

Hebridean Hostellers

Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust

www.gatliff.org.uk

Newsletter 65

Spring 2019



**The North Harris Postman's Path
with Lewis Beyond**

Photograph by Julian Paren

From the Chairman

Peter Clarke, Chairman, writes: There are warnings of gales in sea areas... Rockall, Bailey, Malin, Hebrides ... Hum I think, yes, '**Sea area Gatliff**'. I hope the hostels will be OK. Gales have been all too frequent this winter. Bad weather in the islands isn't only confined to the winter months. But come rain, wind or shine, our hostels are there as a safe haven. All the hostels have background heat; get the fire going and you will soon dry out. Come rain or shine hostellers with a sense of adventure will visit the islands.

The early 20th Century poet, **James Elroy Flecker**, summed it up in the lines 'West of these out to seas colder than the Hebrides I must go / Where the fleet of stars is anchored and the young star-captains glow.'

Some of my local friends call days with gales, 'Duvet days'. There is nothing for it but to fire up the stove, with plenty of fuel nearby, and get the kettle on. Nothing for it! Slow down, snuggle up in front of the fire and enjoy that cuppa. There is that memorable passage in ***The Wind in the Willows***:

'Once well underground you know exactly where you are. Nothing can happen to you, and nothing can get at you. You're entirely your own master and you don't have to consult anybody or mind what they say. Things go on all the same overhead and you let 'em and don't bother about 'em. When you want to, up you go and there those things are, waiting for you ... no builders, no tradesmen, no remarks passed on to you by fellows looking over your wall and, above all, no weather ...' and enjoy the company of your fellow hostellers. They have come from a **spectrum** of places and occupations. You never know what you will learn. Again the book sums it up for me:

'It seemed a place where **heroes** could fitly feast after victory, where weary harvesters could line up in scores along the table and keep their Harvest Home with mirth and song, or where two or three friends of simple tastes could sit about as they pleased and eat and smoke and talk in comfort and contentment. The ruddy brick floor smiled up at the smoky ceiling; the oaken settles, shiny with long wear, exchanged cheerful glances with each other; plates on the dresser grinned at pots on the shelf, and the merry firelight flickered and played over everything without distinction.'

These are some of the ideals I have in my head when I work away behind the scenes to help **the hostels**. As George Mackay Brown says in his poem, *The Storm*, 'For the islands I sing / and for a few friends; / not to foster means / or be midwife to ends.'



The 'safe haven' at Rhenigidale from 1962. This photograph by Julian Paren was taken in 1986, before the construction of the road.

Continuing the Promotion of a Movement

In terms of even human history, let alone evolutionary development, the last 110 years is a rather short period of time. It was in 1909 that a German schoolteacher, Richard Schirrmann, devised the '**youth hostel**' concept and after three years opened the first building to carry its name. Almost 20 years, and a World War later, the first eleven British hostels were opened by the Easter of 1931.

A European, to become worldwide, movement was underway, bolstered by the social demands of the Great Depression, the harsh conditions of inner city-life and a desire to give young working people an opportunity to spend leisure time in open countryside, fresh air and **affordable accommodation**. It was the creation of conditions that were healthy for the not-so-wealthy.

Herbert Gatliff was a pioneering member of the hostelling movement. However, by the 1950s he had reservations about the ways in which the various organisations with which he was involved were progressing. He wanted to see a return to the 'simple' aspects of residence and the stimulating environments of discovery and awareness rather than of comfort and convenience.

So after a visit to the **Outer Hebrides** with Sir John Cadbury in 1947, he quietly starting devising an alternative network of hostels that would promote original values. This then began with the opening of the Rhenigidale hostel in 1962 and the creation of five further distinctive hostels until and after his death in 1979. The current legacy of three in the Gatliff mould are cherished by many.

If you have an attachment, sympathy or interest in helping to drive this particular 'continuing' aspect of the movement, used by thousands every year, the Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust, then please **register** your interest by notifying us at any of the addresses in the list on the final page of this newsletter. We are looking for volunteers, specialists in specific areas of management as well as directors.

For those who wish to learn more, a session is planned to portray what is required to complement the work of hundreds of individuals who have helped in the past to create the present range of hostels and to implement ways to preserve them for future generations. If you feel sufficiently **inspired** to help in the continuation of this activity, then do make contact and become involved.



The ruined store at Gearraidh Lotaigear, photographed by Julian Paren, is mentioned on Page 5.

Hooked on the Hebrides - Four

John Joyce, GHHT Project Manager, writes: 'My journey to the Hebrides started 50 years ago on a station platform ... when **Herbert Gatliff** and I got talking while waiting for a train to London after a YHA meeting. Up until then my singular experience of Scotland had been a Glencoe winter mountaineering course in 1968 run by Hamish MacInnes.

