

Hebridean Hostellers

Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust

www.gatliff.org.uk

Newsletter 63

Spring 2018



The Rhenigidale Hostel and New Bike Shed

Photograph by Peter Clarke

From the Chairman

Peter Clarke, Chairman, writes - In June, the **Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust** will be 30 years old. The Trust was incorporated as a Company Limited by Guarantee on 10 June 1988. The first Executive Committee meeting was held on 11 June and the first AGM on 21 July 1989. Philip Lawson and I, two members of that committee, have served continuously for the whole period.

Others such as Jo Burgess, Alan Busson and John Joyce were involved in the early days, but have since made a come-back! I thank all the EC members for their service to the cause of the hostels. The AGM, is perhaps, an opportunity to reflect on what the next 30 years might bring. There is little doubt that there will be **challenges**, for which we need to be ready.

This year's **AGM** will take place on **Saturday 30 June**, again at Glasgow Youth Hostel. Coffee from 10.00, AGM at 10:30, followed by a Members' Forum, concluding with lunch at noon. This year there will be no speaker in order to give members the maximum time to ask questions on hostel matters. The meeting will conclude with lunch. Full documentation will be sent out in early June. (You will also be hearing from me on the subject of the General Data Protection Regulation!)

In the autumn I referred to the plans being developed by Howmore Church, our neighbours in South Uist, to make **Howmore a destination for pilgrims**. Their work is ongoing but, sadly, their first application for Lottery Funding was knocked back.

Back in September 2016 we asked members and others to put forward ideas for the development of our building, the **Old Croft House**, Howmore. The EC will be discussing this topic over the coming months. If you have any thoughts on the matter, please let us know. Is there a demand for bookable family or group accommodation, especially for groups such as school or youth groups?

Do try to visit the hostels this summer. However many times I visit, the hostels always work their magic on me. The **essence of the Outer Hebrides** is right outside each of our hostels: The tranquil, but gaunt beauty of Rhenigidale best enjoyed sitting outside the hostel; the mesmerising quality of the sea at Berneray; plus Howmore's gentle arcadia and intriguing ecclesiastical ruins. Go further. Stay longer.



The Gaunt Beauty of Rhenigidale - Peter Clarke

A Sense of Urgency

Time and the elements are remorseless. In the case of the GHHT, this observation relates to the trustees growing older and the fabric of the hostels being exposed in north-westerly coastal areas. With matters of maintenance constantly needing attention, there are major construction demands looming ahead. Funding is a requirement, but volunteering and expertise are vitally needed.

John Joyce has now been in charge of project management for ten years. It would be of great value for him to be 'shadowed' by someone to take over his work in due course - for his knowledge of the details of three different buildings is an immense asset. His achievements at Howmore have brought a building from 'bothy-to-starred-hostel' status.

When John and a work-party of Eddie Webb, Meg Richards, Frances Passey and Sheila Hamilton were at Rhenigidale late last year, they built the new bicycle shed, solved recurring drainage problems, cut back vegetation from encroaching on the path, painted fencing and railings, discouraged rodents and undertook assignments to restore the kitchen decor as well as to preserve many features of the hostel.

John's assessment of Berneray means that soon shower and wash-rooms, windows and thatch will need attention. These are of critical importance and, on an ideal time-frame, would be phased in with proposed Croft House, Howmore, renovations. This could all prove too much for an organisation that has large appeal and a small work-force. The trustees are aware of this conundrum and seek solutions.

This Golden Fleece

Esther Rutter, an enthusiastic knit-a-holic, had a memorable 2017 when she visited British places where wool products have been devised over the centuries. She went from Kent to Fair Isle, from the Cotswolds to Berneray, spending a memorable week at our hostel. Go to 'This Golden Fleece' - <https://thisgoldenfleece.wordpress.com/> - log into her Hebridean Adventure, a part of *A Very British History of Wool*.



Cyclists at Berneray - Peter Clarke

Hooked on the Hebrides - Part Two

Philip Lawson, former GHHT Treasurer, writes: ‘My first close-up view of the Outer Hebrides was in June 1960 from the deck of a Scalpay fishing boat sailing through the Sound of Harris for St Kilda. I was a member of one of the early work parties of the National Trust for Scotland. I had seen the Western Isles’ outlines many times before, but from the hills of the mainland or other islands.

I had read the works of Seton Gordon, W H Murray and others who kindled a desire to visit, while I had often passed through Mallaig on the way to Skye and observed the ‘Outer Islands’ steamers *MV Lochmor* and, later, *MV Loch Seaforth*. They made long, slow journeys to places with sparse public transport and accommodation.

