

Crofters' Newsletter

2020 Edition



The Rhenigidale Hostel by Julian Paren

Jo Burgess writes: 'I was really **happy** to be back in the islands in April 2019, having not been on the Ulists for some years. We were blessed with good weather and company. Although it was very windy at Howmore, we enjoyed beautiful sunshine at Berneray, made new, and caught up with old, friends.

It was good to meet Tom Abbott, whose father, **John**, started the Schools Hebridean Society, which first brought me to the islands in 1984 and a year later to Rhenigidale. I wrote in the Log Book that when I woke at Rhenigidale the words of a Runrig song came to me - *Back on the Stamping Ground, to where it all began.*

Never more have those words been so **relevant**. For Roddy, Kenny and the crew of the 1985 Expedition and in memory of Sally Sharpe, I negotiated the path back to the ferry from where I was *Going Home*. Thanks to my new fitness routine, I really enjoyed the walk, with fantastic visibility and views.

Some things on the islands have **changed** - for example there are now many places to buy a coffee. Some aspects stay the same, the stunning landscapes, the wonderful culture and the unpredictable weather. I am looking forward to being in the islands again at some time, for the music as well to practise my Gaelic.'

Howmore

Debbie and Tom from Ullapool were here in wild weather during March, after a **20-year** absence. They enjoyed brilliant wildlife on the sea lochs of the east coast including a family of otters, four white-tailed eagles and two golden eagles.

In April, Katelyn from Canada came on a fine evening and described the setting as 'a beautiful land'. Like Debbie and Tom, she thanked those who **care** for the hostel.

Visitors who had travelled from Jordon and Prague immediately fell in **love** with the Hebrides and thought the hostel in a magical location, better than a hotel.

Tom was here for several nights and quickly felt at home. Gary kept **busy** painting preservative on the wooden table outside before moving on.

Alice and Emily were grateful for the hostel, as was Claire who was doing the Hebridean Way in cold wind and rain. Angus and Eilidh will **recommend** it and, like Tom, felt very much at home.

A Gaelic speaker and others were here at Beltane (the Gaelic May Day Festival), when Maria wrote that she enjoyed a peaceful rest. Others appreciated the wildlife and meeting **interesting** people.

Kirsteen and James cycled in a headwind, arrived exhausted and received a warm welcome from hostellers. They found the hostel well-equipped and thought highly of Betty. They would have loved to have stayed longer, writing 'we will be **back**'.

Sheenagh and Alison were made welcome with a meal made by another visitor. One hosteller, who stayed in the then-ruined building next door in 1971, recalled that it provided much needed **shelter** for his tent. Now he heard corncrakes on arrival.

Jonathan who followed in the footsteps of his late uncle, **Bernard Selwyn**, an original trustee, enjoyed seeing where he spent so much time. Jude and Benj arrived in wind and rain, happy to find spare bunks, a warm fire and good conversation.

Tom meanwhile was back trail-weary in a **safe haven**. Philip meanwhile stayed for one night in absolutely perfect weather and wrote that he could not have asked for a better place for R&R.

Todd had been to all three hostels and Tom was back due to tent-damage. Other hostellers assisted the next morning and the problem was resolved. As Tom wrote, Gatliff hostels attract the **like-minded** for which he was grateful.

In July, Sarah and Ben cycled from Vatersay and, having arrived in glorious sun, then went for a dip in the sea and found it surprisingly warm, although they had to avoid the jellyfish. They were especially **impressed** with the kitchen facilities.

Becka and Matt from Snowdonia were walking north on the Hebridean Way. The hostel was quiet, but relaxing. Sean and Jackson from Cambridge arrived late having cycled south against the winds. They found it beautiful, cosy and **dry**.

Catriona was walking to Lochmaddy (slowly) and was pleased to find a bed and lots of friendly people to chat to. Joe from Glasgow has been many times and finds that it never fails to disappoint for setting, people, relaxation and the raising of **spirits**.

The Hamilton clan from Ranish, Isle of Lewis, were celebrating the 5th wedding anniversary of their oldest daughter who was married here in the church. They **enjoyed** the beach, otters, corncrakes and a swim in the sea.

In August, a hosteller wrote that this is one of the best hostels ever visited. Someone else wrote '**bòidheach**' (beautiful). I could not agree more. Through early August hostellers commented on the atmosphere, songs and banter.

Claire and Reginald wrote that it was a good place to spend a day when the weather starts to be '**Scottish**'. Betty received a lot of praise, being described by Ed as 'a lovely lady full of useful information and stories'.

Regulars, Jane and Martin, were here with a 'superb bunch of people staying from all over the world'. They enjoyed sunshine, wind, heavy rain, but David lit the fire daily and they were all cosy. Card and board games were enjoyed - what a **joy!**

Despite the howling wind, Andrew and his 13 and 11 year old sons from Sheffield went on an **arduous** walk across the bogs and up Beinn Mhor. It was certainly dramatic up on the ridge, but alas shrouded in cloud.

