



NEWSLETTER 13

NOVEMBER 1991

HEBRIDEAN HOSTELLING 1991

Hebridean Hostelling success. The 1991 season has undoubtedly been a success for the five hostels. Bednights increased again, with Berneray recording 1456 for the season (which actually runs from 1st October to 30th September), an increase of 15%. Claddach Balashare was up 25% at 425, whilst Rhenigidale recorded 1010 overnights in its first full year of operation after its major renovation. Howmore's bednights fell by 32% in logging 633, perhaps reflecting its position at the south end of the hostel chain while the star attraction was at the north end. For at 1550 overnights, Garenin has undoubtedly been a success and a major attraction - clearly the frustrations of 1989 and 1990 were worth the result. In all, bednights were up by 100% on 1989 - but statistics deceive, neither Garenin nor Rhenigidale was open in 1989. The season has been successful for Hebridean Hostellers as well. On the workparty front, John Murdo Webb's decision to use individuals and smaller, shorter but more skilled workparties proved to be sound, matching skills and resources more evenly to the work to be done - Thanks to our volunteer workers, especially Roy Ashworth of Grimsay, North Uist, who, again, has frequently responded to John's call for help. Financially the increased usage has resulted in a healthier balance sheet, whilst the absence of the cash demands of a major project has given John Duyck less problems and more time to look at the GHHT's future requirements.

Too successful? The increased usage is not all good news. Full and over-flowing hostels at Howmore, Berneray and Garenin were reported at various times during the peak months of July and August with the inevitable strains that this puts on space and facilities, and unfortunately on one occasion at Berneray, on the peaceful co-existence of hostellers. Full and over-flowing hostels make it more difficult for the conscientious hosteller to do necessary house-keeping duties and easier for the lazy hosteller to avoid necessary hostel duties, with consequent reports during the season that Rhenigidale in particular had become unacceptably dirty. Whilst this housekeeping can be (and was) subsequently done by volunteers at later, quieter times, it both detracts from their enjoyment of the hostel visit and causes more work for the Wardens and Workparty Organisers.

The Executive Committee discussed this problem at its last meeting and concluded that there is no alternative to putting up a notice in each hostel reminding hostellers of the need to do any necessary housekeeping and to be tolerant of the needs and arrangements of their fellow hostellers. This was not without debate of course, to some it is the first step towards house rules, without which the GHHT hostels have managed so far, and to many this informality is part of the attraction of the Hebridean hostels. So Hebridean Hostellers

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members using the hostels can play a part by leading by example, by doing necessary jobs over and above the immediate and obvious requirement, and by 'preaching the gospel of peaceful co-ordination'.

On a broader front, the Hebrides (more usually called the Western Isles in the media) have been in the news in connection with the BCCI collapse. Peter Clarke puts this in perspective in his article 'This Winter in the Hebrides'. Pam Moncur reports on September's AGM, Mark Chamberlain responds to 'Partnerships with Islanders' from the last Newsletter, and other articles of Hebridean interest follow, so read on....

Berneray Hostel was rethatched earlier this year, just before the main season, by Donald Angle MacAskill, Berneray's local thatcher but better known as Berneray's ferryman. Particular thanks are due to Donald not only for doing the thatching but also for organising and doing most of the cutting of the bent.

A.G.M. Report

Pam Moncur

This meeting was held at the Youth Hostel in Melrose on Saturday 7th September 1991. Newly renovated, a fine old house, the sun shone, it was a good venue. The meeting was well attended and it was especially good to welcome ordinary members from Melrose and Edinburgh as well as most of the Executive who had been at their meeting in the morning, and of course Alan Busson hot-wheel from the Hebrides. John Joyce chaired the meeting and a full executive was elected (see below).

Several points were raised and lively discussion took place with regard to the cost of overnight stays and membership fees. We welcomed comments from the ordinary members present. It was agreed to discuss the overnight fees after the Scottish Youth Hostels Association have set theirs for 1992 and the membership fee is to remain at £3 but with the option of including a donation as many members already do.

We look forward to a successful year in 1992 - happy hostelling.

PS At the October Committee Meeting, overnight fees for '92 were set at £3.45 (£2.85 for Juniors)

Committee Business. For many people, GHHT and Hebridean Hostellers is a voluntary organisation with charitable status. We are - but additionally we have Limited Company status, which determines that in certain procedures, we cannot act like other voluntary organisations, and we thank Alan Busson for keeping us right on the complex Limited Company legal requirements. One such requirement is that the principle officers are elected by the Directors (i.e. Executive Committee members) who in turn have been elected by the AGM (as reported above).

