

The History of the HF & CHA Founder

The legacy of Thomas Arthur Leonard, founder of co-operative and communal holidays and Father of the open-air holiday movement.

Thomas Arthur Leonard, who founded the Co-operative Holidays Association (CHA) in 1893 and the Holiday Fellowship (HF) in 1913, was described on his death in 1948 as the Father of the open-air holiday movement. This article seeks to show that this epitaph is no under-statement.



Memorial tablets were erected following his death in 1948 on the slopes of Catbells, near Keswick in the Lake District, on Conwy Mountain near the HF Centre 'Bryn Corach' and on a small hill overlooking the Conwy Valley (Cadair Ifan Goch).

The photograph above is of the memorial tablet originally erected on Conwy Mountain and subsequently relocated within the grounds of 'Bryn Corach', and which now resides at the HF's Centre Newfield Hall, Malhamdale.

By common consent, the CHA originated in 1891 when Leonard, Minister of the Dockray Square Congregational Church in Colne, Lancashire, took 32 members of the church's social guild on a four day's holiday to Ambleside in the Lake District. Leonard sought to dissuade the young workers of Colne from going in droves during 'Wakes Week' to Blackpool, Morecambe or the Isle of Man and introduce them instead to the pleasures of the wilds of Pendle Hill, Ribblesdale and the Lake District. The following photograph of that first holiday group is taken from 'A Hundred Years of Holidays' edited by Robert Speake, a long serving CHA Member, and published to celebrate the centenary of the CHA in 1993.



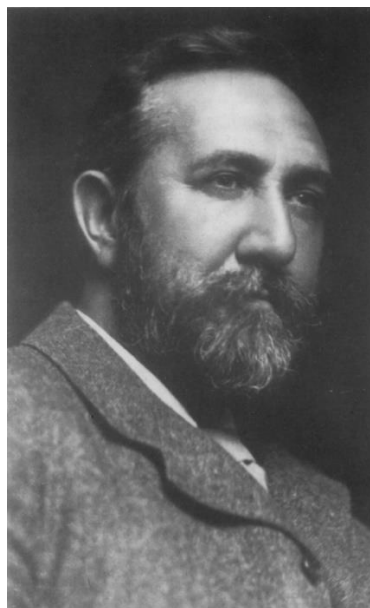
Ambleside

This group photograph taken in 1891 shows the Colne young men's "democratic" Guild on their first visit to Ambleside. T. A. Leonard then a young Congregational Church minister is in the second row, fourth man from the right. It has been recorded by J. Hacking who later held office as financial assistant that "After a tramp to Ambleside (from Lakeside) we reached our headquarters at Smallwood House and settled down finding for each day some special point of interest." This was part of Leonard's Social Guild work before his association with the N.H.R.U. There are no records extant for this period but the Colne and Nelson Times of Friday, August 7th 1891 reported a sermon by T. A. Leonard on "Laking" in which he spoke about the philosophy of holiday making and taking holidays sacredly. "Speak to the earth and it will teach thee," he said.

The Lake District

In most references to the origins of the CHA and HF, Leonard is described as the Reverend T A Leonard, a congregational minister from Colne, Lancashire, and the image presented is of an elderly Victorian gentleman. The following photograph is taken from David Hardman's *History of the Holiday Fellowship: 1913-1940*, published in 1981, which also appears in Harry Wroe's more recent *Story of HF holidays*, published in 2007.

What else do we know about Thomas Arthur Leonard, the man, and of his many achievements?



T A Leonard, Founder of CHA & HF, 1864-1948

According to his birth certificate, Leonard was born in Finsbury, London on 12 March 1864, at 50 Tabernacle Walk near John Wesley's first chapel on City Road, Finsbury. His father was a clock and watchmaker; Finsbury and neighbouring Clerkenwell being centres of clock and watchmaking in the 19th century. His mother was the daughter of the eminent congregational minister, John Campbell, minister at the Whitefields Tabernacle on Tabernacle Row just around the corner. Leonard, therefore, inherited a Congregationalist tradition.

