

Hebridean Hostellers

Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust

www.gatliff.org.uk

Newsletter 54

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The Howmore Special Issue

From the Chairman

2013 will see us pumping up the volume as we launch our **Howmore Appeal**, promote Rhenigidale as a destination and encourage more people to become Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust members.

The GHHT is dedicated to running Berneray, Howmore and Rhenigidale hostels to a sound basic standard in partnership with islanders. Its goal is to provide hostellers, including young people of limited means, with the opportunity to stay-awhile, to get to know, and maybe come to love, the unique culture and natural environment of the islands. We are part of the SYHA family. If the Howmore Appeal succeeds, we have **ambitious plans** to improve the quality of the hostel. We want it to win back its VisitScotland one star status.

We have welcomed Julian Paren as a **new trustee**. He is a natural scientist, who has recently retired to the Black Isle, and is taking a fresh look at our insurance policies.

Last year's overnights were down to 4031. You have to go back to 1990 to find a lower number. But on the bright side - and the islands have been enjoying summer weather - it means that there is plenty of peace and quiet at the hostels and ... plenty of empty beds. **Help us fill them!**

Editorial

The Gatliff Hostel at **Howmore** is the most southerly of the six hostels that were set up either by Herbert Gatliff or by people he encouraged. For almost half-a-century it has provided accommodation for travellers and a destination point for visitors. Its position, close to the machair of the ocean shore and with the mountains of South Uist in sight, has been agreeable to many and inspirational for some.

The time has come to build on what has been achieved. The geology and history of the place are compelling factors; the foundation of the hostel and its ethos are admirable; the service of wardening shown by one family is much appreciated; the provision of hospitality is, literally, attractive. However, two forces - of the climactic elements and the marketing of accommodation - mean that building work is required to **preserve and improve** on what we provide.

GHHT AGM and Members' Forum **Saturday 20 July 2013**

Holland Park Youth Hostel in its fine setting, in London

Coffee served 10.00 All are welcome

An event for family, friends and interested parties

Innovations for the Howmore of New

Now that the GHHT has purchased the Howmore hostel it aims to upgrade its facilities. Originally it was a simple hostel within the original thatched cottage. Very little was changed so it provided only the most basic facilities. In the 1990s there were major improvements, including the common room, annexe, the provision of showers and hot water. Current legislation and higher expectations by hostellers have set new standards and these have been heeded in **future plans**.

Our aim is to refurbish the buildings to continue providing accommodation for independent travellers who like to meet and exchange information in a relaxed atmosphere, enjoy a degree of comfort and have space to prepare, cook and serve meals. The emphasis is on **elevating** facilities from basic to more appealing levels. However, Howmore will never be a 'luxury' or 'hotel standard' hostel.

Our **appeal** is to fund a first phase to increase the size of the common room and provide a larger space for the kitchen. The small dormitory will cease to exist. All existing wooden windows, external doors and frames will be replaced as will beds and bedding. A further phase, taking until 2015, will involve the construction of a sleeping platform and storage space for cycles and equipment in the outbuilding.

These projects will improve standards without compromising the Gatliff **purpose and philosophy** of providing practical facilities at a hostel of destination. We ask you initially to support this venture by contributing to our appeal. Thousands have been introduced to the Outer Hebrides since Herbert Gatliff's first enterprise over 50 years ago. Here's a way of assisting even more. Howmore has recorded over 40,000 overnights since 1966.



Two Sides; One Bedrock

Its east may be a low-lying coastal plain while its west rises to the 2034' peak of Ben Mor, but South Uist has a bedrock of Lewisian Gneiss that has been there for some 2900 million years. Excavations indicate that parts were **thriving** in the New Stone and Bronze Ages as well as in Viking times. Records show the ascendancy of the MacDonalds of Clanranald until they sold the island to Colonel Gordon of Cluny in 1838, bringing in the era of Clearances.

The population of over 5000 slumped during the 19th Century to under 2000, at which it currently hovers. However, South Uist had a new lease of life in 2006 with the largest community buyout to date and management by its new owner, Storax Uibhist, with its strapline '**Going Forward Together**'. It remains a hub of Gaelic culture and its people are referred to in Gaelic as *Deasaich* - 'Southerners'.