Although 50 years my senior, Herbert was still full of ideas and I was intrigued by his heartfelt **passion** for the Highlands & Islands. In 1972, I ventured on my first trip to the Hebrides with my girlfriend (now wife), Maggie. Ferries at Ballachulish and Kyle of Lochalsh meant slower venturing north than now.

Coming into Tarbert, the lunar landscape of **Harris** was a shock and we walked all the way to off-grid Rhenigidale across that wonderful coastal track. Here cereal crops still grew on the lazy beds. Roddy, the warden, would set up the Tilley lamp in the evening as there was no electricity. You got drinking water from a small covered spring along a track towards the sea.

On the first work party I organised, everything had to go around to the stone jetty at **Rhenigidale** by sea on a hired boat from Kyles Scalpay. There was very little fencing on the surrounding land so it was easy to roam and below the hostel was a flattish grassy area we used for football!

The only link between Harris, Berneray and North Uist at the time was a small clinker-built open boat. It was a 'spray-in-the-face' experience across the shallow sea around the tracery of tiny islands, going through the navigation channel in front of what is now **Berneray** hostel and on to Newton Ferry. From here we hitched down to South Uist.

At **Howmore** the warden lived in a thatched house by the track and she insisted that Maggie slept in the luxury of a proper bed with a quilt in her outbuilding while I had to settle for a camp bed in the hostel. What a location to explore, so open and wild from estuary to beach to machair and the beckoning triumvirate of mountains to the east.

Around midsummer time there are magical night sounds on the machair and walking on the beach at midnight when it never seems to get properly dark. **Time** weaves and connects the people, events and places into memories and there are too many to write in this brief space.

They include: discovering the abandoned village at Garenin before we developed a hostel there; exploring and scrambling around the amazing coastal scenery of Lewis; abseiling down blow-holes; the ever-changing sky and seascape; hostels at Claddach Baleshare and Berneray; wardens, work parties and volunteers; friends, family and children who visited with us and **appreciated** the islands along the way.

So far it has been a near **50-year journey** and a final thought is that I am now the same age as Herbert was when I met him!

A Remarkable Place

In order to have a history, places must have had dynamic features - geological, social and personal. **Rhenigidale**, site of the first Gatliff hostel, remains a small settlement with a vibrant past. It became home in the early 19th Century to groups of people from the far shore of Loch Seaforth and from Taransay, with transport connections exclusively by sea.

When postal services were established, a three-and-a-half mile zig-zag footpath towards Tarbert, the main town of Harris, was regularly used. Then in 1921, new crofts at Portnalong, Skye, were opened and by 1925 there was a 'mass migration' there by many of the 100-strong Rhenigidale population. The future looked **uncertain** then.

There were pleas in the 1930s for a **road** to be constructed from Màraig, with plans finally drawn up in 1974 and an eventual wait of a further 16 years for funding and completion. This was the last village of a comparable size to be connected to the British road network. It had taken almost 60 years to get things done and to facilitate vehicles with internal combustion engines!

A **telephone**, linked to a radio relay station, was made available in 1958 and its single digit number 'Rhenigidale 1' remained in operation until 1990. Morag MacInnes, widow of the postman, Duncan, kept the phone in the lobby of her house by the beach and she was the last person in Britain to supervise what was once a common practice in rural areas, 'attended call services'.

Her brother-in-law, Roddy, was the person who encouraged Herbert Gatliff to set up his hostel in 1962. It developed a **dynamic** of its own in encouraging visitors to trek over the hills. The Schools Hebridean Society had what was a vital camp there - for the group's project of surveying the route for a road was carried out by one of its leaders, John Hutchinson, a civil engineer.

In more recent times, the nephew of Donald and Roddy MacInnes, Kenny MacKay (postman from 1975 - 1987) has been instrumental in his successful striving to bring in the road, broadband and a range of services, including electricity which appeared in 1980. His **book**, *Rhenigidale - A Community's Fight for Survival*, has been acclaimed - for it shows how easy it is for evacuation to end a way of life.

If you have the privilege of walking the old Postman's Path, there are two **indicators** in and just beyond the village. One is that the old school, where Kenny's wife, Moira, was the single-teacher, has been converted to holiday accommodation. The other is the now ruined settlement of Gearraidh Lotaigear (photograph on Page 3) that was actually occupied until the early 1970s. The place had a store for supplies.

The closure of school and 'shop' often heralds the final phase of a community. However, such has been the working of personalities with devoted spirits, that their **legacies** are of somewhere that is now thriving and attracting steady streams of visitors throughout the year. If you have not ventured that far in North Harris, a remarkable place awaits you and, moreover, accommodation is readily available.

Alternative Guides

Social, financial and diplomatic barriers to national and international travel started to lift after the First World War with the revolutions in leisure, the improvements in transport, the popularity of cycling and the establishment of national **hostelling** organisations. Then, with the end of austerity some years after the Second World War, came the first guide-books aimed at adventurous and younger travellers.