Leonard's father unfortunately died when he was five years old and the family moved to Hackney, where Leonard's education included trips to Heidelberg in Germany, an experience which sowed the seed for his interest in International relations. Little is known about this phase of his life, but Census Records show that by 1881, the family had moved to Eastbourne, where Leonard's mother ran a lodging house. Leonard worked as a builder's clerk and it was at Eastbourne that he met his future wife, Mary Arletta Coupe, a Sunday-school teacher. His leaning towards the congregational church led him to enrol in 1884 at the Congregational Institute in Nottingham, newly established by Doctor John Brown Paton, a pioneer of educational and social reform. Subsequent events confirm that J B Paton's undoubted influence on Leonard shaped the character of the future CHA and HF.



T A Leonard, aged 18 years, at Eastbourne in 1882. [Nancy Green Collection]

After 3 years at the Nottingham Institute, Leonard took up his first pastorate at the Abbey Road Congregational Church in Barrow-in-Furness in 1887. At this time, Barrow was expanding fast with widespread squalor, sickness and conflict between migrant communities. Leonard sought to improve the social as well as spiritual

conditions of his congregation but struggled to reconcile his faith and ideals with the reality of life in this Victorian boomtown. Church records reveal that he had a few differences of opinion with his deacons, who felt that he was rather too radical. It was at Barrow that he first took his congregation on rambles in the Lake District.



T A Leonard and his wife, Mary, at Barrow-in-Furness in 1888. [Nancy Green Collection]

He resigned his post at Barrow-in-Furness at the beginning of 1890 and it was in September of that year that he arrived at Colne. The following June, he took his first holiday party to the Smallwood House Hotel on Compston Road, Ambleside. “It was champion” was the verdict of the thirty-two men who had walked the fells, heard talks on flowers and trees and the contours of the mountain scene, listened to the poetry of Wordsworth, and learned the pleasures of fellowship. The details are described in Leonard’s book *Adventures in Holiday Making*.

After an equally successful trip to Caernarvon in North Wales in 1892, J B Paton encouraged Leonard to expand his holiday programme under the auspices of the National Home Reading Union (NHRU), which Paton had founded in 1889. “Do it for thousands” he is reported to have said. From 1893, holidays followed to an increasing number of destinations with a voluntary committee with Paton as Chairman and Leonard as Secretary. Holidays under the auspices of the NHRU continued until 1897 when the Co-operative Holidays Association was formally constituted with Paton as President and Leonard as General Secretary.

The objects of the CHA, as set out by T A Leonard were:

*To provide simple and strenuous recreative and educational holidays
and to promote friendship and fellowship amid the beauty of the
natural world.*

Leonard has been described as a Christian Socialist and disciple of Matthew Arnold and John Ruskin. There is no doubt that he was influenced by contemporary social and political thought. He gained inspiration from William Morris, Edward Carpenter and Charles Kingsley. The term guesthouse for the CHA accommodation, first used when Ardenconnel House near Rhu on the Clyde was purchased in 1898, came from Morris's *News from Nowhere*, although the term *Gasthaus* was in common usage in Germany. Lecturers and guides at CHA centres included leading academics and distinguished professionals such as Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley of Crosthwaite, near Keswick, later founder of the National Trust, who introduced the first parties to the Lake District to the poetry of Wordsworth and the teachings of John Ruskin.

Reflecting Leonard's philosophy, the CHA's first purpose-built centre, Moor Gate Guest House, at Hope in the Derbyshire Peak District, opened in 1916, was designed in the Arts and Crafts Style. The house was extensively refurbished in 1991 with the introduction of en-suite facilities and continued to provide all the year-round CHA holidays until 1999 when it was sold to Shearings. Now privately owned, and re-named the Losehill House Hotel, it is a luxury hotel and conference centre.



Architect's drawing of Moor Gate Guest House, Hope in the Derbyshire Peak District, opened in 1916, designed in the Arts and Crafts style by J Gibbons and Son, Architects.

