

THE GATLIFF TRUST

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Malcolm Campbell
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March, 1971

Dear Hosteller,

Here is our usual letter to tell those who have visited the unofficial youth hostels in the Outer Hebrides provided by Crofters with our help, how they did in 1970 and future prospects.

LAST SUMMER

Bednights at the three hostels in 1970 were about 542 (Howmore 302, Scarp 139, and Rhenigidale 101) enjoyed by 150 visitors (Howmore 88, Scarp 22 and Rhenigidale 48 which add up to 158, but 8 were at two hostels.) Bednights were 155 Scots, 256 English and Welsh and 131 others, visitors being 40, 78, and 32 respectively.

The total was nearly 100 less than in 1969. This was mainly due to there not having been at Rhenigidale the large semi-camping party from the Nicolson Institute though there were several smaller expeditions from Stornoway later, and a hosteller from one of these came again later and was we believe, the first hosteller under 17 who has visited any of these hostels on his own.

At Howmore the main non-event was the arrival of the electricity in mid-summer but its failure to get connected. It still has not been but will be in the Spring. We had always expected to spend something from revenue on this, but it was a great help to receive a donation of £50 from an English visitor knowing Mull, not the Uists, who valued our work generally. Half of this sum went towards electricity expenses. The other half was added to our capital; the gradual increase of this enables us to contribute modestly to local churches and other bodies such as Councils of Social Service as anyone running youth hostels in remote and difficult communities should.

We know many hostellers regret the arrival of electricity. So in some ways do we. But we felt it worthwhile partly to reduce the fire risk, partly to provide more effectively for hostellers arriving wet or late, without much skill or energy to cope with Tilley's. It is difficult under hostel conditions to provide or keep intact those frills like wall or table lamps that antique cafes use to maintain the mediaeval atmosphere but if any of you have any practical suggestions for small improvements and will let us know, we will see whether anything can be done. And if you are going out again or in touch with anyone who is, and can find one or two stout candlesticks or candle-lanterns, they would be welcome at each hostel - not only as background for fireside

conversion; electricity in the winds of South Uist is a bit temperamental and Rhenigidale has not got any at all.

The history of Scarp was less uneventful. In the Autumn of 1969 we heard that one end of the building had fallen in and it was really no longer suitable for use. However, Myke Gerrish and friends going over in the Spring found it was the byre and, and did considerable first-aid. This survived for a while and the hostel was just usable. But the wind damaged the first-aid and, more important, the roof over the other end, the dormitory, began to collapse. We reluctantly had to recognize that the building could not be kept habitable and must be abandoned. However for 6 years it had provided something unique in Britain for some 150 hostellers in an island of much character. Some hostellers felt they should have been charged less for such a building. If we had taken the receipts ourselves we should have reduced the charge. Even at the standard charge such a hostel with only 100-150 bednights really makes a loss quite apart from wardening, and the loss would have increased, but we would not have minded that. (It must be faced that small marginal hostels do make a loss. If the YHA's are to do adequately their job of encouraging the young to see the so-varied countryside and history of Britain not just its beauty spots and famous buildings, they must face 50 or even 100 small hostels losing up to £50 a year.)

But in fact all the receipts of these three hostels are taken by the Crofters who provide and look after them. Scarp has always been most welcoming and life there is difficult so we hope that on reflection those who feel the charge was too high in itself will regard it as thanks for the help and welcome.

Many hostellers regretted the absence of the old house books and the new more bureaucratic form. We have from the beginning kept photo-copy records of these books and this meant calling in the book each year which for the large Rhenigidale one in particular was a problem. We hope either to return the original books or at least provide photocopies. It's clear too that hostellers prefer to write their comments and sometimes expand them into literary and artistic works in the house-books themselves. This is not altogether practicable but we intend to leave decent exercise books in the hostel for use as hostel logs, though space is left on the house-book forms for shorter comments.

THE FUTURE

While Myke Gerrish was around last year he saw possible houses in Barra and Eriskay. The former is a good house that would almost make a small standard hostel. The latter is in need of a working party and would be more primitive. We are also looking for another house in Scarp but we may find that the only habitable houses are good enough to let as summer cottages and beyond our reach.

We have a sufficient margin to subsidise at least one more hostel on similar lines up to £25 or even £50 a year, and might even finance a second but whether more can be found depends to some extent on whether those who care for such hostels in the Outer Isles in particular will take on the job of finding them and in some cases organising working parties as at Scarp to get them going.

It is possible that in some cases we might find an abandoned house not good enough to use even as a primitive hostel, but that could for a few years at any rate serve as a camper's shelter. Such a shelter provide no more than a primus table and perhaps a bench. It would enable campers to escape wind and midges for cooking, and would either be free like a bothy or cave or make a nominal charge of a few pence if the owner lived nearby. If any of you think this suggestion worth pursuing please let us know.

CONCLUSION

Probably to most of you the Hebrides and these hostels are a new and strange experience. Though we must bid goodbye to Scarp, we hope the others may continue and more like them be established for many more visitors. Their provision was originally made possible by a gift in memory of Keith Chambers - an outstanding independent youth hosteller who also did great work of management for his region of the YHA, tragically ended by his being drowned on a climbing weekend in Cornwall in 1955. He did not believe that the only real hostels were the primitive small ones; he cared intensely for making the whole Y.H.A., (and also the activities of caving) widely known to his fellow-young. But the kind of individual adventure we are trying to encourage in the Hebrides was an essential part of what he stood for.

Yours sincerely,

Malcolm Campbell
Hon. Secretary.