



GATLIFF HEBRIDEAN HOSTELS TRUST

Newsletter 28

May 1999

Apologies first of all for the lateness of this newsletter. I tried to wait until the hostels had been graded by the Scottish Tourist Board so that I would have some results to report. Unfortunately, they have not visited our hostels yet and the inspection is due at the end of May or early June! This grading will be for both SYHA (with whom GHHT is affiliated) and private hostels and is not so much five star gold ratings as for ambience, cleanliness and comfort.

By the way, if anyone is going up to the islands this summer I may bump into them during the month of July, when I shall be visiting and attempting to take part in 'It's a Knockout' on Berneray if anyone will have me on their team!!!

SHINTY IN BERNERAY

Prince Charles recently attended the first official shinty competition in the Western Isles since 1907 when he visited Berneray. He was also there to 'officially' open the causeway linking North Uist to Berneray. Prince Charles donated a trophy called 'Lord of the Isles' (taken from his own title), to help promote the game of shinty throughout the islands since it died out at the beginning of the century. There was an accompanying youth festival with teams from Lewis, Harris, Uist and Barra. Whilst on the island Prince Charles renewed his friendship with Donald MacKillop and his wife Gloria with whom in 1987 to learn about crofting, over a glass of whisky! The prince was interested to hear from the youth of the island as to what the causeway would mean to them and was informed that it meant greater freedom for them to not be tied to the ferry timetable and that they had been using the causeway since Christmas.

ERISKAY CAUSEWAY

Now the small isle of Eriskay is hoping to link up with South Uist by means of a causeway. Already a grant of £4.1m from the Public Transport Fund has been allocated to this project and the European Objective One programme has given £2.8m of funding. These two amounts combined with the commitment by the Western Isles Council of £2m and £1/2m from Highlands and Islands Enterprise give the total sum needed for the project. This causeway will be the last link in the chain to unite the whole of the Western Isles. Last year Tony Blair opened the Scalpay bridge and this year as noted above Prince Charles opened the Berneray Causeway, so the Eriskay Causeway will complete the unification. It is hoped that with these improved communications, these remote polulace will feel less isolated and have a greater quality of life and thus stay on the islands.

BUY OUT

Another public and privately funded project on the west coast of Lewis has enabled a 70 croft community to purchase their 690 hectare crofting estate from its owner a Glasgow-based architect James Gilchrist. The area includes the towns of Uigen, Cliff, Reef, Bhaltos and Kneep, and also a large caravan park. The owner helped the crofters out by reducing the price of the estate by £15,000 and a grant was given by Highlands and Islands Enterprise of £50,000, which combined with various other monies raised by other agencies and the community gave them the sum needed for purchase. Whilst this is good news for the peoples of Bhaltos, it has been declared that there will be no more lottery financed land fund money forthcoming until the end of the year at the earliest, so any other communities hoping to own their land will have to wait awhile.

POPULATION LOSS

Unfortunately, despite these new links and better communications there has still been recorded a steady rise in unemployment and this inevitably leads to families or individuals moving to the mainland seeking work. At present the unemployment figure in the Western Isles is over 9% whilst the rest of Scotland is between 5 –6%. Therefore an urgent initiative is needed to help create jobs and keep people on the islands. It has been proposed to make a single body dedicated to the task of job creation and development which would help to ensure that one agency isn't duplicating another agencies work.

One example of this depletion of population can be seen in the new intake of schoolchildren this year, in the five primary schools in Harris, just fourteen children are starting school. There are four main areas in the Western Isles which have been selected for their socio/economic fragility, remoteness and population loss; Uig area of Lewis; the bays of Harris; Lochboisdale and Eriskay, it is to be hoped that all these conferences can help the islands and islanders in new and positive ways.

OBJECTIVE ONE

In March this year the Highlands and Islands lost their Objective One status despite much bargaining in Berlin with the European Parliament. Fortunately, however, they did manage to get priority status for six years and £210m to 'cushion' the blow. It was thought at first that they may be eligible due to low population density of the areas if the seas and lochs were included in the capita per square kilometre. This funding will be aimed at trying to eliminate social exclusion and rural poverty and to help stimulate economic development.

SHEEP SHEARING TRICKS

June and July are the months when visitors to the Western Isles will be able to see the crofters even busier than usual at the annual event of sheep shearing. The sheep are brought in from the hills and common grazing land to the pens where deft hands catch the sheep and pin them between knees and arms to strip them of their fleeces. Years ago this was of course done manually and would take about ten minutes per sheep, nowadays however, with the advent of technology and the aid of a car or tractor battery sheep shearing can take as little as one minute!

The standard way to clip, is to start at the neck and work down the back and to try and keep the fleece whole, however, since all fleeces have to be sold via the British Wool Advisory Board and they fix the ridiculously low prices, there is not much incentive to keep them in one piece anymore. An additional problem is that of salt, heather and sand which lessens the quality of the fleece.

The average croft will have one hundred head of sheep and many of the older experienced crofters will still shear by hand, maintaining that the sheep has less injuries then when electric shears are used. So, next time you see the sheep being rounded up ready for this annual event, remember the back breaking work that the crofter endures for such small recompense!

GIRL TALK

Well the secret is out, Uist has nearly a third more men than women and the figure is increasing. It appears that whilst the menfolk on the island have more than enough work to do with farming and fishing, the women are not happy having nothing more appealing to do than pack prawns or keep house.

It is reported that most young women who grow up on Uist can't wait until they have saved up enough for the airfare to Glasgow to leave and find work there. In fact, it has been brought to the attention of the European Parliament who have given the island a 'love grant' to try and improve the employment opportunities for women and induce them to stay.

WORK PARTY

Following on from the training weekend held in Glasgow last year, it was decided 'hands on' experience was necessary for our volunteers, so they braved a winter trip up to Rhenigidale last February. The training involved a week of work which included painting the floor and walls of the hostel and finding out what sort of information a team leader would need to know, how to organise people and cater for them and the location of various services. We now have two team leaders who will be able to take work parties up to the islands and feel confident of supervising them. It was not a week for the faint hearted and Jim would like to thank Joanna and Lucy for their hard work and commitment.

WINDOWS FOR BERNERAY

This summer will see the installation of new windows in the hostel at Berneray. This is a job which has to be done during the summer months when it is (hopefully) dry and should cause no inconvenience to hostellers.

UPHEAVAL AT GARENIN

Due to building works being carried out at several of the other buildings in the village, the path outside the hostel has become quite muddy and the outlook from the doorway and bench outside is not as picturesque as usual. Vehicular traffic will be using the road. It is unknown how long this will go on for.

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

This years Annual General Meeting of the GHHT will be held at Glasgow Youth Hostel on Saturday 10th July 1999 at 10.30 am. All members are very welcome to attend.

Useful Names and Addresses

Chairperson: Peter Clarke, 264 Alexandra Park Rd, London N22 4BG

Vice Chair: Deidre Forsyth, The Sheiling, Glenburn Road, Ardrishaig, Argyll PA30 8EU

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