

SUBURB Style

Suburb
Style editor
Deborah
Warland,
talks to
residents
about some
of their
favourite
things



Deborah
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SUBURB

Hostel

featuring Sarah Knox

Hands up those who are aware of the large, attractive Grade 2 listed building situated near to the Heath Extension – which is home to more than 50,000 overnight visitors a year. Located in Wellgarth Road, this unique residence is owned and operated by the Youth Hostel Association (YHA). The YHA is a registered charity whose primary objectives are to help all, especially young people of limited means, to enjoy a greater knowledge and care of the countryside, and to provide the means of exploring the ‘great outdoors’. Although far less well known than it was some 50 years years or more ago, the YHA still has over 300 hostels in the UK including one in London’s Oxford Street! It is part of a worldwide movement, with some 4,500 hostels in 60 countries.

The Suburb hostel started as a Nursery Training School when it was built in 1916 then changed it’s title to College after the Second World War when it became one of the founder members of the Association of Nursery Training Colleges. In 1970 the College had 36 children in residence. Then in July 1979 the premises were acquired by the YHA (for a reputed £500,000), and were officially opened as a hostel by the botanist David Bellamy in 1981.

Sarah Knox is the hostel’s current manager. Having taken a degree in geography, Sarah was initially attracted to a career which involved nature rather than being enclosed by four walls – although she accepts that her current post involves as much city life as it does nature. She is quick to point out that the training for her job is much the same as that for the hotel industry – including the necessary skills for dealing with guests whether they are 7 years old or 70! Yes, despite it’s name the Youth Hostel Association welcomes guests of all ages, be they part of a large group, a family unit, or someone who arrives on their own. Sarah says the only drawback for some of the older guests who may have been used to living on their own for some time, is the reality of having to share a room if they are not prepared to pay for single occupancy (a double en-suite at Wellgarth Road costs £48 including breakfast). Recently one guest mentioned to Sarah that she was somewhat surprised that the elderly lady she was sharing with felt it necessary to sleep in her bicycle crash helmet!

The majority of visitors to the local hostel are groups of youngsters who arrive with a tour leader. This leader is very important as they are responsible for the behaviour of their party. As Sarah wryly remarks, “If we have trouble with a group we find that if we wake up the team leader in the middle of the night to tell them about it, that trouble is unlikely to re-occur.” Although the largest number of visitors are from within the UK, overseas numbers are increasing. France and Germany account for the major percentage but Scandanavia and Eastern Europe are both on the rise. In September the Youth Orchestra of Kazakhstan were staying at the hostel while on an arts visit, booked by EMI Classics, they still managed to find the time to play for other guests in the hostel lounge. A Russian party on a sports tour took immense pleasure in playing some cricket ‘in the nets’ on the heath with local school children.

There are some remarkably brave visitors, such as the Japanese teenager who arrived speaking hardly one word of English, with his copy of the ‘Lonely Planet’ Guide to London in Japanese tucked under his arm. He made it to Wellgarth Road by pointing at the appropriate page. Recently Sarah witnessed a highly successful youth initiative which was filmed for the television programme ‘Do it 4 Real’. 11-17 year olds staying at the hostel were encouraged to take part in live arts activities over a seven week period, which culminated in a performance at Swiss Cottage. She was delighted to witness this at first hand as it involved so many different ages, backgrounds and nationalities and as she says, “The joy of youth should be meeting others, not sitting in front of a computer playing games.”

In her limited spare time Sarah is now taking a Post Graduate Diploma in Management at the Open University, while she and her team try to ensure that their growing number of guests from around the world leave with positive impressions from their stay on the Suburb in Wellgarth Road.

A word from Style’s Editor

With the centenary of the founding of the Suburb rapidly approaching (in 2007), I am very keen to compile some experiences of those early years, ideally from residents with any personal or family memories. I would therefore like to hear from anyone who has lived on the Suburb for 70 years or more and has records of family members who were among the early residents. If you can assist, please let me know by writing a brief note to Deborah Warland, 58, Southway, NW11 6SA. At this stage please do not go into any detail as I intend to contact all those who respond in due course, I would be grateful if you could supply a telephone number. Thank you.