

Hebridean Hostellers

Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust

www.gatliff.org.uk

Newsletter 43

January 2007



The Berneray Hostel, photographed here by Paula Walker, opened 30 years ago on 16 April 1977. Three days later Herbert Gatliff, the visionary founder of the hostels that bear his name, died, aged 78.

Events for Three Seasons

The Islands Book Trust has a full programme of events outlined for the Winter, Spring and Summer of 2007. In 2006 the Gatliff Trust donated £500 to the IBT 'to uphold the traditions maintained by Herbert Gatliff involving discovery about and commitment to the Islands'. The topics covered show our common interests.

The Gearrannan Blackhouse Village, Lewis, is the appropriate venue for the first session of the year when, on Tuesday 23 January at 7.30 pm, **John Randall**, the IBT's Chairman, gives a talk entitled ***Introduction to the Islands Book Trust and the Angus Macleod Archive***. Go to the distant setting of 10 Callicvol, Ness, Lewis, on Tuesday 13 February at 7.30 pm for an illustrated lecture on that most distant settlement ***Tristan da Cunha***, by **Paul Tyler**, who has recently lived on this island.

Thursday 8 March at 7.30 pm at An Lanntair, Stornoway, is the time for ***Breaking Down Barriers***. These will be reflections on the history and future of the Western Isles by **Lesley Riddoch**, the well-known broadcaster, who never takes an uncritical view and who interviewed the Editor of this publication at the Berneray hostel for her Radio Scotland series last Autumn. Also at An Lanntair, but at 8.00 pm on Tuesday 17 April, **Sandy Matheson** will address the topic of ***The Role of Stornoway in the History of Lewis***.

From the evening of Friday 4 and onto Saturday 5 May, there will be sessions at Sabhal Mor Ostaig, Skye examining the ***Links between Skye and the Outer Hebrides***. Speakers include **Donald William Stewart**, **Bill Lawson**, **Roger Hutchinson**, **Aonghas MacCoinnich**, and **Iain Mac an Tàillear**. On Saturday 19 May at 10.30 am there will be a talk by **Bill Lawson** at Tarbert, Harris, on ***Taransay***, followed by a boat trip to that island.

Another two-day event, on Friday 8 and Saturday 9 June, will take place in Castlebay, Barra, on ***Vatersay, Pabbay and Mingulay*** when talks by **Ben Buxton** and **Calum Macneil** will mark the centenary of Vatersay raids, followed by a visit to Vatersay and boat trips to Pabbay and Mingulay. Saturday 30 June, 10.30 am, Lemreway, Lewis sees a return to ***The Shiants*** and talks by **Adam Nicolson and his son**, followed by boat trip to their islands.

On Saturday 14 July, 2.00 pm, The Old School, Shawbost, Lewis, **Finlay Macleod** will examine ***The Norse Mills and Kilns of Lewis*** before leading a visit to Shawbost Norse Mill. Then on Saturday 28 July, 10.30 am, at the Community Hall, Berneray, **Bill Lawson** will give a talk on ***Pabbay*** before taking his audience to the island.

A three-day conference will take place from Thursday 16 - Saturday 18 August, at Tarbert, Harris on ***Whaling and the Hebrides***. There will be contributions from people from the Western Isles who were whalers, speakers about the Harris whaling station and other whaling-activity around the Hebrides, including the Faroes.

Legacy

For many years Derek Baker, of Paddlesack Way, Frome, Wiltshire, was involved with the work of the YHA (England & Wales). However, he had a particular affinity with the Gatliff hostels and, following his death last Summer, left the GHHT a legacy of £5,000. This is much appreciated and will be used to further the cause our hostels.

Wildness, Winds and Weathering

There's a price to pay for everything. Our hostels may look safe and secure havens in remote and often wild places. They appear to have stood the test of time. Yet the battering that they take from the elements puts pressure on their construction and on our costs.

