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Newsletter 5

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#### NEWS FROM RHENIGIDALE

The Gatliff Trust's bid to buy Rhenigidale hostel has been successful. It's absolutely certain that people will be able to use it this year, regardless of the length of time it may take legal technicalities to be settled. In the Scottish system of property purchase, bidders put in their bids without knowing what other people are bidding and with only guidance on a probable price, rather than a fixed sum. The legal procedures are not quite completed, but the Trust has been told that its bid is successful.

To hold Rhenigidale as a Trust property is an exciting challenge. Money will have to be raised for the purchase and some repairs, but it will be a wonderful thing to ensure that there will always be somewhere to stay on this most lovely stretch of coastline.

The opportunity to buy Rhenigidale arose from the sad news of Roddy MacInnes' death. Everyone who stayed at Rhenigidale will be sorry to hear of this, for it was his presence and company which contributed so much to the enjoyment and interest of staying there. One hosteller, Jon Cross, wrote an entry that expresses what many will feel.

"June 29: Though it took me 3 hours to walk here (too heavy a pack, 45 lbs), I would say this village, for village it surely is, must be regarded as a reminder to us all not to lose hope. I learned today that Roddy MacInnes recently died. I can only say with gratitude and respect, thank you, for it is the generosity of people as you must have been, that enables those of us from the hustle and bustle a little peace and solitude."

Reprinted below are two obituaries for this gentle and respected man. One is from the Stornoway Gazette and the other is by Frank Martin, Chairman of the Gatliff Trust.



RODDY MacINNES

Warden, Rhenigidale Hostel

1961-86

I first met Roddy in April 1964 when I was on my way to find out if the Gatliff Trust could open a hostel on the Island of Scarp. Roddy, a Gatliff Trust Hostel Warden, was very interested in the project and gave me useful advice on how and who to approach. Since that time I have visited Rhenigidale with my family every four or five years. Last year Roddy was in fine form and the children loved feeding his lambs. Last winter he was wanting to help the Trust with the work on Berneray, so it was a very sad surprise to learn that he had died on the 16th May 1986.

Roddy met Herbert Gatliff, the founder of the Gatliff Trust, in 1960 and agreed that his house in Rhenigidale could be used as a youth hostel during the summer months. It was opened at Easter 1961 and since that time well over 5,000 people, mainly young people from all parts of the world, have visited the township and met Roddy. The friendly greeting and talking into the early hours will be missed.

The walk from Tarbert eastwards along the rugged Harris coast was described by "Country Life" in 1974 as one of the finest walks in Britain. On one occasion a few years ago I learnt that all the National Office bearers of An Oige (the Irish YHA) were visiting and Roddy was able to give them a real Scotch welcome!, including one who arrived many hours after the main party having walked north (instead of east) from Laxadale Lochs and arrived from Maaruig.

The tiny township of Rhenigidale is the remotest community in Britain. It has a school for one or two children under 11 and all supplies which cannot be carried have to come in by boat. Roddy's openness and willingness to share his life with so many visitors meant a unique experience could be enjoyed by many young people. The Gatliff Trust are indebted to Roddy for this pioneering work and I regard it a privilege to have known him.

Roddy was a tenacious leader of his township and fought for many years to get electricity and a road. It is a great pity he didn't live to see the road completed. He did know the project had been approved (phase 1) and that work had started on the initial metalled section in the Spring of 1986.

Roddy is buried at Maaruig where the road access starts so please, if you are passing, spare a few minutes for a kindly, gentle, hardworking man.

Frank Martin  
Chairman, The Gatliff Trust

30.10.86

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On a more sombre note, we are sorry to report the passing, at a Glasgow hospital, on May 16, of Mr. Roderick MacInnes of Salacha, Rhenigidale. Roddy had been transferred to Glasgow from the Lewis Hospital and the end came suddenly, though his health had been giving cause for concern for some time.

Aged 67 years, he was a son of the late Mr & Mrs Angus MacInnes (Aonghas Dhunnchaidh), Rhenigidale and was unmarried.

Although Roddy undertook various employments throughout his working years, his main interest in life was his sheep, of which he had a fair number. He was always ready to talk about sheep and made a good living for himself off them.

Although he may not have been by some standards considered as physically robust, he was a good hill walker who thought nothing of the long trek to and from Rhenigidale in all weathers or at any time of the day or night. Neat and tidy in appearance, he looked band-box fresh despite his long walk to the village of Tarbert.

His remains were conveyed to Harris for interment at Marig. The funeral service was conducted in the Church of Scotland, Tarbert by Rev. Duncan Macaskill of Inverness, assisted by Mr. Malcolm Macdonald, Scaladale.

