

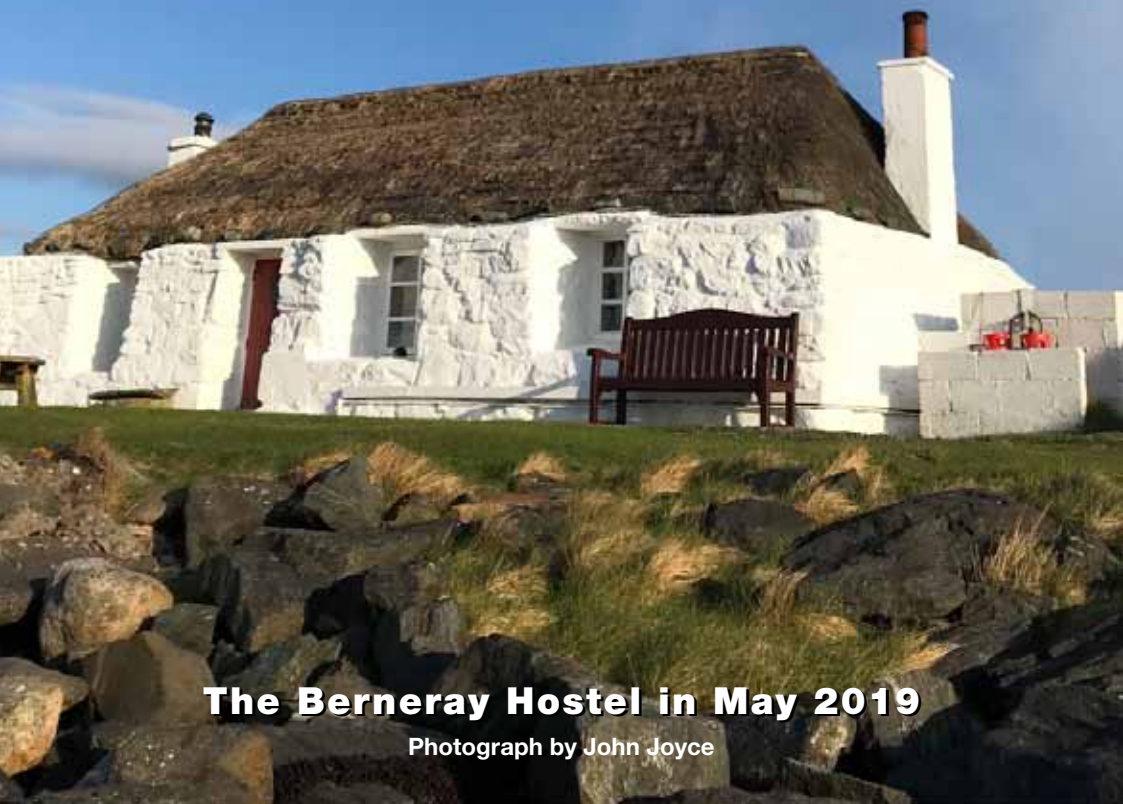
Hebridean Hostellers

Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust

www.gatliff.org.uk

Newsletter 66

Autumn 2019



The Berneray Hostel in May 2019

Photograph by John Joyce

From the Chairman

Peter Clarke writes: 2019 has been one of the most remarkable years in the history of the Crofters' Hostels to date. Thanks to you, our members and supporters, Berneray hostel is now ours and we have been gifted almost all the funds required for the improvements. Rethatching of the hostel roofs has started. Work on the rest of the improvements will follow on. Financially this is all due to the remarkable sum of **£106,839.50** being raised. Thank you!

Membership has nudged over the **300** mark for the first time. The average fee paid so far this year (excluding Life Memberships) is £17. It is appreciated if you pay extra, for the basic membership fee has been held at £10 for 15 years. We have three Life Members who have each paid a one-off £200 which has been invested in Charifund to provide permanent income for the Trust. Why not join them?



The turf foundation for rethatching at Berneray - Peter Clarke.

It looks as if our hostel overnight numbers will be well up on 2018. Another **success**? I just wonder if at times Berneray and Howmore were too full.

All of this leaves me pondering on the question, what is success? Yes, to some extent it is our owning the three hostels, the numbers of people using them, joining as members and giving donations. Clearly, we are doing something right on the ground and in the back office. But it is more than that. It shows us united by the desire to give all, especially young people of limited means, the **opportunity** of coming to know and love the Outer Hebrides.

