

THE GATLIFF TRUST

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Malcolm Campbell
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Dear Hosteller,

This letter is to tell those who have visited the unofficial youth hostels provided with our help by crofters in the Outer Hebrides how they fared in 1967 and our hopes for the future.

Last Year

There were again three hostels open all the year round and they had in all 500 bednights (Howmore 264, Rhenigidale 129, Scarp 107). Rhenigidale bednights included about 30 for 3 working parties from Stornoway, all Scottish. Excluding these working parties there were 156 visitors to the three hostels (16 going to more than one), 43 Scots, 84 English and 29 from other countries.

Several regular visitors were back again, Ernie Ives and Richard Ardern to all three, Frank Martin, David Stone and the Carliles. Fiona Macfarlane was again at Scarp, twice for three weeks in all, but with a different friend. But to most this was the first visit to any of the hostels and to very many to the Outer Hebrides. It is easy to forget that what is not news to us who have been concerned with the hostels for several years, or to regular visitors, is a new experience for most, a once for all experience inevitably for many. The life, adventure, beauty and character of these places may not be news, but for them it is new, which is far more important.

There were the usual differences in tastes. One hosteller found Howmore a big improvement on Scarp, another thought Scarp "most primitive is BEST". Both however were no doubt glad, if only sub-consciously, that Scarp and Howmore had been rethatched, the former at our cost, the latter by a private gift. The redecoration done by Stornoway School working parties at Rhenigidale at no cost to us was also most welcome. Stornoway people have traditionally taken to the sheilings awhile in summer; it would be welcome if with better transport they would extend these adventures to remoter places like Rhenigidale.

The last entry in the Howmore housebook rejoiced in a brief poem that it was free from psychedelic fish and chip shops. The Stornoway party however hoped someone would finish the roof of Rhenigidale in psychedelic yellow. The difference perhaps between the not quite so young and the even younger?

The housebooks did not last year inspire any full dress poems or route guides, though a German girl gave a most interesting account of her whole visit to Harris, strongly

recommending Rhenigidale to "those who like solitude rather than loneliness", and an American made an excellent list of birds seen there. But in addition to the many comments on the welcome given by the wardens and others, there were significant entries by campers who much appreciated an escape from wild weather and/or midges (with wise advice that cattle have a liking for orange tents; this was already known in Glenbrittle 30 years ago). A number of visitors wanted more such hostels, and a number hoped that not too many would reach them.

General problems

This hope lights up the essential problem. These marginal places and marginal hostels can only be a very small part of the life even of hostellers visiting the Highlands as they are of the national life as a whole. But the 500 bednights they provide for some 150 visitors have a unique value. They are a sort of catalyst. There could be many more such hostels in many more places, and if there were more people would seek them out. But there must not be so many more hostels that they spread the use too thin or so many people at any one that it loses its character and homeliness.

It is now pretty clear that big organisations cannot themselves find and take on such hostels. They must (and can) be found by individuals making personal contacts and able to count on modest help from Trusts such as ours. But it is very desirable that the Y.H.A.s and other large bodies should recognise these independent adventures in some way. At present they do little or nothing to keep contact with independent adventurers, and it is obvious that, while the independent lose something, the big bodies lose much more because many who might help to keep their leadership young and imaginative are being lost to them.

This as we have said before goes wider than hostels; it applies also to camping. The Schools Hebridean Society are doing a magnificent job in this field. Their leaders are on the same side of the river as the young. But so far as we can see most of those who run large established highly respected bodies are across not merely the river but the Channel from them.

The Future

Future prospects are in some ways uncertain. The old pre-road routes from West Lewis past Kinlochresort to North Harris are being used and the Schools Hebridean Society had a camp at Aird Bheag, but whether any more permanent arrangements can be made for shelter along these routes is uncertain.

The MacIennans have left Scarp and now live at West Tarbert, but Norman MacInnes has taken charge of the hostel. He and others however are probably leaving before long, and it may be that the island must become a sheiling lived in only during the summer. That after all still succeeds happily in Norway. Visitors may then be mainly campers using the old houses as shelter, particularly perhaps school groups, though

if there are some who want to stay for several weeks they could keep the hostel going and perhaps one or two other houses might be similarly used.

There are signs that camping with an abandoned house as shelter may also come about on the "mainland"; the Schools Hebridean Society think that a "shelter" house with small tents is likely to be better than large tents simply as a matter of business, and the use of personal small tents makes it easier for two or three campers to go off on their own for two or three days during, or after, an organised camp. Indeed this may well be the solution of the still unfilled gap between hostelling and camping. In the S.Y.H.A. and some regions in E. & W. the trend has been the other way. We take strongly just the opposite view, that hostels in the Hebrides and similar areas should welcome campers.

The future of Howmore is very different from that of Scarp and Rhenigidale, The machair of South Uist is good farm land and the villages will continue. Howmore itself has an upstanding church, an old graveyard with church ruins, and a number of thatched houses still inhabited and in good heart. It may well be that those living in them will be happy to go on doing so for quite a while, but if any fall empty as that used as the hostel did, and are not wanted by people living in the island, we hope they can be used for similar simple holiday use.

This kind of use keeps the character of these houses better than more elaborate modernization. They have considerable beauty of a simple kind (as well as being cosy and quiet in the wind) and indeed the village might if tidied up become a living Museum. This would cost much more money than we could find, but there are signs that others may be interested in such a scheme, and we could make a modest contribution.

There is need of more hostels of this kind, and more people to use them, though not too many of either. If you or any of your friends could find crofters with old houses of their own or relatives now abandoned, particularly in Barra or West Lewis, we could get them equipped and contribute £15 or so towards their running as hostels by the crofters.

Two Special Points

First as before we have contributed £2 to local church expenses at the three places where there are hostels, and we hope in 1968 to contribute also to the Catholic Church in South Uist. We feel strongly that those who arrange for hostels particularly in remote parts of Britain where living is difficult should make some contribution to local needs rather than expect local grants (as contrasted with that mutual help "in stride of life" which alone can make living in general and hostels in particular possible in such areas). Our Hebrides Fund has been significantly increased - its income

is now over £80 a year - and carrying out this principle we charged to it in 1967 our annual and special contributions to Stornoway Y.M.C.A.

Second, it is clear that many who visit these three hostels do much rather wandering too, and some keep logs or diaries. Quite a number have been written in the last few years by hostellers and campers in various parts of Britain and some have been very remarkable indeed, largely because the writers did not go to write a book or even a report but, going just to enjoy themselves, wrote "in stride of life" of what they saw and felt which is far better. We are always glad to read such logs and we can normally get them duplicated even if quite lengthy. One excellent one was only a few hundred words, another was over 30,000 and we would not have wished it to be any shorter; some good ones have suffered from a limit of words.

Conclusion

We feel that these three youth hostels have encouraged as well as any in Britain that greater knowledge, love, and care of the countryside and independent adventure that are the objects of the Y.H.A.s. But as long as they are not recognised in any way by the S.Y.H.A. we must rely largely on you who know them and your friends to make them known to others. Except for possible variations in bus-services and the change of warden in Scarp, (Mr Norman MacInnes's address is Flowerbank, 9, Scarp, next to Mr. Angus MacLennan's house) details are much as last year, but if you would like to have a few copies of our "handbook", for yourself or others, please let me know.

Yours sincerely,



Hon: Secretary.