

Hebridean Hostellers

Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust

www.gatliff.org.uk

Newsletter 67

Spring 2020



The Berneray Hostel Annexe in 2020

Photograph by Neil Nicholson

From the Chairman

Peter Clarke writes: ‘With the greatest regret, the trustees decided to close the hostels on 18 March to **protect** our wardens, hostellers and local communities. However, the hostels will re-open, don’t know when, but it will happen. The AGM is still scheduled for 5 September 2020. The Annual Report and Accounts will be circulated and members asked to vote on them. Although a physical meeting is unlikely, we will advise members by post and, of course, on our website.’

Reinvigorated Roofs

John Joyce writes: ‘With the arrival of May finally some good news came bursting out from the recent gloom. As can be seen from the photographs, Berneray’s **thatched** roofs look resplendent in the Hebridean light with their natural appearance and colour of fresh marram grass. Fortunately, the thatcher, Neil Nicholson, locally sourced the turf and the harvesting of marram. He was able to continue his skilled activities observing a social distancing approach which was agreeable to the local community and all other parties concerned.

Our thanks are extended for his **perseverance** through ‘unhelpful’ Hebridean winter weather and the current pandemic to deliver the reinvigorated roofs. The GHHT reiterates appreciation to both members and donors who contributed to our appeal and to Historic Environment Scotland’s grant aid for the project, showing how they value the heritage of such vernacular buildings in the island landscape.



Roof resplendent - Neil Nicholson.

However, the downside is that the hostels remain closed for the foreseeable future. It may be some time before we are able to enjoy the places in the way we have grown to appreciate them. Unfortunately, the lockdown caused the cancellation of the planned work-party and visits of trustees to prepare for the 2020 season. In the current circumstances it has been necessary to put all other planned assignments on hold, but be **assured** that the funds for these works will be applied to the improvements as soon as it is practicable.’

Tha mi ag ionnsachadh Gàidhlig

Jo Burgess writes: 'I first became aware of **Gaelic** in place-names on the maps of Knoydart and Rum where I went with the Schools Hebridean Society in 1980 and 1981. I then heard Gaelic in Runrig songs in 1981, then psalm singing at a church service on Colonsay in 1983. My first visit to the Outer Hebrides the following year highlighted the living language and I wanted to better understand what the words of the songs meant.



Gaelic is Fun

I found that there was a Gaelic tutor living in the Forest of Dean, but originally from Harris. John Angus Macleod sent me **Teach Yourself Gaelic** and for quite a while tapes and grammar exercises flew between Devon and Gloucestershire. I only met him once, but there were rumours he taught Prince Charles some Gaelic before he went to Berneray to experience crofting.

In the early '90s, I bought a Gaelic dictionary, *Gaelic is Fun*, together with videos and books of *Speaking Our Language*, and **attained** the first two certificates in tests over the phone. Lack of practice as well as life got in the way, although I was able to manage a very brief conversation with the last Gaelic speaker on Coll - Hugh Mackinnon.

When **BBC Alba** became available through Freesat, I watched a few programmes but could just make out the odd word. On visits to the islands I had the confidence to say only 'Ciamar a tha sibh?' - how are you?; 'Tapadh leibh' - thank you; and 'Tioraidh' - cheerio. In Rhenigidale, I not only encountered the Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust, but met Gaelic speakers, in particular Kenny MacKay.

Matt Bruce, former Chairman of the Trust who lives on Lewis mentioned that his daughters were learning Gaelic with **Duolingo**. Its daily reminders and targets made it an ideal skill for My Peak Challenge (MPC) - the 30-day continual effort to do something whether it was physical or non-physical during the month of January. MPC had transformed my life over the previous two years.

MPC was set up by Sam Heughan, the lead actor in the *Outlander* television series. I have been reading Diana Gabaldon's *Outlander* novels from the early '90s and was impressed by the adaptation and how the actors mastered Gaelic pronunciation. Every night I spent 45 minutes or so working my way through the exercises and tests, with my husband making amusing guesses as to what the Gaelic phrases meant. On day 88 of my efforts I was advised that I had **climbed** the Scottish Gaelic 'skill tree'.