Sympathy is extended to his brother Finlay at Balallan and his sisters Marion at Rhenigidale and Jessie at Inverness, his various nephews and nieces and all other relatives.

Harris News  
Stornoway Gazette

31.5.86

### BERNERAY APPEAL NEWS

SUCCESS! £10,000 has been raised for the Berneray Appeal. Thank you all for your contributions and support. This was the first time the Gatliff Trust had launched an appeal and the response has been tremendous. It means the Trust can go ahead with negotiations to draw up a legal document for continued use of the house, can develop further plans for improvement and just as importantly, the Trust now has the confidence and skills to go about raising money for important capital projects. The generosity of both individuals and businesses has shown that the hostels are used and loved by a wide range of people from all over the world.

Thank you very much for all your donations. One person the Trust would like to thank especially is Andrew Gannon who walked the entire Pennine Way during the summer of 1986 to raise money for the appeal.

Below is a breakdown of where people have come from on their visit to the Hebrides and the numbers of visitors to each hostel. For Berneray, it has been a successful year with the help of everyone who helped in any way. THANK YOU!

#### OVERNIGHT STAYS AT THE HOSTELS 1986

| From:                     | Nos of visitors |            |        | Total |
|---------------------------|-----------------|------------|--------|-------|
|                           | Scotland        | Rest of UK | Abroad |       |
| Berneray (N Uist)         | 56              | 220        | 167    | 443   |
| Claddach Baleshare (Uist) | 52              | 126        | 136    | 314   |
| Howmore (S Uist)          | 100             | 243        | 173    | 516   |
| Rhenigidale (Harris)      | 62              | 146        | 156    | 364   |

The total number of overnight visitors to the hostels for 1986 is 1,754 which does not include the 28 day visitors to make a note in the log books. This is an increase of 854 on last year's overnight total of 1,608. Just goes to show that the hostels are being used by more people and that they really do offer cyclists and walkers welcome places to stay in at little expense amidst the natural and cultural richness of the Western Isles of Scotland.

### WESTERN ISLES DRAFT STRUCTURE PLAN

Comhairle nan Eilean's draft structure plan for the Western Isles includes several proposals which show the Council's continued commitment to developing a tourist industry which is sensitive to the local environment and the traditions of the islands. Contact between the Gatliff Trust and the Comhairle's staff is friendly and productive. Both parties are interested in promoting more local use of the hostels and in seeing the local communities become more involved in the work of the Trust.

The relevant Sections of the draft plan are:

A44 The Council recommends that the range of accommodation available for tourists be improved.

A46 The Council will encourage further provision of youth hostels in the area and in particular in or within easy reach of Stornoway.

### SEAWEED FACTORY TO CLOSE

The sudden and devastating news that the Spanish seaweed factory in South Uist is to close came at the end of last year. Local reaction was bitter and articulate. We reprint the Editorial from the local newsheet Am Paipear.

"'Nothing short of a disaster' - that was the typical Uist reaction to the news that the Spanish seaweed factory was to close. It was, indeed, like a sudden intimation of mortality - a chill such as the defenders of some besieged and impregnable city might have felt when they learned that the source of their only water supply had fallen to the enemy. What now? There is nothing to stop the worst happening. There is no reason to expect any mercy from those distant figures who, just beyond gunshot, while away their waiting days with dice and giggling wenches.

"An overdrawn picture? Not really, for, if an account is drawn up of all that the seaweed industry has meant to Uist, it can be seen as one single item that once stood between the life and death of the island.

"When the seaweed industry first came to Uist some thirty years ago, it arrived at a time when it seemed as if one of the Brahan seer's more sombre prophesies was rapidly being fulfilled, and that the island would soon be left to the grey lag goose and a hornless breed of sheep. Scarcely a week would go by without some crofting household being sold up, and, if at times the tide of exodus seemed to slacken, that was because so many had already gone. The memories of those days are poignant - perhaps crystallised by the sight of a solitary horse roaming ceaselessly back and forth on the machair in search of the dozens of others that had so recently gone to the Belgian knackeries.

"The causes of that exodus were a potent mixture of economics and simple biology, for the difference between the austere island living conditions and mainland affluence was not only wider than it ever had been in the past but many more people were by then acutely aware of the size of this difference. As people would say at that time - once a girl hits the pavements of Glasgow, it will be most unlikely that she will return to live in a thatched cottage without privacy or running water, where there is a pot of hen food perpetually on the stove and six inches of mud outside the door. Uist had become largely an island of bachelors - perhaps a dozen or more in one small township and not a marriageable girl within bicycle range. And so, after a while, the men had begun to follow the girls across the Minch.