There is one other key to our success, the **legacy** we leave. We need a flow of new Trustees and volunteers to help us carry forward our mission and our work. (All Trustees carry out tasks at the hostels and/or at their homes as volunteers.) We have a duty to make sure these hostels stay open for many, many, years to come. So why not think about it and get in touch for a chat? Come and join us at our Executive Committee Working Party from 23 - 27 April if you want a taster.

On behalf of all the Trustees I thank you for your amazing support and wish you good **hostelling** in 2020.

Final Phases of the Berneray Saga

There has been much positive action at Berneray this year. 24 April was when Historic Environment Scotland (HES) confirmed that our two buildings would continue to be listed as being of Special Architectural or Historic Interest. Then on 22 May, after years of uncertainty, we finally became owners of the hostel and from a dream came **reality**. Of course, one of the realities of owning a seashore property is the erosive nature of the location.

The thatched roofs of the hostel take a pounding from the elements and, consequently, the news that HES had responded to our application with a grant of **£18,525** was gratefully acknowledged and received. Then came the search for a supply of marram grass to enable local tradespeople to complete the work by the end of October 2020. Officials of Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (CNE), the Western Isles Council, were most helpful despite changes in legislation.

Rules and regulations have changed since 1985 when CNE first assisted us. Roofs have now to be completely stripped back to be the main construction timbers which are then covered with horizontal sarking timbers. They are overlaid with semi-permeable membrane with vertical and horizontal battens. Then the structure is covered in turf and thatched with marram before being netted and again weighed down with stones, adhering to a **traditional** Hebridean form.

The services of **Neil Nicholson**, of North Uist, have been acquired and he aims to finish before the start of the 2020 season, keeping the hostel open by working from 10.00 - 16.00. This will not be the end of the Berneray improvements - for work will go ahead with replacement windows, washroom and shower upgrades, sea-defences, loft-works, cycle-facilities and groundworks to keep the hostel in good heart.

Personification is used here in the literary sense. At the same time, one individual stands out as being personally responsible for so much by way of work in purchasing and then planning, preparing, organising and working on site - **John Joyce**, our Project Manager. When John first visited the Western Isles, the Berneray hostel buildings were not yet converted by the Gatliff Trust. So he has been involved, in one way or another, (see 35 Years Ago on Page 7), throughout its existence, and its eventual position, as the most popular of our hostels and now owned by the Trust.

His living in South London means that distance and travel feature at every turn whether in the organisation of work and work-parties, whether hands-on or hands-off. Thanks are due for his every mile travelled, minute worked, minutiae considered. How many details are involved with a project that covers purchase, applications, conversion and re-creating? The answer is '**countless**' and for this we should be comparably grateful.



The Berneray Hostel in May 2019 - John Joyce.

Access Through the Ages

Mankind appears to have a **mindset** that extends control, links people with places and makes travel easier. Sometimes things fail spectacularly. It was possible, apparently, to walk the ten-mile stretch to what are now the Monach Islands, off North Uist, as late as the 16th Century. Tidal movements changed, land became submerged and it was not until 1962 that a causeway was built to give easier access to Baleshare, still far away.

In the 18th Century, a 600-yard causeway was constructed across Loch Bee, South Uist, and in 1942, hastened by the demands of war, the South Causeway created the permanent link with Benbecula across the South Ford. So there remain a few people able to recall when that extensive area of land, including Howmore, was very much insular by nature. The Western Isles Spinal Route now means **effortless** travel from Berneray to Eriskay.

Berneray has recently celebrated the 20th anniversary of the official opening of its causeway and many visitors to the hostel can look back to the times when a primitive ferry served the island. Some individuals **focus** on the progress of being able to travel on impulse; others see the end of a way of life. Inevitably, where changes cannot be implemented, communities die. This was apparent on Scarp where the Gatliff hostel ceased when the last islanders left in 1971.

Rhenigidale was very much an island, with only sea access for many services and goods heavier than mail, until the road was built in 1988. An increasing number of hostellers can now experience somewhere unique. **Investment** was needed then and it's on this topic that discussion has centred on possible future funding of large-scale developments such as have been undertaken on the Faroes, where tunnels and on-demand helicopter services have complemented bridges and causeways.



'Access by Sunlight' - Peter Clarke.