So the constraints of time and student finances delayed the pleasure for a few years, until after the introduction of the first car ferries in 1964 and, in 1966, the SYHA’s opening of a hostel at Stockinish. Seven miles south of Tarbert, it could be reached within a day from the mainland. My first visit there was a revelation.

The rocky terrain of east Harris on the road down to the hostel resembled the surface of the moon, yet a few miles away were the most spectacular beaches, every bit as attractive as those in the South Seas, so long as tropical heat was not a requirement. This was an island with a difference!

Howmore was opened in 1966 by the Gatliff Trust, but it was three years later before I was able to visit. In July 1969, having acquired a small car, a friend and I set off for the Outer Hebrides. We travelled on the *MV Hebrides* from Uig to Tarbert and stayed at Stockinish to explore Lewis and Harris.

We knew about the hostel at Rhenigidale, but, famously, it still had no road access so was not included in our itinerary. Our base at Howmore holds the fondest memories. For seven days, we walked the beaches, observed the birds, climbed Ben More, and discovered the prehistoric and medieval remains.

Each evening we indulged in rudimentary catering while enjoying the conviviality of our fellow-hostellers. We also relished a couple of nights when we had the hostel to ourselves. Many changes have affected the islands in the 49 years

since those blissful days and for me nothing can ever compare with those first impressions.

Happily the Gatliff hostels are still offering simple friendly hospitality on a ‘do-it-yourself’ basis in a wonderful environment to enable others to create their own memories. Long may they continue to do so.’



Some of the Many Changes at Howmore - Peter Clarke

Things that Make Me Happy in the Hebrides

Heidi Dore writes: ‘The Outer Hebrides has been ranked the happiest place in Britain in a new survey. But what is so special about a remote archipelago where a 70mph wind is a breeze and no one escapes the menace of the midge? The answer lies in a curious but happy paradox. The Outer Hebrides satisfies the deep and conflicting human need for solitude, space and freedom - and a longing for meaningful connections and friendship.

It is a place where you can experience emptiness - and profound fulfilment. The Gaelic name, Eilean nan Gall, or Islands of Strangers aptly describes a land where so many outsiders return because they feel at home. When you have had your fill of emptiness, head to the friendly charity-run hostels in stunning locations on Harris, Berneray or Uist for the solace of company.

They are based in charming traditional buildings and are run with a generous, open-minded, easy going ethos - offering shelter at all hours. There are few pubs or evening activities on the islands, so they fulfil an important social function for Hebrideans and travellers alike, attracting people from all walks of life and ages.

A welcoming open fire, no phone signal or WiFi, and accommodation which obliges you to sit around a table with strangers, fosters a special ambiance. You may find yourself swept up in the birthday celebrations of girls from Barra, a boozy night out for fishermen from Stornoway or an art class from Lochboisdale. The place attracts extraordinary characters, and you’ll be guaranteed soulful conversations and whisky-filled hilarity. Few things can beat listening to the howling wind from within.’

Mountain Bothies Association

Here is an organisation with a comparable ethos to that of the Gatliff Hostels. At the GHHT Spring meeting in Stirling, Peter Rowell spoke about the 53-year-old MBA of which he is Area Organiser for the South-West Highlands. The Association maintains 102 bothies in Scotland, England and Wales. Last year 482 volunteers helped on 123 work-parties - all of which involved journeys to simple shelters in remote country.

Your Editor then continued from the meeting north to Sutherland and Caithness, counties with remote enclaves, and had the pleasure of visiting Bernard and Betty Heath, founders of the MBA, at their Thurso home. Alas, Bernard does not recall his remarkable contributions to the ‘Outdoor Movement’, but Betty was in her characteristic sparkling form.



The MBA Bothy at Usinish - South Uist - a ‘Neighbour’ to Howmore - Danny Rafferty

Celebrations for the Road



Beach at Rhenigidale - Peter Clarke

the national road network. Those hostellers who recall having to walk, must now be at least 40 years of age.

The GHHT has provided a particularly appropriate feature with the construction of a bicycle shed at the foot of the hostel steps. It provides elements of shelter and security for cycles which have cruised down and laboured up the road. It seems hard to believe that, in a village with a history that extends for some 200 years, this means of transport to and from it is relatively new.

