



stop press

RODDY MACHINES died 16 May

Rhenigidale still open

Newsletter 4

June 1986

HEBRIDEAN HOSTELLERS' MEETING

21 JUNE starting at 1 p m

HOPE CENTRE, BRISTOL

Each year the Gatliff Trust organises a meeting for the Hebridean Hostellers. This year we invite you to join the Trustees at their summer meeting. All Hebridean Hostellers and their friends are welcome to attend.

As always proceedings will be conducted with the minimum formality. A buffet lunch will be served at 1 p m. The meeting is expected to finish at 4 p m.

After lunch we will hear from Frank Martin and Roger Clifton about their trips to the islands. Both will be visiting the Outer Hebrides in early June. These reports will provide the basis for planning the final stages of the Berneray project.

Action will also be planned at Claddach Baleshare, Howmore and Rhenigidale.

There will be an exhibition of photographs of thatched houses in the Outer Hebrides organised by Jim Souness.

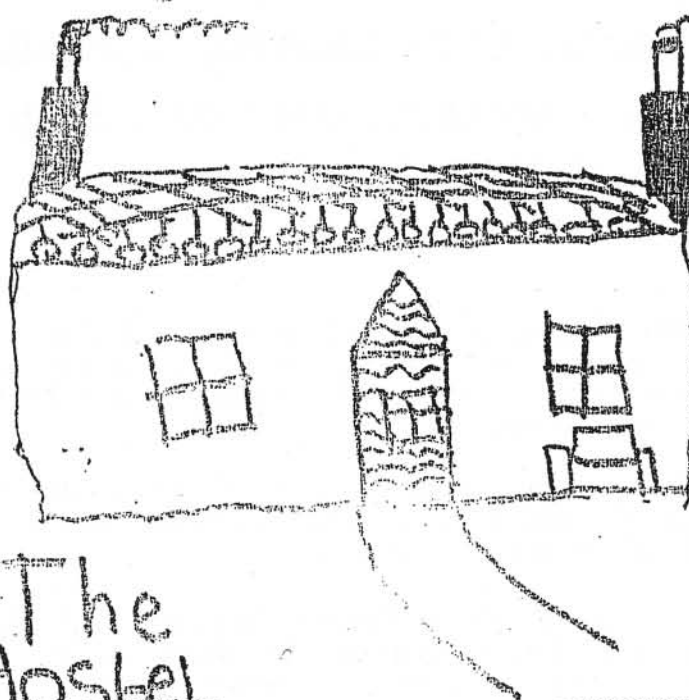
You give us absolutely splendid support. This annual meeting is our chance to say "Thank you".

If you are planning to attend can you let Peter Clarke know. (His address is 264 Alexandra Park Road, London N22 4BG. Tel: 01-888 2449) He will send you a map giving directions to the Hope Centre.

One of our satisfied hostellers

4/8/81

I did a project on Black
houses at school after I had
seen them on Harris. I have
always wished I could stay
in one now my wish
has come true. It's lovely



Claire
Coatham
age 9
2 Virginia
Terrace
Thornhill
Near Leeds

The
Hostel

NOTELET CARDS - still available

Frank Martin still has a stock of the notelet cards showing the hostels. Each card is blank for your own message and comes complete with an envelope. They are available singly (33p - please specify which design) or in a set of four, one each of the designs. (£1)

Send your orders to Frank Martin, 20 Cornwallis Avenue, Bristol
BS8 4PP

NEWS FROM THE HOSTELS

BERNERAY

John Joyce and Arthur Meaby coordinated a work party at Easter. With Roy Ashworth's help the hostel was commissioned for opening on 1 May. The kitchen work surfaces were completed and the sink installed. The interior brick work was painted white and the window frames stained. Two bunk beds have been put in the dormitory and one in the common room/kitchen. This is not an ideal arrangement but will suffice until the second dormitory is completed.

Last year the old roof was successfully removed and replaced by a new roof with new timbers. It is boarded, felted and thatched. Only time will tell whether this is a successful method of retaining thatched roofs whilst minimising maintenance problems.

Mains electricity was installed and all the floors were renewed. The internal v-lining was stripped out and the walls painted white.

Next

Discussions continue about the use of an adjacent building for the second dormitory and washroom/WC. Until they are concluded no further work can be done at the hostel.