Modern engineering **techniques** could see bridging across the Sounds of Harris and Barra. Would the connecting of most parts of the archipelago that is the Outer Hebrides make that much difference? When tunnelling methods have improved even more, could there be a 15-mile Neist Point to Wiay crossing, linking Skye to Benbecula? The completion of a mainland project would ensure many connections, but curtail customs that are different and distinctive.

Herbert Gatliff's **initiatives** have brought thousands to a remote part of the UK. His aims were to share with others his affections for values that he wanted to see preserved and strengthened, not incorporated into the mainstreams of British cultural life. Changes will continue, but those associated with Gatliff's approach will tread carefully before adopting and adapting.

Sects and Hebridean Society

There's always something to look out for and listen in to. **Christianity** is some 2000 years old and has branched into a worldwide network of churches, each within its own group. There are close on 40,000 separate denominations often with subtle differences between them. The Outer Hebrides show signs of this proliferation and visitors to the islands can observe something of the phenomenon - with many sects, buildings and the linguistic divide of Gaelic and English services.

The coming of Christianity to Scotland was through Ireland with the all-important move of St Columba to Iona in 563. This Celtic Church at first maintained its own traditions and withstood Norse invasions until the conversion of the Vikings in the 11th Century. Half-a-century later the **protests** of the Reformation led to the establishment of the Protestant movement and the formation of such as the Church of Scotland in 1560.



Howmore Parish Church - Photograph from the National Churches Trust.

The northern islands, above Benbecula, developed along Protestant lines while those to the south remained in the Roman Catholic fold. The former saw major **splits** in 1843, 1893 and towards the end of the 20th Century, and so there are similar-styled buildings carrying slightly different signs - The Church of Scotland, the Free Church of Scotland, the Free Church (Continuing), the Free Presbyterian ... the Associated ... the Reformed ... the Episcopalian ... and so on.

The very strict observance of the **Sabbath** in Lewis, Harris and North Uist is now a relic of the past with the opening of air and ferry services, petrol stations and some facilities. However, there is a subdued atmosphere prevalent despite the visual displays of many residents dressing up to attend church. More relaxed attitudes are evident on Sundays in South Uist, Eriskay and Barra.

Howmore is a village well known for its collection of former chapels and churches. The hostel nestles close to the grounds of the ruined Tempull Mor, the 'Large Church of St Mary's'. A short distance away on the shore side is Howmore Church, built in 1858 as the Church of Scotland's surviving parish kirk, very much a Protestant enclave in a Catholic heartland. It has recently received a £20k National Churches Trust Cornerstone Grant to help fund repairs and to install toilets.

Hymns, which are non-Biblical, and music, which is secular, are not permitted in many Protestant churches here, but the alternative rhythms of **unaccompanied** singing in Gaelic is well worth hearing. The shouted opinions of some of the faithful were not so melodious and the voice and actions of the late Revd Angus Smith accompanying the beginning of CalMac's Sunday services to Kyleakin, Skye, in 1965, are long recalled. In fact, a nickname stuck following his protestations - 'The Ferry Reverend'!

Gordon Berry (1934 - 2019)

When **Gordon Berry** died on 1 May 2019, many hostellers and those associated with outdoor activities in Scotland lost a companion. He was born in Burnley, Lancashire, the only son of Harry and Dora Berry, who encouraged him to be a technical draughtsman. His two careers with Rolls Royce and Lucas lasted until early retirement in 1989. However, he had taken in the mid-'70s a gap of three years to be the SYHA warden at Gairloch, Torridon and Kirkwall.

His commitment to group activities, hostelling, ornithological recording, steam railways, Munro-bagging and support for fell-running brought him in contact with many fellow-travellers as well as the Gatliff hostels. His friendship with, and eventual devotion to caring for Ros, brought out an engaging temperament that was appreciated by many who met him either once or regularly and who enjoyed the aspects of his quiet, yet compelling, personality.

Len Clark (1916 - 2019)

Leonard Joseph John Clark, who has died at 103, was among the last surviving infants born during the First World War. He survived the primitive conditions of a London tenement building, where 20 people shared some of the basic facilities, and went on to become, in adult life, a protector of vast swathes of the English countryside.

He first met Herbert Gatliff, then 42 years of age, in 1939 and realised that they had a common cause. Both men were independent, persuasive crusaders for their causes, although their temperaments were markedly different. Len was a Quaker, a pacifist and a person able to reconcile the contradictory viewpoints of individuals at a meeting that he was chairing.

