

Hebridean Hostellers

Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust

www.gatliff.org.uk

Newsletter 41

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A view of the Sound of Harris, from a few yards north of the Gatliff Hostel on Berneray, captured by photographer, Charles Twist.

The Mind Behind the Lens

The new-style cover of this issue of *Hebridean Hostellers* was partly prompted by the dimensions of the photograph taken close to the Berneray Hostel by the Middlesborough-based photographer, Charles Twist. He is not a professional, in the employment sense, but the standards of his work are comparable to those of anyone who has looked through their camera lens at the forms, colours and textures of the Islands. He is a scientist by training, a biologist in speciality, is employed by a micro-engineering company and appreciates, in particular, the colours and wave-lengths of light that are evident in both his work and pastime. He also indicates that 'photography is a hobby that has got out of hand.' Judge for yourselves by looking at his website www.chtwist.com and if you make contact with him, mention your Gatliff connection.

An Artist's Impression

The Cumbrian-based artist and sculptor, Martin Norris, was a visitor to Rhenigidale last May. He brought his kayak, ventured into Loch Seaforth and, as ever, was looking for inspiration for his work. His speciality concerns man and the natural environment, which is not surprising for a person who worked in the Lake District National Park for 23 years. However, his plans were affected by the weather. He had been exploring the desolate eastern shores of the loch, had climbed Beinn Mhor on the Eishen Estate, but was forced, by a change of wind direction, to take shelter by the uninhabited house at Kenmore. In effect he became trapped there and was conscious that his supplies of food were limited. Eventually he paddled down the loch, struggling against the currents especially as he had to contend with the tides of The Minch on rounding into the bay at Rhenigidale. While camping at Berneray he had been intrigued by the movements of a seal in the waters. Here, however, one of the more striking memories he retains is of 15-20 tyres that had been left on the summit of Beinn Mhor. Was it high-level dumping, a guide for helicopter navigation or a piece of art as a contender for the Turner Prize ?

Places to Stay: People to Meet

The readers of this publication are likely to be travellers who like distinctive accommodation. Our preferred choices, while away from the Islands, are probably the hostels of the YHA and SYHA. However, there are parts of the country where these have not been established or are closed for either the season or permanently. It would be good to have, appearing regularly in these columns, a series of recommendations provided by subscribers. Let us start with The Rondo Guest House at 62 Queen Street, Dumfries. Here Colin & Angela Green will make you welcome, comfortable and well-fed at a very reasonable price. If you call 01387 265501 or email vacancies@therondo.co.uk please mention your Gatliff connection.

From Father to Son

The late Len Westerdale was a great enthusiast for the Gatliff hostels and for their local traditions. His son, Edward, has inherited the symptoms and indicates that, in particular, he starts every year hoping to make it back to Berneray. He has lived in Germany for the past ten years and worked as a musician and translator. Last year he recorded an album of traditional and new Scottish music with, among others, the Edinburgh singer, Craig Herbertson.

The album was inspired by the story of the 'Sporting Battalion' led by Sir George McCrae in the First World War and the title song, *Hearts of Glory*, was premiered at the unveiling of the new memorial to them in Contalmaison, France, in November 2004. The single from the collection was a great success and reached the Top 20 in the BBC's Indie Charts. A donation of £1 is made to the Great Hearts War Memorial Fund for each single and album sold.

Ed has kindly offered to contribute a further £1 to the Gatliff Trust for each album sold as a result of this newsletter item. So please purchase directly from his website www.fiddle-and-feet.de. The secure PayPal system is in operation and pleasure, while not guaranteed, is highly probable.

Visit the Abandoned; Swell the Empty

Do take a trip, via the Internet, to Scotland's abandoned and sparsely-populated islands. By accessing www.lonely-isles.com you will look at the unexpected, learn much resourceful information and link with other relevant sources. The devisers, Paul Clements and Deena Mobbs, express a debt of gratitude to Hamish Haswell-Smith's outstanding book, *The Scottish Islands*.

The nearest featured isles to the Gatliff hostels are the abandoned ones of Scarp and Taransay, off Harris, and the Monachs, six miles to the west of North Uist. The last two became deserted in 1942; Scarp remained inhabited all-the-year round until 1971. Any loneliness experienced by island-watchers can be eliminated by the Forum on the lonely-isles site. Sign up ... now !

Incoming Treasurer in Profile

Few organisations have finances supervised by a person with such deep knowledge of their history, whose talents have been recognised at such high levels. Philip Lawson MBE joined the Board of the GHHT when it was formed in 1988. By then he had already been National Chairman of the SYHA for eight years and continued for a further thirteen. He is now its Honorary President. From 1990 to 2001 he was President of the European Union Federation of YHAs and from 1994 to 2002 a Board member and Vice-President of the International Youth Hostel Federation. He is a former Headmaster of a school in Linlithgow, a resident of Fife, a lifelong hillwalker, a Board member of the Scottish Rights of Way and Access Society and a Hebridean visitor of over 45 years standing. Credentials both copper-bottomed and of a gold-standard !

Another Voice

Matthew Parris, who writes the *Another Voice* column in *The Spectator*, described at length his mid-November visit to the Western Isles, in general and to Berneray, in particular.

