

THE GATLIFF TRUST

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Dear Hosteller,

As you have visited one or more of the unofficial Youth Hostels in the Outer Hebrides provided by crofters with our help you may like to know how they fared in 1966 and our hopes for the future.

Howmore was opened in April in good heart, thanks largely to Ernie Ives, a handicraft teacher from Essex, who spent his holiday in South Uist working there. There were therefore three hostels for the whole summer. They had between them about 400 bednights (Rhenigidale 168, Scarp 95, Howmore 135). This number is, of course, insignificant compared with those of ordinary official hostels, and only a fraction even of those at Stockinish (which has the same number of beds as the three together, but is easier to reach). But a well-known Scot who understands the problems and difficulties of the Hebrides intimately has written - "I am quite sure that these hostels will do a service quite out of proportion to the numbers using them - a service to the Hebrides as well as to hostellers."

Rhenigidale

For the first time the hostel had several student parties from Stornoway, both the Nicolson Institute and Lews Castle College. This was due largely to the interest of two teachers at the Nicolson, Ian Millar and Robert Scott, experienced hostellers, who have both in other ways also come to the front in Stornoway. That great school, though serving the whole of Lewis, is inevitably somewhat of a town one, and it is we feel most valuable thus to increase the contact between its students and the wilds and remote crofting communities, particularly by bringing them across the 'border' into Harris, which seems to the visitor going south on the bus from Stornoway almost like another country. If they meet there hostellers from the mainland of Britain or even further afield, that will also be good, for such hostellers will learn from them that the crofting islands have much more life as well.

We were glad that the S.H.S. (Schools Hebridean Society) had a camp at Rhenigidale (as well as another far away from any human habitation at Valamus across Loch Seaforth). An incidental merit of hostels in such places is that they provide some insurance for washed out or blown down campers, but no such mishap befell these camps.

Roddy, the crofter-warden, was still away during the week, working in Tarbert on the new water scheme, but his

sister-in-law, Mrs MacInnes, took good care of the hostel and hostellers in his absence.

The housebook at Rhenigidale is large and encourages self-expression, both grave and gay. We photograph its entries each year. It includes a poem, but we do not know whether the author wishes this to be published, so those who were there earlier and specially want to see it had better go again. It also includes two most appropriate psalms, quoted by Jamaican and Welsh hostellers, a less appropriate sketch of Himself of France by a French hosteller, and some excellent notes on the surroundings which we hope to have duplicated. But the most striking comment of all came in a letter afterwards. "During the summer I have been on holiday in Scotland. I spent almost every night in a Youth Hostel and it was whilst at Uig Hostel in Skye that I was told about Rhenigidale. After four nights at Stockinish we went there. We were only able to stay for one night, but the peace and beauty of this remote village stands out as one of the most memorable features of our holiday in the Hebrides though it is the most simple of hostels, it is in so many ways the best of any in Scotland and its atmosphere is most certainly unequalled by any of the many hostels in which I have been."

Scarp

Rhenigidale is not a difficult walk in fine weather (much easier than Craig on the mainland). Scarp is more difficult to reach, because the bus service is scanty, hitching not to be relied on and the sea crossing infrequent and sometimes difficult. But those who are prepared to sleep out for a night on the way or in sufficient numbers to meet the expense of special transport or boat and have several days to spare can find it an even more rewarding adventure. As a boy of 17 wrote in the S.H.S. report for 1965 - "no one in the Harris expedition is likely to forget the strange feeling of having suddenly been washed up on the shores of a Tristan da Cunha."

The hostel had last summer rather more use than we had ventured to hope, including a small party from the S.H.S. Rhenigidale camp. An American hosteller commented: "Most enjoyable stay anywhere made more so by the hospitality of the MacLennans and the people of Scarp." The last entry in the house book is "Suggestion: Advertise the hostel more widely, if possible include the S.Y.H.A. handbook - (in a different handwriting) - "No please don't. Let it be the wonderful surprise to others it was to us." The dilemma of Multitude and Solitude !

Howmore

Howmore is less remote than Rhenigidale and Scarp, but difficult to reach in a different way; there was no longer in 1966 any public transport from Harris or the North Western mainland to South Uist as there had been for sixty years or more, so it could not easily be combined with hostelling in those parts. However the island has its own unique character and

there is fine hill walking quite near the hostel, so some hostellers no doubt chose it for its own sake. A number expressed warm appreciation of Mrs MacSween's care of the hostel and hostellers (we are a bit afraid she does more than she really has time for) and one added, "Lovely to find one of these black houses being put to such good use instead of being left to rot like the other empty ones." The comment is perhaps more important than he realised; thatched houses, though often not now convenient as homes, make excellent summer quarters for visitors, being quiet in the wind. They are also when well kept most beautiful in a simple way.

