



Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust

www.gatliff.org.uk

Newsletter 39

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Loch Seaforth in the direction of The Minch, with Seaforth Island on the left
(Photograph taken by Mike Briggs and supplied by the Harris Windfarm Group)

Rising Interest Rates

If an organisation may be judged solely by the attendance at its AGM, then both the GHHT and its parent body, the Gatliff Trust, would be perceived as being in fine fettle. The meetings, held on Saturday 27 November, at Holland Park Youth Hostel, in Kensington, were in an attractive setting, but that in itself does not draw 20 people to what is purely a business function. There may be changes next year in order to accommodate these numbers which have become too large for the venue. The GHHT Executive Committee was increased by the appointment of Stuart Jones, from Scarborough, as a Director. He brings a wealth of experience from a career in the construction industry and from his frequent travelling by cycle and public transport in both the UK and Europe.

Back Up

The improvements in public transport on the islands mean that it is now possible to make the journey from Barra to the Butt or back by bus and ferry in one, rather full, day. There is no need to do this, of course, because our hostels provide admirable stopping places for accommodation or refreshment along this spinal route. The most recent timetables can be accessed via the GHHT website and will show that the turning for the Howmore hostel is an official stopping place for the bus, that Berneray is ideally suited for the Sound of Harris ferry terminal, that there is a daily bus from Tarbert into Rhenigidale and that Garenin is well served by connections on the way to Ness. Those wanting to explore the southern extremities of Vatersay or the northern access to the Butt of Lewis lighthouse may have to go on foot, but there are well-trodden paths.

Explore Scotland's Wild Places

The SYHA has produced a most attractive guide to small hostels, including ours, that are to be found throughout Scotland. If you come across the publication, *Rustic Hostels*, put it in the path of others to raise awareness of the distinctive features of this outstanding heritage. As there is obviously no mass market of demand for these places, it is vital that there are people around who care for these places with such evocative names as Achmelvich Beach, Craig, Glen Affric, Loch Ossian, Raasay, Kendoon and Papa Westray, to name but a few. The booklet also has details of the Association's Small Hostels Appeal, which has been supported by the GHHT.

For Island Watchers Everywhere

The writings of the Cheshire-based author, Graham Wilson, are well-known to many Scottish travellers and his recent book, *Macc & Other Islands*, has recently been featured in the John Muir Trust *Journal*. His interests in people, places and aspects of island life are a natural fit for Gatliff hostel enthusiasts. His observations on Rhum, Mingulay and Barra are well worth reading in themselves, but the ways in which he captures the spontaneity and encounters of our sort of travel certainly appeal. Take a look at what is available from Graham Wilson via the website of his publisher, Millrace, at www.millracebooks.co.uk

Permanent Ways

Notions are fine, but focused, hard work is needed to realise them. One person who used his abilities to the highest standard in order to create hostels that provide for needs and give much pleasure was Arthur Meaby. His work for the Gatliff Trust and the YHA was both appreciated and acclaimed. It is fortunate that following his death last year, two particular projects have been undertaken. One is a published compilation of the tributes recorded that has been put together by Frank Martin, the Chairman of the Gatliff Trust. The other is a permanent exhibition that is being prepared for display at the Lea Valley Youth Hostel at Cheshunt in Hertfordshire. Arthur was involved with the planning of this new hostel, opened in 2002, within a park of 10,000 acres that is relatively close to the capital.

Heritage on Tiree

Tiree is well known for coming first among the list of coastal stations on the Shipping Forecast, for its relatively balmy weather and its agricultural fertility. The Heritage Society and the Friends of Tiree Chapels have recently promoted the Gaelic edition of the Pilgrimage Route Guidebook as well as six information boards. These have been erected at the Kirkapol Chapels, Dun Mor Vul Broch, Ringing Stone, Kilkenneth Chapel, Temple Patrick and Soroby Graveyard sites. If you want more details of the work of these interested parties on the outermost island of the Inner Hebrides group, contact the Revd Robert Higham on 01289 302392.

