

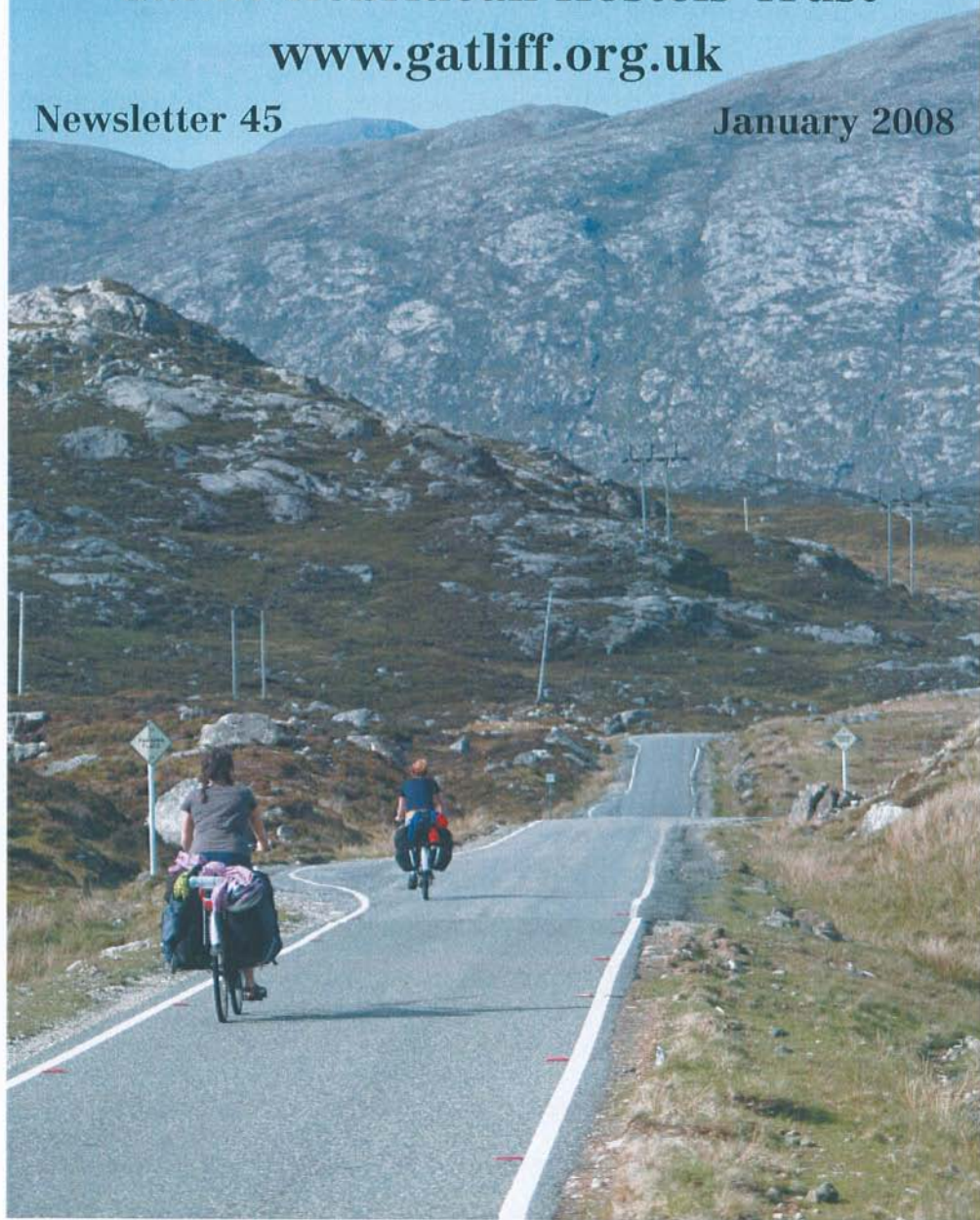
# *Hebridean Hostellers*

Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust

[www.gatliff.org.uk](http://www.gatliff.org.uk)

Newsletter 45

January 2008



En route to Rhenigidale

## North Atlantic Treats Organised

The Islands Book Trust – [www.theislandsbooktrust.com](http://www.theislandsbooktrust.com) – has once again devised an innovative series of lectures and outings. Make a note of them and plan ahead.