"It was at this time - when the island seemed terminally ill - that the seaweed industry appeared like some sort of miracle cure, for it is very difficult to think of anything else that would fit into the crofting way of life and yet stop the rot so effectively. The reasons for the success were simple. By working as hard, as long, and as often as he chose, a man could steadily gather enough capital to pay for those improvements which could make his life tolerable - a kitchen, or toilet facilities, or a down-payment for a small van, or a tractor,

or a boat, and so on. It is near enough the truth to say that the seaweed industry allowed the people of Uist to move out of the nineteenth century into something approaching the present age. As they still say, the seaweed was the best thing that ever came to the island.

"For the next twenty-five years the seaweed industry provided what can best be described as a "floor" to the island economy. Fishermen worked at it between October and March, filling in the seasonal gap by profitable work which would eventually contribute to the purchase of a better class of vessel. Crofters would use it to accumulate funds for a decent byre. And more than a few Uist men returned to the island only because they knew they could pay the grocer by working at the seaweed while they found their feet. Contractors came and went, the price of stock could rise or fall, but there was always the seaweed therefor a man who did not hesitate to bend his neck.

"The first real hint of danger was when the enterprise was bought by an American-based multi-national accompanied by the familiar fanfare about access to wider markets, a greater degree of financial resilience, more rational investment, and so on. Though far too many were gulled by all this razzmatazz, the signs were not good for those who cared to look. Prominent persons (such as Sir William MacEwen Younger, of all people) had shortly before warned that an industry seldom prospers once its control passes into foreign hands, and the brittle, short-term exploitative nature of American investment in UK industry was time and again being exposed. We do not know (and have no means of knowing) whether there ever was any intention of re-investing in the Spanish factory, but certainly it did not occur. All the appearances suggested that it was merely being run out till it collapsed.

"It was perhaps because we did not really want to see the signs that the news of the Spanish closure came as such a shock. Yet no sign could be plainer or more ominous than control passing to a multi-national, for then the fate of things like seaweed factories and the remote people that depend on them will be reduced to an exercise in accountancy - a simple, impersonal adjustment for the benefit of innumerable, faceless hordes of share-holders who know nothing and wish to know nothing of the Spanish factory and would not give a jot if it was tossed aside like a bit of used bait off a hook.

"One of the monstrous illusions in the modern scene is that multinationals are just vastly expanded versions of some thriving local business. They are nothing of the sort - perhaps not even the same species. A computer does not have any sense of loyalty, good faith or social responsibility."

### LOCAL HISTORICAL SOCIETIES

On a more positive note, we have news of the growth of several local historical societies in North Uist, Benbecula and South Uist. Each society has its own organising committee, but they will be publishing a joint newsletter through the Federation of Southern Isles History Societies.

North Uist History Society was the first one to get started and the initial meeting was held in September 1986. The Society has already held a series of talks and plans more for 1987. Local enthusiasm is high and attendances at the talks have been of 50 and more people.

The main project for 1987 is the launch of an Uist project which will have two researchers based in part of the Bayhead school house. The researchers will record old songs, collect documents and photographs, compile a bibliography and create an archive at Bayhead. Already, £600 has been raised in North Uist through a bring-and-buy sale.

South Uist Historical Society is developing another strand of local history collection. Their main project is to get together an authoritative and comprehensive list of all the historical sites on the island and to publish this as a detailed guide. A number of talks, on Hebridean dancing and on piping (which is particularly strong in the South Uist culture) were held last year and it is hoped more will be arranged for the 1987 South Uist Mini district Festival.

All the societies are very new but local support is strong and the organisers have exciting plans to develop an educational role and to begin the joint newsletter. The newsletter will contain reports of what is going on in the societies and dates of meetings etc. The societies are also waiting to see what will happen once the new community school opens at Liniclate. The school will incorporate a museum and the societies hope to be linked in to both the school and museum in some way. Ann Lantair, the new arts centre in Stornoway is another organisation the Federation hopes to develop links with in future.

The future of Gaelic culture looks promising. The setting up of local historical societies throughout the Hebrides, the building of new community schools at Liniclate and Castlebay, the community workshops funded by the Integrated Development Programme (IDP), community cooperatives and the success of Ann Lantair are all positive examples of the islanders' determination to retain and develop their cultural identity. Nobody involved in these projects wants Gaelic culture to be represented by a few shelves of tapes; songs sung by long dead singers, or albums of sepia photographs showing the seaweed gathered in. Keeping a record of the past is essential, but the local history societies want to be part of the present and to ensure a Gaelic culture for the future. That is why the development of links with schools, Ann Lantair and the local media is so important, and why the societies want to involve every age group in their activities.