Land From The Lairds

Large areas of the Western Isles are owned by a relatively few estates. The balance was partly rectified in Lewis in the 1920s when Lord Leverhulme's offer of land to residents resulted in the Stornoway Trust covering some 69,000 acres. Now over half the population of the 26,000 islanders lives on its land. Recent land buyouts in North Harris and Valtos have added a further 52k acres to community ownership, with a further 50k owned by government agencies. There are talks of estate take-overs in Galson, Pairc and Eisken (115k in total) on Lewis, in North Harris, around Rhenigidale (7k), and on South Uist (92k). It is estimated that within five years over 50% of the land will belong to the various communities.

Money-Go-Round

The charitable works of Herbert Gatliff continue long after his death in 1977. These are administered by the Gatliff Trust, while the trading matters involving the island hostels are run by the Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust. However, the latter makes allocations to various local concerns in order to promote causes that the founder wished to thrive. These include the following: parishes of the Church of Scotland at Berneray, Carloway, Howmore and Tarbert; the Roman Catholic Church at Ardkenneth and Bornish on South Uist; the North Harris Trust; Voluntary Service Organisations on Barra & Vatersay, Harris, Lewis and Uig; Sabhal Mor Ostaig on Skye; Scottish Rights of Way Society; Scottish Youth Hostels Association.

Walk Out

The Winter 2004 issue of *Walk*, the quarterly magazine of the Ramblers' Association, had stunning photographs of Uig Sands on its cover and the beach at Luskentyre to lead an article on the Outer Hebrides. Its author, Terry Marsh, a freelance travel writer, explained how the place feels as though it is 'a million miles from home.' Although true in certain ways, it is reassuring to think that we have access to four 'homes' in these parts. The magazine also offered readers a chance to win a £600 holiday in the Western Isles. This included travel by ferry and accommodation in a luxurious hotel. Come to think of it that sum of money could buy you 75 nights at the Gatliff hostels !

Safety Matters

The end-of-the-season saw Alan Sidaway, our Maintenance Officer, and Meg Richards, our Housekeeper and Minutes Secretary, undertaking that vital work involving risk assessments under the Health & Safety legislation. The splendid feature of the Gatliff hostels is that they have long provided safe havens from heavy weather in remote places. Yet rightly the authorities realise that people need high levels of protection that are consistently maintained, while the organisers of the hostels want to ensure maximum comforts at minimum prices. One reassuring aspect of this tour of duty was that Alan and Meg reported how much hostellers and wardens appreciated the new equipment that has been installed in the kitchens during the course of the year.

Simple Hostels Need Spreading

The flyer produced by the GHHT features its four hostels as well as the one run by the Kershader Community Co-operative. It may be a single sheet that bears the title *Simple Hostels in the Outer Hebrides*, but it is packed with information concerning positions, directions and attractions. It has been produced annually for a number of years; now it will not carry the year date for the demand has meant that we need flexible reprinting. If you have what you consider to be a potentially rewarding outlet for these flyers, please contact the Editor of this newsletter for supplies. The greatest recent demand for supplies has been the Tourist Information Centre in Portree on Skye where copies have been requested right into the winter months.

The Eyes of the World

The world wide web enables information about the Gatliff Trust to be received by billions of people. It is just as well that only several thousand log onto our site www.gatliff.org.uk because too much exposure could mean that our facilities would be in too much demand. However, we have had site visitors from countries as diverse as Cameroon, Bangladesh, the Ukraine, Georgia, the Russian Federation, China, Korea, India, Brazil and Iceland. From April to September we were attracting around 500, mainly UK, visitors per month, with 646 in August and, on 29 June for some reason, 50 visitors. Even in the quiet Winter months, people do their research for the warmer seasons and the numbers per month have not fallen below 250.

Buy the Book, Talk the Talk, Walk the Walk

Neil Pinkett reminds us in his *Walks from the Gatliff Hostel at Reinigeadal*, first published in 2000, that Herbert Gatliff's axiom for hostel development was 'we won't go cosy' despite the open fire at Rhenigidale. The first warden, the late Roddy MacInnes, campaigned for many years for the road to be built, but did not live to see the finished access that was opened in 1991. Bednights subsequently more than doubled and the place, named after the 'Dale of the Rowan Tree Bay', became etched in even more memories.