On Tuesday 22 January at 7.30 pm at An Lanntair in Stornoway, Peter Cunningham will present photographic material from the collection of **Dr Macdonald of Gislea**. This is an outstanding opportunity to see the unique collection of old slides of the islands taken the late 'Dolly Doctor'.

From Wednesday 23 – Thursday 31 July there will be a visit to the **Faroe Islands**. This will be by boat from Scrabster to Torshavn and return. The draft itinerary takes in the celebrations to mark the Faeroes National Day, visits to Mykines, the Vestmanna bird-cliffs and some of the northern islands. The guideline price (excluding lunches) is £900 per person and priority will be given to IBT members. For full details contact Alayne Barton on 01851 820946 or by [alayne@theislandsbooktrust.com](mailto:alayne@theislandsbooktrust.com)

A three-day conference on the theme, **The Hebridean Contribution to UK Military History**, will take place at The Old School in Shawbost on Lewis from Monday 11 - Wednesday 13 August. Speakers will include Mike Hughes, author of *The Hebrides at War*.

The popular programme of Saturday boat trips to off-shore islands continues with **Taransay**, featured in the television series, on 24 May; the **Shiants**, a home of the Nicolson family and the inspiration for Adam Nicolson's *Sea Room*, on 21 June; and **Little Bernera**, nestling close to Great Bernera at the meeting point of the East and West sections of Loch Roag, on 19 July.

## First View, Then Explore

The photograph on the back cover is an aerial view of Rhenigidale and was taken by John Sharkey, of Highland Airways. When John, to whom we are most grateful, worked in the Education Department of Comhairle nan Eilean Siar he took photographs of all schools in the Western Isles and these are featured on [www.cne-siar.gov.uk](http://www.cne-siar.gov.uk). Were the single-teacher school in the village still to be in use, it would be the white building to the bottom left. This view is a reminder that remote places inspire stories and have histories as well as geographical features to explore.

### ***Walks from the Gatliff Hostel at Reinigeadal***

by Neil Pinkett

Single copy: £3.00    Three copies: £6.00    Six copies: £10.00

Postage included and cheques, payable to GHHT, to be sent to the Editor



## Change of Wardens

Alasdair Mackay has been an effective and popular warden at Rhenigidale since 1993. Hostellers speak with affection of his welcoming and informative ways. He decided to retire from the end of 2007, but he will not be out-of-touch with what is the first of Herbert Gatliff's hostels, created in 1962, for his wife will be taking over his duties.

Catherine Mackay's personal connections with the settlement at Rhenigidale go as far back as possible, for she was born there. Her uncle, Roddy MacInnes, owned the house that became the hostel. Her work took her to the Mathematics Department of a secondary school in South Queensferry, on the Firth of Forth, and, subsequently, as a teacher of Gaelic to the school in Tarbert, across the hills from her home.

Colin Macleod completed five years as warden at Garenin and helped create a place of special appeal. Many hostellers were delighted to talk to him on their first night at the hostel and then to find themselves, the following day, being shown the intricacies of Harris tweed looms in his weaving shed. His place has been taken by Andy Stopforth, who has also endeared himself to hostellers by running the highly-acclaimed Blackhouse Café and Restaurant.

## Working Out

The Gatliff hostels take a beating – particularly from the outside forces of wind and rain as well as the interior wear and tear caused by increasing numbers of visitors. There have been hold-ups in getting things done, but the re-felting and re-battening of the roofs at Berneray, together with the installation of new hot-water and shower systems as well as the fitting of a new stove are near to completion. The roof repairs and the installation of an electric cooker at Rhenigidale are completed.

## Gourmet Gatliff

The Gatliff Trust will be presenting a cash prize for the best meal to be produced on the cooking facilities at the hostels. The ways of entering and being judged in this competition will appear on hostel notice-boards. Calculate, cook, capture with camera ... and consume!

## From Passive to Active

We are looking for individuals who have the abilities and time to keep Herbert Gatliff's vision of a chain of crofters' hostels operating successfully. Increasingly the building projects as well as the maintenance of the fabric are undertaken by professionals. Yet there is much to do to promote the present, and secure the future, of this charity of conservation and accommodation.

