts of past hostellers, their interests, concerns and happinesses. I shall quote a few comments, which were written since 1975.

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"Beware! It is a well-known fact that the warden of this hostel will eat anything that does not eat him first."

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Wild life at Tanners

<u>Date</u>	<u>Wild life seen</u>	<u>Where</u>
13/9/75	Ferret	Girls' dormitory
15/9/75	Fleas	Men's dormitory
15/9/75	Cockroaches	Kitchen
15/9/75	Spiders	Loos
16/9/75	Pink elephants	Path from Ranmore Arms
16/9/75	Brown trout	Cess pit
17/9/75	Malarial mosquito	Loos
17/9/75	Crabs	Blanket pile
17/9/75	Woodworm	Everywhere
18/9/75	Colorado beetle	Graham's potatoes
19/9/75	Blue bottles	Common food shelf
19/9/75	Bed bugs	Laundry basket
19/9/75	Book worm	PTO
20/9/75	Cholera bacterium	drinking water
20/9/75	Lizard	Wash basin - annexe
11/12/75	Sloth	On settee in front of fire

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"Give me the luxuries, And I can dispense with the necessities."

Oscar Wilde, London 1878

"Give me the necessities and I can dispense with my begging bowl."

Mark Taylor, Tanners 1975

"Please leave a little food on the common food shelf today."

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The 18th day of FEBRUARY anno domini 1976

Tips for cycling in this area

1. Buy a new bike
2. Eat a lot of Mars Bars
3. Don't bring the kitchen sink
4. Wear your cycle clips
5. Avoid hills (up)

6. Only go down hills
7. Keep to the road
8. Learn to drop your ankles *
9. On no account wear yourself out
10. Go to Holland

(* See books at Ewhurst Green Youth Hostel, e.g. "Let's Go Cycling")

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"I'm writing this slowly because I know you can't read fast."

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"Now is the happiest time of your life."

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

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Endangered species #23

(This entry was illustrated by a biro sketch of a grimy hiker with woolly hat, rucksack and boots.)

Species: Tanners Hatchian Homo Sapiens

Habitat: A yet undiscovered hideout in darkest Surrey

Eating Habits: Anything that doesn't move.

Natural habits: Calling out "Someone put the kettle on!" or "Anyone got a fag?"

Is often seen scavenging for fodder on a place called common Food. Can be distinguished by his distinctive smell as no showers or baths are provided. If you want to approach this creature quietly offer him a cigarette or a hot meal. The leader of the herd is an animal called Graham. He is the fiercest of the species and is often heard to shout "BED!" at the top of his voice. But he can be quite tame if treated carefully.

Nigel xxxxx

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"Nigel xxxxx: the world's first case of Athlete's Breath!"

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Psychedelic stew

3 cups vegetable stock

1 lb potatoes

1 lb carrots

½ cup barley

1½ cups cooked brown rice

10-14 Amanita Muscaria mushrooms (commonly called Fly Agaric)

Combine all ingredients except mushrooms. Simmer until barley is cooked. Fry mushrooms in plenty of butter until soft and then stir into stew. Serve with large slices of granary bread. Bon voyage!

[Noel Vincent suggests that the anonymous writer has made a mistake in naming "Magic Mushrooms" and that eating Amanita Muscaria might result in illness or fatality. Bon Exit! You have been warned!]

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Epitaph

*"When I am dead, say only this of me.
He's had his last free cup of Tanners tea."*

Albert West, 1980

Electricity comes

Tanners might easily have gained electric lighting in 1946 had a supply been readily available. But there was no local supply, so gas was used for lighting. At the time this was probably not unusual. Some of my relatives relied on oil lamps in Worcestershire into the 1950s. Gas continued to provide the main source of lighting at Tanners until 1994, a period of 48 years. It was not always the sole source of lighting. Tilley Lamps were for some time used in the dormitories, where there were never gas lights, and candles were used too, until safety regulations prohibited these means. So, until 1994, it was "torches only" in the dormitories. Although I can now admit to using a Tilley Lamp in the annexe as late as Winter 1994, when staying there alone. It hung conveniently from a broom handle spanning the gap between a bunk bed and the window sill.

Plans were presumably made to electrify Tanners for a number of years. There were ideas to run a cable from Polesden Lacey. And then, when the cost of that was calculated to be rather high, attention switched to a generator. Technology moved on, and it became possible to use a generator for an hour or two a day to charge batteries which would power the hostel lighting. Low energy light bulbs reduced the power requirement. And finally the generator, batteries, control panel, wiring, lights and so on arrived during Autumn and Winter 1994.

It was a controversial plan. Members who knew Tanners as a refuge from a noisy, busy, technological society were asked, or rather told, to accept an infusion of modernity. At least two petitions were organised to protest. However electricity seemed to be a *fait accompli*, and retention of at least the gas lights in the common room was agreed with the YHA. The traditional atmosphere of Tanners has been retained.

The future

There have been two periods of vital importance to the history of Tanners Hatch as a youth hostel. The first period was the restoration between 1944 and 1946. The second took place during the first half of the 1990s, for it has been during this period that the modern YHA has come to terms with Tanners Hatch and begun to understand its unique position.