There's the Tarbert Path to take for a distance of over six miles and which will involve passing the deserted village of Gearraidh Lotaigear and what was to have been a shop, supplied by boats. The postman used this path and returned to Rhenigidale with letters for delivery and lists for the grocer. The goods would subsequently arrive by sea. The only decision on this walk is whether, at the road, to turn right to Tarbert or left to Scalpay, see the main settlement on Harris or a thriving island of some 450 people.

Toddun, at 1733', is the highest hill within easy reach of Rhenigidale and may be approached by three routes. The views from the summit include, on a fine day, the Pairc, the Shiants and St Kilda, some 70 miles distant. The Molinginis walk is some seven miles in length and reaches a settlement where there were once some 18 buildings. One has been restored. The construction of the house at Gerraidh Mhurchaidh, some half-mile behind the hostel, required a rollercoaster device up which materials could be transported from a boat.

A visit to Mulla requires a two-mile walk, while Nostar and Toscam demand a six-mile jaunt with views across Loch Seaforth. The lonely Loch Lacasdal can be viewed by taking in a 13-mile stretch in a round-trip from the hostel which is, to those who have acquired this book, something of a centre for some of the more remote and compelling landscapes in the British Isles. Let us, as members, acquire as many copies as stocks allow and raise awareness of these walks through time and space.

Walks from the Gatliff Hostel at Reinigeadal

by Neil Pinkett

Single copy: £3.00 Two copies: £5.00 Five copies: £10.00

Prices cover postage and packaging

Please post your cheques
(made payable to the Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust) or send cash to:

John Humphries Editor *Hebridean Hostellers*

Elm Lodge Garden House Lane Rickinghall Diss IP22 1EA

Get Away

There are comparable hostels to ours in different parts of the country and it would be good to learn about some of them through these columns. Two that appeal are in contrasting parts of the country. One of the most upmarket seaside areas is now the North Norfolk coast and the village of Burnham Market has been dubbed 'Chelsea-on-Sea'. However, at nearby Burnham Deepdale (01485 210036) is a fine newly-created complex that offers both backpackers and group hostelling, camping and its innovative Sioux Native American-style tipis (teepees to some !) See what's on offer through www.deepdalefarm.co.uk and then move from this relatively flat county to Snowdonia by accessing a fine web-site www.boulderadventures.co.uk Here is the Bryn Du Mountain Centre at Lanberis (01286 870556) where accommodation and activities can be enjoyed independently or experienced in a complementary way. Please keep the Editor posted so that more such organisations may be featured here.

Note, Plan and Go

The provisional programme for the Islands Book Trust has ventures that will appeal to Gatliff members who are urged to make two resolutions for the New Year. One is to note the topics featured below and the other is to watch for final details via www.theislandsbooktrust.com There is to be a three-day conference on St Kilda from 25-27 August with a possible day-trip to the island on 29 August. This is to mark the 75th anniversary of the evacuation. Then in May there is to be a talk on the history of Scarp and a boat trip from Husinish; a similar event in June on and to the Shiant; and then in July the focus on South Pairc with a boat trip taking in such places as Valamus and Mulhagery (OS 14: 297017 & 367066). Evening talks will be on Martin Martin, Angus Macleod and aspects of Scottish islands in a wider context. New books include an important publication by Michael Robson on St Kilda in which evidence from church sources will challenge some of the myths about repression and the neglect of social conditions. In October there is to be a second publication from the Angus Macleod Archive on the subject of Crofting Life.

Sleeping Around the Islands

Although the Gatliff hostels are seen by many as 'places of destination' in the most compelling parts of the Western Isles, there are a significant number of other hostels offering comparably-priced accommodation in the area. It is, perhaps, a benefit to us all that some people perceive the islands as being, in themselves, a backpack-hostel centre. It is good to report that, contrary to reports, bunkhouse accommodation continues to be offered on the north-western coast of Lewis at Galson Farm and adjacent to the airport at Ballivanich on Benbecula. It is worth checking, however, on whether the facilities at the Drinishader Hostel will be continuing into the New Year and on the off-season opening times at the Rockview Bunkhouse in Tarbert. One great advantage of the opening dates and hours of the Gatliff chain is that 'we never close.'

