



NEWSLETTER 23

NOVEMBER 1996

HEBRIDEAN HOSTELLERS AND GATLIFF HEBRIDEAN HOSTELS TRUST

Welcome to this November newsletter which also include best wishes for a happy new year since it is going out slightly later than usual due to technical hitches (ie the computer). Once again the hostels were busy during the season with a slight increase in hostel overnights a trend which we hope will continue with the further opening up of Howmore.

AGM 1996

AGM for 1996 was held in July at the Berneray Hostel. This happened to coincide with Berneray Week and so the hostel was full. One of the main reasons for holding the AGM in Berneray, apart from its obvious appeal, was to make a presentation to Annie and Jessie who were retiring as the wardens. Annie and Jessie had been wardens of the hostel for over eighteen years and had always provided a warm welcome to hostellers whatever the season. As everyone who has ever met these two ladies will agree, they will be sorely missed for their friendliness and helpfulness. Their 'retirement' will enable them to concentrate on their croft and sheep and knitting. They were presented with two Royal Doulton figurines by the chairman Peter Clarke.

IT'S A KNOCKOUT - BERNERAY WEEK

Once again the hostel managed to raise two teams, captained by Graham MacDonald and myself. There was also a team from the CalMac ferries who appeared determined to win the trophy, because they re-arranged the ferry timetable so that their strongest team could take part. There were seven teams in total and I am pleased to report that the hostel team captained by Graham won the trophy, which makes three years in a row for the hostel teams. It was a very close competition and everything hung on the last game, which was rolling a tractor tyre through the river!!

During July whilst at Berneray I had great pleasure in having a sail in a fully restored fishing boat of the early 1900's. The boat consisted of one sail which had to be lifted onto a hook on the mast and then hauled aloft with the use of ropes and then secured. Also to turn the boat around we had to drop the sail, unhitch it and manhandle it to the rear of the boat and pass the sail to the other side of the mast, hook it on to the mast and haul aloft. After a few dry runs we were ready for the open sea. As we pushed the boat alongside the pier to the open sea, the excitement grew as we waited for the command from the skipper

to haul aloft. As myself and partner hauled on the ropes we had just got the sail aloft and secured when the wind filled the sail and we were off at a great rate of knots. We sailed for about one and half hours changing the mast when necessary. There were eight of us on the trip and it cost about two pounds per person for this experience. I understand that this is to be set up on a more regular basis from summer 1997.

BERNERAY FERRY

The new £2.2m ferry which started sailing in May of this year between Leverburgh/Otternish/Berneray is having problems due to low tides. This is because the waters around the island are too shallow for the bigger boats and the crew are having to navigate extremely carefully. The council are going to dredge the affected areas but it is quite probable that the shifting sand will just return. Some sailings are up to two hours delayed and passengers can contact the CalMac offices in Tarbert or Lochmaddy for information on the day.

Concerns have been expressed by hostellers regarding the noise of the exhaust from this ferry as it passes the hostel and the crew have been obliging by turning the boat so that the exhaust passes on the other side.

CAUSEWAY TO BERNERAY

The government has agreed to fund the shortfall of £2.36m of the £8.6m cost to build the causeway between N. Uist to Berneray. The European Objective 1 programme has contributed the bulk of the monies. Work is due to begin on the causeway in the summer of 1997, for completion in Spring 1999. While the islanders are in broad agreement that it will benefit the island, some crofters fear that they may be invaded by the rabbits that live on N Uist and which have so far been unable to get to Berneray. It is quite a real fear since the rabbits consume up to 25% of the crops in N Uist, S Uist and Benbecula.

CORNCRAKE REVIVAL

Lured by a variety of grants, crofters in the Western Isles and Inner Hebrides have turned their land into corncrake havens and the noise is causing a lot of sleepless nights - literally. Hundreds of hectares are now part of these corncrake-friendly schemes. The bird sounds like a football fan's rattle which runs continuously and can make sleep impossible.

The RSPB has reported some success in that there are now 537 craking males, compared to 463 last year. It now seems possible that this bird with the unusual call may be saved from extinction.