The appeal

There has been a phenomenal response to the appeal. Already £5,500 has been raised. We are very grateful for the generous support we have received. Amongst notable donations received:

£1,000 - YHA National Committee	£200 - Christian Salveson
£1,000 - Cadbury Trust	£200 - Barclays Bank
£100 - YHA Southern Region	£200 - Tennant Caledonian Brewery
£250 - M & G	£200 - Russel Trust
£200 - Scottish and Newcastle Brewery	£150 - ICI
£200 - Chivers Regal	£100 - Bank of Scotland

Andrew Gannon has agreed to walk the Pennine Way during the summer to raise money for the appeal. If you are prepared to sponsor Andrew you can contact him at 16 Willow Path, Waltham Abbey, Essex EN9 3EX

The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, the Mountain Bothies Association, the Scottish Vernacular Buildings Working Group and the National Trust for Scotland are helping with the appeal by circulating the appeal leaflet.

HOWMORE

Jim Souness from Argyll and his merry men and women patched the roof at Howmore with Tommy Tosh's help. Over the winter a number of major leaks had become apparant. They used the spare bent from Berneray and some staw. The roof is now water-proof.

The roof will be completely rethatched with bent next year but Jim's work has raised the question is a Berneray style roof really necessary at Howmore? When the first reports of the leaks were received this looked likely. Jim takes the view that the old roof is sound and has many more years life in it so long as the roof is rethatched by skilled people.

The stove will be replaced during June with a brand new stove. Fuel is to be purchased, peat if it can be obtained. Though very difficult to light, once going it burns with fantastic heat.

CLADDACH BALESHARE

There are plans to improve the hostel to provide space for the WC and a wash room. Initially a stone porch was favoured but now using a second building seems possible.

RHENIGIDALE

The road has not reached Rhenigidale and looks unlikely to reach it in the near future. It is about half way there. The money has run out and the prospect of further funding looks bleak.

The place remains in much the same state as before but Frank Martin will be visiting Rhenigidale as a matter of priority to see if a work party can be organised to take action.

THE HEBRIDES

The 'Hebrides' made her last scheduled crossing of the Minch on 14th November. She was a happy ship, held in great affection by her many regular passengers. Over the years her skippers and crews had come to be regarded as friends, so it was not surprising that ceilidhs and ceremonies were arranged at all her ports of call on the 'triangular' route to mark her departure.

Her successor, the Hebridean Isles, was due to have paid courtesy visits to Lochmaddy and Tarbert early in December, to enable local people to see her but, unfortunately, these were cancelled due to unforeseen hold-ups, and she will now go straight into service on the Stornoway/Ullapool run whilst the 'Suilven' is refitting.

The new 'Heb' is due to come into service on the 'triangular' route next May.

From Am Pàipear The Newspaper of the Uist Council for Social Service



no road home

In his book "The White Island" (which described the wild life project set up by Gavin Maxwell on Eilean Ban, off Kyleakin) John Lister-Kaye wrote thus: "The Hebrides", he said, "are a drug to be shunned at all costs unless one is prepared for permanent addiction." There is more than a grain of truth in that. It is quite common for first-time visitors to the Outer

Isles, intending to go just once, to become addicted so rapidly that they find themselves returning again perhaps only months later. Some have made repeated visits every year ever since. Three months after the first NWS Meet to visit the remote outpost of Rhenigidale, on the coast of North Harris, I was back there again with another group, and I still can't explain why! In all, three NWS Meets have visited that idyllic spot in the space of five years, so there must be some truth in the assertion.

