

THE GATLIFF TRUST

Trustees:

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Hon: Secretary

Malcolm Campbell
98, Agar Grove
Camden Square.
London. N.W.1.

April 1972.

Dear Hosteller,

For the tenth time we write to tell visitors to the unofficial youth hostels provided by crofters with our help in the Outer Hebrides how they fared last year and future prospects.

1971 Results

Scarp as we said in our last letter had to be abandoned, and we were unable to find any replacement there; indeed, the island is no longer inhabited as a place of work all the year round.

Howmore and Rhenigidale however were far more used than ever before. Bednights at the two hostels were 740 (Howmore 481, Rhenigidale 259, not including special working parties from the Nicolson Institute Stornoway) enjoyed by 232 visitors, (Howmore 146, Rhenigidale 92, which makes 238, but 6 were at both). Bednights were 128 Scots, 357 English and Welsh, and 255 from fifteen other countries, visitors being 47, 104 and 81 respectively.

This increase in numbers led to the hostels being occasionally full, as Frank Martin, our Trustee now specially responsible for contact with Scotland, and Len Clark, formerly Chairman of the Y.H.A. (E.& W.) found when they were there early in September. While we may be able to add a few more beds at Rhenigidale hostels of this kind become both difficult to manage and liable to lose their intimate character if they get much larger than 12 beds, and so long as there are only two we feel it would be unwise to give them much more publicity. The real need is for several more in other parts, Uig in Lewis and Berneray, off North Uist, being perhaps most outstanding; quite probably if there were more with more publicity, there might be enough usage for 5 or 6 in all specially if, as seems possible, the S.Y.H.A. cannot manage to retain Stockinish or find an alternative.

Meantime we would emphasise what has long been obvious to those who know the Outer Isles that the remoter areas, with their strange and wonderful variety both human and scenic can only be effectively reached by camping (or occasionally sleeping in the car if motoring). Those who can if need be do this are welcomed at both hostels to cook in midgeless calm or take refuge from storm.

The summer was not very eventful. Electricity only arrived at Howmore in early autumn. Parties from the Nicolson as before gave welcome help at Rhenigidale. Frank Martin, Myke Gerrish, Simon Fraser, Archie McCallum and John Turnock were back again, and also Terence Mordaunt, younger son of one of the leaders of London Y.H.A. in the thirties who has himself visited both hostels. But most of those that came, were there for the first time, and will not come again but may well remember both the landscape (so strangely different) and the hostels among the most vivid of all memories of their travels.

HOSTEL LOGS.

More prosaic and postable log books were provided at both hostels, and a little regretfully we must accept that they did not stimulate quite so much decoration either verbal or pictorial as the vast old Rhenigidale book did. Perhaps if a sufficiently monumental album were conveyed to Rhenigidale, some one might be stimulated to adorn it with one or more Old Masters that could be relegated to some National Gallery if it could be got safely up the zig-zags, or rolled on or off some mysterious new ferry.

However, the new books produced some very significant comment. Most important perhaps was the first in the Howmore book by Archie McCallum from Glasgow - "The way the machair is divided into strips of barley, strips of potatoes, and so on, the arrangement of the houses in the villages at different times, the division of people's time between working the croft and some other job, the arrangements for mutual help (as with tending the bull which is behind the hostel) - all these things seem to make people into a community instead of, well, whatever you and I live in when we're at home --- The last thing we can afford to do is to let a sort of alternative society die away, and be lost, so that it can't suggest anything to us." These last words put the value of these remote communities to the nation as a whole as well perhaps as it has ever been put.

And there are other memorable words - Jane Briggs from Edinburgh - "If you sit quietly for just a few minutes, you should hear the fascinating and unusual animal conversations - and birds too, - which are constant day and night. Don't be alarmed - its the bull which is safely locked up in the barn next door." Andrew Collinson from Oldham - "Staying at this magnificent spot has been more of an experience than any hostel I have ever visited, ... unlike many places the weather is a mere incidental it is the people that make it so special." Anthea Goodwin from New Zealand - "The countless tiny heartease faces smiled a welcome as we walked the machair that first night, at peace with the world, filled with the light and enchantment of this beautiful place." Martin Beaver from Wolverhampton - "The houses, the building of the hostel, is the best house that I have ever lived in.....Everything here is

natural. The people are real, what people should be like." John Iain from Glasgow - ".... be aware and conscious of what is around you, specially the light. It is this quality that makes the Hebrides unique. It is not so much what you see but rather, almost more, a feeling of vast space and clarity for an infinite distance all around. If the wind blows as it does most of the time, don't let it batter you back inside yourself, but watch what it does to the water, the clouds, and look at the changes of light across the surface of the lochans and the ground."

Then of Rhenigidale. John Turnock, from Newcastle-on-Tyne - "But for me, the thing that is really different about Rhenigidale is freedom from the road, and consequently the total involvement in nature; one can simply watch and listen for hours." Alec Murdock from Pennsylvania - "This is what I dreamed of when I came north to Scotland." Rosemary Souther from Norwich - "Rhenigidale surpassed any dream I had of the perfect holiday place: I'd been moving about a bit too fast and too much in cars and buses so the village and hostel provided the perfect answers to my needs."

THE FUTURE.

We have quite sufficient margin on our income to deal with minor repairs and improvements, and we hope that one or other of those with whom we are in touch will be able to visit the Outer Hebrides before the high summer and consider any problems that arise over running the existing hostels. But more are wanted. The landscape of the Outer Isles (as of most of Britain) is very varied, and those who visit such hostels as these are eager to see many different places. It is difficult to achieve anything like adequate cover of the countryside with standard youth hostels, but our experience has shown that it is economically possible to have many more hostels of this kind, provided by crofters but with some subsidy - supplemented perhaps by bothies or campers' shelters but it is far better that campers who roam the remote areas should now and again as a change from camping come to such hostels and meet both the local people and other hostellers. These hostels however were only found when we had more than casual contacts, people who could spend several weeks in the islands or go over if for a shorter time year after year. If any who see this letter are themselves able, or know others able to do this, it would be a great help.

If you can help in this way or have any other significant comments or suggestions, please get in touch with Frank Martin, our youngest Trustee who is now specially responsible for our Hebrides interests. The address: 6, ALEXANDRA ROAD, WIMBLEDON, LONDON SW19 7VZ. (no telephone) will always find him within a few days.

Yours sincerely,

M. J. Campbell,
Hon: Secretary.