

GATLIFF HEBRIDEAN HOSTELS TRUST

(Urras Osdallean Nan Innse Gall Gatliiff)

HEBRIDEAN HOSTELS - NEWSLETTER FOR 1989

John Joyce (Chairman)
2 Beaumont Road,
Upper Norwood,
London, SE18 3QZ

Alan Busson (Secretary)
4 Sambre Road,
Ridgeway View,
Chisledon,
Swindon, SN4 0JB

Peter Clarke (Vice Chairman)
Roger Clifton (Treasurer)
David Brown
Richard Genner
Phillip Lawson
Frank Martin
Arthur Maaby
Jim Souness
John Murdo Webb

RECORD OF OVERNIGHT STAYS BY VISITORS

	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989
Berneray	242	225	178	200	581	657	1173	1078
Claddach Baleshare	186	158	227	471	313	349	435	423
Howmore	410	405	387	523	518	389	615	848
Rhenigidale	299	266	270	414	384	532	384	118
	<u>947</u>	<u>1137</u>	<u>1052</u>	<u>1042</u>	<u>1806</u>	<u>1754</u>	<u>2807</u>	<u>2467</u>

Without a doubt, the main event of the year, if not the decade, for the Hebridean Hostels took place on 20th July 1989 in Berneray, when Duncan Campbell, Director of the Countryside Commission for Scotland, officially opened the newly refurbished hostel. Trustees, officials, wardens and friends of the organisation flowed off the ferries from Harris and North Uist and made their way to town where the ceremony took place and islanders and visitors were given the opportunity of exploring the hostel. Afterwards a sumptuous lunch was provided in the school to which all were invited. All the hostel wardens, even Mrs MacInnes from Rhenigidale, were able to attend as did one of the future wardens from Garenin in Lewis.

There was both local and national press coverage of this event but there was television coverage of the long awaited opening of the Rhenigidale road in late 1989. Early in 1990, Mrs MacInnes, warden of Rhenigidale was featured in local and national press when the Rhenigidale telephone exchange which she has operated for years was closed. It was the last manual exchange in the United Kingdom.

At this time, it is appropriate to remember the former warden of Rhenigidale, the late Roddy MacInnes who fought so long and hard for the road, but did not live to see it.

CLADDACH BALESHARE

Apart from the visitors to Berneray in July, the most distinguished visitor to any of the hostels was Alan Devereux, Chairman of the Scottish Tourist Board, who on the 8th June 1989 wrote in the Baleshare log: "Alas only a two minute visit. What a delightful place - peace - smiles from Mrs Tosh - if only I could stay for longer. This is tourism at its best. My kindest regards and thanks for the welcome."

A description of new experiences provided by the hostel comes from Dean Stewart Mayborn of Canada: "This hostel is probably the best one I've been in. Some of the sunsets here are brilliant and you can catch (pick?) enough mussels for a small feast on the beach near the causeway. Especially enjoyed watching twin lambs being born."

Another trans-Atlantic visitor, John T. Bertolini of Wisconsin wrote "The

birdlife is strange and intriguing to a North American from the prairie/woods of the North and the ocean is a giant marvelous foreign beast who reaches up the sloughs (or lochs) with salty pungent tentacles. The sky is abundant, though I find it strange that in a place so remote, it is hard to get out of site of a house."

Beautiful sunsets are recorded many times in all the log books but this anonymous entry is particularly descriptive: "The first evening was memorable. The sinking sun over Baleshare cast an orange glow across the whole sky, reflected as pink patches by scattered clouds. To the north, a low swirling cloud base also captured a little of the sinking sun adding a trace of muddy illumination to that sector of the sky. Contrasting with merging colours of the north west, the rest of the windswept sky was a deep marine blue. The overall effect was breathtaking."

RHENIGIDALE

Unfortunately, most of the Rhenigidale Hostel log for 1989 has been lost and, of course, the hostel was closed for a large part of the year. As already described, Rhenigidale was very much in the news in 1989, so the loss is a pity.

One intrepid hosteller, Geoff Kabaservice of Florida writes about his night-time walk to the hostel in April: "Got in last night at 11pm - a rough journey in the dark over steep and slippery paths. I was late and I decided to risk the walk. I'm not sure that I would recommend it to anyone else but the night hike had a charm of its own, the dark shadows of the hills, moonlight on the waves, the sky full of stars and no sound save that of the breakers bearing softly against the shore. When I finally saw the lights of Rhenigidale below me in the valley, I felt like Bilbo going down to Rivendell for the first time. And then after trial and tribulation and more muddy falls, I entered this homely house."

HOWMORE

This little South Uist hostel continues to attract enthusiastic comment. On 18th April 1989 someone writes: "Had a great stay in a great cottage on a great island with great people and great scenery/wildlife. I think Uist should be kept a secret so that people like ourselves who find wonderful places as this can return for a joyful, wicked second indulgence."

