



NEWSLETTER 17

OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 1993

HEBRIDEAN HOSTELLERS AND GATLIFF HEBRIDEAN HOSTELS TRUST ACTIVITIES 1993

Another summer is past, another hostelling season is complete. Despite a poor year for tourism in the Outer Hebrides, it looks as though the Hebridean Hostels have at least held steady. The closure of Claddach Baleshare leaves a gap in the hostel chain and we regret its passing but Berneray and Garenin continue to weave their magic, reporting increased bednights. Rhenigidale has returned similar figures to 1992. Actual figures have to be confirmed for all three hostels, and Howmore has yet to make a count but reports another busy year, so we feel well satisfied with the season that has just closed.

AGM Report, 24 July '93

Pam & Joanna Moncur

Our ferry journey on Thursday 22nd July went with a real swing! The bar was full of musicians on their way to a festival on Barra, who played and sang for our enjoyment. The music didn't stop when they disembarked as a piper en route to a competition on Uist tuned up and took over where they left off - living culture indeed and such fun!

Meanwhile Peter Clarke and Alan Busson spent a quieter evening at Berneray hostel, reflecting on the hostel's open day that been neither hectic nor slow - a worthwhile contribution to the Island's activity week.

We travelled to Berneray on a windy, sunny Saturday morning. A few bemused hostellers continued with their breakfast as the gathering of the 'head-yins' and camp followers took place. Despite Alan's kippers (or because of them) the work of the meeting was carried out quickly and efficiently. At the end, your Committee comprised the same faces as before it, but as John Duyck had retired as Treasurer earlier this year, somehow I came away as the new Treasurer. Thanks to Peter Clarke who has kept the books since March, and for chairing the meeting so effectively.

The AGM had no nominations to replace John Duyck as a Trustee and at the recent Committee meeting, Diane Waddell (of the Berneray dunes workparty - see later) was co-opted to fill the vacancy, welcome Diane!

At the AGM we looked forward to a busy year with plans for the refurbishment at Howmore, South Uist. The hostels are providing many, many people with an absolutely unique opportunity to enjoy the islands. For this we must thank our wardens for their efforts on our behalf - we couldn't do without them - thank you all. Hope to see you soon.

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Berneray Sand Dunes Workparty, May '93

Gerry Quinn

The crossing to Lochboisdale was extremely pleasant which made me wonder if we were really heading for that famously inhospitable climate of the remote Western Isles. We arrived quite late in the port, but managed to meet up with the green (demon from hell) shuttle bus which seemed to resemble an old grocery van I once knew. It was definitely a reversal of the famous story of 'the country yokel goes to a city' since we seemed to stand out like sore thumbs with our fluorescent coloured rucsacs and multi-colour assortment of hiking clothes. The shuttle proceeded at seemingly break-neck speed down the narrow single track road to Howmore hostel which was our first taste of Hebridean accomodation.

Discovering that we had no food we debated on how to best utilise our scant resources between ten hungry conservationists. Fortunately the hostel log came to the rescue revealing that there was a small shop nearby which the owners might open late for those practised in the art of the silver tongue. Success and hospitality were on our side and we managed to secure the necessary provisions, making a good omen for the rest of the journey.

The arrival at Berneray hostel was nervously anticipated since we knew we would be spending almost a full week in its confines. The premonitions seemed to be groundless since upon seeing the hostel for the first time we knew that it was definitely a jewel in the crown of GHHT. Personally I thought that the character of the building was just so awesome, with the traditional metre thick stone walls and the low lying thatched roof weighed down from storm force winds by large chunks of the local Lewisian gneiss lashed around the border of the thatch.

Sunday was an excellent sunny day just ripe for the circumnavigation of the island. We discovered why they call it the Bahamas of the north in the hostel journal. The beach on the atlantic side of the island just seemed to stretch perfectly into the distance like some scene from 'Mutiny on the Bounty'. We had a lot of fun just combing the beach seeing old fishing ropes & crates washed up by Atlantic gales, driftwood in strangely smooth shapes like some modern art sculpture and of course the obligatory buoys which were too cumbersome to carry away as souvenirs. One of the party found a lifebelt from *HMS Valiant* which had been perched 4 metres up a sand dune by some ferocious waves. We had great fun diving around the beach playing frisbee and throwing it into the sea to see who would be brave enough to scramble into the rather bracing waves after it.

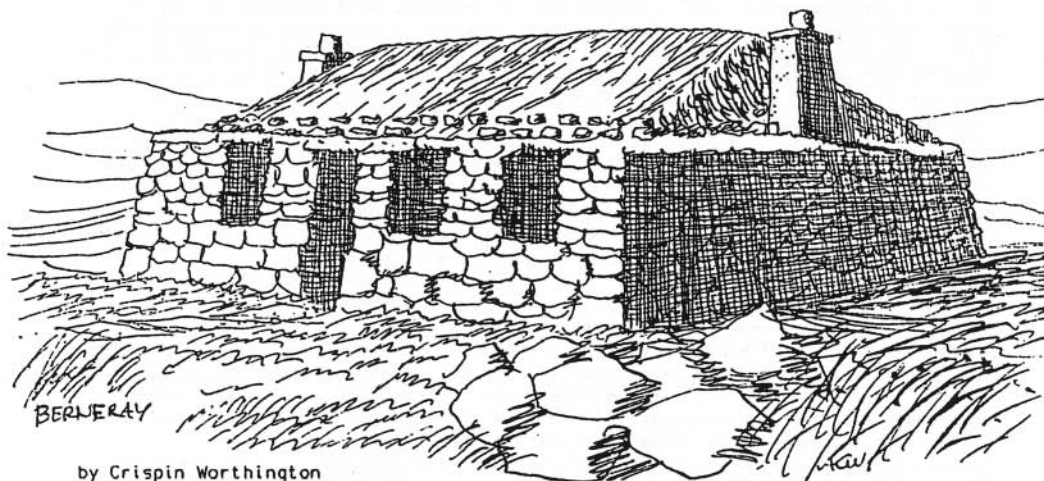
Monday was the real start of stabilising the sand dunes. This began in earnest with the leader, Diane Waddell, demonstrating to the team (of vegetables?) how to use a spade. There was quite a bit of wind that day-so we were all geared up for the elements with double jumper rations and tammies - fortunately it didn't rain, but at the end of the week a few of us did come back with blotchy wind burnt ears. The work quickly assumed an organised momentum of adjusting the existing sand dunes and then transplanting Marram grass from further along the beach so it was quite easy except for the fatiguing factor of constant digging.