Society talks are open to everybody and information about them is available from:

Peter Trehwitt, Newsletter Editor,  
Federation of S. Isles History Societies,  
Nurses Cottage, Grogarry, S. Uist.  
Tel: Grogarry 221

Donald MacCauley, Secretary,  
c/o Bayble School, Isle of Lewis.

The S. Uist Mini District Festival will be from 17th - 21st July 1987. Activities include a Regatta, Balbegre dances, piping recitals, talks of local interest and an exhibition. Details are not finalised, but hostellers will find information at Howmore nearer the time.

Contact: Jill MacLean, 8 Howmore.

### WRITING IN THE HOSTEL LOG BOOKS

Many hostellers express their feelings about the islands in the hostel log books. They are always a pleasure to read because here are stories and experiences that we can share, often recognise and always delight in. When people have recorded that they have seen six golden eagles, or attended a Gaelic Mass, heard corncrakes or watched a little hedgehog scratching himself, the accurate and loving description builds up a picture of the islands for all those who come afterwards.

One visitor to Berneray in 1985 was Bettina Selby who is writing a travel book about the Outer Hebrides. She wrote a long log book entry which we rewrite here as it brings the island vividly to mind.

"22nd July 1985

I stayed here for three nights during Berneray week. I arrived with tent, cooker etc. but being between working parties, I stayed inside, quite alone. I'm writing a travel book about the Outer Hebrides and would not want to leave out Berneray as I feel a great affection for it after visiting it several times over the last fifteen years.

"Most impressed as I am with the work that has already been done to this hostel when I remember what a damp, decaying building it was. A great pity that it will have to be partitioned as it looks splendid like this, so spacious and with such good proportions.

"During my three days I have industriously worked up my notes and wandered around the island. The first evening I went to the Berneray Week film show and saw four films about the Hebrides. Unfortunately,

the quality was pretty ropey due to a fluctuating power source and as one of the films was the historic German Count's 1936 film of Eriskay, which I have long wanted to see, it was a bit disappointing. However, like the hostel, it will all be better next year when the new hall is finished.

"The next night was ceilidh night and that was super, with the hall packed to the doors and great singing from visitors and locals kept me riveted in spite of my precarious perch on a hard, backless, wooden bench. Today I should have joined the outing to Boreray and had stayed precisely to do this. But it was a miserable day with mist and rain so I didn't go and now regret it.

"The previous evening had been the most marvellous I have ever experienced in all the years I have been coming here. The light in the Western Sky was quite astonishing, long after the sun had set in a riot of yellow and orange hues. I can only describe it as the most unearthly sort of light I have ever seen. Everyone coming out of the ceilidh for a breath of air remarked upon it, with gasps of amazement and delight. At 1.00 am, the after glow was still lighting up the Western sky, quite overpowering the half moon and stars of the Eastern sky - it was very difficult to tear myself away and go to bed."

Bettina Selby

If you have enjoyed reading Bettina's entry, why don't you read her book, 'Riding to Jerusalem' (Sidgwick and Jackson), which is the story of her travels along an old Crusader route. At the moment, Bettina is apparently bicycling to the source of the Nile, staying in what she calls "no-star hotels" along the way. Obviously, she is an adventurous and robust traveller.

Whether you are a travel writer or not makes no difference to the interest of the entries. As one writer, Sarah, put it, 'Been sitting and reading the old log book. I think that one of the best things about these hostels of the Gatliff Trust is the sense of being part of a time continuum - we stay in an old hostel, most of us for only one or two nights, and yet by reading the old logbooks you can be aware of the numbers of people who have passed through before you, and that there will be many people after you.'

Once you have visited the Hebrides, experienced the light, the sea and the kindness of the islanders, you do find you want to return. Peter Clarke is the Secretary of the Hebridean Committee and organiser of the Hebrides Hostellers group. What makes the Hebrides special to him?

'Why do you like the place?'

I have been asked this question countless times. It is remarkably difficult to answer. This summer driving the 1,600 miles there and back, I was forced to declare that all the romance of the journey had been squeezed from me. Yet once there, the attraction of the place remains undiminished.

I found myself pondering on the question. Is it the softness of the breeze against the face, the profusion of delicate flowers dotting the grass, the abundance of birds, the seals, the gentle machair or the rugged hills strewn with lichen covered rocks? Or is it the people, with their open welcome? Maybe it is the way the human landscape adapts to the environment with the solid houses against the hills, the electricity lines which resemble match sticks strung with cotton thread amidst a wild scene. Here and there a house is found with a pile of peat stacked ready for the winter. Lochmaddy: a cluster of houses amidst the slate grey of the tide; the solidity of the Lochmaddy hotel, the white of Ostram house, the zinc green of the new cattle mart and the security of the red, black and white of the MacBrayne ferry.

