

Helen says: I have been sent the following article and photograph by John Reason about his exploits at Bucklebury. I would be very interested if anyone has any further information about the Youth Hostel at Hill Foot Farm and many thanks, John, for this information.

YOUTH HOSTEL AT HILL FOOT FARM, BUCKLEBURY

It had begun to snow at lunchtime on Saturday 18th January 1941. I, a young 16 year old, had gone to work at 7a.m. on that morning, as a relief switchboard operator at a department of the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital at Stanmore in



Bucklebury - Hillfoot Youth Hostel 1936

Middlesex. I had only started work the year before and was training in accountancy, but was asked to fill in on the early Saturday shift until 3.30 p.m. There had not been an air raid, doubtless due to the bad weather, so I had not had to rush over to the boiler house on receipt of "air raid warning red" to operate the wailing siren – just another of the little jobs I was expected to do.

I cycled to work daily from my home at Bushey to the Hospital in the birch woods on Stanmore Common, via the back entrance, although the main gate was at the top of Brockley Hill, where the A5 Roman Road, Watling Street, came past from Marble Arch on its way to Holyhead. In fact I cycled everywhere. The year before, at the time of Dunkirk, on my brand new, red, lightweight bike, I had done a 3 day tour through Wiltshire, Hampshire and Dorset to stay at the Youth Hostel at Swanage, where at that time one could hear the guns from France.

But back to that Saturday in January 1941- the cycling club, the South Bucks DA of the Cyclists Touring Club had a regular programme of rides on both Saturday afternoons and all day Sundays, that weekend it was to be tea at Chalfont St Giles on Saturday and lunch (we hoped) at a pub at Compton on the Berkshire Downs on the Sunday, so that we could explore some of the Ridgeway.

It had been decided the week before that we would go on to Bucklebury Youth Hostel after tea and meet the others at lunch on Sunday at Compton.

At 3.30p.m. on that Saturday, I said goodbye to the switchboard and cycled home – changed into shorts – collected sheet sleeping bag (lightweight = Egyptian cotton) and other necessities – 1 egg safely wrapped in one of Mother's egg cosies – 2 rashers of bacon and two slices of bread – just enough for a frugal breakfast – tea etc would hopefully be available at the Hostel. Then it was off on the usual route via Rickmansworth – not too much snow on the main roads but once into the lanes it had built up to 6 inches and was beginning to drift.

At the crossroads by Newlands Park entrance – then a teacher training college, now a very interesting Museum of the Chilterns – I braked and went flying but no damage and on to tea at Stacey's Tea Shop in Chalfont St Giles, opposite the pond. This was an institution – cyclists' teas for 1/3d – a mecca for all the cyclists from far and wide. Not many riders turned up for tea, only George Hewitt and myself decided to brave the elements and carry on to Bucklebury.

And so we set off – a very dark night with lots of snow everywhere. Our route took us through Beaconsfield, Marlow, skirting Maidenhead and joining the A4 Bath Road at Knowle Hill – through Reading and on to Thatcham. The Bath road almost completely deserted, which was just as well as George, who was not a very steady rider, fell off several times, much to his annoyance but, again, no damage done. Once into the lanes after Thatcham, it all became rather difficult – a very dark night – lots of snowdrifts – pathetic wartime hooded cycle lamps giving hardly enough light to read the map but after quite a few false starts, more by luck than judgement, we found ourselves at Hill Foot Farm. No lights showing anywhere and too dark to see the notices, if indeed there were any. The door to the farm house was not locked – we crept in and found ourselves in a rather nice sitting room with the remains of a fire in the large inglenook fireplace. We called out to no avail and then managed to find two mattresses and some blankets, put them in front of the fire and turned in. Needless to say we slept like the dead until a very surprised Warden found us next morning in her sitting room. We apologised for being late (it was after 12 when we arrived) and said we had tried to wake her – she said she was very glad that we hadn't! Apart from that she didn't seem to mind at all. I had been determined to make it and George (my mentor) was happy to go anywhere at weekends rather than his bed-sit at St Albans.

In the light of day Hill Foot Farm looked very different – we found the Men's dorm in a large barn out in the farmyard – the women slept in the house. And so we sorted ourselves out, despatched the egg and two rashers and set off through the drifts towards Compton – no exploration of the Ridgeway possible – just survival. Compton was not very far away but quite a battle to get there and I cannot recall if we managed to get some lunch. But I do remember that as we were about to leave and head for home, brother Les arrived, having ridden from home at Bushey – probably all of 50 miles – just another weekend.

I see from my Youth Hostel cards that I stayed at Bucklebury for a total of 4 times during 1940 and 41 – the last being the 20th September 1941, a short time before it closed. Whilst out walking a few years ago, Dorcas Ward discovered the farm and found that the old farm house had been demolished and replaced with a new model – a pity that.

John Reason