'The bus met an efficient little ferry, which took us over the water the small island of Berneray, and a three-mile walk to a thatched crofter's hut converted for hikers to stay, unwardened but cosy within its impossibly thick stone walls, everything laid out to be paid for as used, reliant on honour. We walked the whole circumference of Berneray, about 15 miles, all along its huge, empty beaches, the mountains of other islands hanging above the watery horizon like frosted buns in the sky. We saw St Kilda in the distance, got back to our hut at dusk, drank two bottles of wine, played Monopoly, stood out under a clear, freezing, starry sky, and slept deeply.'

The columnist was sent details of the GHHT and a copy of *Walks Around the Gatliff Hostel at Reinigeadal* together with an invitation to return. Watch his space.

Safeguarding Public Access

The 2005 Annual Report of ScotWays, The Scottish Rights of Way and Access Society founded in 1845, indicates in both interesting and informative ways how public access continues to be safeguarded. The Catalogue of Rights of Way includes over 8000 routes and these are, where and when possible, surveyed.

Jim and Janet Clark record their adventures of looking at the mere 19 recorded routes in the Western Isles. These soon proved to be arduous and 'mere' needed to be replaced by 'mire'. Route W10 looks inviting on the map with its 10 km due north/south from Kilaulay to Howmore and, despite some obstacles, 'makes a scenic and exciting cycle ride.' [*Our new Treasurer, incidentally, is a member of the Executive Committee of this organisation.*]

Three Hundred for 2006

Numbers are creeping up and there is a chance that the bednight totals for 2005 will reach a record high. This rise in interest is replicated in the Membership of the Hebridean Hostellers. It now stands at 280 and another mailing is due this month to a further 275 people who signed in at the hostels *giving their full address*. The work of Judy Westerdale has been particularly helpful in this area for she has undertaken to collate all addresses with their correct postcodes. Delivery is therefore virtually guaranteed and duplication avoided. She has found the Royal Mail website at www.royalmail.com to be invaluable for her research. Judy is the widow of Len Westerdale and the Mother of Ed, the violinist who is featured in this issue of *Hebridean Hostellers*. She and her late husband were keen walkers on the Mainland, but she, wisely, left him to undertake the 60-mile-a-day cycle rides through the Western Isles by himself! A much-appreciated achievement will be for her to have helped us attain a membership base of 300 by early in 2006.

Timely and Timeless

Peter Clarke's *The Outer Hebrides The Timeless Way* reflects the landscape it describes by having that fine element of *strata*, readily identified levels of interest. Its style has both depth and detail. There are references to the underlying geological formations, to the historical perspectives, to recent and contemporary events, to the current sensations of walking paths, some of which are long forgotten, and, above all, to giving the reader a sense of being accompanied on an adventure.

This book, as the author explains, is not a compendium of knowledge, neither a guide-book nor a travelogue. It is, in effect, the account of a journey through which we are invited to share his experiences as a pilgrim in a distinctive area of the UK - 'where time can be made to stand still.' It's no coincidence that Peter is a Bedfordshire-born man, who has an affinity with John Bunyan and who gives a very real feeling of pilgrimage together with an abiding sense of progress.

It would certainly be a most progressive move by the powers-that-be to designate this series of paths as a Statutory Long Distance Route. It was a long journey and a circuitous one by the author - some 120 miles as the eagle flies from the Butt of Lewis to Vatersay; some 230 miles on foot. However, this Outer Hebridean Way reveals ancient embedded tracks, frontier conditions of moorland, treacherous stretches of tide-engulfed paths and remarkable features from end-to-end.

Insights and revelations are not unusual in books on travel, but here we are, in certain ways, close to uncharted territories. The Bridge to Nowhere, the Pentland Road, the Morsgail Forest to Kinlochresort, the Rhenigidale Postman's Path, the Golden Road, the Berneray Circuit, the Ardheisker Causeway, and many other such places, have never been written about before in this illuminating way. Go there for yourselves with a copy of this book, but have your OS maps ready for reference, not rescue, purposes !

The Outer Hebrides The Timeless Way

by Peter Clarke

£9.99 (plus £1.00 postage per copy) direct from the Publishers

Cheques payable to Northampton Square Ltd 26 Lewis Street
Stornoway Isle of Lewis HS1 2JF

Via booksellers at £9.99 - ISBN 0-9550696-0-2

Expansive and Enlightening

The Islands Book Trust has seen a busy 2005, with a range of new publications, successful lectures and visits, a well-attended conference to mark the 75th Anniversary of the Evacuation of St Kilda, and the continued flourishing of the Angus Macleod Archive at Kershader.

The 2006 plans are ambitious with a summer conference planned to take place (22-25 July) in Benbecula on the subject of Alexander Carmichael, the great collector of Gaelic folklore. Berneray will be the starting point (1 July) for a boat trip to Pabbay in the Sound of Harris, while Barra will be the place of embarkation (10 June) for an informative visit to Mingulay and the other Pabbay. Plans are also advanced for a Hebridean Book Festival.