Loop the Way

The Hebridean Way consists of long-distance routes for both walkers and cyclists. It has been officially opened and newcomers are making their venturesome ways. Our hostel at Howmore is a few yards off the path and about a half-mile from the road. It's at the epicentre. Berneray and Rhenigidale are in several ways 'just missing out' and people need encouragement to loop briefly off the designated routes and stay.

Berneray appears to be perfectly placed, a 30-minute walk from the Sound of Harris ferry terminal. However, users of the Way tend to proceed with the wind behind them, taking the south-to-north direction. Those keen on taking the late afternoon ferry miss out on the enchanting island as well as its hostel. Taking in Rhenigidale needs that extra effort, but it's so worthwhile. Do spread the word ... 'loop'!

Julian Paren

Some people have the knack of applying their minds vigorously in conditions that are rigorous. Julian Paren's career was with the Cambridge-based British Antarctic Survey and research expeditions into that hostile continent. In his retirement he has, among other pursuits, served for three years as Secretary to the GHHT. Now he feels it is time to focus on his work with several Black Isle community projects, ways of preserving the train sleeper services to London and promoting www.geograph.org.uk

This photographic record of every square kilometre in Britain and Ireland is still to be completed. We are particularly grateful to him for the ways in which he has, as a trustee, put the information and activities about us on the wider 'map' of the internet by enhancing www.gatliff.org.uk Here visitors to the web are readily converted to become prospective users of the hostels by, among other features, videos. He looks forward to continuing as an active member, following five years as a trustee.

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

‘**Elizabeth Gatliff**, the younger daughter of Herbert and Lois Gatliff, died on Boxing Day 2012, aged 86. ... Liz vividly recalled the family walks on the South Downs during her formative years and maintained her father’s enthusiasm for both the Outdoor Movement and for small, relatively remote, communities.’ (Editor John Humphries) [Like father, like daughter]

and of Ten Years Ago ...

‘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.’ (Editor: John Humphries) [In fact five prizes of £25 each were awarded and published in Newsletter 47]

and Fifteen ...

‘Our **web-site** www.gatliff.org.uk has a constant stream of visitors, well over a thousand so far this year. The counter that can be accessed from the foot of the home-page, was fitted in January 2003 and the first full month recorded 276 visitors in February. This increased to 301 in March, fell back to 218 in April, but then recorded its monthly highest number with 369 in May.’ (Editor: John Humphries) [*Now we are averaging many more a month*]

and Twenty ...

‘The Chairperson, Peter Clarke, is researching the possibility of a **long-distance walking-route** through the islands. The aim is to establish a route from the Butt of Lewis to Vatersay, taking in all the inhabited islands, using old tracks and quiet roads’ (Editor: Jim McFarlane [*Things come to pass*])

Twenty-five ...

‘It is with considerable regret that the Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust and the wardens Catrina and Tommy Tosh jointly announce that Claddach Baleshare hostel (below) is closed with immediate effect.’ (Editor: Richard Genner) [*Happy memories aroused by a truly simple hostel and the good times provided*]

... and Thirty

‘From 1 April 1988 the day-to-day management of the hostels will devolve to a **new charitable organisation**, incorporated as a company limited by guarantee. This is the Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust, also known by its Gaelic equivalent, Urras Osdailean Nan Innse Gall Gatliff. It will ‘trade’ as the Hebridean Hostellers.’ (Editor: Peter Clarke) [*And trade it continues to do*]



Rhenigidale – North Harris

Berneray – North Uist

Howmore – South Uist



Go Glasgow

There are advantages to booking ahead and making entries in diaries and on calendars - so please note 'Saturday 30 June 2018 for the AGM of the GHHT at the SYHA Glasgow Youth Hostel'. That's the splendid, finely-designed, former-hotel overlooking Kelvingrove Park and Glasgow University. Coffee will be served from 10.00 and after the brief AGM there will be a Members' Forum followed by lunch. Once the date is settled in your list of forthcoming events, do think about making it a weekend with the advanced-ticket bargains available from ScotRail, Virgin Trains, National Express and Megabus. A range of room-styles is available at the hostel.

Looking Ahead

If you are considering joining one of our work-parties, why not approach John Joyce, the Project Manager, to indicate the approximate times that you would be available for the Autumn of 2018 or during the months of 2019? It would help him schedule dates well in advance to incorporate maximum assistance.

Membership Numbers

The membership of the GHHT is close to the 300 mark, helping us with funds, the broadcasting of information about our hostels and the increased distribution of this newsletter. Why not either encourage others to join or present them with the gift of belonging? It confers something of access to the Hebrides.



Berneray from the Sound of Harris - Peter Clarke