HOWMORE HOSTEL

The new annexe was open from October this year and is proving a great success. The accommodation consists of common room, kitchen, disabled dormitory, washroom and shower. Until work is completed on the original hostel a temporary dormitory has been created in the cycle shed, which is better than it sounds being a detached new building and plans are afoot to make it draughtproof and put insulation on the ceiling.

GARENIN HOSTEL

A new shower and cubicle was fitted this autumn and now gives instant hot water at all times. A vast improvement over the previous system.

BARRA HOSTEL

Architects have been instructed to draw up plans for the conversion of this village school into our newest hostel. Hope to have more information in the next newsletter.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDS

Rare examples of some of the earliest forms of writing in Scotland have been unearthed in South Uist. Teams of archaeologists working on a settlement dating from the 4th to 9th centuries at Bornish found a carving on a tiny piece of bone, consisting of just five letters, called an ogham. It is written in ancient script and one of only half a dozen of its kind to be found in Scotland. Archaeologists are now trying to decipher it. Other sites being worked on the island include a Viking house dating from 9th to 13th centuries.

HEN HOUSE VICTORY

Engineers working for the past twelve years on re-assembling the only Halifax bomber aircraft to survive beyond the 1950's have found the final piece to their jigsaw. The 20 foot long piece of fuselage lay for 30 years on a croft at Grimshader on Lewis and was being used as a hen house! Mr MacKenzie to whom it belonged offered it free of charge when he heard about the appeal being made for this final piece, but unfortunately he did not live to see the aircraft being unveiled at the Yorkshire Air Museum.

HIGH AND DRY

A crofter driving his tractor in W Gerenish made a very unusual find when he noticed some brown paper wrapped bales lying on the shingle shore. He had unwittingly stumbled upon one of the largest hauls of cocaine ever discovered in Scotland! He loaded the bales onto his tractor and took them to his home. He said 'There was white powder inside and I had a fairly good idea what it was', it turned out to be 15 packages tied together weighing 30kg which had been in the water for up to a year. There is no indication where they came from and their discovery has sparked speculation over whether they were thrown overboard by desperate smugglers, had broken free from an underwater anchor or were washed overboard from a sinking vessel.

NEW SKYE FERRY

A new passenger-only ferry sailing from Kyleakin to Kyle of Lochalsh has started sailing. Passengers will be able to make the half mile crossing for as little as £1.00, local youngsters sailing just one way for 50p. This has been set up in competition to the controversial new Skye Bridge. The 38 foot 'Heather' which can take 50 passengers will make hourly sailings for those of you who would still like to sail 'across the sea to Skye'. The operators of several touring coach

companies have indicated that they would use his ferry because of the genuine desire by people to sail over this stretch of water. Locals on the island who work on the mainland are also favouring this ferry.

Runrig vocalist, Donnie Munro, lodged a campaign for exiles to return to the Isle of Skye. Questionnaires are to be sent out worldwide to about 4000 people who left Portree or Plockton High School within the last thirty years, to see if they were interested in returning home to their native Scottish island. Positive responses are to be followed up by a newsletter, highlighting employment opportunities, the availability of housing and leisure and recreation facilities. The £15,000 project "Thig air ais" (Coming Home) is the work of Skye and Lochalsh Enterprise (SALE) and the European Leader programme in an effort to reverse the drain of talent, which for centuries has underpinned the idea that the only way to succeed was to leave the Highlands and Islands. Local businesses and community groups had approached (SALE) chairman, historian Dr Jim Hunter if he could reverse the trend where few people return to the area to work after completing their studies. With one of the fastest growing populations in the UK, (17% in the 1980s) and at 6% unemployment, opportunities in this area have been taken up by people from elsewhere stated Dr Hunter 'it would be good if we could encourage our own folk to return'.

MEMBERSHIP FEES

These have been increased from £3.00 to £5.00 to meet the ever increasing cost of paper and postage. The membership secretary Jim McCulloch will be contacting you when your annual payment is due.

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