In September, K&M were welcomed by Betty who provided them with fudge for **sustenance** on the Hebridean Way. The hostel was full a week later with everyone bunkering down from the tail-end of Hurricane Dorian, including Aston from Australia.

Hostellers, **grateful** for the storage heaters in the dorms, came in October and November. Neil recounted the SS *Politician* story and recommended Eriskay's pub, Am Politician, plus the original Ealing Comedy film (one of my favourites - Jo).



The Howmore Hostel by Julian Paren

Berneray

Debbie and Tom called Berneray a truly magical place. They saw two golden eagles, a male hen harrier, a short-eared owl and barnacle geese gearing up for migration. They appreciated Jackie's keeping the place **ship-shape**.

Tomas, Martin and Daryl were surprised by this wonderful place in an amazing location and thanked Jackie for her hospitality in what they described as '**a wild paradise**' with cosy warm rooms.

Having been to HebCelt, this place holds a **special** place in Jennie's heart. Apparently snow boots were necessary in March. Having been caught in the dark and in torrential rain near North Uist's stone circle, she was thankful for the hostel fire.

In April, John and Melissa again enjoyed **fantastic** weather on a third visit. They had started thinking that awful conditions in the Outer Hebrides was a myth. A few days later I (Jo Burgess) wrote, 'Remember the sunrise, the sunset, the sunshine, the wind, the great company and the wonderful wildlife.'

Canadian Kathryn, travelling the **Hebridean Way**, rested on Berneray and could not resist walking the West Beach in perfect weather. She thanked the volunteers who were here fixing up the hostel and grounds and thought it a seriously special place.

At the end of April, Corinne, Lyndon and Gwyn from South Wales were on the same long-distance walk and had their best hostel-nights. They returned home full of experiences and **memories**.

In June, Olivia, from Chicago, thought it a lovely spot with gorgeous views. Scott was back again and was pleased to meet old friends, some of whom he had not seen for years and enjoyed the Gaelic folk-group, **Dàimh**.

For Tony there have been very many **changes** since he last came in 1994. He lamented the number of vehicles, especially camper vans, but while walking the island saw no one.

In August, Luke and Signe enjoyed the dolphins and fellow-hostellers, including visitors from Switzerland, Belgium and Holland as well as musicians from Norfolk. Jenny described a great **ceilidh** with music, dancing and poetry.

They enjoyed bread made by Iain who also taught the others some **Gaelic** and they all ate together, only breaking to enjoy the setting sun.

One of the families joining the ceilidh included Mark who had been here in 1986 and felt it was a real **treat** to come back. They also enjoyed great views from Beinn Shleibhe and of birds, including lots of greylag geese.

Ali and Carl came with their offspring, having first been here pre-children, and wanted to show them this **magical** place. It did not disappoint. They wrote 'Berneray you are special and so are the people that stay here'.

Elizabeth and Philip were here for their 'millionth visit' and were pleased that the GHHT finally own the buildings as well as re-thatching them through the **generosity** of donors.

In September, Alan and Maryanne returned after a 30-year plus gap and wrote that some places become ever more valuable. In October, Eric and Dave came from **Tasmania** and enjoyed a great walk on the beach seeing many new birds.

In November, someone wrote about a gentle night under a velvet sky with all the stars and a meal with strangers. 'Yogi Chai tea, talk of knitting, fluid dynamics in peat and secret birds of Berneray ... camping under the inky **firmament**'.

In December, Hugh was offering advice on making pizza dough and Maigorete was here in tribute to a friend Jose who came 15 years ago and told her about the place. She wrote '**Amazing** - thank you all for the experience'.

Rhenigidale

Till, from Germany, was here again in January having been here many times in late Spring and the Summer. He found Harris very different in Winter - everything more relaxed and only sparse ongoing traffic on 'these so 3D shaped single-track roads.' The colours changed even more than in Spring - nearly black and white with snow and thick clouds, bright and clear in sun and everything mixed within minutes ... and it was warmer than in south west Germany. He read a lot and mostly had the hostel to himself. Every day the stove was his best **friend**. He thanked Kate and everyone at GHHT for keeping the hostels alive.

In February, Rosie and Raphael travelled from North Uist and wished they could stay longer because it was so peaceful and cosy. They walked up the hill and watched the sun rise over **Skye** and hoped to come back soon.

In March, the 1st Harris **Scouts** came and, having lit the fire, were instantly warmed. They slept comfortably and, because the weather was not attractive, spent a lot of time in the hostel, chilling out and playing games.

