



Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust

Crofters' Newsletter 2005



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'Rhenigidale was my home for three weeks in 1985 and as I didn't get to the islands during this past Summer, reading some of the comments made me feel homesick. It is clear that many others also have formed a special bond with the hostels and their island communities and like me have fallen in love with their beauty. Here is my selection from the 2004 Visitors' Books.'

Jo Burgess - Editor Crofters' Newsletter

Howmore

A hosteller staying in January fought against the wind southwards. In between the hail showers, the sun shone and the hills sparkled, the sea was majestic and his party found their way to the standing stone at Cnoca Breac. In spite of the weather (or perhaps because of it) the whole journey was a joy.

For Arthur Simmonds visiting in March, Howmore was his fourth hostel and surrounded by the sight and sound of lapwings and within the distant sound of the sea, he thought it magical too. The absence of notices and rules made it a place to settle into after a day's trekking.

A Polish visitor felt that here you could discover things really important for life – trust, goodness, faith and friendship – and wrote, 'In this place you can surely rest and enjoy.' Later in April a cyclist had a long wet pedal from Barra into the teeth of a gale and so was glad to arrive.

In May, Keith and Celia from Aberdeen swanned down with a back wind all the way from Lochmaddy with glints of sunlight, but mainly it was misty and dreary and wrote 'It was wonderful to sit in front of a warm stove with the wind moaning in a most un-May like fashion outside.'

Richard and Hilary left instructions as to how to find the Usinish Souterrain which will be copied and left in the hostel. They also saw a corncrake. Others did, too, and at the beginning of June there were lots of short-eared owls evident.

Also in June Richard and Francis were 'bagging' mountains and recommending Stulabhal in particular. Gill and Mark from Huddersfield enjoyed fantastic and interesting company and many commented on the strong winds and variety of birds in June, especially dive-bombing terns.

Irish and American hostellers wrote that they would always remember their visits here and so did David from New Zealand who wrote, 'My pride in my Scottish

heritage is even stronger now. Thanks to the other hostellers for their unconditional friendship and warmth.'

In July, Nikki from USA making a return trip after 30 years, found the changes made the hostel 'much more comfortable but don't detract from its charm. It is still a warm, cosy, friendly place ...thank goodness there are still some untouched places left in the world.'

Visitors from Sweden were returning after 27 years. It was reported that the chicken from the nearby house apparently likes tea (from the cup). It was also good to see that some young visitors: Megan (10), Emma (8) and Alistair (5) made new friends and loved it here.

Mona from Germany wrote in Gaelic 'Chord an t-aite rium gu mor'. Jeanne from Switzerland wrote that the islands have touched her heart, Ernest from Holland was amazed and delighted, a visitor from the Czech Republic wrote 'wonderful', a visitor from Canada wrote that the Hebrides are 'magic'.

Gloria from Spain simply wrote 'perfect'. Jackie saw the cottage nearby where her grandfather was born while visitors from France walked up Beinn Mhor from where they could see St Kilda, Skye and the Small Isles, saw seals at Loch Ainort and got a lift back in time for a magnificent sunset.

Andrew and Johanna from Sunderland on leaving wrote that they 'will miss the hostel, the beach, the islands, but most of all the somewhat random assortment of friendly faces that they have met at the hostel and along the way'.

In September Michael and Jan found a most interesting group – Spanish, Dutch, German and English and wrote that when the warden called she cheered them all up by saying the weather would get better and it did! They didn't see otters, but others did in the river.

Amanda from New Zealand enjoyed getting back to the basics of life – wild outdoors, no frills living and good company – and Tales of Boris – the skull that turned into a dragon! The Greenwoods found it a place to stop and take stock of where one is going in life with so much beauty to behold.

In October, Anne from Aberdeen was storm-bound, but enjoyed the salt air, the peat smoke and starlings imitating lapwings. Jane, Martin and Izack were back for Christmas, arriving in a force 9 gale, and had a fine time drinking 'yogi bears' (large measures of Scotch) with John and Mike from Worcester.