The Executive Committee Members elected at the AGM are:

Alan Busson (Secretary), Peter Clarke (Chairman), John Duyck (Treasurer), Deidre Forsyth (Vice Chair.), Richard Genner, John Joyce, Philip Lawson, Frank Martin, Arthur Meaby, Pam Moncur, Jim Souness, John Murdo Webb.

with the appointment of the four officers having been made at the Executive Committee Meeting at Melrose Youth Hostel on 26th October '91.

Most members will note that John Joyce is no longer Chairman, stepping down after guiding GHHT through its first three years - John is thanked for his efforts over this period. Peter Clarke succeeds John as Chairman and Deidre Forsyth steps into Peter's shoes as Vice-Chairman. Although only elected to the Committee at the September AGM, Deidre is no stranger to the Executive and brings much needed legal expertise. Deidre succeeds Roger Clifton as a Director/

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Executive Committee member and we thank Roger for handling the finances of the Hebridean hostels over many years.

Another long serving retiree is Wilf Ludlow, Gatliff Trust auditor and also GHHT auditor since its formation. The Companies Act 1989 requires that, from 1992, Limited Companies (i.e. GHHT) have licensed practising auditors, and consequently Wilf has decided to step down as Honary Auditor. After looking at several options, the Committee has appointed Kate Sayer of Sayer Vincent, North London to be the company's auditor. The Trust gives its thanks to Wilf for his auditing services since 1988.

New Hostels: Hebridean Hostellers are a vital part of meeting GHHT's first aim - ensuring that the existing hostels are maintained to a good basic standard. Nevertheless there is considerable enthusiasm amongst Hebridean Hostellers for new hostels, and certainly new blood and good publicity results from a new project. The current level of use indicates a crying need for more hostels.

Several potential new projects have been 'on the back burner' for a while, others have been investigated and not pursued - for example, two years ago a possibility in north Lewis was not pursued when it became clear that the proposed hostel would never get local support. Now by the twist of fate that demands that things never happen singly, three projects have been propelled 'off the back burner' and Peter Clarke, Deidre Forsyth and Jim Souness are following up enquiries directed to GHHT from southern South Uist, western North Uist and the Isle of Tiree, the latter offering an exciting expansion of Hebridean Hostels into the Inner Hebrides. All three properties are former croft houses, all three are thatched, all three will be welcome expansion to the Hebridean Hostels, all three possibilities may come to nought. We'll keep you informed.

This Winter in the Hebrides

Peter Clarke

The Outer Hebrides are facing a most uncertain time as winter approaches. Economic problems have been compounded by political difficulties, caused by the loss of £23 million by the local council, Comhairle Nan Eilean, in the failed bank BCCI.

The economic base of the Islands

The basis of the Hebridean economy is crofting with sheep and fishing the dominant occupations. Salmon ranching is also notable. Harris Tweed is important in Harris and Lewis. The local council, Comhairle Nan Eilean (the Western Isles Island Council), is the biggest employer with education and social work the main areas followed by roads and housing. Local builders are helped by the fact that the Council gives generous home improvement and repairs grants. A surprisingly large number of people depend on jobs in the public sector. The main employer here is the military, or jobs related to military bases, but the Post Office, British Telecom. and Caledonian MacBrayne are important. Tourism is now a significant cash earner.

Uncertainty

In each of these areas there is economic uncertainty. Sheep and fishing are subject to changes within the European Community. For example, the EEC is involved with the renegotiation of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). Agricultural support under the Common Agricultural Policy will be cut. Within the UK this could mean that up to 15% of land will come out of agricultural production. What will that mean for the Hebrides, remote from markets, and with so many small crofts? Livestock prices are already at rock bottom.

Fish stocks have been decimated, reducing the economic value of Hebridean fisheries. With the European Single Market (1992) it will be impossible to stop

boats from other EEC countries fishing in Hebridean waters. Open competition for fish may not favour the local boats.

Salmon ranching has not proved to be a financial bonanza for crofters despite early expectations. The first blow came some years ago when the Crown Commissioners ruled that they owned the sea, so would charge a rent for its use for salmon pens. This yields over £250,000 a year to the Crown, money not available to local people. Not surprisingly, many crofters who owned small pens have sold out to the bigger concerns, such as McConnel Salmon. Some crofters have taken jobs on the pens which they formerly owned.

