



Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust

www.gatliff.org.uk

newsletter 35

DECEMBER 2002



Settlements on the island of Scarp, North Harris, once home to an early Gatliff hostel.
(Photo courtesy of Sea Trek)

Healthy Recruitment

The Membership Secretary, Peter Clarke, indicates that there are 246 paid-up members of the GHHT. During 2001 there was a healthy number of 59 new members joining. This is encouraging - for the contacts and networks created by individuals with similar interests can only prosper the Trust. Do use your connections to boost recruitment directly or inform the Secretary of potential new members. His e-mail is ghht@gatliff.org.uk

The Membership Income during 2002 has been £1230 and in addition the donations received directly from them is £2166. 148 members have signed Gift Aid Forms and the recovered tax has yielded £755. So from this source alone the work of maintaining and promoting the four hostels in the group has been supported by over £4000.

AGM Matters

The Annual General meeting of the Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust was held on 14th September 2002 at the YHA in Oxford. It was in an entirely new venue and enabled more people to become aware of the activities of the group.

The hostels saw a decrease in usage of 3.2% in 2001, caused in part by the downturn owing to Foot & Mouth disease. Fortunately neither the Islands nor the North of Scotland were directly infected, but the tourist trade was indirectly affected. However, there was a 12% increase in overnight stays at Howmore with its new dormitory.

The Trust made an operating surplus of £11,930 compared with a surplus of £12,263 during 2000. The major differences were an increase of £2,322 in donations, gifts and grants; an improvement of £1,327 in trading; higher costs of £1,296 on hostel running and maintenance; an extra £875 in administration; a fall of £1,812 from interest payments.

Matt Bruce, Lawrence Washington, and Alan Sidaway were re-elected as Directors. Arthur Meaby, Philip Lawson, and Peter Clarke are nominated by the Gatliff Trust.

New Warden

The newly-appointed warden of the Garenin Hostel is Colin MacLeod, who lives nearby in the last house on the right before the renovated buildings. We wish him a long, successful and happy time in charge of the newest Gatliff hostel, just as we offer Donald MacLeod, the outgoing warden, similar wishes for his retirement. 'DR' lived in the last house on the left before the restored houses.

The Closer Hebrides

When that unexpected opportunity arises to have time off and to go places, the impulse to visit the Western Islands can surge. Alas, the complexities of travel and the constraints of the ferry schedules can have a restraining influence. A new daily air service has recently been introduced and BMI now flies the Stornoway - Edinburgh route by jet in just 55 minutes. Go to www.flybmi.com or phone 0870 60 70 555 for details and get ready to respond to the company's re-branding of the islands as 'The Closer Hebrides'.

When Everything is Right

The Autumn/Winter 2002 edition of the national YHA magazine *Triangle* announced the result of the publication's 'Photographer of the Year' Competition. The winner was Norrie Phillips of Dorset ... and his picture was of the Gatliff Hostel at Berneray. In the background was the house of the former wardens. The caption to the photograph included the words - 'It's the light that makes a picture' and 'you know in your heart when everything is right.' The black and white print of this newsletter cannot do justice to the award-winning print, but Gatliff hostel enthusiasts will have the opportunity of seeing how 'everything is right' about this photograph, and their hostel, through other channels.

A Fellow Traveller

When the Revd Robert (Bob) Higham was Minister of the Parish Church on Tiree, he became involved in a local community project to create a youth hostel on the island. He has now retired and lives in Berwick-on-Tweed, but came by invitation to the Executive Meeting at Melrose.

The GHHT was interested in finding out more about the proposed scheme and to provide advice, although not financial assistance. The siting of a hostel could well be six miles from the ferry terminal and have only limited public transport. Completion, even if interest were sustained and planning permission received, would not be until 2005. The prospect of the Inner Hebrides having a hostel of a similar type to the Gatliff ones in the Outer Hebrides is attractive. However, recent developments reveal that a proposed bunk-house, with commercial ambitions, would undermine an essentially charitable set up.

The way of life on Tiree is both distinctive and different. Its landscape, coastline, settlement pattern and atmosphere are well worth seeing and experiencing. What better method than by 'b&b' - bicycle and bothy !

Call Calmac

Ferry operators Caledonian MacBrayne have reported a successful Summer season for 2002 and look forward to further increases in the number of passengers carried on the Western Isles routes. Many Gatliff hostel-users will be looking south for a point of entry because of new ships and services. The traditional direction has been to come from the east via Ullapool or Uig.