Some General Thoughts

Only a very few visitors to these hostels (apart from Stornoway parties) came from Scotland. In our 1965 Trust Report we wrote " Those of us who know the remote crofting country well have noticed at times a little sadly that it seems to appeal more to the English than the Lowland Scots." This seemed even more true last year. It is common knowledge that in many hostels of the North West there are far more hostellers from England than Scotland but we do not know what the experience of Stock-inish is.

We were glad to make modest contributions to church expenses at Rhenigidale, Scarp and Howmore. Religious tradition is very strong still in the Outer Isles and maybe some hostellers who are not churchgoers feel there in the words of an English hosteller written of a small village church in the Hardy country: "I have sometimes despite myself thought that though truth on earth may be unknown, yet here is truth of a kind." The last entry in the Howmore house book, by a hosteller who helps to look after old people's welfare, in very small handwriting is ~~15~~ £1. Deo gratias "

The Future

So much for 1966. But what of the future? Ian Millar and Robert Scott who brought the parties from the Nicolson and Lews Castle to Rhenigidale hope to bring more and to have a working party meantime. Howmore has been rethatched by a local craftsman. Angus is hoping to get Scarp rethatched and Tim Willcocks of the S.H.S. has hopes of a small party there in spring or early summer. The investment income of our Hebridges Fund has increased to about £70 a year, and provides enough to keep these three hostels going on present lines so long as the three crofters are glad to continue them. Indeed we have enough margin for another and hope that it may be possible to arrange, if not a hostel, 'bothy' shelter at Kinlochresort and perhaps also between there and the Uig road-end. The route from Uig through the hills past Kinlochresort to Harris is the ultimate adventure hill-track of Britain, and Tamanavay the lonely house in the nest of mountains

between Uig and Kinlochresort ranks almost with Torridon and the Fionn-Dubh causeway beyond Loch Maree among the superb mountain landscapes of Scotland. More news of these possible shelters will, we hope, be available before the summer.

But beyond this are other problems both for the Hebrides and hostellers. It may well be that some remote settlements will continue only as 'sheilings' for summer occupation. Hostels like these may help this, particularly if those interested, both Hebrideans and regular visitors, could get together and establish a Hebridean body to 'oversee' them. So long as such a body continues to encourage adventure and a greater knowledge, love and care of the countryside, mainly by the independent young (and we venture to think that there are very few youth hostels in Britain that do this so well) we would hand over to it most of the income of our Hebrides Fund, though we should retain the Fund itself in case one or more of the hostels could no longer be kept as such.

There is a still wider problem beyond this. We believe that more, perhaps many more, hostels on similar lines could be got and run, in Lewis, Barra, Islay to mention only three islands with a modest grant such as we provide, if young, or even not so young, hostellers who adventure round the Hebrides, mainly camping, will make the personal and understanding contacts needed to find them. Indeed in much remote hill-country on the mainland something of this kind is happening already but with the difference that it is either just bothies or school or club huts limited except by special arrangement to particular groups which do not provide as youth hostels and camping do for those who want to go to many places meeting many people on their own.

We doubt whether the two YHA's will ever now either themselves adequately do this job or even 'recognise' those who do; perhaps indeed no large body can of its very nature. The difficulty is not financial, but fear of administrative trouble and reluctance to take responsibility for, or even an interest in, hostels which they cannot fully control. There may be scope for something on the lines of our Trust, but much larger, that can give modest help, financial or administrative, to many small independent bodies, and quietly circulate useful information among them.

This may start some of you thinking and if (which doesn't often follow), you can commit the more sensible thoughts to paper, we should welcome them. Meantime as our hostels get no publicity through any official YHA means (except along with camping advice on the John Adams Street, London, noticeboard) it rests largely on you who know them to make them known to others. We hope too that some of you may be able to give a hand either in the Hebrides or at home on various odd jobs that need to be done, minor repairs, small equipment renewals, route guides etc, out there, typing, local publicity, etc. if you happen to be within range of those in London, Birmingham, Manchester & Glasgow, who are already helping in one way and another.

Yours sincerely,

(sd) MALCOLM CAMPBELL.
Hon. Secretary.