A highlight was learning how to say "You are as fat as a seal" in Gaelic. My husband, bemused by the translation, thought it sounded romantic, which amused my stepdaughters. The Learn Gaelic website and the resources of Speaking our Language tapes help. By the time I get to the islands again I hope that I will have the **confidence** to use my newly-acquired language skills to the full.'

The Beginnings of the Berneray Hostel

Roger Clifton writes: ‘The purchase of our hostel at Berneray is a good incentive to share some memories about how it started, while we are still able to do so. There has always been a slow turnover of Gatliff hostel properties - islands are depopulated, leases expire, buildings become too expensive to maintain - so the Trust always keeps half an eye open for potential replacements. In 1976, the late **Dr John Macleod** of Lochmaddy (who was my brother-in-law) told us about a traditional house on the eastern shore of Berneray, which had just become vacant on the death of the tenant.

The owners, Annie MacKillop and Jessie Macleod, were identical twin sisters, and it was hard to tell them apart. They lived, with their dog Roy, in a house in the middle of open ground at Town. There was no track to it - you just drove across the grass. They knitted hose and sweaters (very warm, but a bit itchy) for sale in the local shop. Jessie was a widow, and when I asked her sister if she too had been married, she replied, “No, I’m an unclaimed treasure!” We discussed the possibility of the house being used as a hostel, with them as wardens, and after consulting Jessie’s son Calum (who was a church minister on the mainland), and after several visits and drinking lots of tea, the **plan** went ahead.

The house was in a poor state, with grass growing in the thatch, a rickety corrugated iron porch, leaky windows and a boarded interior which was not going to last much longer. But it was reasonably weatherproof, and in an **amazing location** which has worked its magic on visitors ever since. I borrowed Frank Martin’s big estate car and took a load of camp beds, Tilley lamps and other basic equipment from Glasgow to get it started. I forget where it all came from - I think it was surplus to SYHA requirements - but it is interesting to recall that we were able to set up a simple hostel with the contents of just one car.

This was long before the new pier was built, while a causeway was just a dream. If you had a car, it had to be driven carefully over planks onto the deck of Donald Angie’s boat. I remember inching over the planks on the pier at Newtonferry, trying not to imagine my friend’s car and all the kit disappearing into the Sound of Harris. But we **made it**, and in 1977 Berneray hostel received its first visitors. It operated, more or less unchanged, until 1985, when we began a series of major improvements.

This included having a set of new windows made by a joiner near my home in Bath. Peter Clarke, who had an even bigger estate car, came down from London and drove them up to the island. By then the first car ferry had arrived; it held just four cars. We had a series of **work parties**, including a group of students from Scandinavia under the Erasmus scheme. They loved swimming with the seals at the end of the day’s work. (For several years after that we were wistfully asked if the young Swedish lassies were coming back).



Uig Bay with the Outer Hebrides and Gatliff projects in the distance - Peter Clarke.

Some of the work was done by local builders, and I spent quite a lot of time driving all over the Uists trying to track them down. All our groups were **volunteers**, using precious holiday time, but the builders sometimes found it difficult to grasp that we were operating to a tight timetable. The Trust owes a great deal to John Joyce, and before him Arthur Meaby, who organised the work parties and building schedules.

One of the main difficulties of maintaining a traditional croft house is thatching. The first time, we rethatched Berneray ourselves, with local help and advice. The biggest problem was finding and cutting the bent (marram grass), which needs to be cut with a traditional reaper - we eventually acquired the bent from Balivanich airport and stored it in an outbuilding near the hostel. Then we were blessed with a whole week of calm, sunny weather and ferried the bent across the grass in my little Renault 4, and in that week the job was **done**.

This is just a memoir of how the hostel started. For those who were involved, it is hardly believable that it was 44 years ago. One could write a lot more about the growth of the hostel - bringing in water and electricity, restoring the annexe and bringing it into use, getting a huge digger to build up the sea defences, and all the many smaller things which are necessary to meet the standards required of even the most basic hostel accommodation today. It is a **far cry** from the days when an elderly lady lived there alone, on the shore, looking across to Harris.'