Please either contact one of us listed in the Address section or come along to the Members' Forum to be held from 10.30 on Saturday 19 January 2008 at the Holland Park Youth Hostel in Kensington, London. Your involvement as one of the 300 members is appreciated; your commitment with personal and professional skills could assist us greatly.

### ***Planning to Visit the Outer Hebrides this Year?***

Please contact [peter@peterclarke.com](mailto:peter@peterclarke.com) as we are looking for hostellers to help the GHHT with its work in the islands

## Views in All Directions

Our Honorary Treasurer, Philip Lawson MBE, has three favourite vantage points in the Outer Hebrides. Ceapabhal, at the south-west tip of South Harris, is almost a high island in itself. The Scarasta sands and a strip of machair have to be crossed before climbing through heather and boulders to a grassy summit. Here is a fine viewpoint that has been enjoyed for centuries, certainly by those using the now ruined chapel.

Rub Aird Mhicheil is a promontory on the Atlantic shore, some two-and-half miles from Howmore on South Uist. Boulders, not sand, feature here, a fine place from which to observe Ben More and Hecla. The third place he recommends is the Rhenigidale path from the once cut-off village to the Tarbert – Scalpay road. Here many still tread in the footsteps of those who were compelled to take this route.

## The Mines of Berneray

One of the UK's rarest bees has established a stronghold in the sandy banks and dunes on Berneray. More than ten colonies of northern colletes or mining bees have been found on the island in, what is, the most northerly site in this country of the threatened species.

Northern colletes is a solitary variety and burrows underground into soft soil to build a nest to store nectar and pollen for its larvae. They differ from honey bees in having no workers and not co-operating with one another. This is, perhaps, a reason for their being a struggling and rare species.

## The Bunk Stops Here

Dixe Wells, a freelance writer, visited the Gatliff hostels for the Travel Section of *The Guardian*. This led to a full-page feature in the newspaper on Saturday 11 August and to a flurry of interest, evident on our website. She opened her account with – 'English hostels may be going soft with posh food and ensuites, but in the Hebrides bunkhouses are as no nonsense as ever.'

Her findings were sympathetic and stimulating. She saw us as trend-bucking, with a 50% increase in visitors since 2000; as providing facilities for like-minded travellers, many of whom were larger-than-life; as places for sharing, countless examples of small kindnesses and the lost art of conversing. Go to the newsfeed on our website, link and read Dixe's observations in full.

## No Change to Charges

There is the official Rate of Inflation, often proclaimed as an attractive statistic, and there is the actual increase in prices, which seem to have a slightly higher ring to them! The Executive Committee of the GHHT has decided that the 2008 charges for using the hostels will remain the same as for 2007. So £9 for over 18s, £6 for under 18s, and £5 per person for camping, continue.



## In the Company of 'Blue Men'

Rhodri Evans is the Countryside Access Manager for Comhairle nan Siar (Western Isles Council) and the John Muir Trust *Journal* published this account under the title *Rhodri Evans' Track Record*:

'The tiny village of Reinigeadal in North Harris was only accessible by sea or on foot by a rough upland path until the late 1980s when an asphalt road connected it to the rest of Harris.

The historic path between Reinigedal and Urgha, East of Tarbert, is now one of Harris's most popular routes for mountain bikers and walkers, many of whom stay at the Gatliff Trust Hostel at Reinigeadal. The track often features in the annual Hebridean Challenge Endurance race.

A beautifully hand-crafted path over challenging moorland and coastal terrain, it was probably built over a number of years during the 19th century. It crawls through the mountain beauty of North Harris, rising from the Tarbert-Scalpay road, over the bealach between Trollamul and Beinn Tarsuinn at 280 metres above sea level, then plunging 170 metres down the Sgriob (meaning to scrape, drag) into the bay of Trollamaraig. Often the only company here is that of the 'blue men' of the Minch – the seals that shelter in the bay.

In 2006 the footpath was surveyed in detail and damaged areas requiring urgent attention were identified. Traditional stone construction techniques are being used in repairs. Collapsed culverts, cross drains, water bars, revetments and stone pitching features are being rebuilt, while hand drainage and light touch landscaping will ensure minimal impact to the sensitive site and environs.

If you are looking to walk all day and often see no one else (even in the height of summer!) and if you have an interest in upland and moorland flora and fauna then visit this largely unspoilt area.'