Howmore has been in the news recently too but for a regrettable reason. In about March 1990 it was discovered that an armorial panel, commemorating one of the Clanranald chiefs buried there and possibly dating back to the fifteenth, had been stolen from the churchyard near the hostel. Should any reader have observed anything strange going on in the churchyard at Howmore they should contact the local police or South Uist Historical Society.

The importance of the old chapels is not forgotten by hostellers. In May 1989 Martha writes "Perhaps an unusual place to come in order to study for university exams and yet, what better place than beside an ancient place of learning near the hills and the sea."

Still on a cultural note, on 19th July 1989 Jo Allan says "The guide told us that the building (i.e. the hostel) was custom built for a shepherd in 1890. The shepherd had got the job on the basis of his musical talents and was not a native of South Uist."

To this day, music flourishes in South Uist. On 19th May 1989 Alix from Brittany records that "I've come to hear the Gaelic songs which are some of the most beautiful songs of Western Europe. The kindness of the islanders, their hospitality, the vast beauty of the islands and my first experience of walking alone - all this has been wonderful. I hope the Highlanders will never give up their love of music, of gatherings, story telling and having a wee dram!"

P.T.O.

BERNERAY

If Alix went to Berneray she would have found all these attributes there. On 23rd July Abigail Little and friends write "Came over for three days and stayed for 5. The island is an oasis of sanity in the sea of civilisation. We have walked the coastline and machair listening to the sound of birds. The weather has been kind to us as has the people. The concert was delightful and the dance memorable. Walking back at 2am in the moonlight after the festivities was so different from the city."

In early 1989 there was much work done on the hostel by groups from the Prince of Wales Community Venture, to whom much thanks is due. As all will see if they now go to Berneray a magnificent job has been done. The dormitory, the flush W.C.'s and wash basins are a bonus to this delightful hostel.

The volunteers certainly worked hard and the log contains their description of digging a cess pit, unloading building materials, excavating the trenches, installing the shower and toilet and numerous other jobs. Happily, they also managed time to enjoy the wildlife and the birds and the beauty of the island.

Birds are described frequently in 1989. In April George and Margaret Tonhin record a very impressive list of birds observed in the island between 1st and 3rd April.

In late May, a family from Hampshire write: "The birdlife is an abundant source of interest and delight from the swooping fulmars to the baby starlings shouting from their nests in the next door ruins. The sound of the snipe drumming sends us to sleep however late in the night." This family also had the good fortune to have "our deepest hopes fulfilled - otters."

Douglas from Australia also had an encounter. "I spotted a large grey seal about 10 yards off the rocks. I stared at him through a telescope and he stared back at me. What a thrill it was to meet such a large creature of the wild in a different element face to face."

Perhaps the feelings of all visitors are summed up by Lotte Glob who says "It has taken me 20 years to get to this lovely island - it shall not be long before I am back."

The main excitement in 1990 will be the opening of a new hostel at Garenin on the west side of Lewis in June. The building has been restored by the Western Isles Islands Council, Comhairle nan Eilean. It is situated in the last street of thatched houses in Lewis, alas now all ruined. The hostel wardens will be John and Pat MacGregor who live nearby. John is a weaver of Harris tweed and most knowledgeable about local history. There is no doubt that Mr and Mrs MacGregor will soon be as popular and well loved as the other hostel wardens.

It is, of course, the wardens who make the hostels possible and the holidays memorable for so many. The logs are rightly full of praise for them. It is impossible to include all the compliments and tributes here but notably mentioned are Mrs Tosh's smiles; Mrs MacInnes warm welcomes; Miss Annie MacKillop and Mrs Jessie Macleod in Berneray are described as "a bonny pair" and Mrs MacSween is hailed as "an angel of the best kind and long may she reign as warden" - what a comment to write in the log book in the last year of Mrs MacSween long wardenship. After long years of wardenship, 1990 will see Mrs MacSween in well earned retirement and her daughter in charge of the hostel!

Isabel Steel,
Bridge of Allan,
May 1990.

Hostel lady retires

EIGHTY year old Mrs Catherine MacSween has decided to call it a day and retire from her post as warden of the thatched Youth Hostel at Howmore in South Uist. In the twenty-four years since the hostel was opened by the Gatliff Hostels Trust, Mrs MacSween has seen over 10,000 youngsters come and go, and she has now handed the care of the hostel to her daughter, Betty, who also lives in the village.

The Gatliff Trust is a small voluntary organisation founded in 1961 by Herbert Gatliff, a stalwart of the youth hostels and outdoor movement.

They plan to make more thatched accommodation available in the Western Isles in the next few years, according to their chairman, Mr Frank Martin.

"With the support of the Western Isles Council, we're working on the first house in the old village of Garenin in Lewis. But we're also very keen to find a suitable cottage in South Uist and Eriskay. There's a great demand from youngsters for an experience of the old crofting way of life, and on average we get around 600 at each of the hostels every year".

To mark her retirement, Mrs MacSween was presented with an inscribed silver tea service at a ceremony in her home, by the Deputy Lieutenant of the Western Isles, Dr. John Macleod.