Hostellers will have seen the pens off the coastal path to Rhenigidale. They do not enhance the beauty of the scene and detract from its tranquility.

Harris tweed sales are at a low point, with one of the three processing mills going into liquidation last year. Some attempts have been made to produce lighter weight tweeds, but the industry appears resistant to innovation. The US market has collapsed, and the change in world climate does not help sales. Harris Tweed also suffers from its success. It is a high quality product but is so hard wearing that a Harris Tweed jacket will last for a lifetime. This is good for the customer, but paradoxically does not increase sales.

Government may talk of a 'peace dividend'. However, this might mean closure of the rocket range on South Uist. Already there are rumours that it will be 'privatised'. This must mean fewer jobs for local people.

Tourism has been down this year except for the backpackers. We have noticed this at our hostels. Backpackers are a 'long term' investment for the islands, because many return later in life on holiday with their families.

BCCI

On top of all this the Comhairle has suffered disastrously over the collapse of BCCI. It had £23 million on deposit and appears to have lost every penny. This is equivalent to a third of the council's revenue budget. Whilst the council is being allowed, by the Government, to re-borrow this sum, there are rumours that this will increase next year's poll tax by £100 to £150 a head. I haven't spoken to anyone on the islands who is prepared to pay this increase! Job losses and improvement grant cuts, with their knock-on effect to local builders, are expected. Already road work has been halted with job losses.

But the most devastating impact is political. Externally the Western Isles have become the butt of jokes and national newspaper cartoons. Long after the dust has settled, the islands will be associated with this disaster, just as Eriskay is associated with *Whisky Galore*. Within the islands confidence in the Comhairle is at an all time low.

I remember visiting the islands in 1973 just after the new single tier council had been announced. The islands were redolent with expectation that the Comhairle would bring great social and economic improvement. And it has done just that.

Now all that good work is in jeopardy. In Uist and Barra people shake their heads and wonder at the implications of rule from Stornoway, up to 100 miles away. But in Stornoway itself confidence in the Council has never been lower.

This is dangerous, especially as the government may step in. Already it is 'reviewing' the structure of local government in Scotland. The fear is that Comhairle will now be swallowed up by Highland Region. Local control and



Rhenigidale Hostel

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Identity will be lost to Inverness.

Population static

In the midst of all this, the provisional results of the 1991 Census have been announced. At best they show a static population (of about 30,000) compared with 1981. There was an increase up to the middle of the 1980s, but this dropped back especially in Lewis with the closure of the Arnish Oil Rig construction yard. The expectation is that the population will remain static up to the end of the century.

The Gatliff Trust has always encouraged hostellers to get a realistic view of the islands. At this time, we must be concerned to ensure that economic prosperity is returned to the islands, so that islanders can enjoy the same standard of living as the rest of Britain.



Hebridean Hostels drop lucky again! Over the years the annual Crofters Hostels Newsletter has paid tribute to the friendly natures and magnificent efforts of Roddy McInnes, Marion MacInnes, Catherine McSween, Tom & Catrina Tosh, Annie & Jessie McKillop, the Hebridean Hostel wardens. Recently a note came with a Hebridean Hostellers membership application referring to the wardens at the new Garenin hostel - 'Pat is a treasure and a great help, John has recovered (from a heart attack), has to be careful, *but is finding work therapeutic!*' At Howmore Betty MacDonald has seen out her first full season after succeeding her mother as hostel warden and by all accounts has continued to charm her hostel visitors in the way that her mother did for years. All three of our new hostel wardens are obviously from the same mould as their colleagues. Our thanks go to each and every one of the hostel wardens without whom the hostels would not exist.

Pay Up! Pay Up! - yes it's subscription renewal time again. If you pay your subscription by cheque, postal order or cash (and you've not yet paid your subscription for 1992) then a renewal form is enclosed. Please help Lynn and the Hebridean Hostellers by returning your renewal form and payment promptly.

No renewal form enclosed? You pay by Bankers Order - this is confirmed by the B in the bottom right-hand corner of the address label, or by Deposit Covenant, look for D in the same position. The letter C indicates that you have covenanted your subscription. Most members who have covenanted their subscription have a Bankers Order. The few whose covenanted subscription & donation is paid by cheque/cash will find the amount to be paid written on the renewal form.

