



Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust

www.gatliff.org.uk

Newsletter 40

July 2005



This Shieling at the Head of Loch Shell is a mid-way point between the Hostels at Rhenigidale and Kershader ... as the Eagle flies!

'For the Beauty of the Earth'

The life and work of the late Arthur Meaby will be commemorated and celebrated in two places later this year. The AGM of the GHHT will be held at the Kildonan Museum on South Uist on Saturday 3 September and attenders will remember Arthur when a seat is positioned at the nearby Howmore Hostel. Its inscription - 'For the Beauty of the Earth' - will recall the work of a person who made it possible for many to experience this feature in distant places. The AGM of the Gatliff Trust will be held at the Lea Valley Youth Hostel at Cheshunt, Herfordshire, on Saturday 26 November where there is to be a permanent exhibition to display his contributions to Youth Hostelling, Gatliff initiatives and the Outdoor Movement.

Peter Meaby, one of Arthur's nephews, emailed from his Australian home and recalled walks that he had made with his uncle in Scotland and Wales. They had a certain frantic element involving speed, timing and the catching of trains. Arthur was undoubtedly an authority on the railway timetables, but he made his platform entries either with a graceful accuracy or an element of the mad dash. Peter became convinced that the train times were actually governed by Arthur who could, he thought, have been the inspiration for the Fat Controller in *Thomas the Tank Engine*.

Beyond the Minch

Organisations need surveys to see where they are going. The GHHT advertising budget is not large, but has to be directed effectively. Advertisements for the Gatliff Hostels appear during the Spring and Summer months on three CalMac boats that ply across The Minch from the Mainland to the Western Isles. Recently the rates have risen considerably and we are wondering whether it's worth continuing to use the display services of the company. Is there anyone out there who read about us for the first time while travelling on the ferry? While our website is attracting close on a thousand visitors a month at negligible expense, is it worthwhile spending heavily to attract the occasional passenger who is both unaware of, and interested in, our type of accommodation?

ABC – 'A Backpack Centre'

There are times when the Western Isles appear to have a surfeit of hostels, but it's large enough to include many of them and an attractive feature is that their presence attracts visitors seeking this type of accommodation. However, when the Skye Bridge was built, the village of Kyleakin, the major gateway to that island, had to re-brand itself. It was effectively cut off from passing traffic and has developed into a backpack centre. This is a place where the unwary can find themselves in hostels that are too large and frequented by groups that descend on them from coaches. An established, friendly and very well-managed place is the Dun Caan Hostel on the Pier Road (01599 534087) where the proprietors, Terry and Laila Hall, are enthusiasts for the Gatliff Hostels. Take a look for yourself via www.skyerover.co.uk and, if in contact with them, do mention the Gatliff connection.

See the Norse Now

Some four miles to the south of Howmore is the Viking Settlement at Bornais. Archaeological work began there some ten years ago and is now nearing completion. Revelations have been made about a substantial settlement that started in the Iron Age and which was maintained until after 1400 AD. Its busiest phase was during the Norse period when a group of five separate farms were thriving. Each farm survived on a different mound protruding from the machair and each still has its own distinct identity. The irony is that the excavations will, for this year at any rate, be open only until 20 July. So there are mere days to see closely what has been in existence for thousands of years.

Food for Thought ... and Travel

The standards of cooking, considering the limited kitchen space in our hostels, are surprisingly high. However, cuisine and gourmet factors do not normally feature. Yet this could change with the development of the so-called 'Outer Hebrides Speciality Food Trail' presented on a flyer and through www.outerhebridesfoodtrail.com. Visitors to Howmore can easily shop for locally grown oysters at Daliburgh or for award-winning flaky smoked salmon at Lochcarnan. Connoisseurs from Berneray will need to travel over the causeway to Arbhan Organics at Paible on North Uist for Highland beef, mutton and potatoes. Rhenigidale has a current speciality famine, but a trek north by those at Garenin craving for black, white and fruit puddings will bring them to E Morrison & Son at Cross, Port of Ness.

