



NEWSLETTER 25

NOVEMBER 1997

HEBRIDEAN HOSTELLERS AND GATLIFF HEBRIDEAN HOSTELS TRUST

Welcome to this Newsletter. Many apologies for it's lateness, however, it does give me an opportunity to wish you all a Merry Christmas and a prosperous New Year.

Figures for this year's overnight stays at our hostels have seen a serious decline. Hopefully due to the strong pound which made it more expensive for foreign tourists to visit our hostels - not by shortening their stay but not visiting altogether. We are given to understand that this has affected the tourist industry as a whole throughout the Western Isles.

NEW TARBERT BUNKHOUSE

Proposals for a new bunkhouse in Tarbert may have serious consequences on our hostel at Rhenigidale. The £5,400 development to be built on the main street in Tarbert is just a short walk or ride from the ferry terminal. The 32 bed bunkhouse has secured funding of £34,000 from Western Isles Enterprise including £17,000 from the HIE Standards Initiative - a European-backed programme aimed at improving visitor accommodation throughout the Highlands and Islands. However, since the hostel at Rhenigidale is in such a unique situation we believe that the two hostels will cater for a different type of hosteller, or even the same hosteller, who upon arriving late at night, would rather wait until morning before walking over the hills to Rhenigidale.

SCALPAY BRIDGE

The £7m Scalpay bridge linking the island to Harris mainland will be opened to the public on December 9th, although the official opening takes place in February. It is hoped that 102 year old Mrs Morrison of Scalpay will travel in a vintage car on the last ferry and then return over the 300m bridge at the head of a convoy of vehicles.

MEMORIAL CAIRNS

Three superbly constructed cairns on Lewis have won the supreme award in the Environmental Regeneration award. The cairns were designed by Mr Will MacLean, professor of fine art at Dundee College, and the stonemason, Mr Jim Crawford who lives on Lewis.

The Crofters Memorial Cairns represent historical events in the struggle by the Lewis people trying to build their communities while clashing with local estate owners. The award was promoted by Scottish Enterprise and Scottish Natural Heritage.

RABBIT PEOPLE

Archaeologists, who last year wanted to destroy a Scottish Iron Age village are now to list it as a National Monument. Historic Scotland intends to schedule the site as an historic monument because it is a 'fine example of an Iron Age settlement, with high quality surviving structures'. This is the same settlement that I reported to you last newsletter that they were trying to protect from the sea whilst they investigated it.

The site was discovered buried in sand at Bost Beach on Great Bernera. During stormy weather in 1992 incredible honeycombed constructions were revealed and it was believed to be a single wheelhouse home. It turns out to be three houses with more under excavation. The site dates from 300 AD and is believed to have been inhabited by a mysterious group of underground 'rabbit people'.

An appeal to the National Heritage Fund is being made to rebuild one of the 1700 year old homes and if successful, work will start in the summer of 1998. Local stonemason Jim Crawford will be called in together with a team of volunteers. The knowledge gained from this reconstruction (of which there is no other experience), will be made into a book and lodged with relevant Scottish bodies. It is planned to open the house to the public and have some of the artifacts found on site, including pottery, a carved bone haircombe, and milling stones on display in the local museum in Bernera.

In fact members may be surprised to know that a close associate of the GHHT Mr Roy Ashworth (who many of you may recall doing maintenance work around the hostels for many years now) spent nearly eight years excavating a wheelhouse near his home in Grimsay. I had the privilege of visiting this site earlier in the year and it had been exposed to a depth of about three feet and it was a very obvious round dwelling house which had a central circular area for cooking and stone walls spreading out from the centre to the outer circular wall of stones, hence the name 'wheelhouse'.

Roy first thought that the few stones he saw poking out from the dirt in a remote field could have been a blackhouse but once he started to excavate he realised he had found something much older and far more unique. Sadly, however, despite numerous applications to archeological bodies and societies, no interest was shown and now that he has moved from the area it seems as if his amazing find will once again be consumed by the surrounding landscape.