Leonard was also an enthusiastic member of the fledgling Independent Labour Party in the 1890s and knew many of its leading figures. He shared a platform with Keir Hardy at a meeting in Colne in 1894 and advertised holidays in *Labour Prophet*, a socialist journal established by John Trevor, a Unitarian Minister who founded the Labour Church. Leonard was outspoken at meetings on socialism, betting and liquor reform and the local paper, the *Colne and Nelson Times*, reported many of his speeches and activities during his time at Colne. In fact, his socialist views once again caused friction with the deacons of his church, although the majority of his congregation strongly supported him.

Leonard resigned his Ministerial post at Colne Congregational Church in 1894 in order to pursue his wider social aspirations. Letters and other contributions to the *Colne and Nelson Times* illustrate the heart-felt sorrow of many of his congregation at his decision to leave his work at Colne.

REV. T. A. LEONARD AND THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH.

To the Editor of the Colne and Nelson Times.

Sir,—The young men of the town must look upon the resignation of the Rev. Mr. Leonard with unfeigned sorrow, for of a surety no preacher of recent days who has appeared in our town has catered for the spiritual welfare of young people more than has this gentleman. His genial disposition has won for himself golden laurels by reason of his readiness to cooperate with the young in every class, not only among his own church, but "outside its pale" in every good work. Often have I noticed that the Congregational Church, since Mr. Leonard took the place of pastor, was ahead of all other churches of the town in that it had associated with it a far larger number of the rising generation, a fact which must be a source of genuine satisfaction to both Mr and Mrs Leonard. I cannot all of us claim to see eye to eye with Mr. Leonard in all his views, but in the general ministry I consider him a typical modern preacher, and why the adverse vote of a select few should have had the effect of practically (I use the word advisedly) dismissing him from his charge, I fail to understand. Is a man who preaches the glorious gospel of Christ to be limited in his utterances in the pulpit or elsewhere by the influences and notions of a select few? I had thought that it was the proud boast of dissenters that they had the freedom of thought and utterance that their forefathers had bought, even at the price of their own blood.—Yours, &c.,

A SEEKER AFTER TRUTH.

[A considerable portion of the above letter has been struck out for the simple reason that the author has written in a strain that hardly applies to the persons who were in office at the Congregational Church when Mr. Leonard tendered his resignation.—ED.]

Extract from Colne and Nelson Times, 21 December 1894.

Leonard and his wife left Colne on 24 December 1894 “accompanied by the well wishes of a large crowd of townspeople who met them at Colne Station”. Leonard spent 1895 running J B Paton’s first Social Institute in Islington, London, although he did return to Colne on several occasions to preach and give speeches in local halls. During 1895, the holiday scheme operated from an office in South Tottenham and in 1896 from the CHA’s first centre at Abbey House, Whitby. However, by 1897, the continued expansion of the holiday programme required a permanent office and so the Co-operative Holidays Association was established as a legal entity.

By 1913, the CHA had thirteen British centres catering for 20,000 guests. Although foreign travel was not one of its original objectives, the CHA experimented with trips to Switzerland, France, Germany and Norway. During this time, Leonard became great friends with J B Paton’s son, John Lewis Paton, who as High Master of Manchester Grammar School was an outstanding educationalist of the Victorian and Edwardian periods. With J L Paton, Leonard organised exchange school trips between Britain and Germany, students and young workers staying at CHA centres.

It came as a great shock to many members of the CHA, when in November 1912, Leonard announced his intention to resign from his post as General Secretary of the CHA and form a new organisation. The reason given by Leonard in his book was his desire to extend the work begun 20 years ago and bring holidays within the reach of poorer folk. Records reveal a growing dis-satisfaction with the General committee’s desire to improve the quality of centres. In his letter of resignation, he makes his views clear:

I have been conscious for some time that an important section of the Committee have lacked confidence in my judgement upon certain matters.....The questions upon which my advice has been passed over has reference to the appointment or otherwise of Manageresses, the selection of furnishings, provisioning and other arrangements at the centres.