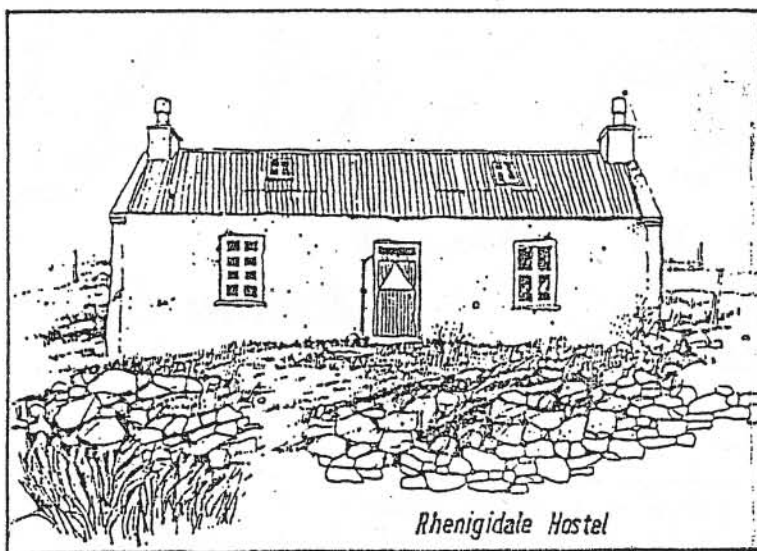


The indefinable 'atmosphere' of the Outer Hebrides (or the Long Island, the Dark Island, Tir nan Og, or the Western Isles - call them what you will) has to be experienced to be believed, and to make the journey to a remote spot like Rhenigidale is a rare experience not to be missed. There is a good crofter's hostel there, supported by the Gatliff Trust, and the hostel stamp sums it up well: the homely croft, the lazybeds around it where soil was built up in strips to aid cultivation, and soaring above, the lofty heights of Toddun, the miniature mountain which serves as a landmark for many miles around and is seen as a prominent dome when viewed across the Minch from Trotternish on Skye.

One thing, though, is missing from the picture, and it is this which makes Rhenigidale unique: the inhabitants of that tiny township, for in terms of absolute remoteness it is not the furthest place from civilisation to be found in Britain. (Parts of the Pairc coast on the opposite shore of Loch Seaforth, or Loch Resort further west, or even parts of Knoydart on the mainland more nearly meet that criterion, as do numerous uninhabited islands.) The uniqueness of Rhenigidale lies in the fact that it is a living community, with old folk and children, crofters who win a living from the land and the sea, and with a school and even a postal service: in fact the most isolated inhabited community in Britain, if you discount the Army presence on St. Kilda. There is

nowhere quite like it anywhere else. When NWS last visited Rhenigidale in 1981 the population of just 14 included Kenny, the postman, who made a thrice-weekly trip of 12 miles on foot to Tarbert and back, and Roddy, the crofter-warden who looks after the hostel.

The effort required to reach Rhenigidale makes arriving there all the more worth while. Most approach it by the spectacular coastal path with its dizzy zig-zags above Loch Trollamarig, a path which was once described in an article in "Country Life" as the finest path in Britain. Carrying a pack loaded with food