Some other hostellers recommended the fish and chips at 'Island Bites' in Tarbert. Debbie and Tom arrived soaked after walking to Eilean Glas Lighthouse and found a glowing fire and **homely** atmosphere, having negotiated the Postman's Path.

In April, Russell was walking the Hebridean Way and thought the route and the hostel were well worth the detour. Josef, from California, enjoyed Gaelic music in Stornoway, hitched to the Callanish Stones, wild-camped, hitched to Tarbert, walked in and appreciated both lighting a fire and returning to the land of his **ancestors**.

Tom (@expedition365hebrides) found it difficult to leave. He enjoyed meeting Jo and their making an impromptu recording of the *Mingulay Boat Song*. For Ian, who was last here in 1979, it was a **home-coming** and he was glad that these places remain open.

Dave and Jill enjoyed some wonderful walking with 'dramatic seascapes, distant island backdrops, mottled yellow and brown **rockscapes**, delicate violets, tumbling waters, sadness in abandoned homes with untold stories -

with some told in Kenny Mackay's insightful recordings - zig-zag **dramatic** climbs and restful stops by bridges and at the head of Loch Trollamarig'. They described the hostel as 'a treasure in this peaceful place, made accessible by this most extraordinary road-building story'.

Katelyn, from Canada, saw the hostel as a divine creature, having spent 'four calm warm nights tenting in the yard'. The birds have been chatting, the sun has been shining and the hills have been so comforting. She shared some words with Kenny and, at his suggesting, explored **Molinginish**.

Dawn perceived the hostel as 'cute, warm and traditional with lovely guests'. She had a dip in the clear, cold sea and found Harris wild and rugged, though a very **calming** place.

Seventy-five-year-old Gordon thought the Postman's path **exhilarating** and even met a cat taking a couple for a walk. Catie and Rosie enjoyed a welcome break from wild camping and made the most of the fire to dry out their wet walking gear.

At the end of June, someone arrived by 16' dinghy (*Orkney Longliner*) from **Scalpay** and on the way sighted two schools of dolphins, one sea eagle and caught nine mackerel.

At the end of July, the weather was good on the Lacasdail walk where barely a soul was encountered, but there were jumping trout and inquisitive birds. The diversion to Molinginish revealed a peaceful place with a **waterfall** leading onto the stony beach.

Kate was praised as having thought of everything to make visitors feel welcome. When Peter (the Chair) was here at the end of July it was rainy, misty, the **horizons** were closed in and the paths very soggy.

After the rain, the burns were raging full of frothy white water; then in the afternoon the rain was gone, it was sunny with blue skies and just hazy cloud. Yet the hostel was **empty**.

Elizabeth and Philip had been at Berneray and were camping at **Hushinish**. Here they packed up in the rain so they were glad to come into the comfortable hostel. They walked along the path, admired some of the best waterfalls they had seen and enjoyed watching gannets soaring and suddenly plunging into the sea.

Alex explored Gerraidh Lotaigear and Molinginish, searched for crofts and found them looking pretty, but all the more **spooky** from the descriptions by Neil Pinkett. He thinks it a special place and the hostel incredible, peaceful, warm and homely.

Asto from **Australia** arrived soggy and cold in the midst of a squall and was very grateful for a place out of the wind. Walking up the hill he was almost blown into the loch, but on the beach enjoyed seeing cormorants fishing and gulls wheeling.

At the start of October, Mark, a cyclist heading south, enjoyed beautiful weather and the peace. At the end of October, Ben saw a red **grouse** near the summit of the climb over Gleann Lacasdail.

In November, Linda got the fire going in order to **relax**. In December, Rosie and Raphael were back again and slept very well, using the excuse of having to go to Stornoway to have a tooth pulled out, in order to stay the night!

The Flett Trek was completed on the last day of the decade by the Stornoway Running & Athletics Club. Scots Brian, Rosie, John and Doreen and Frederic from Brittany were here for Hogmanay. They were disappointed that the SRAC did not leave any **chocolates** as they have done on previous years.

They did see eagles and a 'wee furry bundle of a cat that has taken on the role of hostel window cleaner'. The weather was mixed, though never really cold, and they wrote: 'Relaxing and socialising beside a glowing stove on a **dreich** night as the rain batters against the windows is one of the highlights of this place'.

Postscript

'I finished this newsletter in March and had planned to take photos to go with it while on a visit with the Trustees to the hostels in April. Covid-19 meant that this did not happen and the hostels had to be closed. Reading this again I cannot help thinking of all the folk who had planned to visit the islands and who, like me, cannot wait to be back there. For the those on the islands, it must be quiet not having visitors, but all being well they will continue to stay safe and we will be able to be with them again soon. My HebCelt ticket has been rolled over to 2021, so I live in **hope**.'



Locations of the Gatliff Trust Hostels