The YHA underwent a considerable transition during the 1980, from a volunteer-run organisation to one administered and operated on commercial lines by a professional staff. It was not a straightforward or painless change, and the new YHA probably negotiated more obstacles than it needed to. Investment in facilities and expansion of staff numbers coincided with recession in the British economy, and the resulting need to find cash to pay off newly-acquired debts led to the closure and sale of some much-loved hostels. At the same time the YHA discovered that it still owned an anachronistic old hostel in Surrey, called Tanners Hatch.

Quite how the new management discovered Tanners Hatch is not recorded. Perhaps someone wrote to National Office to complain that, unlike the expensively modernised city hostels they were used to, it didn't have this facility or that luxury. Or that the dormitories were cold in the

winter. (Were they cold! It was warmer camping!) Or was it the doing of a Hostel Standards Inspector? I met one crusty old inspector at The Ridgeway hostel in the early 1990s, boasting how he was going to put a bad report about Tanners - it wasn't his sort of hostel. Who knows what happened? Tanners had been noticed, and someone had found out that it didn't really conform to the new YHA's notion of modern hostelling. One almost sensed that Tanners was viewed with distaste.

It probably took some time for the strengths of Tanners to become apparent to the YHA. To start with, it made an annual profit, something certain larger and more modern hostels didn't achieve. And it was supported by a fellowship of long-term users who had, over the years, carried out a great deal of maintenance work. And paid for a good many overnights. In fact Tanners still offers a unique experience, close both to nature and to traditional hostelling. Eventually the penny dropped and the YHA started to see these characteristics as assets, realising that opposition to modernisation stemmed from impassioned defence of things perceived virtuous, and that complaints were frequently penned by members who hadn't bothered to read the YHA handbook before visiting Tanners. Two things stick in my mind as illustrations of this change of heart. First of all permission was granted to replace the modern plastic YHA logo on the front of the hostel building with the old metal logo. And then it was agreed that the old gas lights could be kept in the common room despite electricity being installed throughout.

A new 21 year lease for both Tanners Hatch and Prospect Lodge was agreed with the National Trust, securing the future of both for the foreseeable future. Coincidentally the National Trust had celebrated its centenary just a year after the 60th anniversary of the foundation of the YHA and a year before the 50th anniversary of Tanners opening as a hostel.

There are still things to be done. A wood-burning stove is planned, providing hot water via a back boiler to be circulated to heat radiators in the dormitories. A bit of warmth up there will make a big difference, and will make good use of the heat which at present just vanishes up the chimney. The chimneys themselves will be lined internally to improve safety, although the concrete linings will be invisible to visitors. More gas water heaters are planned to provide hot water for washing, and there is talk of even converting one of the toilet cubicles down the garden into a self-contained shower.

Suddenly, with all this talk of heating and hot water and showers, Tanners begins to sound vaguely modern. But I don't think it ever really will be. The facilities being added are really quite basic. When originally opened as a youth hostel Tanners did not lag far behind the majority of hostels in comfort and facilities. And many people still lived in homes without running water and inside toilets. However other hostels moved on whilst Tanners stood still in a time warp. The danger was that Tanners would become so backward that members would eschew it outside the warm summer months whilst burgeoning EC regulations would mount up and eventually condemn it. Now Tanners is moving forward to a position simple in relation to most hostels whilst offering the amenities necessary to attract continuing custom. Its future is secure. Long may it remain.

Postscript by Steve Poole (January 2010)

I have been going to Tanners Folk sessions since 1991, a mere novice compared to others. The sessions in the early 90s were very quiet, and I knew nothing of all those far flung stars and stalwarts, like Andy, Sean, Paul, Pete, Noddy, Lorna, Sue, Sylvia, Sarah, Ned, Tricky, Tim, John and others lost in the mists of time. Many nights we would play on, Graham Peddie (the warden) snoozing behind his counter in his 'designer' jumper, waking occasionally to sort out a drip on his nose. It was convivial and a bit weird. Sometimes the room would be full of smoke – either from the fire or fags – and I would be gasping. Then, in 1998 Graham retired. There was a big gathering and lots of people from the past reappeared, having been absent due to family duties, travel, migration or work.

What a tremendous session we had! There was music, toasts and tears a plenty, and for the next few years we had some great Tanners sessions. I always think of the wardens as Time Lords like Dr. Who. Graham set up a drop-in centre for homeless and unemployed people in Leatherhead, and a few years later was awarded an honour. Gordon was the next warden and set to work making the place spick and span. Next up was Martin, a nice young chap who was between somethings and took to the music. One night we wrote a song called Snoring Blues, using the sound of Bob's snoring coming down the stairs as a metronome. I have never laughed so much.

He left and Sarah came in as warden and stayed until 2009. We still had some good times but the YHA was hiking up the costs and we were no longer able to afford to hire Tanners for a weekend for our exclusive use. Now, for the first time, we have a non-resident warden, Louisa, who is supportive of the music. So, we still have Tanners Folks 3 or 4 times a year, usually February, May, September and December. It is still a place where everyone can have a go at singing or playing, and egos are left at home. There is nothing like the place!