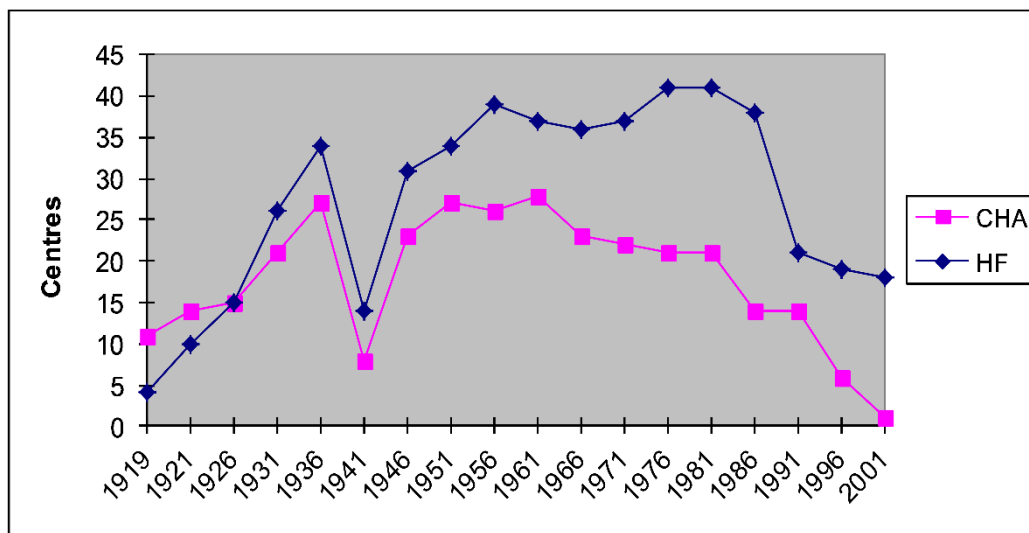
It may also be that his opinions on British-German relations jarred with the views of some members of the Association. Leonard was a convinced pacifist and supported efforts to prevent the outbreak of the First World War. He became great friends with several like-minded labour politicians. Hubert Beaumont, a future Deputy Speaker of the House of Commons in the 1945 Labour Government, was a family friend before the First World War and both Ramsay MacDonald and Philip Snowden (Prime Minister and Chancellor respectively of the Labour Government in the 1920s) were visitors to Leonard’s home at ‘Bryn Corach’ at Conwy in North Wales during World War One. In his book he describes ‘Bryn Corach’ as ‘*A haven of peace to many nerve-strained folk from the raided areas and for the soldiers in training and their friends, and not least to those peace-lovers who suffered for their principles in those days*’.

Nevertheless, the split with the CHA was reasonably amicable, with the HF taking over the CHA’s centre at Newlands in the Lake District and a centre at Kelkheim in Germany. The objects of the new organisation were like those of the CHA but with a greater emphasis on International Relations. There was no thought of competition between the two organisations.

Prior to 1913, Leonard had moved from CHA centre to CHA centre. Leaving Colne in December 1894, he lived in Tottenham, London for a year and then took up residence at Abbey House, Whitby in 1896. The CHA's office and Leonard moved to Ardenconnel, Rhu in 1899 and then to Park Hall, Hayfield in 1902. When the CHA established its office in Brunswick Street, Manchester in 1908, the Leonard's took up residence in Marple Bridge, near Stockport. In 1914 he moved to 'Bryn Corach', Conwy, the HF's first headquarters.