On 19 January 2005 Jim from Lincolnshire was here 'with his missus' celebrating his 40th birthday despite the big storm giving the hostel a real battering.

Berneray

David from Derbyshire 'cycling from Barra to Tarbert planned two nights here but stopped for five; that says it all.' Helen and Richard also stayed longer than planned in May and noted that on a Wednesday between 3 and 5 pm the fish van is at Sollas Co-op.

Richard and Frances wrote that they had to stop on the causeway to allow eider and family across the road and Penny in London wrote 'I got here and stopped ! Such peace. Thank you'

Heather enjoyed the walk to the trig point to see St Kilda. Paul and Janice found one of the Hebridean orchid species in flower on Machair Robach in the dune slacks near the burial ground in June.

In June Cath and Malcolm McKay wrote :

'Clear blue sky and sparkling sea
What a magical place to be !
White waves driven towards the shore
Who could ask for anything more ?
Lapwings calling over the grassland
Terns are wheeling over the sand
An idyllic place to spend the night
A simple hostel is just right
All in all it gives me space
To stand and stare and contemplate.'

Robert from Canvey Island enjoyed Barpa Langass and Uneval and a return visitor was 'here again in the height of summer rain, cool winds, grateful for the warmth and company of Berneray'. Eva from Denmark on her 12th visit finally saw an otter.

A hosteller from the Blue Mountains in Australia wrote that it is 'So good to experience the wonder and beauty of this special place supported by the shelter and warmth of this hostel and to enjoy the companionship of fellow hostellers.' Ruaridh Macdonald (7) liked staying here and saw oystercatchers, some seals and an ancient house which had an old stove and fireplace, but no roof.

A hosteller from Ireland wrote 'In a word Paradise.' Trish asked if Berneray is mentioned in a song. [I'm sure there are many, but when Capercaillie did the soundtrack which was released as an EP for the TV programme 'A Prince among Islands' – about the visit of Prince Charles in 1991, it included 'Fagail Bhearnaraidh (Leaving Berneray) and 'Molaidh Bhearnaraidh' (In Praise of Berneray) – Jo].

May from Taiwan, another island far away, wrote in traditional Chinese that maybe this is the reason that she likes to visit the Island a lot. Kera from Canada wondered at the lilt of the pipes and wrote 'After this week I find it hard to imagine a place of stillness, to be able to walk down a hill and not feel like I am flying. After gathering

the relics of last night's celidh – the island shifts and re-arranges itself and the morning comes like the arms of something ancient.'

In August a visitor from Portugal had a lovely time and Alison the warden was thanked for 'her wonderful welcome and songs and poems'. As a result of the good company and the 'craic', Elizabeth and Philip stayed longer than planned.

In September 5-year old Jude liked it because of the sea and sheep, 7-year old Lewis because they saw a seal and 4-year old Sarah 'because it is.' Also in September Maria from Sweden took a dip in the sea! Dan wrote in Welsh, but in English Sarah wrote that 'It was great to lie in a snug bed and hear the wind roaring around the gable end and asked if anyone remembered Mrs McKillop and her amazing hand-knitted socks.' Another visitor wrote in Gaelic 'Tha osdal agad gle mhath' (I can manage that translation – your hostel is very good – Jo).

As Mike from Edinburgh wrote, 'There is no point in trying to pay tribute to Berneray in writing. Go to the West Beach. Stand still, watch the waves. I hope it does for you what it did for me. I'll be coming back.'

Gareth wrote in October that 'this is a place that will stay in my soul'

Richard from Glenelg here on Halloween had the place to himself and in November Guido dropped in for the day with distant memories of 'It's a Knockout' in 1995 and said that it was 'dreich.'

Rhenigidale

Alisdair, a visitor, found that being woken by the piping of birds 'was a joy, like a corner of paradise.' In April, Jonathan was visiting from America and described it as a brilliant wonderful place – the walk over beautiful, the hostel comfortable and Alisdair, the warden, the ideal of Highland and Island hospitality. He quoted the Canadian Boat Song –

'Mountains divide us and a waste of seas
Yet the blood is strong, the heart is Highland
And we in dreams behold the Hebrides.'