The Autumn conditions in the south of the UK in 2006 were memorably benign. The weather in the north-west was remarkably persistent, for it included over 40 consecutive days during which heavy rain and strong winds were evident.

Work-parties in different locations, led by Meg Richards and Alan Sidaway, helped preserve fabric, renew facilities and provide new features. Much depends on this much-appreciated voluntary commitment. However, the conditions of three roofs on four of our hostels gives cause for concern and will involve considerable capital expenditure in the near future.

Providing Information; Arousing Interest

Most advertising is probably a waste of money, but no one ever knows which part is useless ! There was a time when advertisements for the Gatliff hostels were displayed on the appropriate CalMac ferries. However, it has become evident that most of our visitors do their research for hostel accommodation before they begin their journeys, probably on the Internet.

So the budget for marketing is being spent in different ways. Some publications that appeal to prospective hostellers carry information about us. The SYHA's *Hostel Guide*, the *Scottish Hosteller*, YHA's *Triangle* and the *Walking Guide* published by Pro Sports Promotions certainly attract the attention of that niche market of enthusiasts for alternative accommodation.

If readers are aware of publications that impress – with good editorial, attractive design and an appeal to the typical Gatliff-user – send the Editor of *Hebridean Hostellers* an email or, better still, a sample copy with details of a contact who can arrange a discount for 'fellow-travellers' such as ourselves, wishing to encourage those who will be stimulated by what we offer.

Buyout

St Andrew's Day 2006 brought both strong winds to South Uist and much celebrating. In a £4.5 million deal, a 92,000 acre estate, owned by a sporting syndicate, was sold on that day to the islanders of South Uist, Eriskay and Benbecula. This includes the land on which the Howmore hostel stands. The buyout group, Storas Uibhist (Gaelic for the store or wealth of Uist), looks forward to providing more affordable housing, renewable energy schemes, the transformation of Lochboisdale, drainage and coastal management, and the restoration of the Askernish golf course that was designed by the legendary player, Old Tom Morris, in 1892. News of the proposed buyout of the Galson Estate, on the North-west coast of Lewis, is due early in 2007.

Chairmen of the Gatliff Trust

Frank Martin has been forced by ill-health to step down as Chairman of the Gatliff Trust, the organisation that continues to work for the principles of its founder, Herbert Gatliff. It has, among many charitable projects, supported the small hostels in the UK, encouraged young people to experience and appreciate the countryside and, of course, created the Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust which maintains and promotes the crofters' hostels.

Frank had until last November's AGM been Chairman for 30 years, a longer period than that of Herbert Gatliff himself. From his home in Clifton, Bristol, he presided over a period of stability and development. His contributions have been enormous and sustained. He is now succeeded as Chairman by Peter Clarke, the GHHT's former Secretary and current Vice-Chair as well as Membership Secretary.

World Wide Indeed

The Gatliff website attracts attention from throughout the World. By mid-December over 10000 visits had been made during 2006 to the pages that present information, guidance, sights and opinions. New facilities that have recently come on line are the Forum - with almost 70 contributions made by a variety of people - and the Gallery - where motivation and memories are aroused by splendid views of the areas in the vicinity of the hostels.

Most of the leads – some 97% - come directly from people who have the website details already. 3% are the result of search-engine enquiries. Of these over 96% are the result of Google searches. The overwhelmingly popular operating system of enquirers is Windows with 92%, Mac with 6% and Others with 2%. The principality of Liechtenstein has provided one enquiry; Ethiopia another and there has been one visit from the whole of South America, from Chile. The busiest day was 9 January 2006 when 83 people logged and this coincided with the distribution of Hebridean Hostellers. Thanks for looking !