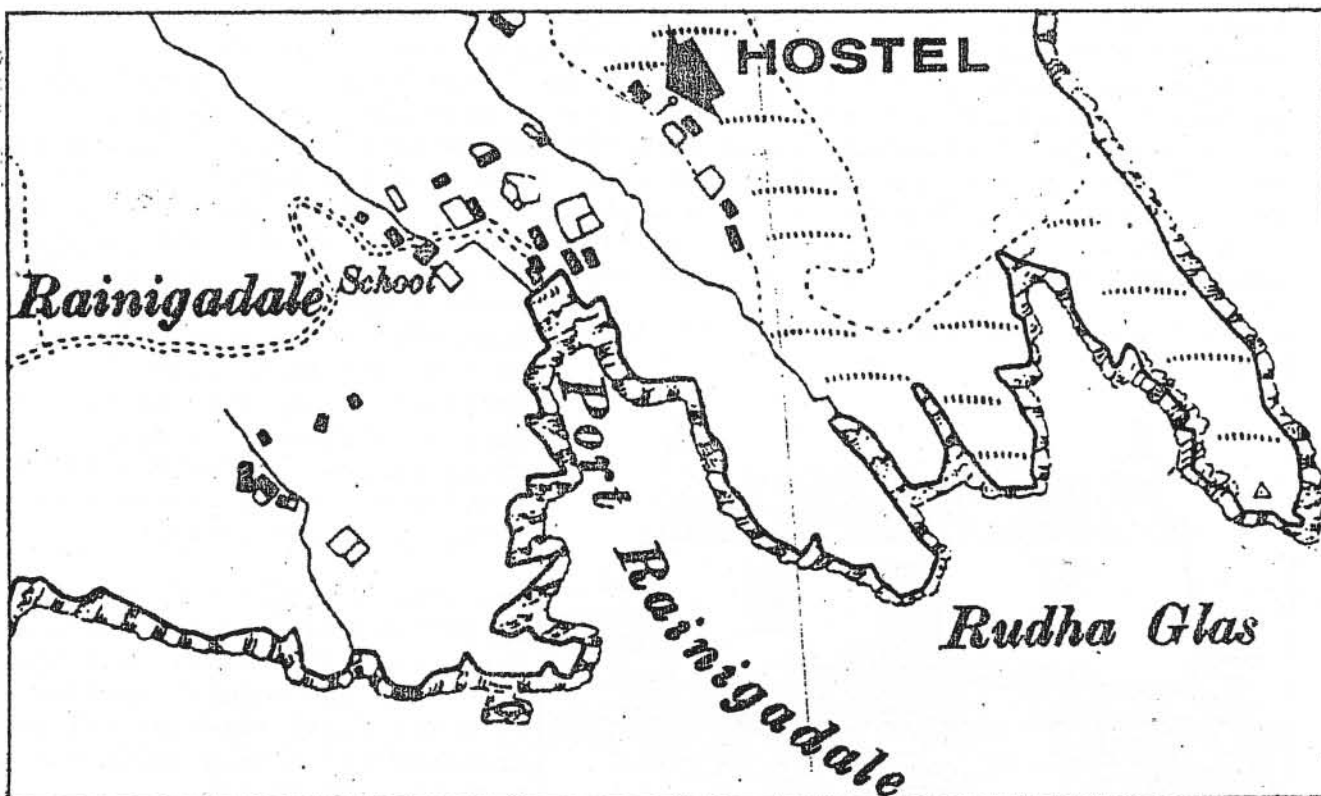


Rhenigidale Hostel

for a stay of several days up and down the undulations of this path is not easily forgotten, and not until the final headland is crossed - almost at the end of the journey - where the path passes through a gate, is there a view of Rhenigidale at last, its scattered crofts and patches of green clinging to the rocky slopes, and hidden from view to all but the sea. The slightly shorter though more rugged approach is from the road end at Maaruig in the north, through the hills beside Loch Mor and below the crags of Toddun, with only a sketchy path in places. This was the way we came on our second visit, arriving in darkness with a steep final descent to the lights of the settlement below providing a really dramatic finish to the day's walk.

For the privilege of staying in such a unique spot one has to thank both the crofter-warden Roddy and the Gatliff Trust. The pity is that there is never enough time to stay long enough to absorb the atmosphere fully. But as Kenny the postman remarked as we met him on the path on our return to Tarbert, "Time is Time"! There's always another day, especially for those who are well past the first stage of addiction. The hostel logbook (a masterpiece in its own way) bears testimony to the fact that many casual visitors who found their way to Rhenigidale, intending to spend just one night there, finished up by staying much longer. The two German girls who were "just passing through" during the first NWS Meet there eventually stayed a fortnight, and the Londoner who was also there at the same time specially flew up by plane to Stornoway a couple of months later to make a repeat visit of another week's duration!

What is it, you may wonder, about this place that makes such an impression on those who visit it? To give a complete answer in cold print would place it out of context and cheapen the experience, so the real answer must be, go and see for yourself. (In particular, do read the logbook, which may help to explain a great deal about the thoughts and feelings of those who come.) But one reason must be that the atmosphere has an unmistakable air of peace and beauty not found in many places nowadays and it must be this, as much as the timelessness, which has stirred its visitors to write poetry or inspired prose in the logbook, or to paint the pictures found around the hostel. Even those who are caught up in the turmoil of city life begin to unwind in a place like

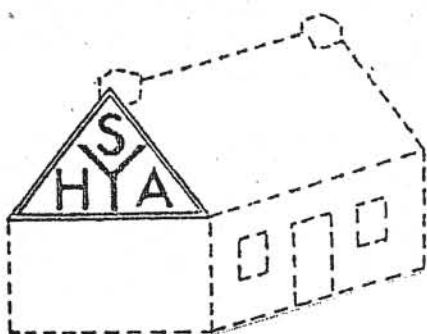


Enlargement (to 1/5000 scale) of out-of-copyright 6-inch O.S. map. The anglicised spelling of place names was replaced by the Gaelic spelling on later maps.

this, where just stopping still to listen to the silence - as NWS members did by Loch Mor - is an experience in itself. Most who reach Rhenigidale will also have shared a similar experience in toiling with some effort on that fantastic path high above Loch Trollamarig, often battling with the elements on the way, and the effort required to get there at all generally results in quite a different type of visitor from the hitch-hikers or suitcase travellers who frequent youth hostels nowadays in increasing numbers. Here, though, everything somehow seems more genuine.