To facilitate addressing envelopes, the membership details are now kept on computer (we are registered under the Data Protection Act). These records will not be disclosed elsewhere, but if you object to your membership details being kept on computer, please let Lynn know.

If by some slip of the mind, your subscription is not renewed, a final reminder will be sent to you with the Crofter's Hostel Newsletter to be distributed in February. Not bothering to renew?, then let us know, explaining why - your views may help us to serve future members better.

Looking Back

John Joyce

I have lost count of how many times I have been to the Outer Hebrides since Herbert Gatliff inspired me to make my first trip close on 20 years ago. When I look back on my last trip late in October, impressed upon my mind is one very still evening at Garenin when I walked along the cliff tops and over quiet moorland. I became quite engrossed in the colours and variety of the seams in the tortured rock formations and the weather worn curved and sculptured shapes of some of these outcrops that, for some reason, reminded me of the larger scale works of Henry Moore. Below the white latticed sheets of surf foamed stark against dull jet cliffs whilst in the further distance there was a quiter, pale rose tinted sea. Looking up I saw leaden anvilled cloud hung heavy, surrounded with an ochred light. Above them an Italianate pale blue sky with wisps of cirrus cloud and below them lighter grey with glimpses of moulten gold and salmon red where the sun could pour through. Walking along with the sunset to my back the evening had slipped into night. As I returned to the hostel a wan yellow autumnal moon was riding off the top of the clouds; shimmering in a veiled aura, casting sufficient light over the hills for me to navigate my way back without any problem.

A few days later I was out from Rhenigidale hostel early in the morning of a beautiful day. By the time I had got to the top of Toddun I was in a T-shirt, it was so warm. Through the hazy mist the lochs below were so still that they looked like the pieces of the sky that they reflected. I walked about 16 miles over the hills that day in a lovely clear warm light and returned by way of the old Rhenigidale track without meeting another soul.

Even though it was late October there were people staying at every hostel so all the time I met new people and passed away some time in conversation. I met all the wardens. It is always good to see them again; to discuss how things are going, exchange stories and experiences and enjoy the crack and warm hospitality.

When I left Tarbert early the next morning, from the deck of the *Hebridean Isles* the sunrise was a deep almost blood red. Even after 20 years the Hebrides are still full of surprises.

At the same time it was a contemplative week for me. I had been Chairman of GHHT since its inception in June 1988. It had been an eventful 3 years. The renovations of Berneray and Rhenigidale have been completed and this year the establishment of Garenin hostel has finally become a reality. The renovations have been a really practical exercise in the conservation of thatched and vernacular buildings which have given due consideration to the environment and have engendered a very positive attitude to our activities amongst local communities. The foreseeable future for these hostels has been guaranteed. Other things have moved fast too. The overnights are now over double what they were in 1989. I look back with a great deal of satisfaction and pride at what has been achieved through GHHT and Hebridean Hostellers.

In the early 70's when I took my first workparty to Rhenigidale we had to hire a boat to take all of our food, equipment and materials as this was the only practical way of getting there. Water was fetched from the well. An open fire and Tilley Lamp gave the only warmth and light. A swim in the cold April sea was the easiest way of getting an all over wash and our teams, Rhenigidale Sheepherders and the Tarbert Bogtrotters, played football on the grass below the hostel where the road is now. Over the years our experience of the work at the hostels increased and the renovation of Berneray became the watershed from which a more professional approach became necessary. Still as an economist might say with every up turn came a downturn too. The setting up of the GHHT and its progress over the last three years has, in my opinion, resulted in the

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organisation becoming less personal, more structured and bureaucratic. As Chairman it has been a very exciting time but one that has been hard work too in terms of time and personal expense and lately working in an environment that has become less a matter of consensus and more of cut and thrust. As I left the islands with the smell of peat still on my clothes and I drove along the Highland roads towards Edinburgh I decided the time had come for me to stand down from office. I shall remain as an independent committee member where I can have the freedom to work to see that the ethos and heart of the Trust stays in the right place and that the Hebridean Hostels remain fairly small simple hostels that provide a welcome for independent travellers; an informal atmosphere that encourages friendship and a sense of community and common responsibility; an experience of the place and people that will linger in the memory when the traveller has passed on. I am reminded of a letter sent to me last year from someone who had been at YHA meetings with Herbert Gatliff in the 1930's - "The aims of the Trust have an appeal to me reminiscent of the early days of the YHA when I was young and constantly breaking new ground and widening the horizon in a companionship that owed much to the relatively primitive condition of the hostels. I shall urge my grandchildren, one of whom is going hostelling for the first time this autumn, to find for themselves the uplift that is in wide empty spaces".