The Flyers Have Flown

Updated versions of our flyer *Simple Hostels in the Outer Hebrides* are available throughout Scotland and in the London branch of Visit Scotland. The methods of distribution have changed with supplies posted to many independent hostels, the regional centres of the Tourist Board and to all SYHA hostels via their own system of communication. Nothing is more effective, however, than the personal touch and so a copy of this publication is included with this newsletter. Pass it on to a potential visitor with a recommendation or, perhaps, with a challenge !

Slow Progress for Spectacular Vistas

Stocks of Neil Pinkett's *Walks from the Gatliff Hostel at Reinigeadal* are high and sales are slow, despite publicity in *Walk*, the John Muir Trust *Journal* and the Newsletter of the Mountain Bothies' Association. So generations to come will have copies available for them and information about a landscape that is particularly well-embedded. The diversity of walks around the hostel is impressive and the views afforded can be unforgettable. The well-known Postman's Path to Urgha on the Tarbert - Scalpay road is easily found, but needs negotiating owing to erosion. Therefore to have more exciting, yet less used, tracks presented is particularly stimulating. Many find the hostel particularly appealing, especially having tramped and triumphed over the local terrain.

The Estate We Are In

Someone writing in *The Field* once likened owning a Scottish Estate to taking a cold shower while tearing up £50 notes. It certainly is a relentless matter to keep up with the maintenance and housekeeping issues at our four hostels, because of constant use by visitors and abuse by the elements. Thanks to the services of Alan Sidaway, Stuart Jones and Meg Richards the busy season opened with the hostels looking in good fettle and with new features providing additional comforts. It may be a delusion of grandeur, but there is something attractive in seeing our four sites as being Scottish estates, at least in miniature.

Roadends Project

A way of looking at the Gatliff Hostels is to see them as distinctive places of accommodation at the ends of roads. Rhenigidale and Berneray are literally there as markers to show that there is little beyond, while Garenin has only a short reconstructed street and Howmore an impressive church before the nearby shorelines. The *Roadends Project*, together with the evocatively named *Hut of the Shadow*, *Mosaic Mackerel* and *High Tide, Low Tide*, are sculptures commissioned on the Uists and Benbecula. They have been created with the intention of widening people's experience of art in the environment and of encouraging them to explore beautiful and less-visited places. Picking up a leaflet at the Tourist Board is certainly a lighter effort than that involved in creating these substantial works of art.

Over the Waves

Listeners to a special Scottish edition of *Today* on Radio 4 were treated to an interview that took place in the communal area of the Berneray hostel. It was presented by a new resident on the island, John Kirriemuir, and he was speaking with a couple who had come to spend a night at the hostel. They had found it idyllic, altered their plans and stayed for several days. The website that John, who has moved from Worcester, has constructed is certainly worth looking at. For www.isleofberneray.com succeeds in giving a full, informative and endearing picture of this island that has led to many people, including the Prince of Wales, coming to stay, extending their visit and leaving with a vision of a place that simply appeals.

Insights for Some; Exciting for Many

Three major local festivals are being held in the Islands, but the window of opportunity to attend is closing fast for two of them. The Hebridean Celtic Festival celebrates its 10th Anniversary with several well-known groups attending this Stornoway-based gathering. The web site www.hebfest.com gives the details and the dates are 13 - 16 July. On South Uist, the Ceolas Summer School will be presenting Gaelic song, dance, piping and music for the fiddle from 9 - 15 July with www.ceolas.co.uk being the place for the first stage of a visit.. Then during October, the Mod will be held in Stornoway where high standards of competitive singing will be heard and celebrating will be evident.

Stimulating Off-shore Options

The Islands Book Trust enables its members to get to know much more about Hebridean life and assists its supporters to get to places that require organised efforts. The programme for 2005 involves nine matters of outstanding and defining interests.

In lectures so far this year Dick Balharry, Chairman of the John Muir Trust, considered *People, Islands and Wild Land*; Michael Robson examined aspects of *Martin Martin and the Western Isles*; Donald John MacInness and Callum John Mackay spoke about their life and research on *The Island of Scarp*. Many members of the audience then visited the now depopulated island.

Last year's visit to the Shiantis was repeated in June, after Adam Nicolson had, by popular demand, given another personal account of the islands that he owns and about which has written in his highly-acclaimed book, *Sea Room: An Island Life*.