So much for the dream. Now the reality. Life is not easy for the inhabitants of Rhenigidale, cut off from shops and other amenities of civilisation except by the tortuous lifeline of the coastal path, or where the only alternative is the hire of a fishing boat from Scalpay for an expensive 24-mile double journey. All fuel and other items have to be brought in one way or another, and even the convenience of electricity is a recent innovation as the poles were being erected when we were last there in 1981. Several of the population are elderly and the future of Rhenigidale, until a few years ago, looked uncertain. For many years the township has been pressing Comhairle nan Eilean (the local council) to construct a road, or at least a Land Rover track, through the hills from Maaruig in the north, to serve the community. The first surveys took place over ten years ago and support for the project from the Army as a training exercise was sought. In the years that followed, much lobbying of Comhairle nan Eilean's councillors took place to ensure that this lifeline to a precariously poised community could compete fairly for a claim on the council's limited budget. With cuts in public expenditure and other more important priorities the outlook seemed uncertain until the arrival of a fairy godmother in the form of a grant from the EEC. As part of the Integrated Development Programme for the Western Isles, a Land Rover track was eventually sanctioned and work on the first section leading south from Maaruig started in 1985. Nevertheless it may still be some while yet before it is complete and the first wheeled vehicle arrives at Rhenigidale itself.

When that day arrives, Rhenigidale will never be the same again. Gone will be the inaccessibility, the effort required to reach it by that incredible path, and gone too will be something of the atmosphere of the place, even if the road does guarantee its continued existence as a community, bringing it new life and a more secure future. Yes, Rhenigidale deserves another visit before long, while it still remains inaccessible and unspoilt. A longer stay next time, for sure, even after five previous visits, and even though "Time is Time". Now what was it John Lister-Kaye said about addiction? Or is it too late?



Hostels No More

Here today and gone tomorrow: this could describe some of the youth hostels in the Highlands, and particularly in the Nor' West. A glance at an old map will often show a red triangle where no hostel exists today. Some closures and replacements are inevitable with rising costs and changing demands, but on balance the walker and climber in some of the prime mountain areas has been the loser.

Some of the losses have been particularly unfortunate, and with the closure of key hostels on some of the major cross-country walking routes it is often no longer possible to walk from one hostel to the next without using transport. When the hostels were first established in the Highlands they were deliberately provided in areas which gave good walking or climbing, rather than in a haphazard fashion. Often in key positions at the junction of major glen routes and hill tracks, they benefited both walkers and pass-storming cyclists. One of the early SYHA officials, Arthur Cromar, had much to do with this as it reflected his own keen interest in walking, and particularly in long walks in the Highlands making use of some of the hill passes. Thus it was that 25 years



ago SYHA maintained a network of hostels not much more extensive than that today, but many of which were within walking distance of each other. Sadly this network has become broken up over the years, partly because the SYHA officials seem nowadays not to comprise as many active walkers as in the early days, and as in England and Wales the motorist and family hosteller seems to be better catered for than those who walk, cycle or climb. There are exceptions, of course, and we must be thankful that SYHA still regard it as important to retain such fine small hostels as Glen Affric, Craig and Achininver. But these are the few that remain on the map: many more are now hostels no longer.

The hostel at Glenelg was the former Inn just above the slipway on the mainland side of the car ferry to Kylerhea on Skye. This formed a most useful stopping place for cyclists

on their way between Skye and the mainland and was ideally sited for walkers, being midway between Broadford and Ratagan and giving an easy day's walk in either direction. The hostel at Glenelg was enshrined in history during its time as an Inn when Samuel Johnson and James Boswell called there on their famous Journey in 1773. The Inn had no food and these intrepid travellers had to sleep on a bed of straw, their resultant discomfort being vividly recorded in Johnson's lively account of the Journey. Things were a little more comfortable when a party on the first "Road to the Isles" YHA Adventure Holiday stayed there in 1968. In charge was a massive kilted Scot with a red beard. The hostel closed shortly afterwards and has never been replaced.