From Survey to Reality

Robert Hanna of the Isle of Harris Landscape Partnership Scheme has undertaken a survey that he hopes will attract up to £2 million from the Heritage Lottery Fund for schemes promoting tourism. He is grateful to the part played by those connected with the Gatliff hostels for their contributions. Almost 300 returns were made and a number of myths about holidaying patterns were challenged. The main age-group of visitors was not, as sometimes perceived, the older generation, but the Under 35s; 10% of tourists came from the USA; 17% used bunkhouses for their major holiday; 18% came on day-trips from Lewis or Skye; 73% claimed that low-level walking was their main activity. Several schemes will be considered for an appealing project - such as a 35-mile designated walk from the independent hostel at Leverburgh to Rhenigidale.

In Praise ... of Scottish Islands

This Leader in *The Guardian* of Saturday 11 November 2006 emphasised the appeal of islands, put the Hebrides into perspective and focused on a favourite Gatliff hostel.

'The seas around Scotland contain at least 300 islands (almost 100 of them inhabited), not including Skye, which lost its status after being pinned to the mainland by a concrete bridge. Most of them are remote, almost all of them are beautiful and together they make up the most extraordinary part of Britain, under-appreciated by travellers happy to fly around the world to find adventure but put off island travel by the fear of midges, mists and rough seas.

This month has been good to the islands, with lottery money helping residents of Benbecula, South Uist and Eriskay buy their estate and Canna, closer to the mainland in the Small Isles, choosing a shortlist after advertising for new residents. Scotland's islands are diverse, culturally and geographically, but they share a sense of fortitude. Whether landing in a small plane on Barra's cockle beach (British Airways flights splash down on a schedule set by the tide) or jumping ashore on Foula, Britain's most remote inhabited spot, walled in by cliffs 15 miles west of Shetland, islands are different from the rest of Britain.

Foula still sticks to the Julian calendar and celebrates Christmas on January 6. Its inhabitants were the last to speak Norn, a form of old Norse which died out around 1800. Throughout the Western Isles thousands still use Gaelic. No island can be singled out as the best: but Berneray, near North Uist, with its white-sand beach and simple thatched hostel by the sea, surely cannot be beaten as a place to sample island life.'

The Outer Hebrides The Timeless Way

by Peter Clarke

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

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

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

'Taking this walk with Peter Clarke is both refreshing and revealing. Its Outer Hebridean setting provides a small world – a real microcosm – as well as a larger landscape against which man has striven to survive and succeed. It also tells the story of how one man has tracked his experiences of a place of destiny through four decades, in three dimensions, on two feet and with a singular sense of purpose.' [From the review in *Scottish Islands Explorer*]

The Road to Rhenigidale

Niche-market magazines proliferate with the technical digital advances and shorter, but economical, print-runs. *Scottish Islands Explorer* appeals to the many enthusiasts who regard islands as sources of interest. Appropriately enough this publication is produced on Fair Isle, between the Orkneys and Shetlands. Ironically it is distributed from almost as far away as possible, Rye, in East Sussex.

The current issue - January / February 2007 - contains an article by someone whose curiosity about the Western Isles was aroused at Rhenigidale in the Summer of 1974 when he joined a camp promoted by the now-defunct Schools' Hebridean Society. The writer is Ben Buxton, an authority on, among other places, Mingulay and Pabbay, to the south of Barra.

Ben considers Rhenigidale as 'The Village That Refused To Die' and gives a vivid introduction to the routes that while now optional were once, before the coming of the road, obligatory. He draws attention to that paradoxical effect - 'While isolation drew the visitors, the residents were trying to escape from it' - and to the rigours of life - 'To live in such a place was tough'.

The population in 1925 was about 100 and they looked back to their ancestors having been evicted over a hundred years previously from the other side of Loch Shiphoirt and from the island of Taransay. Fishing was their mainstay, but they realised in the 1930s that vehicular access was vital. The remote communities on the east coast of South Harris had been linked then; nearby Maraig in the early 50s.

In 1957 an appeal was made by the then local authority, Inverness County Council, for government funds. Things moved slowly and in 1974 a plan was formulated for the creation of a Landrover track. European Union funding was eventually secured for the construction of the four-mile road, started in 1985 and finished four years later.