On 30 July Michael Robson will be giving a lecture at Lemreway on *The History of South Pairc* and his insights into this remarkable stretch of virtually uninhabited land between Lochs Shell and Seaforth. A visit by boat to the former settlements at Valamus, Brollum and Buhinish will follow.

The Anniversary of the Evacuation of St Kilda will be commemorated at a conference to be held at Great Bernera from Thursday 25 - Saturday 27 August, followed on the Monday by a proposed trip to St Kilda. Then on 27 September, Cairns Aitken, who has visited more than 90 uninhabited Scottish islands, will be giving an illustrated lecture at Port of Ness.

In October, Professor Jim Hunter, of the University of the Highlands and Islands, will give the second memorial lecture in honour of the life and work of Angus McCleod of Calbost, South Lochs. Then in November, Alasdair Maceachen, who lives in the Uists, will share some of his experiences and reflect on the similarities and differences between island communities in Ireland and the Western Isles.

The Islands Book Trust publishes transcripts of these lectures for its members and is therefore in the forefront of providing opportunities for information as well as for exploration. It brings the heritage of the Hebrides to life and is laying down resource material for both current generations and posterity. Look at www.theislandsbooktrust.com – call 01851 810681 – or contact Norman Thomson at 40 Cross-Skigersta, Post Of Ness, Isle of Lewis HS2 0TQ.

Walks from the Gatliff Hostel at Reinigeadal by Neil Pinkett

Single copy: £2.50 Three copies: £6.00 Six copies: £10.00

Postage included, but copies will not be delivered until August

Cheques, payable to GHHT, to be sent to the Editor

The Visiting of the 6000

The full tabulation of hostel overnight figures for the last eight years is published in the accompanying issue of the Crofters' Newsletter. The gratifying aspect is that 2004 saw the second highest figures in our history, just below the 2003 record. Once again, for the fifth consecutive year, the alphabetical and numerical sequences were in line – with Berneray recording 1896; Garenin 1631; Howmore 1561; Rhenigidale 956. This gives a total of 6044 compared with last year's 6097. It would be good to see the 2005 figures reveal that over 2000 had stayed at Berneray and over 1000 at Rhenigidale. Do encourage friends to go and, perhaps, to express an element of their appreciation by joining the GHHT.

Thermal Attractions

Seasoned visitors to the Gatliff Hostels have their favourites. Some, particularly pioneers, prefer the rigours of Rhenigidale; the proximity of sand and sea makes Berneray the chosen place of accommodation for many; Howmore has followers who feel that the dormitory next to the cosy kitchen and dining room has virtually an en suite facility. One experienced hosteller did not rate Garenin in his 'top-three' until a visit during a cold May weekend. Suddenly the most recent of the hostels became his favourite and the reason was that most endearing of features, warmth.

The thermal-heating, grant-aided scheme constructed by Lewis Builders of Stornoway, and finished early this year, has led to boreholes plunging 75 metres into the solid Lewis gneiss and bringing inexpensive heating to the blackhouse village settlement, in general, and to the hostel in particular.

The drystone masonry and thatched roofing of the housing maintain the archaic look, but the heat-exchanger in one of the buildings provides underfloor heating and hot-water for radiators without spoiling appearances and without adding CO2 emissions to the pure air that blows straight off the Atlantic, only a matter of some 50 yards away.

So it's Rhenigidale for 'remoteness', Berneray for 'setting', Howmore for 'services and transport', and Garenin for 'creature comforts' at least according to one observer.

Unaccustomed As We Are

New legislation regarding Health & Safety provides ever deeper levels of bureaucratic intervention into the running of organisations throughout Europe. A vital issue raised concerns the risk factors that human beings are allowed to take in what has become an 'over-protection racket'. The Gatliff hostels are not a special case, but do involve areas of particular concern. One is about the lighting and maintenance of fires as well as cooking by gas. Generations have now grown up and matured without much, if any, experience of these devices for heating bodies, buildings and food. Vigilance and attention to detail are key factors in using equipment that demand rituals to which many are unaccustomed.