Finally I should like to welcome Peter Clarke as Chairman and wish him every success. I am especially pleased that Deidre Forsyth has become Vice Chairwoman and will have a much more active role in the Trust's affairs. It encourages me that other more recent appointees are becoming more active too.

Partnership with Islanders

A response from Mark Chamberlain

I read with interest Peter Clarke's article in the last Newsletter. Whilst I was in the Outer Hebrides researching a supplement to 'By Mountain and Machair' to include Garenin I had time to consider the article's theme of partnership with Islanders.

During my stay at Garenin I spoke to well known local 'media personality' Dr Finlay Mcleod of Shawbost, who was one of the directors of a film crew which was using the hostel to film for the Gaelic childrens program *Seall*. He remarked on the absence of local people when looking through the hostel logbook with its name and addresses of people from throughout the world.

If this partnership with the islanders is to be established then I feel we need to encourage Hebridean themselves to use the hostels, particularly the younger generation. This would encourage them to feel that 'our Trust was their Trust' at the same time as helping to raise awareness of how unique an environment the Outer Hebrides really are.

Maybe having access in the hostels to books on local history, wildlife, culture, etc. would help foster an increased concern for the islands. During youth hostelling trips in England I've encountered a couple of hostels which have made a point of purchasing a few recently published books on the subjects of local interest for the use of hostellers. This small collection of books seemed to have been very much appreciated by many of those staying in the hostel.

The next Committee Meeting will be held on Saturday 29th February 1992, at a venue yet to be decided. Details in late January from Alan Busson. Any member with comments about the running of Hebridean Hostellers and/or the hostels is welcome to join the Committee at its meeting or to write to Alan.

The next Hebridean Hostellers Newsletter will be published in April '92, contributions to me, Richard Genner by 31st March please.

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For Peat's Sake!

Author unknown

Oh no, not that time already! Who'd be a crofter, no sooner is the lambing season over than their thoughts turn reluctantly to PEAT. There is some controversy surrounding the tradition of peat cutting regarding damage to the moorlands - scarring the nature's braw landscape and so on, not to mention the burning of fossil fuel, highly unfashionable these days. I don't know about you, but how seriously can you take this issue if meantime, over in the Gulf, millions of gallons of oil burn in an inferno every minute. Call it burying my head in the sand but I shall continue to take warmth and comfort from my peat fire for as long as it is there.

Apart from that though, the skills involved in the correct cutting of peat are undoubtedly dying out. It is virtually impossible to find a reliable 'squad' - necessary for the efficient processing from moor to the stack.

In times gone by, and that isn't so far back in this case, every village had its team of strong hardworking and skilled cutters. Today it can take weeks of frustrating telephone calls and still, more often than not, you can end up with a motley crew who literally hack the peat out of the moorland.

Peat is not as necessary as it used to be and therefore peat cutting is not taken seriously enough. This is particularly saddening for the old folk who can no longer participate in the work they once regarded as almost an art form - ask any old 'bodach' about the decline in peat cutting and he will shake his head in disgust at his modern successor's efforts! The main reason for this I believe, is NOT that the old folk have impossibly high standards, BUT is connected to the decline in crofting. With crofts getting smaller and more and more a part-time occupation, there often isn't enough work for the young to get involved in. In this reversal of the 'old ways', when youngsters were a necessary and indispensable workforce, the offspring grow up having lost their interest and awareness of the importance of croft work and crofting in general.

Perhaps the older generation could amend this gradual swing away from tradition by sharing the workload, however small, with their children from an early age. We are doing them no favours by protecting them from hard work. Also I believe that it is not emphasised just how rewarding outdoor work can be - to work as part of an efficient, well organised and skilled team, peat cutting in the moorlands, is a healthy and satisfying experience. It is also well rewarded financially and the day will usually include three substantial meals - and a dram to celebrate the job's completion.

As for peat LIFTING, well that's another story, but anyone interested in keep fit take note:- one day of peat lifting is worth ten of aerobics! - with the added bonus of breathing the fresh moorland air.

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