Another sad loss was Achtascailt hostel at Dundonnell. This was a series of huts rather like Durness but somewhat more conveniently sited for the mountaineers - in fact at the very foot of An Teallach, and right at the start of the path leading to the main ridge. To climb An Teallach in one day from a youth hostel without one's own transport is now difficult, although the Sail Mhor bunkhouse just along the road certainly helps.

Staffin hostel on Skye was a large mansion with its own grounds, on the coast on the opposite side of the Trotternish peninsula to Uig. It was ideally placed for exploring the rock towers and rock pinnacles of the Quiraing, at the northern end of the 'Backbone of Trotternish'. The closure of Staffin in 1967 heralded other developments in this part of Skye. Before the coming of the Hebridean car ferries in the late 1960s, Uig was an insignificant crofting township hardly anyone had heard of, but it did boast a youth hostel - a small cottage at the foot of Glen Uig. With the ferries, Uig became a busy ferry terminal almost overnight, so SYHA sold the cottage and no doubt with the increased business in mind, opened up a much larger 56-bed hostel in the former hospital which had just closed.

Curiously, despite this development the Outer Hebrides have never been well supplied with hostels, at least official ones, in contrast to the Orkneys and Shetlands where several have been opened in recent years. Until Stockinish opened in the early 1960s SYHA's only foothold in the Outer Isles was in the town of Stornoway, where one room in part of the YMCA building was reserved for SYHA members. This arrangement ended many years ago and even today there are only two hostels - Stockinish and Lochmaddy - in the Outer Isles.

Meanwhile, back on the mainland, at Achnashellach in Strath Carron, right by the railway and close to some good hills, SYHA were running a small, simple hostel in a series of huts leased from the Forestry Commission. The enterprising warden was one Dave Goulder, a railway enthusiast who indulged in a little folk singing on the side. Evenings at this hostel were usually lively as a result! When SYHA decided to close the hostel, Dave Goulder was out of a job so responded by starting up his own private hostel in a cottage leased from the National Trust for Scotland in Glen Torridon. Dave continued to run Glen Cottage, as it was known, for many years until the Trust refused to renew the lease in 1974 and the building was offered to SYHA as a temporary hostel pending completion of the large Grade 1 hostel in Torridon village, which opened the following year. Dave is now a folk singer of some note.

Torridon had been on the hostel map many years earlier in the form of a tiny cottage high above the village of Inver Alligin on the north shore of Upper Loch Torridon. This too had been well sited and was within a day's walk of Craig in one direction and Achnashellach in the other. When Inver Alligin was closed, many years were to elapse before this gap was filled.

These are only a few that have ceased operating, along with North Strome, opposite Strome Ferry, Lonbain on the coast of Applecross, Harlosh in West Skye, Aultbea on Loch Ewe and Castletown in Caithness. Why did they close? Presumably rising costs and a drop in bednights had something to do with it, coupled with a trend towards larger up-graded hostels on the main hitch-hiking routes, and one suspects that some of the remoter hostels were thought of as a bit of a nuisance by tidy-minded accountants in Stirling, who may have found them difficult to reach to check the books! However, costs cannot be the main reason for closing a small cottage leased from the Forestry Commission at a purely nominal rent, which costs little to run and obviously meets a demand. As a result many small, simple hostels of this kind in the Nor' West have ceased to open their doors to travellers, and many of the best mountains are now quite impossible to reach from a hostel in one day on foot unless you have your own transport. Even NWS can play its part in helping to patronise the smaller hostels while they remain - which is one reason Craig was visited in its 50th anniversary year.

KEITH PENNYFATHER



(The two preceding items are reprinted, with permission, from the magazine of NOR' WEST SGURRAMBLERS, a group of mountain walking enthusiasts who share a special interest in the Hebrides and the mainland hills north and west of the Great Glen. The group was formed in 1975 to promote interest in the "Nor' West" and to cater for those who enjoy walking, scrambling and "agurr ambling" among the most rewarding mountains in Britain. With a nationwide membership (mostly based in England) and with Meets every six weeks or so, NWS offers a good opportunity of reaching the wilder parts of Scotland at minimum cost by sharing transport with others with similar interests. Since 1975, nearly 90 Meets have been held, generally based at youth hostels, mostly in Scotland but with a reunion each year South of the Border. A regular newsletter keeps members in touch as does an occasional magazine. Enquiries are always welcome from those who share similar interests, particularly those for whom an enthusiasm for this unique part of Britain is as great as their interest in walking. A handout giving more information, together with the programme of Meets for the current year, is available by sending a stamped addressed envelope to: The Secretary, Nor' West Sgurr-ambblers, 6A Beaufort Close, Alderley Edge, Cheshire SK9 7HU.)

