

THE GATLIFF TRUST

Trustees: Herbert Gatliff  
Bernard Selwyn  
Malcolm Campbell  
Robert Wickenden  
Frank Martin

Hon Secretary: Malcolm Campbell  
98 Agar Grove,  
Camden Square,  
London,  
NW1 9TC

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Dear Hosteller,

Crofters' Hostels - 1973 Results

For the twelfth time we write to tell you how the unofficial youth hostels, provided with our help by crofters in the Outer Hebrides, fared last year and our hopes for the future.

Both Howmore and Rhenigidale were again more used than ever before. Overnights at the two hostels were 1,151 (Howmore 665, Rhenigidale 486), spent by 220 visitors (Howmore 120, Rhenigidale 127, which makes 247 but 27, many more than in previous years, were at both hostels). Overnights were 119 Scots, 479 English and Welsh, and 553 from 14 other countries.

Returning visitors included Raleigh Mordaunt, with whom our Chairman went to Winchester hostel in 1952, whose two sons have also visited these hostels several times; Rob Wightman of Lancashire; Roger Clifton and Sid Parrott from southern England; and three - Archie McCallum from Glasgow, Werner Geiger from Stuttgart and Virginia Blankenhorn from Harvard University - showed their great appreciation for South Uist by staying several weeks. New visitors included Ian Porteus, whom our Chairman met on the way back with the milk to Struan hostel in 1952, now a distinguished mathematician at Liverpool University, and who also took his eldest boy to both hostels; and John Joyce of London who is in close touch with our Trust.

Roger Clifton and his companion Michael Lambert carried out a careful survey of both hostels and reported that while Howmore was generally in good health, Rhenigidale was in a less desirable state. After twelve years' use (and twelve Harris winters) urgent repairs are needed and John Joyce has organised a party to tackle these at Easter 1974. Once these have been carried out there is a need to improve the facilities at the hostel. Roddy MacInnes is campaigning for a Land Rover track to the village - this is probably vital to the continued habitation of Rhenigidale.

While the number of visitors has not increased very much the length of stay has become greater and this sometimes leads to an impression of proprietorship on the part of those already established in the hostel. This can be off-putting to new arrivals, so please welcome the newcomers. It is very easy to overlook the fact that it is a new experience for most people coming to the hostel when you have gained a rapport with the hostel, the landscape and the crofting way of life.

One of the most interesting entries in the hostel logbooks and housebooks was

Susan Young's from Aylesbury, who wrote in the Rhenigidale logbook:-

"Sunday, August (the glorious) 12th, 1973.

"I have stayed for four nights and although it's Sunday I'm on the point of leaving. It is a pity to be leaving so soon as I am beginning to feel part of the village after the events of yesterday ....

"Four of us set out from the hostel and village - Julian, Alec, myself and John Campbell himself. He was going out by the path for the first time in over two years, and although he is 73 he showed us the short cut and almost ran up those twelve zigzags!

.....

"John promised us a lift by boat with his family back to Rhenigidale so we waited on the pier and two hours later nothing had happened and an expedition, consisting of Julian and myself, John, his daughter and her four children left by taxi for the path. The idea was to walk over to Molinginish which is a deserted group of houses round the coast from here. A boat was promised to come and meet us all there. But, although John was faithful, I think the rest of us were doubting if a boat would indeed pick us up .... and the thought of retracing steps back to the main path and over the zigzags to Rhenigidale (by now it was almost dark) with all the bits and pieces and children and John, who was now getting tired - well I didn't want to think about it.

"Anyway, the boat was there and took the whole expedition round the point to here with no bother at all.

"The Campbells were celebrating in style last night, and we with them. The gathering continued almost until dawn, which perhaps explains the semi-nonsense of parts of this entry .... Rhenigidale is a fine place to come - peaceful and friendly and fun: and above all five long miles from the nearest car."

There were many other appreciative comments on the landscape and people of the Western Isles. Several commented on the need for more crofters' hostels.

The SYHA hostel at Stockinish is reopening this year early in the summer; this will result in more people visiting the Outer Isles and possibly using the crofters' hostels. The Gatliff Trust was pleased to make a modest contribution to the cost of adaptations. If any readers would like to extend their visit in order to search for further hostels - this is best done by making local personal contacts with crofters willing to rent an empty house as a hostel - the Trust would be happy to contribute to expenses. Please contact the Trust if you would like further information.

Yours sincerely,

Malcolm Campbell  
Honorary Secretary