To join the Trust or to find out more either access www.theislandsbooktrust.com or telephone 01851 810681. This is an organisation that is endeavouring to offer opportunities for involvement from Ness on Lewis to Mingulay at the southern end of the island chain. Its purpose is to enlighten and examine many aspects of life – historical and contemporary, social and natural, literary and linguistic. *[The Gatliff Trust recently gave the Islands Book Trust a grant of £500 to help fund, among other initiatives, the programme of meetings in the Southern Isles.]*

Website Watch

The Gatliff Hostels website – www.gatliff.org.uk – has been renovated, thanks to the efforts of Hugh Lorimer. It is now ready not only for the New Year, but for the new holiday-planning season. In 2005 an average of 14 visitors per day clicked on and looked at the features of the hostels from the comfort of their homes or offices. Understandably the highest monthly total of visitors was in July with 922 and yet the lowest, in November, was still an admirable 404.

Mondays attract the most and then decline slowly as the week proceeds. The popular log-in hour is after 1.00 pm, with 9.00 pm just behind and 4.00 pm a close third. The hour after 3.00 am has still attracted some 124 visitors during the course of the year. Most people log straight onto the website and some 5% come to us from search-engines, 95% of which are directed by Google.

The most popular continental European country of origin is Germany. A number of unexpected nations appear to have residents who, at least, know something about the Gatliff Hostels. They include Georgia, Peru, Yemen, Cameroon, China and the Faroe Islands. There is a large contingent of Gatliff watchers in the USA and, perhaps, this was why the highest number of visitors – 50 in all – appeared on 4 July 2005. Did many want to get away from their Independence Day celebrations and become independent travellers in far-flung islands ?

Publications that Carry Us

Advertising the Gatliff Hostels tends to be by word-of-mouth and Internet-interest. Two recommended publications that carry our paid-for advertisements are YHA's *Triangle* and SYHA's *The Scottish Hosteller*. Look for us ... and pass on your copies.

From the *Hebridean Hostellers* Issue of Ten Years Ago

'Garenin: Apologies to any hostellers who have used this hostel since the summer. It was belatedly drawn to our attention that the stove has been virtually out of commission since then, due to misuse. An entire new stove has had to be built specially for us. It will include a small oven and the manufacturers have said we can cook pancakes on top !' (Editor: Jim McFarlane) [*Consider the thermal attractions of today*]

and of Fifteen Years Ago

'The Sunday sailings to the Western Isles have been in operation between Uig on Skye and Lochmaddy on North Uist for the past two summers and have been commercially successful, according to the operators, Caledonian MacBrayne. This year's summer timetable includes sailings to Tarbert, but these have recently been suspended by the CalMac Board, presumably because the company has not been able to reach agreement with island representatives on the sensitive issue of breaking the Sabbath. Future aspirations for Sunday sailings on the Ullapool - Stornoway route have also been put on ice.' (Editor: Richard Genner) [*Some things still remain unchanged*]

and Twenty

'Few crofters now live in the traditional thatched cottages, though many can still be seen used as stores or byres for livestock. Consequently the number of people able to thatch with bent or heather has declined, making it difficult for owners to maintain the thatch on their cottages. Thatching involves the cutting, pulling and thatching with marram bent, and the cutting of special sods of turf for use as an underlay. If you are planning a holiday in the Outer Hebrides, there could be an opportunity to help on the croft.' [*We are still waiting for a thatcher wanting a busman's holiday !*]

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Garenin	–	Lewis
Rhenigidale	–	North Harris
Berneray	–	North Uist
Howmore	–	South Uist



Fifteen at the Forum

A casual observer at the Members' Forum held in the Lee Valley Youth Hostel, Cheshunt, on the last Saturday of November would have noted 13 people present. They discussed a wide range of subjects relating to the relatively narrow issue of the running of the Gatliff Hostels. However, Ian and Susan McManus, who were unable to attend, contributed purposefully by email.

They referred to a stay of several days at Berneray and Howmore earlier this year where they experienced the usual magic, of mixing with like-minded people of different ages and from various backgrounds. Their photograph of supper-time certainly reflects this camaraderie, so often experienced in the small hostels.



Their comment about too many people hurrying through the islands, regretting travel plans that force them to rush on, led to a question – 'How do you slow down these travellers?' They suggested that the emphasis in the flyer, the *Simple Hostels in the Outer Hebrides*, should focus more on the special nature of the hostels and of their environment. A re-write is planned.

Another aspect they raised was that the leaflets inviting membership of the GHHT were not evident in the hostels. Again a new plan is in hand, but would existing members who feel that they could recruit a 'fellow-traveller' with a Gatliff outlook, please request some forms from the Editor. Our membership figures are a barometer of interest. Let's raise the pressure!

Ultimate Matters

The Butt of Lewis is no joke. It is the buttress of one significant section of the United Kingdom, features as a Coastal Station on the BBC Shipping Forecast and is visited by a constant stream of travellers. If ever there were to be a fifth Gatliff Hostel, there would be considerable interest in some quarters for its relatively close proximity to this ultimate point of land, where the lighthouse appears to command the waters of the Atlantic and survey those of the distant Arctic.