The Sound of Harris sailings will be enhanced in May with the introduction of a new vessel, the MV Loch Portain. This ship, named after the North Uist loch, will regularly sail past the Berneray hostel on its way from Leverburgh to Otternish.

The new services linking Barra and Eriskay, now connected to South Uist by causeway, will give greater flexibility for those wanting to travel the 'island spine'. Call Calmac on 01475 650100 for detail of times and special offers.

Harp back to Scarp

One of Herbert Gatliff's passions was to introduce young people to his favourite part of Scotland and to share his enthusiasm with others. A legacy is that the hostel-users continue to be young in spirit, whatever their age. Gatliff Hostellers fall into several categories, from occasional visitors to committed members, and although age is of little significance, experience brings its rewards.

There are those who look upon Garenin as very new and somewhat different in being purpose-built. There's the section who recall staying at Claddach Baleshare, on North Uist, until a rooftop escapade put an end to this unique building. Members of the 'spartan-army' recall and relish the time when the only access to Rhenigidale was by the postman's route across the hills or by sea. This group includes those who were fortunate enough to meet and know the legendary warden at Rhenigidale, Roddy MacInnes. Then there are the 'originals' who met and were encouraged by Herbert Gatliff himself in the early 1960s.

Just occasionally one meets somebody who has stayed at the 'sixth' hostel, the one on the island of Scarp, to the west of Hushinish at the end of the B887 on North Harris. It was a thatched crofters' house, was opened as a hostel in June 1965 and closed in 1970, having gradually fallen down. An account of its brief history is included in Angus Duncan's *Hebridean Island* (Tuckwell Press). The material for this section of the book was compiled by Frank Martin of the Gatliff Trust and the hostel's log-books are to be found in the Stornoway Reference Library.

However, hostellers who used this remote and dilapidated building must have tales to tell and the Editor looks forward to hearing from them. Details of dates, conditions, contacts, incidents and adventures are eagerly awaited at the address or computer given below.

A first-rate account of this island appears in an outstandingly good book - *The Scottish Islands* by Hamish Haswell-Smith - published by Canongate [0 86241 579 9] and available at £25. This book is a must for those who value insights into the past ways of small communities on the off-shore islands of Scotland and the current means of reaching them.

These extracts from the vivid account of Scarp in *The Scottish Islands* illustrate the fragility of island settlements, the vulnerability of their residents and the interest aroused in outsiders.

Population: Settled by eight farming families in 1810. About 1823, thirteen villages between Loch Resort and Bunabhainneadar were cleared and some of the displaced villagers settled on Scarp. 1814 - 129 (23 houses). 1861 - 151, the eight original crofts had been subdivided into smaller and smaller units. 1881 - 213. 1891 - 143 (29 houses). 1931 - 95. 1951 - 74. 1961 - 46. 1971 - 12. The last two resident families, seven people in all, left Scarp in December 1971. 1981 - 2 (shepherds ?). 1991 - 0.

Geology: Chiefly gneiss and gneissose granite but containing some soft asbestos-bearing rock which is geologically unique in this region. The asbestos content was noted by geologists in the early 1930s.

History: on 14 January 1934, attended by an eighty-five-year-old midwife in her home on Scarp, Mrs Christina MacIennan gave birth to a child. On the following day her condition was poor and as there was no telephone on Scarp an islander crossed to Hushinish. But the telephone

there was out of order so the postman's son was sent to Tarbert to call the doctor. The doctor decided that Mrs MacLennan must go to hospital. The sea was rough but she was taken to Hushinish tied to a stretcher laid across a bouncing open boat. There she was laid on the floor of the local bus for the seventeen miles of bumpy road to Tarbert. She was then taken by car to the hospital at Stornoway where the cause of her distress was discovered. She gave birth to a second healthy child, and felt much better for it ! Thus the twins were born on different islands, in different counties and in different weeks.

This story, widely reported in the press at the time, came to the ears of a young German (who was later to become prominent in the German V2 rocket programme during the Second World War). So on 28 July of the same year - which came to be known as 'Latha na Rocait' (Gaelic - the day of the rocket) - Herr Gerhard Zucker chose to demonstrate his rocket-mail invention on Scarp. Special stamps were printed for the occasion and a letter was written to the King. The one-metre-long solid-fuel rocket weighed 14kg and could carry several thousand letters at 1000 mph but when Gerhard lit the fuse the rocket exploded prematurely scattering mail over a wide area. The local postmaster had the letters collected and he labelled each cover with violet ink reading - 'Damaged by first explosion at Scarp - Harris.' A second experiment with the same mail fired from Harris back to Scarp was successful but the project was abandoned, although a few letters addressed to Orkney actually reached their destination, having travelled by rocket, ferry, automobile, mail-steamer, railway and Highland Airways.