From the *Hebridean Hostellers* Issue of Ten Years Ago

Howmore Refurbishment: 'A work party was organised and led by Jim McCulloch at the beginning of November to move all the stones and general debris in the adjacent buildings to the hostel in preparation for the rebuilding work. A week later I joined the stonemason Brian Wilson and his colleague to rebuild parts of the walls and dismantle and rebuild the doorway. It has to be said at this stage that my part in all this was to sort and grade the stones – some as large as a full rucksack others as small as a mouse – into various piles. By the time I had finished Brian said it was a shame to take from and spoil such a well-formed cairn of stones. That was just the pile for infill.

The area now looks as if it is surrounded by battalions of regimented stones, which Brian selects to create a perfectly straight and even wall. Each layer of stones is levelled in exactly the same way as a bricklayer would line them up, but without the cement to keep them together – it truly is a highly-skilled craft. Upon completion the walls will be a metre thick, comprising an outer and inner wall with an infill of small stones. Thankfully, the weather was excellent with only one day of rain, which is most unusual for mid-November and this enabled us to complete many tasks in the one week. Brian will be returning early in 1995 and again around May to finish the work on the walls and gable ends allowing the next stage to begin.'

(Editor: Jim McFarlane)

..... and of Fifteen Years Ago

'So the GHHT's long term ambitions are for crofters' hostels in areas such as Ness and Uig of Lewis and on the island of Barra. Opportunities could exist on some of the Inner Hebrides such as Tiree.'

(Editor: Richard Genner)

Addresses

The Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust: 30 Francis Street Stornoway Isle of Lewis Western Isles HS1 2ND ghht@gatliff.org.uk

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

Secretary: Alan Busson Loanend Kinnoir Huntly Aberdeenshire AB54 7XX 01466 793670 secretary@gatliff.org.uk

Hon Treasurer & Membership Secretary: Peter Clarke 264 Alexandra Park Road London N22 7BG 020 8888 2449 Mobile: 0790 999 3863 treasurer@gatliff.org.uk

Maintenance Officer: Alan Sidaway Cairnraus New Galloway Castle Douglas DG7 3SB 01644 420293 wpo@gatliff.org.uk

Newsletter Editor: John Humphries Elm Lodge Garden House Lane Rickingham Diss Norfolk IP22 1EA 01379 890270 editor@gatliff.org.uk

GHHT Website: www.gatliff.org.uk

Hebridean Rocks, Waters, Wind and Light

The Garenin Trust has been investigating ways of making their Blackhouse Village both warmer and more cost-effective by thermal methods of tapping into the resources of the Earth's crust. Whether any investment required by the Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust will lead to real savings for our hostel's heating bill remains to be decided.

However, this is a timely reminder of the power that is beneath us. At the end of 2004 Scotland's largest photovoltaic project was installed at the Sir E Scott School in Tarbert. 120 panels were fitted on the roof to capture energy from daylight and to power the solar water heating system. Yet many residents of Harris are aware of the possible intrusive nature of another alternative form of energy.

The Harris Windfarm Group has been formed to oppose the plans submitted by Beinn Mhor Power on the Eishken Estate, across Loch Seaforth on the Pairc area of Lewis. It is concerned about the proposal for 133 wind turbines of over 100 metres high with 90 metre blades in an unspoilt area that is home to golden and sea eagles as well as to hundreds of deer and otters.

This is one of several windfarm applications on the islands. Their implementation would lead to significant changes to prime hillwalking and camping sites and on views of original landscape. Perhaps the quietest and most unobtrusive form of renewable energy could come from the tidal generators that are the strategic component of a proposed causeway linking South Harris and Berneray across the Sound of Harris ?

Quite rightly much human involvement and energy are casting light on and generating heat over these issues, but the fact remains that the Hebridean rocks, waters, wind and light are recognised as being in demand in this area of development. Herbert Gatliff and others experienced the same forces, but wanted to share their aesthetic pleasures with others.



**Looking north with Seaforth Island immediately across the water
(Photograph taken by Mal Hall and supplied by the Harris Windfarm Group)**