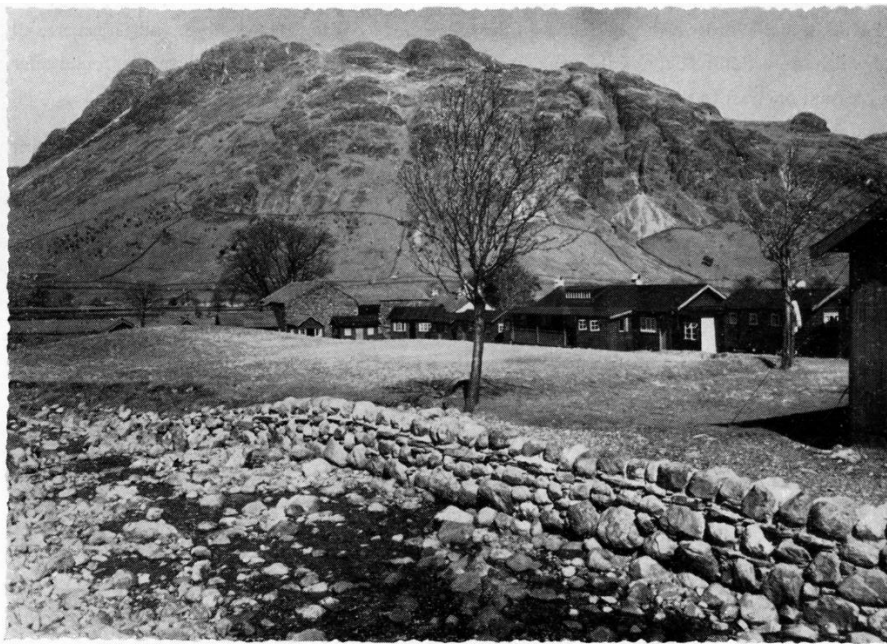
Leonard was General Secretary of HF from 1914 until 1925 when HF decided to establish its headquarters in London. He resigned as General Secretary and the post of International Secretary was created for him, a post he occupied from 1925-1930. He then took a back seat, moving from 'Bryn Corach' into a nearby cottage, 'Wayside' in 1935, but remained on the General Committee. He was elected President of the HF in 1938/39 and was then Vice-President until his death in 1948.

By the time of his death, HF operated some 30 centres with over 45,000 guests. CHA meanwhile had also expanded and operated some 25 guest houses with 30,000 guests. Notwithstanding Leonard's aim of returning to more Spartan accommodation, the CHA and HF developed in a very similar way with country house accommodation. Throughout the 1960s and 70s, the HF operated some 40 British Centres catering for over 60,000 guests. The CHA, renamed Countrywide Holidays in 1964, operated 25-30 guest houses catering for some 30,000 guests. The following graph shows how the two organisations were seriously affected by changing economic circumstances in the latter part of the twentieth century. Recession and inflation in the 1980s led to a considerable down-sizing of both organisations with the CHA eventually going out of business in 2004 with the sale of its last property, Stanley Ghyll House in Eskdale in the Lake District.



Although Leonard's involvement with HF declined after 1930, he never rested on his laurels. It's probably true to say that through the 1920s and 30s, Leonard also became dis-satisfied with the progress of the HF. Minutes reveal him constantly trying to reign-in those who wanted to continually expand and improve the standard of accommodation provided. He pushed for youth centres and Spartan accommodation

such as that provided at Wall End Farm in Great Langdale in the Lake District, rather than the country house type of accommodation favoured by the General Committee of HF.



Wall End, Langdale

Photo by Hamilton-Fisher

His desire to keep accommodation as simple as possible led him to play a prominent part in the establishment of the Youth Hostels Association. It was at the headquarters of the Liverpool HF Club that the Liverpool & District Branch of the British YHA was set up in December 1929 by Leonard, Harry H Symonds, Tom Fairclough and others. When the YHA was formally founded in April 1930, Leonard became one of its four Vice-Presidents. When he was gifted Goldrill House in Patterdale by HF on his retirement in 1932, he promptly let it to the YHA as one of its first youth hostels.



4399. GOLDRILL HOUSE, PATERDALE.

LOWE, Patterdale
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He was President of the Merseyside Ramblers' Federation before the establishment of the Ramblers' Association and chaired the first meeting of the ten Area Ramblers' Federations held in 1931 to form the National Council of Ramblers' Federations. He became the National Council's first Chairman and continued in this role until 1938 when the Ramblers' Association was formed. He then became the Ramblers' Association's first President, a role he held until 1946 when it was taken over by John Dower, the architect of the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act.