Worship and Wealth

Howmore's name derives from the Old Norse *Tobha* - 'mound' - and the Gaelic *Mòr* - 'large'. The village stood prominently on the machair and its church is still used as a marker by passing ships. However, the mounds that now attract attention belong to the four or five ruined churches and chapels in the vicinity. They date back possibly as far as the 9th Century, but were **influential** centres of worship between 1200 - 1600 AD and certainly constructed in the style of early Irish Celtic monasteries.

Ecclesiastical ruins feature in the hostel-grounds. However, the hostel buildings date from the 19th Century, belonging to a 'squatter' on the common grazing land, with no legal rights, and not to a 'cottar' or tenant renting land. Nearby

Ormaclieit Castle was the home of the wealthy Clanranald MacDonalds until 1715 when it burnt down. The Kildonan Museum now houses the Clanranald Stone, stolen from Howmore in 1990 until it was discovered, unscathed, in Euston, London, five years later.



The Third Opening

Herbert Gatliff's life was from Victorian days to the Elizabethan era. He was a Coldstream Guards' officer in the First World War and a pioneering member of the Outdoor Movement before the Second World War. However, the part of his life when he was at his most influential was when most men consider retirement. His love of landscape, in general, and of hiking through it, in particular, had led him to cherish small hostels and to **crusade** for ways of encouraging the young to enjoy them.

This led to his seeing, as a 65-year-old, his first small hostel open at Rhenigidale in 1962. It should be noted that this was accessible only on foot or by boat. Three years later an even more remote hostel was opened by him on the island of Scarp, to the west of North Harris. Then a further year on, his visits to South Uist came to **fruition**. He had met Mrs Catherine MacSween, and when the house her family owned became vacant, Frank Martin, on behalf of the Trust, was deputed to ask whether it could become a hostel.

Soon **Frank Martin** had made the arrangements and Howmore Hostel was opened at Easter 1966. It was very different from the previous two hostels and certainly 'mainstream' rather than 'backwater'. People could easily locate and reach it from the footpath along the shore and, more especially, from the road and its junction on the islands' spinal route. Bus timetables were suddenly relevant to Gatliff hostellers! The frequency of bus services only improved in the 1990s.

Family Connections

The **connections** that Herbert Gatliff started when he came to South Uist have certainly been on-going. He first stayed, taking bed and breakfast, at 149 Howmore, owned by the parents of Tommy MacDonald. Tommy recalls, as a child, meeting the wiry, busy and purposeful visitor, but not understanding a word he said. The letters that the English civil servant wrote were to the family 'a source of puzzlement' but, of course, they were not alone in this response!

When the hostel was secured by lease from the MacSween family, Catherine became the first **warden** and continued to meet and greet hostellers for many years. She is still recalled by some present-day older visitors. Her role as warden was taken over by her daughter, Betty, who had married Tommy MacDonald and gone to live at Ben More House at the junction of the main road. The lane to the hostel has been travelled by the two wardens for some 46 years.



*Mrs Catherine MacSween
photographed in 1979 by Helle
Wiese*

Community and Communications

Howmore's sense of community may have suffered a recent blow with the closure of its petrol station and shop. Residents no longer walk along the roads to buy groceries and, consequently, a social hub has been lost. However, the village remains a settlement where people identify with **crofting** and its long traditions. There are only two Church of Scotland parish churches in South Uist, predominantly a Roman Catholic island, and one of them, Howmore Church, close to the hostel, has a distinctive and rare central communion table.

People come and go regularly and Howmore is something of **a hub in itself**. Betty MacDonald's family has long been associated with the hostel which, obviously, brings in visitors. Her husband, Tommy, set up Rohan Cycles almost 20 years ago, and his brother and sister-in-law, Donnie and Sandra MacDonald, run the island's main public transport company, Hebridean Coaches, from its only depot, centrally situated at Howmore.

The **Ceolas** is a week-long Gaelic cultural summer school that takes place every July in South Uist. Tommy is particularly involved in the work of Feisean nan Gaidheal that attracts over 100 young people the following week for singing, drama, piping, instruments and art. When Donnie and Tommy's Father settled in Howmore in the 1950s one of his enterprises was to provide cycles for hire. However, on his marriage certificate he described himself as a 'Radio and Cycle Salesman'. This was certainly timely, innovative and communicative work.