A scholarship took him to Highbury Grammar School, but it was an article in the *News of the World* encouraging hiking in the Chilterns that influenced his life. He joined the YHA in 1937 and soon became involved in the organisation. His careers were in local government and NHS administration, although he is remembered for work in the governing bodies of the YHA, Open Spaces Society and the National Trust. He was a Gatliff Trustee from 1980 – 1994, during which time the GHHT was created.

People, places and protection of the landscape dominated his interests. He was always willing to access areas of land in order to assess their potential for giving pleasure to future generations. His means of visiting them was often on his Honda 50 moped, a way of transport not usually associated with the landed gentry associated with the National Trust.

For some 40 years he showed commitment to the South Downs having status as a designated National Park and was almost 90 when this occurred. Earlier this year he recorded part of the commentary for a film marking the 70th anniversary of the Campaign for National Parks. His voice was one accustomed to inform, calm and encourage others.

His memoirs were called *Out of the Wind* for, according to him, he had lived a relatively quiet life, free of stress. His wife, Isobel, died in 2016 and he is survived by three sons, Alastair, Stuart and Neil, six grandchildren and a great-granddaughter. Reflections about Len appear in the final section of his life of Herbert Gatliff, a pdf of which is available freely though www.gatliff.org.uk

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

Peter Clarke writes: Everyone has great stories to tell about the hostels. Could you become a hostel **ambassador**? Please tell your friends about these distinctive and stimulating places. (Editor: John Humphries) *[Make your mark in the hostels' logbooks as well as in conversation]*

and of Ten Years Ago ...

'From the Obituary of **Jessie Macleod** (1924 - 2009). Her genial and caring ways were particularly evident when the Berneray Hostel was opened and she and her twin sister shared wardening duties from 1978 - 96.' (Editor: John Humphries) *[18 years of service often recalled by hostellers]*

Fifteen ...

'The **membership** of the GHHT has remained stable at around 250 despite the increase in the annual subscription to £10. The need for new members is not primarily financial; it is a matter of injecting additional energy, innovative ideas and different perspectives.' (Editor: John Humphries) *[If only the membership had doubled in those 15 years]*

Twenty ...

'There is serious debate taking place at the moment to change the Skye port for the Uig/Tarbert/Lochmaddy ferry service to **Loch Dunvegan**.' (Editor: Jim McFarlane) *[Some proposals never come to pass]*

Twenty-five ...

'Negotiations are still ongoing regarding the site for the new **Barra** hostel. I hope to give you more details and a definite location in the May newsletter.' (Editor: Jim Macfarlane) *[On this occasion it did not materialise]*

Thirty ...

'Plans are now well advanced to ensure that the fifth crofters' hostel is opened for use on 1 June 1990 at **Garenin**, West Lewis.' (Editor: Richard Genner) *[The plans came to fruition, but failed to last as long as hoped]*

... and now Thirty-five

'We began 1984 with high hopes of rapid remedial action at **Berneray**. This did not occur, but that is often the way with the Hebrides. The priorities and intentions remain the same, but the plans are different. John Joyce, Gerald McGuire, Peter Clarke and Frank Martin each visited the hostel. A local architect has been hired to draw up plans. Arthur Meaby is acting as clerk of works. John Joyce is co-ordinating volunteers.'

(Editor: Peter Clarke) *[Some names continue far beyond a generation]*



The Berneray Hostel-to-be in 1974

Rhenigidale – North Harris

Berneray – North Uist

Howmore – South Uist



Making Your Mark

The pages of our newsletters are intended to inform, encourage you to visit and, certainly, to inspire you to **volunteer** - whether connected with paper- professional- or manual-work. The first step is to glance down the page and use the contact details for John Joyce who is organising a work party at the hostels from 31 March - 14 April 2020 or to join the Trustees in the Western Isles a week later. (See below)



Berneray Work Party in 2019 - John Joyce

Dates for the Diary

There will be an opportunity to meet the trustees and see progress that is being made at the three hostels which they plan to visit and work at between 23 - 27 April 2020. Details will be posted on the website. The **AGM** of the Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust will be held on Saturday 5 September at the SYHA hostel in Glasgow. The next meeting of the Gatliff Trust will be in Bath on Saturday 4 April 2020. Venue to be confirmed.