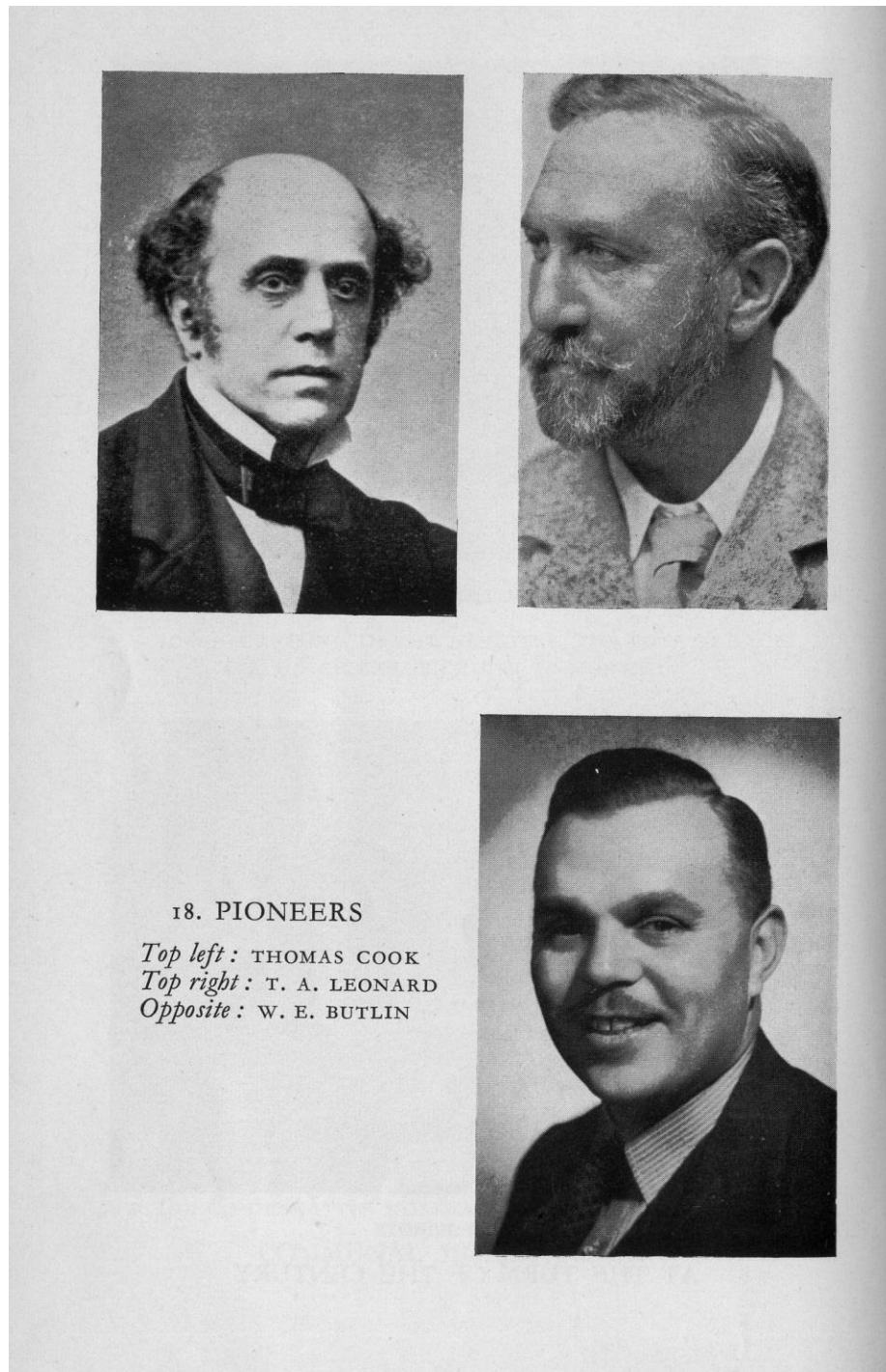
Leonard related to a range of other organisations. He strongly supported the National Trust (founded by his close friend, Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley and Octavia Hill), the Footpaths Preservation Society and the Campaign for National Parks. He was a founding member of the Friends of the Lake District in 1934. He was President of the Grey Court Fellowship, founded in 1935 to provide holidays for unemployed workers and their families from North-east Lancashire. They still run a holiday centre near Arnside on Morecambe Bay. He founded the Family Holidays Association after the Second World War, which was formed to convert derelict Government training camps into holiday homes for families. This organisation continued well into the 1960s.