1957 saw the appearance of Arthur Frommer's publications; the first BIT Travel Guides in 1968, named after the small computer unit; then in 1973 the name, **Lonely Planet**, was used by Tony & Maureen Wheeler to complement this new genre of guides. The company is based in Melbourne and has sold 120 million books as it approaches its half-century.



Logo is TM and reproduced with permission from Lonely Planet © 1973

How Herbert Gatliff would be delighted to see **Rhenigidale** featured in the forthcoming 13th edition of the Lonely Planet travel guide to Great Britain. His plans for the Hebrides started in the 1940s & '50s and in 1962 a hostel opened to assist the adventurous and the young. It was part of an 'alternative' movement, in bricks-and-mortar rather than paper-and-ink.

Archives and Galleries

There is a paradox in the multiplicity of material being produced to record human activities and the singular way in which much of it is lost, being of an ephemeral nature. Sometimes a complete revolution goes astray with, for example, the devising of microfiche as a storage system and the obsolescence of machines to **retrieve** the information processed.

The work of the pioneers of the hostelling movements is 'within living memory' but only just. The scarcity of photographs of people associated with those innovative times is marked. There is, of course, a range of images of the Gatliff hostels from early times, but they are not in one place and really need to be **archived**. The recording of memories is another matter.



Photograph of Claddach Baleshare in 1986 by Julian Paren

Future historians need to know about the **observations** of people who have, for example, worked at Rhenigidale, stayed at our former hostel on Scarp, enjoyed Claddach Baleshare, were pleased to find a vibrant hostel at Garein. If you have material on any aspects of our six hostels - photographic, written or auditory - please contact the Editor or Project Manager whose addresses are on the back cover.

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

'There will be individuals around still able to recall the **Berneray Airfield**. They are needed - for the Airfields of Britain Conservation Trust has recorded that the facility, apparently used by the RAF and civilians, was on 'open land' and yet with 'location unknown'. (Editor: John Humphries) [*So no one responded then. What about now?*]

and of Ten Years Ago ...

'An interesting Berlin-based e-magazine - **www.hiddeneurope.co.uk** ... often features happenings in the Outer Hebrides. A recent item drew attention to the abnormally low-tides that sometimes affect the ferry movements between Leverburgh and Berneray. (Editor: John Humphries) [*Magazine and tides continue*]



An art class at Berneray by Russell Wills

Fifteen ...

'The weather for the **Arthur Meaby Memorial Walk** on Sunday 16 May was particularly appropriate, in being both warm and calm. 60 people attended, representing literally, the many walks of life in which Arthur had been involved.' (Editor: John Humphries) [*The Walk took the South Downs Way to Beachy Head*]

Twenty ...

'One example of the depletion of population can be seen in the new intake of schoolchildren this year in the five primary schools in **Harris**, just fourteen children are starting school' (Editor: Jim McFarlane) [*The number of schools is down; the pupil numbers are up*]

Twenty-five ...

'**Howmore** renovation is proceeding very well. Most of the legal / local authority issues have been dealt with and difficulties over the historically defined and actual access to the hostel have been resolved, giving Deirdre Forsyth one last round of legal activity to pursue.' (Editor: Richard Genner) [*We are now the owners*]

Thirty ...

'You may have heard that there are plans for a hostel at **Garenin** in West Lewis. It is quite true that we are in discussion with the local council, Comhairle Nan Eilean, and we hope that a hostel might be possible in the early 1990s.' (Editor: Peter Clarke) [*Things do come ... to pass*]

... and now Thirty-five

'John Joyce is taking a **work-party** to Howmore at Easter. This will carry out decorating, minor repairs and cleaning. The front door will be altered to stop it letting in the rain.' (Editor: Peter Clarke) [*Changes to tasks, but not to personnel*]

Rhenigidale – North Harris

Berneray – North Uist

Howmore – South Uist



Dates for the Diary

It's a little close for noting Saturday 6 April for the Gatliff Trust meeting at the Bristol Youth Hostel. However, the same venue is applicable for the GHHT on Saturday 19 October. The Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust AGM will be at the Glasgow SYHA on the edge of Kelvingrove Park on **Saturday 6 July** and presents the opportunity for the meeting to be a staging-post on the way to or from the Western Isles. Then there's Saturday 28 September at the Streatley Youth Hostel, in Berkshire, for the GT. So here are dates for the diary and suggestions for seeing somewhere else as well.



*Relaxing at Berneray –
photograph by Julian Paren*

Getting to and around the Hebrides

An advantage of visiting Gatliff hostels is that they are on bus routes, albeit one that has to be booked in advance. The inter-island ferries have connecting bus services and so getting around can be accomplished, given timetable-reading skills. Getting to Stornoway is relatively easy and a different airport for access - **Southend** - was added earlier this year. This airport is only 53 minutes from London by train. Flights are on six days of the week; they take just under three hours, with a 30-minute onboard stop at Glasgow; and are operated by Loganair.