Storas Uibhist

The community buyout in 2006 led to **93,000 acres** being owned by Storas Uibhist. It is the home to 850 tenant crofters and numerous businesses as well as development projects. Among these are the Lochcarron Community Windfarm, the Lochboisdale Regeneration Project and the much acclaimed Askernish Golf Course and its events. It manages the Grogarry Lodge sporting estate, promotes tourism throughout South Uist, Benbecula and Eriskay, focuses attention on coastal protection, endeavours to protect, and encourages the expansion of, ferry services. Storas Uibhist strives to make its domain one where people thrive, prosper and attract others.

Updated Communications On-line

The Gatliff Website has been #re-designed

Take a Look at **www.gatliff.org.uk**

Maps - Past and Future

Christopher Fleet wrote: 'The publication in 1654 of Volume V of **Blaeu's Atlas novus** was the result of over 70 years of cartographic, chorographic [the technique of mapping a region] and editorial activity, by a dispersed network of people in Scotland and the Low Countries. Through their combined efforts, dogged by war, poverty, copyright restrictions, and only intermittent official support, 'Scotland became one of the best mapped countries in the world' (Stone, 1989), and the Atlas remains to this day a uniquely significant landmark publication.'

Take a search engine lead and go via the **National Library of Scotland** website to Blaeu's Atlas, onto the detailed map and there at the estuary of the river is *Auon How Moir*. Interest in this area has been maintained for over 450 years since the compilation of the map. Visitors are drawn to the antique-look of parts of the village, with its numerous thatched houses. The dunes of the seashore and the machair, with its wild-flowers, attract attention and the unspoilt estuary of the River Howmore has been protected as a Site of Special Scientific Interest.

Future maps will feature the long-distance walking route, **The Hebridean Way**, which is currently being marked and signposted. The Chairman of the GHHT, Peter Clarke, has brought the attention of many to this phenomenon through his book *The Timeless Way* - www.outerhebridesway.org - which he researched over three decades. The South Uist section passes within yards of the Howmore hostel, destined to become a resting-place for even more travellers to this part of the Outer Hebrides.



Obituaries

Elizabeth Gatliff, the younger daughter of Herbert and Lois Gatliff, died on Boxing Day 2012, aged 86. She was born on 29 November 1929 in Chipstead, Surrey, was educated at Dartington Hall, Devon, before training and working as a nursery nurse in the East End of London. Following further studies at St Bartholomew's Hospital, she qualified as a nurse, specialising in midwifery and health-visiting.

Her funeral, at Banbury Crematorium, was well-attended by Gatliff Trustees and many others. She was particularly remembered for her contributions to local organisations and by those who appreciated her nursing skills. She had, in the earlier phases of her career, travelled widely and taken up professional engagements in many countries, including Canada and Australia.

Liz vividly recalled the family walks on the South Downs during her formative years and maintained her father's enthusiasm for both the Outdoor Movement and for small, relatively remote communities. Until recently she was a trustee of the Gatliff Trust. A VE Day 1945 photograph of her, taken when an 18-year-old, became an iconic image, following its use on the cover of a commemorative book.

Robert Wickenden died on 11 March 2013, aged 101. He was one of those enthusiasts recruited by Herbert Gatliff in the founding days of his hostels and was of considerable help, as an electrical engineer, in helping to build, promote and, above all, install electrical systems at Rhenigidale, Howmore and Berneray. He and his late wife, Ruth, were keen hostellers and Robert, who had met Herbert in the first decade of the existence of the YHA (England Wales), became involved in the Western Isles.

When Robert celebrated his 100th birthday, on 4 April 2012, the GHHT was represented at the party for family and friends at his home in Brill, Buckinghamshire, and was the recipient of £1,172 (including Gift Aid) given by his relatives and many admirers in lieu of presents for a centenarian. This will help others to update the work that he personally and professionally undertook between 35 and 50 years ago.

Malcolm Campbell, who died, aged 82, on 15 March 2013, was Secretary to the Gatliff Trust for 34 years, from 1964 until 1998. He trained as a chartered librarian, ran the prestigious City of London Business Library until his retirement and was awarded an MBE. His interests in, and influence on, the youth hostelling movement were considerable, being a member of the YHA's London Regional Council and Countryside Committee in the 1950s. During this time he came to know and then assist Herbert Gatliff in his work.