The rest is not history, it's development. The village school had declined to the lowest of figures - one - and this statistic was represented by a boy taught by his Mother. Now there are five pupils who are bussed into Tarbert and the former village-school is used as self-catering holiday accommodation. Families have moved in and the community-owned North Harris Estate has come into being.

Ben Buxton concludes with a timely reminder that the ruined village of Molineanais, across Loch Trolamaraig and deserted in 1966, could well signify what would have happened to Rhenigidale without a road. Access would still have been only by path or water and that does not have appear to have an appeal to permanent residents of the 21st Century.

Scottish Islands Explorer

01595 693380

www.scottishislandsexplorer.com

From the *Hebridean Hostellers* Issue of Ten Years Ago

'Neil Pinkett, one of our regular hostellers, has been commissioned by the Chairman to write a booklet of walks around and from the Rhenigidale hostel. This will hopefully be published some time this year and will prove invaluable to first-time hostellers and regular visitors alike.' (Editor: Jim McFarlane) *[The booklet continues to sell and be much appreciated. Copies are £3.00, including post, from the current Editor]*

and of Fifteen Years Ago

Peter Clarke writes: 'One sage advises, "The Outer Hebrides are a drug to be avoided at all costs, since addiction is bound to follow." How true; most of us are hardened addicts! After three visits to the islands this Spring, and two more planned for later this year, I am glad I was unaware of that advice in 1973 when, by chance I made my first visit to Rhenigidale. I plunged into the world of the Gatliff hostels and, I am pleased to report, it changed my life.' (Editor: Richard Genner) *[This was the beginning of Peter's long interest in the Island's that have culminated in the recent publication of his book, The Timeless Way]*

and Twenty

The travel writer, Bettina Selby, attended a ceilidh on Berneray while researching a book and wrote: 'The previous evening had been marvellous. The light in the western sky was quite astonishing, long after the sun had set in a riot of yellow and orange hues. I can only describe it as the most unearthly sort of light I have ever seen. At 1.00 am, the after-glow was still lighting up the western sky, quite overpowering the half-moon and stars of the eastern sky – it was very difficult to tear myself away and go to bed.' (Editor: Francesca Fraser Darling) *[The Hebridean light and colours remain both appealing and compelling.]*

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



A Star for the Gatliff Hostels?



Jay Kay is not a happy pop star. At 36, the lead singer of Jamiroquai has millions in the bank, a vast house in Berkshire and a garage full of vintage cars. But all he longs for is some peace and quiet. "I managed to snatch ten days in Scotland recently," he told Dan Gennoe in *The Mail on Sunday*. "I've got an old crofter's lodge on the coast, in the middle of nowhere. Great views of the Isle of Skye. And I didn't want to come back, I really didn't. I just thought, I'm happy here. Do I need to be famous? Do I? There are more wholesome and substantial things to do with your life than be stuck in the corner of a room with people crowding round taking photos of you on their mobile phones. I really would rather be on a cold mountainside in Scotland." The only thing better than staying in the crofter's lodge, in fact, is staying in a tent.

"Camping rocks," he grins. "I love it because your day is really all about the simple things: preparing food, going for walks, washing your face in streams, poring over Ordnance Survey maps, going to bed when the sun goes down and getting up at dawn. It's brilliant. Life's so simple. It's the only time I feel like I've got any real control." There's just one problem: "It's not easy to find people to go camping with," he admits. "My friends are like, 'Camping? In Scotland? In October? Forget it.'" [Reproduced from *The Week*]

Dreams in Ruins

It was 15 years ago, during the Summer of '92, that the wardens of the Gatliff Hostel at Claddach Baleshare, Tommy and Catrina Tosh, welcomed their last visitors. The hostel closed in 1993 and, yet, it still arouses memories, stimulates interest and attracts sightseers. One of them, Tom Humphries, is pictured here on the ruined roof, enjoying the afternoon sunshine in a setting which is both desirable and ... dangerous.