VOLUNTEERS WANTED

Since the Hebridean Hostellers began we have been overwhelmed by your offers of help. Many of you have given sterling help on work parties. This year, following the Easter work party, no work parties are being planned ahead of the Trustees' meeting in June. At that meeting we hope to establish a programme of work for the latter part of summer 1986 and 1987.

However, if you are going to the Hebrides this year and would like to do something to help the hostels, there are some jobs which can be done by individuals.

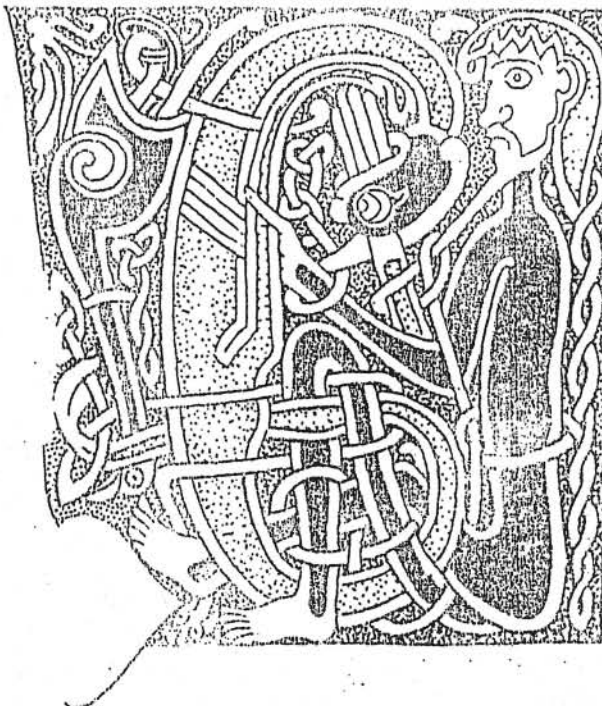
Inventories

It is necessary to compile an inventory of furniture and equipment at each of the hostels. We have some rudimentary inventories but we need a comprehensive set of inventories. These inventories will allow us to make sure that each hostel is properly equipped at the beginning of each season. This job requires a mixture of persistence and patience. Each inventory can be completed in less than one day. Maybe one person would be prepared to complete all four inventories, or four people may come along and be prepared to do one each.

Scale drawings

A similar problem arises with regard to the maintenance of the hostels. We have plans of the hostels but we require a set of drawings that would allow us to plan maintenance before arriving in the Outer Hebrides. For example, a hosteller may report that a window is broken at a hostel and a trustee or someone prepared to mend that window may be just about to go up, but only when on site can you tell the materials and tools required for the job.

A set of scale drawings together with some estimates of the quantities of materials required to do day to day maintenance at the hostels would be a great help.



Non - Hebrides work

A number of Hebridean Hostellers could also play a role without necessarily having to visit the Outer Hebrides regularly.

Equipment officer

It is necessary to purchase items of equipment and organise their transport to the hostels. It has been suggested that the Trust establish a central equipment store in the Hebrides. If this occurred the Equipment Officer would be responsible for maintaining the store at the required level.

Designer

Trust publications would greatly benefit from the input of a professional designer. We have successfully adopted a much higher public profile thanks partly to our high quality literature. But never content to rest on our laurels we are keen to improve its quality.

Newsletter editor

One or a small team of people are required to help with the preparation and distribution of this newsletter. The aim is to produce two issues a year. The current editor is heavily committed to other Trust business which, regrettably, sometimes has to take precedence over producing the newsletter. The current editor does not intend to abandon ship, he merely seeks other enthusiasts who realise that producing a newsletter twice a year is not a major task.

Hebrides Secretary

Traditionally the Trustees have nominated one of their number to be Hebrides Secretary. Currently Peter Clarke enjoys the honour of that title. With the creation of the Hebrides Sub committee the duties have increased, since the Hebrides Secretary convenes the meetings.

This job involves convening the Hebrides Sub committee meetings, and each year replenishing the hostel logbooks and house-books.

Interested?

If anyone is interested Peter Clarke (01-888 2449) will give you further details of what each job involves.