Kerry-Anne from Wales couldn't think of a better place to spend her birthday on 20 April and having wanted for 4 years to come here felt it was well worth the wait, especially the walk in from Urgha. John and Jan Hargreaves from Derbyshire came for the night and stayed the week. Paula from Cumbria observed, 'The colours were so vivid and so clear it was like seeing in colour for the first time.'

Jane, Martin and Izaak from Suffolk got here in late May to recover sleep and dry out from camping. Jim from Shropshire described the hostel as lovely simple accommodation in the most beautiful situation. He climbed An Clisheam, Grimoval, Uignival Mor and surrounding hills and of course Toddun and enjoyed sunshine,

fabulous views, deer, a black grouse, great company and chips in Tarbert !

Cath and Malcolm McKay wrote:-

'This is what hostels ought to be
Simple and welcoming pretension free!
Herbert Gatliff got it right
All one needs to spend the night
SYHA don't lose your roots
For many like us, this just suits.
Walking the hills when the weather's fine
A wonderful way to spend our time.
Then back here for a good night's sleep
With lots of memories forever to keep'

Michael wrote Aite Math (good place). A visitor here for the third time (last in '92) found it hard to understand why they left it so long to see the nights and breathe the air. Mike arrived here 10 years ago by canoe at midnight in a storm. He wrote 'a bit more pedestrian this time (Peugot 306) but no less memorable'.

In June Howard and Kim from Cumbria said it was a great place to stay and that 'Walking on Harris and Lewis was out of this world because you just don't see anybody. Makes Knoydart look like a city centre!'

Heidi from Australia wrote that the walk along the track from Tarbert was so tranquil and picturesque. 'There is an inner peace and beauty that hangs over this place.' Mark and Adam from Yorkshire were back again at the beginning of June and reckon this place 'should be available on the NHS as it is sure to melt away any stresses and strains.'

Judy and Gordon were back after 42 years when there was no road, no electricity, meths and paraffin for the primus stoves and tilly lamps were stored in old whisky bottles and Roddy gave them some milk from his cows and eggs from his chickens. It was great to stay again en route to St Kilda.

Tim and Claire walked to Molinginish (Utopia) and saw a golden eagle but no otters and said staying here was the favourite part of their holiday. Andrea from Mansfield wrote that the silence was truly golden as she had the place to herself and found it inspiring and wonderful.

Will from Sheffield having cycled wrote that the last few hills nearly finished him, but thought it the height of civilised living and stayed an extra day. Ali climbed Toddun had views of St Kilda and saw an eagle. Ian and Jude have stayed in many hostels and bothies, but found Rhenigidale special - 'A place where tired, weary souls can take off their boots.' They even cancelled their return ferry ticket to stay a couple of extra days.

In July, Nick and Melissa were back with their two children, seven years after getting engaged on the top of Toddun and said it was wonderful to find the place

unchanged. Lawrence Washington brought his future wife Jenni and was pleased to see nothing has changed and that it is as magical as ever.

Peter from Sheffield cycled in against a strong headwind which twice blew him to a standstill. Gunnar visited in memory of Dan Moses (USA). Alec from Cheshire was glad to find a hostel in the spirit of the hostels of the 1930s, but also glad that the old rule of no cars, no longer applies.

In August, Chris and Marion found the sea refreshing, but cold to swim in and by mid August the midges were rather demanding! Seonaid and Matthew from Northern Ireland walked the track at night-time and wrote they 'felt like Hobbits in the beautiful landscape of Lord of the Rings. Seeing the light round the last bend was heaven'.

Pete from Edinburgh had a great walk on North Harris and met another walker on the ridge from Stuabhal to Teileasbhal who had been walking the ridge for 20 years and said Pete was the first person he'd met. Simon from Yorkshire caught cod and sea trout off the rocks and shared them with a German cyclist. Martin, Russ and Paul went fishing too for pollack and mackerel until sunset.