From the *Hebridean Hostellers* Issue of Ten Years Ago

Barra Hostel: 'We have now raised £23,000 from charitable donations towards the cost of the hostel and seek a further £12,000. The site chosen is that of a redundant school which has an ideal layout for a hostel and will provide the much needed southern link in the GHHT chain of hostels.' 'Comhairle Nan Eilean have agreed to accept an offer of £25,000 immediately – the balance to be paid over a period once the hostel is open.'

(Editor: Jim McFarlane)

..... and of Fifteen Years Ago

Bill Johnston writes: 'After six days at Berneray, which included the Official Re-opening, I left the Island on a misty morning heading for Harris. At sea, it was quite foggy and the whole journey was navigated by radar. In fact there was a diversion when the boat had to locate another island and take on board a man and woman who were stranded due to the fog. After the misty morning on land, the rest of the day turned out quite beautiful and instead of taking the shorter more difficult route via Rodel I took the flatter western route and made relatively good progress. I found the turn off to Stockinish alright and a downhill run through a lunar landscape. There was another signpost to the left, but I was so preoccupied trying to make sure that I did not run off this road that I missed it. When I arrived at a former tweed factory, now a fish hatchery of some sort, I had to turn back and eventually found my way to Stockinish. I was told that a small party had been turned away because of no vacancies, but as an individual I managed to squeeze in. The cycle shed at the Hostel was roofless as a gale had stripped it in February.'

'The road to Rhenigidale opened on 20 February 1990' (Editor: Richard Genner)

[Some things change – the ferry from Berneray to Leverburgh is now too large to stop at an islet; cloth factories become fisheries; the SYHA at Stockinish has closed; a new road opens. Some aspects remain: Winter gales. (Present Editor)]

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Birds of a Feather

All types of people migrate to the Gatliff Hostels, for a variety of reasons. Among them are ornithologists, those with a scientific, academic interest in birds; bird-watchers (known as 'birders') who like and enjoy studying what they see; and 'twitchers' who take particular pleasure in collecting the sightings of different varieties of birds.

The current leading British 'twitcher' has logged around 530 different species of birds, but would not choose to live in the Outer Hebrides to fulfil his mission. In fact, he spent formative years perfecting his craft by living close to Heathrow Airport in order to answer the call of the bleeper that directed him to various parts of the UK.

However, the Western Isles are stimulating places for bird-watchers and our hostels are situated on well-used flight-paths and near nesting-grounds. A half-dozen pairs of White-tailed (Sea) Eagles are breeding, particularly on Mull, but it's worth watching for a number of non-breeding Sea Eagles in the South Lewis and North Harris areas.

The Eishken Estate, to the north of Loch Seaforth, and the areas around Rhenigidale on North Harris are also heavily populated by Golden Eagles. In fact Eishken has the highest density of pairs in the world while a large area of North Harris is designated by the European Union for its exceptional numbers of 'Goldies'. By late Summer, youngsters should be flying, giving some of the best chances of seeing these birds in Scotland. So keep your eyes peeled skywards and enjoy the breath-taking sight of eagles on the wing.

Summer 2003 saw an immature male Snowy Owl (pictured above) summer on North Uist, near the RSPB reserve at Balranald. It proved a huge draw for tourists and locals alike and it seemed to be a 'once in a lifetime chance' to catch up with one of these stunning birds in Britain. However this Spring there were three sightings! These birds have resided near Malaclete on North Uist and Balgarva in South Uist, not far from Howmore.

Hostel visitors may well be interested in the main avian residents – with the Twite, Merlin and Corncrake at Garenin; the Twite, Merlin and Red-throated Diver at Rhenigidale; the Arctic Tern, Little Tern, Corn Bunting and Corncrake at Berneray; and the Corn Bunting, Corncrake, Hen Harrier, and machair waders such as Dunlin, Snipe and Redshank breeding at the highest densities in Europe, all near Howmore.

Much information here has been provided by Martin Scott, the RSPB's Conservation Officer for the Western Isles. He certainly keeps his eye on research, his binoculars on the sky and, possibly, his finger on the bleeper for all manner of people interested in birds.