Leonard joined the Society of Friends shortly after the First World War, the absence of a rigid creed and the freedom for intellectual thought which it afforded appeal strongly to him and he was a member of the Colwyn Bay Meeting for almost 30 years. In reaching this decision he might well have been influenced by friends and acquaintances such as Arnold Rowntree, Liberal MP, who championed the cause of conscientious objectors during the First World War. Arnold Rowntree was a prominent Quaker from the famous York confectionary family and was the first President of the Holiday Fellowship.

Leonard was awarded the OBE in the 1937 Coronation Honours for his work in outdoor activities. The extent of his influence on the development of countryside leisure is illustrated by the range of organisations represented at his 80th birthday celebrations held at the Friend's House in London on 18 March 1944 attended by almost 100 guests.

The attendance book is signed by representatives of the CHA, HF, YHA, Ramblers' Association, National Trust and the Councils for the Protection of Rural England and Rural Wales. All these organisations owed their existence to some degree to the example set by Leonard. Many of Leonard's old friends such as Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley and Ramsay MacDonald had died by 1944 but signatories include Lord Woolton, President of CHA, who as Fred Marquis was MD of Lewis's in Liverpool before World War Two and was Minister for Food during the war (and famous for "Woolton Pie"); Hubert Beaumont, Derbyshire County Councillor between the wars and Labour MP in Ramsay MacDonald's Government in the 1930s; C E M Joad, an eminent philosophy, ranking alongside Bertrand Russell and George Bernard Shaw, who also visited Leonard at 'Bryn Corach'; Tom Stephenson, celebrated access campaigner and originator of the Pennine Way; Harry Griffin, journalist and writer, who wrote the Guardian's Country Diary for 53 years; and John Lewis Paton, son of J B Paton who had such a strong influence on the development of the CHA and HF. Arnold Rowntree, President of HF, was too ill at the time to attend the celebrations but York was represented by Walter Ingleby, President of the York CHA & HF Rambling Club.

In his book, *The Englishman's Holiday* published in 1947, J A R Pimlott ranks Leonard alongside Thomas Cook and Billy Butlin as a pioneer of the holiday movement.



Extract from J A R Pimlott, *The Englishman's Holiday*, Social Historian, 1947.

A series of photographs taken in 1947, probably for a newspaper article, glorify Leonard's accomplishments.



The above photograph is titled '*Eighty-three years old campaigner for working class holidaymakers, Mr T Arthur Leonard OBE leads an assault on the Welsh Hills. He has conquered Mt. Snowdon eighteen times.*' [Nancy Green Collection]

When he died, he was cremated at a simple Friends Service at Anfield Crematorium in Liverpool. Obituaries appeared in newspapers published all over England, Wales and Scotland. They describe him as at his best and happiest when originating some new venture; a crusader; also, a rebel, never reluctant to 'tilt at windmills'; but also, generous and gracious. One obituary states "*His fertile imagination, his great powers of persuasion, his friendship and warm heartedness were responsible for the initiation and success of many enterprises which brought joy, happiness, fellowship and comfort to tens of thousands. He sought no personal gain for himself.*"

The memorial plaques erected after his death are inscribed with the words: *Believing that "The best things any mortal hath are those which every mortal shares", he endeavoured to promote "Joy in widest commonalty spread"*. The first part is taken from a hymn, written by Quaker Lucy Larcom, which was a popular CHA and HF song before the Second World War. The second part is taken from Wordsworth's poem, 'The Prelude'. They epitomise Leonard's approach to holiday making and are still relevant today.

This article has concentrated on Leonard and his many achievements in the field of outdoor recreation. He has been somewhat ignored in recent times, as his vision of simple, affordable and sober holidaymaking combined with the quiet enjoyment of the countryside has suffered as a result of increasing consumerism, changing cultural attitudes and expectations, and the search for more adventurous and exciting forms of outdoor recreation. Nevertheless, his promotion of friendship and fellowship in the outdoors remains as relevant today as it was 100 years ago.

His achievements in the outdoor recreation movement are rather under-rated today and I hope, through my research, to put that right.

Douglas G Hope
Researcher
University of Cumbria

(If after reading the article would like to get in touch Douglas or request any additional information: [Please click HERE](#)).