Even in the 1940s the population of Scarp - one of Britain's most westerly outposts - was over one hundred but it was dwindling steadily and only seven crofters were left to abandon the island in 1971. The postmaster, Mr Maclean, had finally shut the post-office in 1969, and no more Gaelic sermons were preached in the church.

The island is rocky and the north part is 308m in height (over 1000 ft) with a steep drop to the sea. The village, now used for holiday accommodation, is in the south-east corner and partly sheltered from the Atlantic winds by a low hill. The only land capable of cultivation is here on the east coast and it is easy to see how the island could not support a large population. Communication today is by boat between two stone jetties. There was no electricity and oil lamps were the only means of illumination but there was some piped water. The village had one small shop and a telephone installed in 1947.

Scarp has a proud educational record and it is claimed that more professional qualified people came from the island than from any other island community of similar size. The Hebridean writer, Francis Thompson, tells of a Londoner who was amazed at the sheer isolation of Scarp and asked a Scarpach how he ever got the news from London. 'Well,' was the puzzled rejoinder, 'how do you get the news from Scarp ?'

Access: No regular access, but Sea Trek, Uig, Lewis (01851-672464) provides boat excursions. An introduction to their services is available via www.seatrek.freemove.co.uk

We look forward in the next edition of *Hebridean Hostellers* to supplying 'delayed news' from Scarp concerning the Gatliff connections with the island.

The view of the settlements on Scarp, on the front page, has been provided by Sea Trek, a company that will ferry you to the island.

Head North to Ness

A first trip by travellers to Lewis usually involves ultimate matters, such as an excursion to the Butt of Lewis and the consequent visit to the village and port at Ness. It is a gateway for some to the northern waters and the usually inaccessible islands of North Rona and Sula Sgier. What is accessible is the stimulating web-site of the Ness Historical Society (Comunn Eachdraidh Nis) that is to be found via www.c-e-n.org

In 1977 six people and a supervisor began a 20-week employment programme to record and archive contemporary and historical material relating to north Lewis. Photographs collected from the public were later archived in a collection of several thousand images. In 1992 the Historical Society was relocated to more spacious accommodation at Habost and provision made for the housing of the famous Rona Stone and the 12th century Rona Cross.

The Garenin hostel is itself to be found within an historical complex and the past dimensions on this north-west coast of Lewis are well worth exploring, first by Internet and then in person.

Discussions from the Park Holland Park

Users of the Gatliff Trust hostels were invited to take part in a discussion at the Holland Park Youth Hostel in London on Saturday 30 November. Nineteen members were present and ideas flowed.

The topic of advanced bookings was raised and there was strong feeling to resist introducing them. Although it was conceded that reassurance was needed for those people who were coming to a hostel for the first time and unsure of availability, it was considered not to be an issue for those who were relatively seasoned users. Adoption of advance bookings could destroy something of the ethos of the hostels.

Ways of increasing the quality of a stay at the hostels were considered. It was suggested that a basic requirement is the interaction required with fellow-residents in order to sort out the sleeping arrangements. Individual needs within the communal-style catering also demands attention to the notion of 'getting on together'.

An occasional problem was raised involving relatively large numbers who turn up as a party. A mini-bus delivering a group of hostellers who already know one another can undermine the spirit of friendship that should be forged by individuals. Someone suggested that elements of the Garenin set-up resemble a miniature Disneyland.

There are at least 17 hostels and bunk-houses in the Western Isles and each has its own identity. The four Gatliff Trust residences have their own distinctive ethos and do not compete with the others on either geographical location or price. Gatliff promotes 'hostels of destination, not transition'.

Discussions relating to a new hostel took place, but the general feeling was that any development would have to wait until a person of vision saw an opportunity that could be introduced over a considerable length of time.

New opportunities for marketing were briefly touched upon and it was considered to be suitable to engage the interests of the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme and the Scout and Guide Movements. The idea was to encourage those connected with individual adventure projects rather than with corporate parties.

Two Men, Two Women and Twenty Beds

Seven days in mid-November made a great difference to two of the Gatliff hostels, thanks to the work of Alan Sidaway and his party. They set off from New Galloway, called at the SYHA hostel in Stirling, collected 20 beds, stayed overnight in Portree and caught the early boat to Lochmaddy.