The expedition was firmly split between three omnivores and eight vegetarians so you can guess what we had for dinner. As a result of our meat cravings we were forced into a self sufficient mode, so we grabbed a piece of old hand line that was in the hostel and a hook and headed out for a spot of fishing. Anyway upon casting the line and weights out, it just seemed to snap out of my hands into the sea. We thought it was lost until one of the guys stripped off and dived into the icy water to retrieve it. He needn't have bothered since we didn't even catch a sausage but it was the fun of the participation that counts (as anglers will tell you). We did manage to catch a scallop snapping around under some seaweed at low tide which we stored in a bucket for a later gourmet feed.

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The one thing we did manage to get our chompers on was the fabled Annie and Jessie shortbread - of particular note in the log. We had been reading so much about it that our jaws dropped slack when they asked us if we wanted a biscuit (code for shortbread) and yes it was the best thing I've tasted in years, it just seemed to be the extremely light variety that melted in the mouth.

In nearly every page of the journal somebody mentioned sea-otters so we scoured the beaches looking for evidence but it was in vain. We did see a lot of other wildlife like jellyfish, crabs and some seals hovering out at the low tide mark in a characteristic nosing style. We also saw a variety of March Orchid (near the fresh water lochs on the island) that is meant only to be found in the Hebrides but as yet it is an unsubstantiated report.



by Crispin Worthington

By the time Friday had come we had completed the sand dunes and also painted a portion of the hostel. Over-all the make up of the island reminded me of the untouched communities in the north-west of Ireland facing the same hardships of climate and yet having the same resilience of character to overcome it. I wouldn't have missed the experience for anything.

Elaine Campbell also reported on this workparty:-

The majority of volunteers were from Glasgow and Fife and we were joined by the SNH Area Officer for the Uists, Gail Churchill. With the volunteers working hard, the regrading of the dunes and transplanting of marram grass was completed on time, despite the 2 spade casualties and amorous fulmars. In addition the group carried out cleaning and painting work on the hostel. The day off was spent lazing in the sun, paddling in the sea and exploring local archeological sites (i.e. hunting for the elusive souterrain). Glorious weather and abundant wildlife made for a most enjoyable week.

Howmore Renovation: Appeal for Volunteers Plans for the renovation and refurbishment of Howmore hostel are progressing well. Planning permission has been granted, the legal aspects are moving forward steadily and grant applications have been lodged with Scottish Natural Heritage. The launch of the

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Howmore Appeal only awaits completion of the legal formalities.

Now for your part. Some of the work will, of necessity, be done by professional and semi-professional contractors but a lot of the work will have to be done by you, the volunteer, and the volunteer effort is being co-ordinated by Steve Holding. Steve needs to know when volunteers are likely to be available. Work will progress throughout 1994 and it would be extremely helpful if any potential volunteers for workparties at Howmore could contact Steve at 55 Briarwood, Brookside, Telford, TF3 1TR, tel. 0952 660087, indicating their likely availability to Steve. Message such as 'any time in Spring' are as helpful as those stating 'final week of May'. It is most important that we get a strong list of volunteers, so contact Steve now please.

In the first Newsletter that I edited (No. 7, January '89) I reported on the possible privatisation of the Cal-Mac ferry company. I concluded by stating 'its a wait-and see situation'. Four years later we are still waiting, and we'll happily wait another 40 years most islanders will say. In May '93 Ian Lang, Scottish Secretary appointed KPMG Management Consulting to report on the subsidised ferry services to the Scottish Islands. Mr Lang has announced that he wishes KPMG to look at options for 'private-sector participation' in services operated by Cal-Mac. Islanders have reacted with apprehension in some quarters, absolute fear in others. "Islanders understand quite clearly that privatisation could only mean higher fares and loss of lifeline services" Brian Wilson MP (a Labour Transport spokesman) has said. Ian Lang has countered by stating that he is committed to continuing subsidies for 'lifeline' services.

"Its questionable if changes are in the interests of either the customers or the government. We think we are running services to the islands in the most economical way" has been the response of Colin Paterson, MD of Cal-Mac. Andrew Wilson, a director of Western Ferries, one of Cal-Mac few rivals, says "Cal-Mac has no incentive to save on vessels so it produces grandiloquent ships which require large crews". "It's a flabby operation" says a West coast businessman with experience of operating ferries "Several of the islands would be better served by more small ships rather than one big one".

Perhaps Andrew Wilson sums up the debate "There are plenty of ways in which the ferry services can be organised which would produce better services for the islands and a smaller burden for the taxpayer. But ... I don't expect that the consultants report will lead to any change". So *Watch this space!*

Renewal forms are enclosed for those members not paying by Bankers Order (or Deposit Covenant). Please help by renewing your membership promptly.

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- Gatliff Trust

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