Bernard Selwyn, who died, aged 87, on 14 May 2013 was a founder member of the Gatliff Trust, long associated with it as an active and diligent trustee, and, more recently, a visitor at Trust meetings. Herbert Gatliff realised how Bernard, as a chartered surveyor and an enthusiast for hostelling as well as public land access, could be of great assistance to his cause. He lived in Earls Court and maintained a keen and attentive interest in the Trust until close to his death. He was the Honorary Parliamentary Agent of the Open Spaces Society. The Trust was represented at his funeral at Golders Green Crematorium on 2 June.

Work Carried Out

On the back cover of this newsletter there is a suggestion that you consider taking part in work party activities at the hostels. They are organised by **John Joyce**, have made a considerable impact on structures and maintenance standards and created an impressive legacy of commitment to the cause.

Those involved in the recent work are John Joyce and our loyal tradesmen, Rob Plaister and Eddie Webb. They have been assisted at different venues from Steve and Liz Glover, Dave Golding, Sue McClymont, Nigel Milnes, Frances Passey, Adrian Wallace and Jude Warrender as well as Fraser, on a Duke of Edinburgh Award assignment.

The completion of many tasks is both reassuring and much appreciated. At **Berneray** a Morso Squirrel stove has been fitted, with instant and efficient effect. New taps fitted to the sinks, a replacement storage radiator in the 'honeymoon suite' and the water filter for the shower has been cleaned and replaced.

The **pathway** in front of the main building to the annexe entrances has been dug out, edged with stone, filled with chippings and levelled. New regulation doors have been fitted in the washrooms and 'penthouse suite'. All exterior walls were painted with white masonry paint and all the roof-stones on the annexe roof were re-roped.

The **drainage channels** and fall have been re-structured to prevent water entering the dormitories. They have been tested by severe storms. The porch windows, partitions and ceilings were painted; the clothes-airer repaired; a hard-wired carbon monoxide detector fitted and fire equipment checked.

Howmore has seen considerable activity involving the removal of redundant fittings, units and water-pipes; provision made for new services and partitions erected; some walls and ceilings lined with water-resistant materials, some floors covered with stone anthracite tiles; shower and washroom improvements.

Electrical wiring and plumbing elements were renewed where necessary. The outbuilding has been cleared and its contents sorted, while the walls in the larger end-dormitory were stained-blocked and given a white top-coat. A rodent problem was eliminated and the kitchen and common room given a **deep clean**.

Work-tops and shelving in the kitchen were replaced at **Rhenigidale** and stainless steel tops fitted. The fridge was relocated and microwaves re-housed. A 'breakfast bar' now features. Ceiling-board seams were taped and sealed; walls and ceiling painted. All this work was undertaken by Steve and Liz Glover.

An electric water heater under the sink provides a **constant** supply. New taps were fitted. A wall-mounted heater in the outbuilding enables it to be used a drying room. The shower room and toilet were given two coats of paint as was the hall area, also given a stain-block. Concrete slabs now protect a soil pipe.

Drains have been cleared, the handrails and fence treated, and a new sensor light fitted to illuminate the steps. This final addition symbolises the work of the teams at the three hostels in that they make access and stays easier and safer. A debt of gratitude is owed to John Joyce for his **masterminding** the projects.

Attractions Off the Beaten Track

Rhenigidale may be out on a limb, which often makes it a particularly attractive place, but it has activities going on close by. Later this year is the third annual Harris Mountain Festival, which begins on Saturday 14 September. The full programme has yet to be announced, but it will be worth googling in the early summer.

Every Wednesday from April until September, the North Harris Trust and RSPB Scotland, will be arranging a **Golden Eagle Walk**. Be at the Bowglas car park at 10.00 for an escorted walk up Glen Vigidale to the summit of Tom Ruisg. Last year's ratings indicated a 10% chance of seeing the birds in question.

On Saturday 18 May there was an Islands Book Trust walk from Urgha to **Molinginish** to meet Simon Fraser. This settlement was permanently occupied in comparatively recent times, from 1823 until 1964, and its side-school was an off-shoot of the former village school in Rhenigidale, along the shore of Loch Trollamarig.