Afterwards, at home, even the hours of pounding homewards along the motorways of England cannot diminish my desire to get back to the Hebrides, soon or sooner.

### NEWSPAGE

#### News from the Scottish Youth Hostels

1986 saw the first full operating year of the two new SYHA hostels at Kyleakin and Crianlarich. Both had a very good season and over 11,000 bednights were recorded. The SHYA has been very helpful to the Gatliff Trust in distributing the Berneray Appeal leaflet and giving some publicity to the Hebridean Hostels. In 1987, the SHYA will refurbish the Glencoe Youth Hostel and continue to provide warm, reasonable and comfortable places to stay for all age groups throughout Scotland.

#### Gatliff Trust News

1986 was the 25th Anniversary of the setting up of the Gatliff Trust and 1987 marks the tenth year since Herbert Gatliff's death. The Trust publishes a report every three years, and the next one is due in 1988. It would be an opportunity for the Trust to include an illustrated article on Herbert Gatliff's life and on the history of the Hebridean Hostels.

#### News from the papers

Finally, here are some cuttings from the national papers which may interest you.

### GOOD LUCK FOR 1987 TRAVELLING

#### Troubled Waters of Western Isles may not benefit from Oil

You could feel the temperature in the room drop. Leading members of the Western Isles community had gathered to hear how offshore development might bless their economy.

The Scots are still understandably intoxicated by the effect of onshore prosperity, added to that enjoyed by Aberdeen generated by possible oil to the West and North West.

The sobering-up session was held by the oil companies and the Department of Energy, who told the islanders they should not count on oil being discovered in their patch of the Atlantic. Even if it were it would likely be handled from the existing bases on the mainland, was the joyless message.

A great deal seemed at stake at Stornoway yesterday: a fragile economy, based largely on Harris tweed, fish, crofting, and some offshore fabrication work, and a people wondering how much they should build up their hopes.

The message from the oilmen, while pouring cold water on some hopes, showed the limited impact which remaining discoveries of oil might have on the land-based economy.

The Rockhall Trough lies to the north-west of the Isle of Lewis. It and the West Shetland Basin to the north remain the two areas where oil quantities as large as at the Brent field in the North Sea might still be found.

Twelve exploration licences have been granted in Rockhall, but so far only one seismic well has been drilled.

The obstacles to oil and gas developments on this side of Britain are in an entirely different league to the situation in fields already operated in the North Sea, and their considerable achievements.

Depths in this part of the North Atlantic increase dramatically to 2,000 feet or more, compared with the 300 to 400 feet average of most North Sea oil fields.

Atrocious weather closes in at this time of year, making drilling impossible until March.

BP's plans involve drilling in the sloping sides of the Trough, which eventually reaches a depth of 6,000 feet. Huge slips of sediment will make drilling not only difficult but hazardous.

"We would be irresponsible to raise hopes too high", Mr. Nick De'ath, BP's chief geologist for north-west Europe, told the Western Isles conference. Oil men were lucky in about one out of 20 or 25 wells drilled, he warned, adding that in normal oilfields there was a 10-year lead-up from discovery to production.

However these are not normal fields, and the oil industry is only now starting to find ways of discovering and handling the oil and gas it may produce.

There was further bad news for the Islanders from Mr. James Hay, divisional manager for Britoil in Aberdeen, who said that, even if oil was discovered it would likely be handled from the existing land bases. Long-range helicopters made it possible to fly from Aberdeen to any exploration or production rigs off the Western Isles.

Supply ships would probably also use their bases in north-east Scotland, Mr. Hay said. At the most, Western Isles' ports might be needed for water and diesel fuel.

What hope remained came from dissenters, who pointed out there might be a future if supply bases in the Western Isles were able to show they could operate commercially.

Other detractors from the gloomy official line pointed out that the oil companies had got it all wrong previously about what they might require.

There was also a warning from the Shetland Islands about how, if oil was discovered, plans for its eventual decline as well as its development would have to be made.

This has been the experience of Shetland with the building of the Sullom Voe oil terminal, which since completion does not require many people to operate it.

The Western Isles is highly protective of its culture. Gaelic is heard as often as English and the Free Presbyterian Church frowns on any economic activity on Sundays.

"It would be a shame", an Island councillor said, "if all these natural resources are used and bypass the Western Isles entirely. But, most important, it is a pity for the young people, who need the hope."