Beck from Alice Springs said she rarely cries but that the walk in from Tarbert had her holding back tears of joy, surprise, wonderment and thankfulness at every turn.

Liza from Canada wrote that the ghost stories after the fireworks on 5 November were unforgettable. Once again members of the Stornoway Running and Athletics Club were here for New Years Eve because they love it and in January through hail and wind an Italian arrived.

Garenin

In February, John from Washington State was here tracing his roots. Brian, Rebecca and Jamie from British Columbia and Ontario reckoned this was a wonderful place in an utterly gorgeous part of the world even, or especially, in horizontal weather !

In April, Melissa from Canada enjoyed a Harris Tweed weaving demo from Colin the warden. Stuart Jackson came from Manchester to where his grandfather left in 1865. Paul and Colin camped by the coast to watch the sun sink into the Atlantic. Visitors from South Africa had an 'awesome time' and Xavier from Switzerland thought it 'one of the loveliest and most characteristic hostels I've ever been in.' Elizabeth from New Zealand experienced all four seasons in one day.

In May, Tania from Finland thought it an amazing place and enjoyed wonderful company. Paul arrived on a day when the cliffs were being pounded by large waves and the sunset was fantastic. He felt like he was 'entering a small time capsule, either that or Hobbiton'. Gary from Southampton found many hostellers were coming to visit Callanish which meant interesting minds and good talk.

In June, visitors from Brighton stayed six days and met large German families,

Evangelical Christians, gay photographers and the ubiquitous Aussie traveller – all of them interesting and talkative. Jude and Ian came visiting Jude's Morrison ancestral clan stronghold near the Butt of Lewis and got sunburnt and found the landscape had an austere beauty.

In July, Ola from Poland wrote, 'With the better shade of green, with the warm smell of the burning peat, with the freedom of the floating seagulls and the light deceiving the time, I feel as if in the past, which always makes me happy.'

Peter from Black Sail Hut in Cumbria found it's real home from home. Anne from Idaho was on her third visit and wrote, 'Tucked into this little bay, the houses gather together like a close knit tribe while the North Atlantic wind sheds (maybe shreds – Jo) its spite against the thick stone walls – its an elemental place – earth, sky and sea. This village is like the pale pink sea thrift stubbornly holding its own in the crannies on the cliffs. Colin checks each day, sharing a story or laugh. Anyone wanting to visit his loom shed and watch him weave is made welcome. This hostel is all about welcome.'

Rachel and Eric reckon Garenin has the best shower in the Hebrides and Rupert from Cornwall especially liked the lighting in the village at night, enjoyed surfing the waters and the facilities and warmth of Garenin.

Pauline arrived on Christmas Eve with the moonlight illuminating the earth and the houses. She received greetings by mobile from Canada and wrote that being here was the 'best Christmas gift to myself.'

On 30 December, Richard and Rob arrived again for New Year (as they did last year). Richard wrote, 'Sitting on the pebble beach with my best friend Divyesh just before midnight listening to the huge, powerful waves with their aching groans, smashing and ripping at the harsh, rocky, unforgiving coast line, breaking on the beach and rolling in an unimaginable amount of rocks and boulders down the shore – dragging them back into the depths of the North Atlantic Ocean – it was mind blowing.' On New Year's Day everyone went for a long walk. Divyesh felt very lucky to have stayed here and having travelled all over the world wrote that 'this place has to be one of the bestest!'

HOSTEL OVERNIGHT FIGURES

	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Berneray	1627	1328	1779	1602	1505	1858	2056	1896
Garenin	1969	1796	1576	1329	1225	1316	1522	1631
Howmore	971	1076	1071	923	1034	1222	1627	1561
Rhenigidale	812	787	800	824	767	803	892	956
TOTALS	5379	4987	5226	4678	4531	5199	6097	6044