The annual **Berneray Week** extends from Friday 12 until Saturday 20 July and details will appear on the Isle of Berneray Community website. The events bring together visitors as well as islanders and hostel residents, staying for that week, have a good reputation for participating.

The name is from the Old Norse for **Bjorn's Island** and it has attracted settlers and interested parties from before the Bronze Age. Its western beaches, though renowned, are usually deserted. They were recently filmed and inadvertently used to promote the shores of Thailand.

The island's Thomas Telford-designed and so-called '**Parliamentary Church**', was built from 1827-29, fell into disuse many years ago and was stripped of its roof. However, it was the subject of one of the programmes in Channel 4's *The Restoration Man* series and screened last January. It brought into focus the diligence and design flair of its owners, Keith and Sheena McIntyre.

The background and details of much of Berneray's past can be seen at the Historical Society's exhibition and archives in **The Nurse's Cottage**. The summer opening times, from Monday 3 June, will be posted on the Community website. The vibrant nature of this island makes enhances the pleasures of staying at the hostel.



Steve Glover at work in the Rhenigidale Kitchen



From the *Hebridean Hostellers* Issue of Five Years Ago

Robert Carlyle, the actor, wrote in *The Guardian*: 'On the **Western Isles** you've got four seasons in ten minutes - you simply can't dress for the weather. It'll be a sunny day and suddenly it will start snowing.' (Editor: John Humphries) [*Some inconstant things never change.*]

and of Ten Years Ago

'Seven days in mid-November made a great difference, thanks to the work of Alan Sidaway and his party. They called at the SYHA hostel in Stirling, collected 20 beds, stayed overnight in Portree and caught the early boat to Lochmaddy. Dan Sailor and Alan continued to **Howmore** where they erected the new beds. When they had finished the sleeping accommodation there had been transformed.' (Editor: John Humphries) [*The work continues.*]

and Fifteen

'While we are still waiting for the additional funding to start work on the old hostel building at **Howmore**, the new building is still being used for sleeping accommodation. So, in April, a joiner visited the hostel and tried to ensure that the 'Cycle Shed' is draught-proofed.' (Editor: Jim McFarlane) [*Air-movements in and around Howmore are usually evident.*]

and Twenty

'It is our intention to launch a **Howmore Appeal** in early 1993 to raise funds for major renovation. Howmore has been a loyal servant of the hostel chain, giving many hostel overnights for a modest amount of maintenance effort. Its gently aging fabric is now to be rewarded with a major refurbishment and to answer complaints of overcrowding, additional dormitory space is to be provided in adjacent buildings.' (Editor: Richard Genner) [*Déjà vu, all over again!*]

and now Twenty-five

'Overnight Stays at Howmore: Scotland 100; Rest of UK 243; Abroad 173; Total 516' (Editor: Francesca Fraser Darling) [*Onwards and upwards.*]

Rhenigidale – North Harris

Berneray – North Uist

Howmore – South Uist



Interest & Involvement

There is a probability that owing to your reading this item you already have an interest in the activities of the Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust. This may be a passing engagement as a former or existing visitor or frequent participation as a returning traveller or a volunteer. What matters is that something inside you responds with a dilation of the eyes or an increased sense of **focus**.

All organisations concerned with charities **need people** either to feel or actually to be involved. Work has to be done by many individuals - from being a person with accredited skills to someone who just likes to help out. The main tasks centre around the hostel-based activities which motivate work-parties and the hostelling-based administrative roles. This extends from the handling of materials to money.

Please take a few moments to work out where you stand and whether you would like to **become closer** to the Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust by showing more interest and involvement.

Raising Awareness and Funds

The channels of communication open to us are extensive. The Howmore Appeal demands that a significant number of people should know about it, in the hope that they will see the value of an improved hostel and want to donate. Please assist by raising awareness through speaking out, placing leaflets in strategic places, letting the organisers know if you feel that you have identified a possible generous source, and by **encouraging** those who are promoting the cause. Peter Clarke can supply quantities of the Appeal leaflet.

If you feel motivated to assist by direct financial means, do examine methods of donation - in order to take advantage of Gift Aid, creating a regular cash flow through standing orders or by commemorating the involvement of someone special who benefited through Howmore. The task appears to be massive, but then when many bear relatively small responsibilities much weight is lifted and **funds raised**.