### ***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

'It 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*]

## A Wilderness and Beyond

The group of hostels featured in the last issue of *Hebridean Hostellers* was the subject of an illustrated talk given by Steve Griffiths, of the Elenydd Wilderness Hostels Trust, at the 1 December meeting of the Gatliff Trust held at St Paul's Youth Hostel in the City of London. The venue could not have been further from the topic, at least in geographical terms!

The Trust was set up in May 2006 in an attempt to save three hostels in the southern Cambrian Mountains of Mid-Wales. It was successful in the cases of Dolgoch and T'yn Cornel and is pleased that Blaencaron, although now a private house, still offers accommodation. These outposts continue to serve visitors to this area, often known as 'The Desert of Wales'.

Elenydd is a plateau with steep-sided river valleys. In some ways it is featureless and has been largely de-populated since the severe Winter of 1947. Then most residents moved from an area long-associated with cattle-droving and hill-farming. The subsequent tree-planting programmes of the Forestry Commission were on land that had been used for sheep-grazing.

There are 400 members of the Trust and, although from all parts, there is a strong wish to involve local residents. They may not be numerous, but the relatively close Llanwrtyd Wells, with a population of 601, is one of the smallest towns in the UK and promotes its somewhat unusual activities vigorously. Find out more about the hostels via [www.elenydd-hostels.co.uk](http://www.elenydd-hostels.co.uk)

The most remote bunkhouse in England is the understandable claim of Skiddaw House, some 1550' above sea level, with 15 beds and four dormitories. It's at the Back O'Siddaw and served by public bridleways from Keswick, Bassenthwaite and Mungrisedale. It re-opened earlier last year and its website – [www.skiddawhouse.co.uk](http://www.skiddawhouse.co.uk) – gives pleasure when opened.

Last Winter was particularly difficult, but resident wardens, Martin Webster and Marie-Pierre Gaudes, had the support of members of the Skiddaw House Foundation and of the land-owner, John Waugh. Now the fabric is secure, the décor improved, and the gas installations providing warmth, hot water and welcome showers. There's also a fireside. Get going, start climbing!

## An Ultimate Island Person

Regular readers of this newsletter are committed to, at least, the notion of visiting islands. Andy Strangeway is a man whose commitments have an ultimate dimension. He set himself the target of reaching all the 162 Scottish islands of over 40 hectares and achieved this in grand style ... by sleeping overnight on all of them.

His exploits are featured on [www.island-man.co.uk](http://www.island-man.co.uk) and his first book, *Island Man – Naïve Beginnings*, was published last month. His adventures have been reported in the national press and he looks forward to the visiting of these islands becoming a pastime to complement the climbing of certain mountains. Will the Strangeway become the new Munro?



## **From the *Hebridean Hostellers* Issue of Five Years Ago .....**

There are at least 17 hostels and bunk-houses in the Western Isles and each has its own identity. The four Gatliff residences have their own distinctive ethos and do not compete with others on either geographical location or price. Gatliff promotes hostels of distinction, not transition. (Editor: John Humphries) *[No change of concept]*

## **and of Ten Years Ago .....**

The blackhouse village of Garenin, the site of one of the Gatliff hostels, has the last surviving cluster of traditional thatched houses in Scotland and they are to be restored with a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund of £745,000. (Editor: Jim McFarlane) *[We led the way]*

## **and Fifteen .....**

If you have been enthused by the hostels or inspired by the Hebrides, and want to see new hostels in islands that no other hosteller has reached, please make contact. We have only got where we are by volunteer effort – we have no paid staff – and we are always glad to welcome the contributions of others. And finally remember, you are never too young to start. Indeed Herbert Gatliff was an ardent supporter of the view that teenagers and those in their twenties had better ideas than the older generation. (Editor: Richard Genner) *[Valid view or vapour?]*

## **and Twenty**

During 1987 the SYHA offered our hostels 'adopted' status and inclusion in their 1988 Handbook. This offer was accepted as it will be a great aid to publicising the hostels. (Editor: Peter Clarke) *[Certainly an accurate forecast]*

### **Addresses**

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*John Humphries was appointed as a Trustee of the Gatliff Trust on 1 December 2007*

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



Photo by John Sharkey