BLACK HOUSES

The black house village of Garenin, the site of one of the Gatliff Hostels, has the last surviving cluster of traditional thatched buildings in Scotland and they are to be restored with a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund of £745,000.

The money will enable the Garenin Trust to return the 'A' listed

Outstanding Conservation area to its original form. After restoration, incorporating new rural skills training facilities it hopes to attract 400,000 visitors and generate 3 full-time permanent jobs, 5 full-time and one part-time seasonal jobs.

Sir Alasdair Grant, Scottish Trustee for the Heritage Lottery Fund said "The merit of this project is unquestionable; the village of Gearnannan has such a strong link with the islands' heritage it is vitally important that this area is preserved. This grant is an excellent example of the fulfilment of the HLF's objectives. It will not only preserve a piece of the island's history but will also bring it to life for the benefit of the public".

The cottages date from the 19th century, although a settlement has existed since the 17th century. The black houses were occupied by local people until the 1970's when they were rehoused into modern council accommodation. They are called black houses because of the contrast of new houses built in the 1850's of mainland design which had only single thickness walls, cemented with lime and mortar and painted white. Black houses can trace their architectural origins through the middle ages as far back as Viking times. As anyone who has visited the area can confirm they are quite distinctive with their thatched roofs and double thick drystone walls which are infilled with earth and peat for insulation. They are 40 feet long and only 10 - 12 feet wide with unusual rounded corners.

Visiting the hostel at Garenin is like stepping back in time, with your back to the modern council housing and facing the Atlantic Ocean there is no sign of modern day times - it is as if you are in another world.

AUDREY BOORNE LEGACY

Gatliff Hebridean Hostellers have become a beneficiary of a legacy left by Audrey Boorne. Audrey was an anthropologist by training and did field work in Afghanistan and Pakistan, she had travelled throughout her life to Eastern Europe, Scandinavia, Persia, France and Italy. A keen mountain walker, she always enjoyed the wilder parts of the British Isles. We do not know if she ever stayed in one of our hostels or what made her make the Trust a beneficiary of the Will, although she very much favoured the sort of accommodation the Trust provides. Also to benefit from the Will were the Mountain Bothies Association and the South Wales YHA (for use for simple grade hostels only). The Secretary has written to the executor, send GHHT condolences and to inform them that the £5000 will be used to rethatch Howmore hostel, with a plaque commemorating her generosity.

I have some more sad news to pass on to members. Chris Scargill died suddenly a few weeks ago and more information will be in the Crofter's Newsletter.

FORE HE'S NOT A JOLLY GOOD FELLOW

A unique golf course on the isle of Eriskay has been closed down due to an apparently non-golfer building a house on the fifth green!!! People travelled from as far away as London and Switzerland to say they had played over the six hole course at Eriskay. Now the locals, who hacked the course out of croftland, rock and sand dunes a few years ago, have to play their club championships near Oban a five hour ferry trip away.

The situation of the house also makes it dangerous to use the second green as the balls become a danger to the owner and his family. The golfers intend to approach the owner after the winter, the very fact that the course is on communal crofting land means that the crofters are dependent upon the goodwill of each other.

RISKY BUSINESS

Rodel a former herring fishing port on Harris is home to St Clements church, whose fine mediaeval sculptures have earned it the Scottish Civil Trust accolade as the most important building in the Western Isles.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of the Rodel Hotel. It was built by McLeod of Harris as a mansion when he returned from India and is now boarded up and derelict, alongside roofless and disused buildings. However, the harbour, although it appears run down and unloved at present is probably one of the most historic and picturesque harbours in the Hebrides and definitely has potential. Therefore, the SCT is encouraging the owners to rescue the property and restore the area or make it available to a restoring body or trust.

In it's heyday the hotel was very popular with locals and tourists alike and the Queen even visited in 1953! Donald McDonald the present owner is said to be negotiating with various bodies for a financial package to restore the hotel.

HOSTEL CHARGES

In line with the other national SYHA and YHA hostels we are having to meet increasingly more expensive maintenance and upkeep charges therefore as of 1st January 1998 the charges for overnight stays are:

Adults - £4.65
Juniors (to 16) - £3.85
Camping - £2.30

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