Meg Richards and Susan Sidaway were dropped off at Berneray and made preparations to paint inside the two buildings. Dan Sailor and Alan continued to Howmore where they erected the new beds. When they had finished the sleeping accommodation there had been transformed.

Berneray then became the focus of attention with work on the completion of its fencing and the putting up of a new gate. Two factors helped. The weather was benign and the sandy soil made for easy digging. By midday on the Saturday the various jobs were finished and even the old roofing material had been cleared.

So thanks are due to this work-party that has helped create a new-look to Berneray and increased comforts at Howmore. Whenever we enjoy a good night's sleep and the outstanding settings of our hostels, it is due to the efforts of those closely associated with the Trust.

An Observation



The restored village of Garenin, with the hostel in the foreground.
(Photograph provided by Matt Bruce)

While the three older hostels have a setting that has not changed for decades, Garenin is now just one of an extended group of thatched houses huddling by the sea. All the black houses have changed from old ruins (last lived in around 1974) to a variety of new uses. There are now upmarket holiday cottages, an interpretation-centre-cum-office, a café and shop, an historically-correct black house from 1955 and a public toilet.

All these works have been carried out due to the actions of a Lewis-based charitable organisation called Urras nan Gaerrannan. It also owns the black house that we use as a hostel. The regeneration of the village has resulted in a complete change to the place - as it now hums with people, at least during daylight hours in the tourist season. However, our role sometimes seems to be diminished by the activities around. At least we offer two different features - relatively inexpensive facilities and a sense of coming alive with human activity when other places close.

The Finishing Touch

For those wanting to venture beyond the basic knowledge of the indigenous language of the Highlands and Islands and communicate with speed, Ile Tec Computers Solutions has launched a new Gaelic keyboard. They claim it is the perfect one-key solution for producing computer documents in Scottish Gaelic. The keyboard, with accented, Gaelic short and operations keys, works with any version of Microsoft Windows TM.

Messages for Delivery

Getting around the Western Islands has never been straightforward and getting between them has exercised human ingenuity. The hand-built 'mail-boats' pushed out to sea from St Kilda carried messages from the most isolated of islanders. These often travelled to the more populated Hebridean islands and to the Mainland. These distances are insignificant compared with the journey of the message carried by bottle from Newfoundland and discovered by a nine-year old on a Barra beach in the late Summer. Then in October another message, this time from Burin Bay on the Canadian east coast, came ashore at Mangersta, Uig and was discovered by another nine-year old. The bottle had apparently been dropped from a ferry by two Newfoundlanders over a year ago.

Debris on the beaches, which are only yards from the hostels at Garenin, Berneray and Rhenigidale and a short walk from Howmore, may not normally have such romantic associations, but they serve to remind us of the vital role of the sea in human communications. The demand for properties adjacent to water has always been high. Consequently, if matters concerning 'location' are as important as estate and travel agents maintain, then the Gatliff hostels are in a league of their own - and a premier one at that ! Deliver the message - by all appropriate means - that here, situated on exquisite sites, on the western fringes of the European landmass, with waters propelled by the North Atlantic Drift, are places to stay in and to cherish.

ADDRESSES

THE GATLIFF HEBRIDEAN HOSTELS TRUST, 30 Francis Street, Stornoway, Isle of Lewis, Western Isles HS1 2ND. email: ghht@gatliff.org.uk

CHAIRMAN: Matt Bruce, 'Achnaha', Upper Garrabost, Isle of Lewis, Western Isles HS2 0PN. email: chair@gatliff.org.uk

MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY: Peter Clarke, 264 Alexandra Park Road, London N22 7BG. Tel: 020 8888 2449; Mobile: 0790 999 3863. email: ghht@gatliff.org.uk

SECRETARY: Arthur Meaby, 33 Stratford Close, Colwick, Nottinghamshire NG4 2DL. email: arthurmeaby@aol.com

WORKING PARTY ORGANISER: Alan Sidaway, 'Cairnraus', New Galloway, Castle Douglas DG7 3SB. Tel: 01644 420293. email: alansidaway@hotmail.com

NEWSLETTER EDITOR: John Humphries, Elm Lodge, Garden House Lane, Rickingham, Diss, Norfolk IP22 1EA. Tel: 01379 890270. email: editor@gatliff.org.uk

GHHT WEBSITE: www.gatliff.org.uk