More a Revolution Than an Evolution

Traffic levels in the UK during the early stages of the coronavirus lockdown apparently fell to **1955** levels despite there being many more millions of vehicles stationary in our garages, drives and parking spots. What were things like in the Hebrides just a few years earlier when Herbert Gatliff accompanied Sir John Cadbury on what turned out to be a transformative walking tour?

Car numbers were understandably low there, with the ferries throughout the West Coast using hoist-loading. Cranes were fitted on the old mail boats for loading cargoes and net-slings used once the driver had positioned the car and ... left it. In the '50s **revolutionary** changes occurred on the Clyde ships with decks constructed specifically for vehicles, followed by side-loading in the '60s.

A **linkspan** to enable cars to be driven on regardless of the height of the tide first appeared at Lochboisdale in the late '70s. By the start of the '80s there had been considerable progress in constructing these devices, although Castlebay, Uig, Tarbert and Lochmaddy were still waiting. Roll on; roll off or 'ro-ro' became available throughout the Hebrides by 1990.

Older hostellers will recall, with pleasure or trepidation, the passenger and supply-boat, the *Endeavour of Berneray* that sailed from Newtonferry on North Uist across the Sound of Harris to Leverburgh. On occasions it had cars for Berneray strapped onto temporary decking. Then, in 1996, Otternish at the southern end of what was to be the **Berneray causeway** was built and CalMac's MV *Loch Bhrusda* appeared.

This ship had capacity for only 18 cars and was replaced in June 2003 with the 34-car carrier, the MV *Loch Portain*. It provides a great way to first see or wave farewell to our hostel with a passenger lounge affording **panoramic** views during the tortuous Sound of Harris crossing. However, it was just before the turn of the Millennium that the most significant matter occurred.

In December 1998, the causeway was completed and the ferry terminal moved and became the first (not earliest!) building at Ardmaree on the island. The Prince of Wales **officially** opened the road on Thursday 8 April 1999 and met many residents again since his long, incognito stay there with 'Splash' and Gloria MacKillop eight years previously.

Causeways have given complete **accessibility** to our other island hostels. South Uist had the first boost with the 82-span South Ford Bridge to Benbecula as part of a wartime innovation in 1942; then came the five-mile North Ford Causeway in 1960; and finally the Eriskay Causeway was opened in 2001 with the Sound of Barra ferry sailing for the first time in 2003. Howmore has benefited.

When **John Hutchinson**, a chartered civil engineer, was at Rhenigidale with the Schools Hebridean Society in 1974, he and others surveyed a possible route to the village, then cut off from the national road network. He received £100 from the Highlands and Islands Development Board and another part of the bureaucratic process started.

Pressure had started in the 1930s when many members of the community had been resettled at Portnalong, Skye, and continued with the work of the late Roddy MacInnes, the hostel's first warden, and then of his nephew, Kenny MacKay, who remains a village resident. Their efforts culminated with the **opening** of the road in 1990. There has been a complete revolution since 1955.

From the *Hebridean Hostellers Issue of Five Years Ago ...*
Professor Alec Chisholm (1922 - 2014) had an affinity for sailing ... and for small hostels. His interests extended to the Gatliff hostels. We have received a legacy of £10,000 from him.' (Editor: John Humphries) [*Wills help interests*]

and of Ten Years Ago ...

'In 1980, three years after the death of Herbert Gatliff, his daughter, **Liz**, became a committee member of the Gatliff Trust. She held this position for almost 30 years until deciding to retire in 2009.' (Editor: John Humphries) [*Family interests persist*]

Fifteen ...

'We have had **visitors** from countries as diverse as Cameroon, Bangladesh, Ukraine, Georgia, the Russian Federation, China, Korea, India, Brazil and Iceland.' (Editor: John Humphries) [*They continue to come from far and wide*]

Twenty ...

'It is with great regret that the Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust announces its withdrawal from the project to create a 20-bed youth hostel at the old school, **Brevig**, Isle of Barra.' (Editor: Lawrence Washington) [*Not to be*]

Twenty-five ...

'Since last reported, four work parties have been organised to assist Brian Wilson (stonemason) at **Howmore**. The building is now ready to have a roof built on to it.' (Editor: Jim Mcfarlane) [*Things have come a long way*]

Thirty ...

'We have tough **deadlines** for re-opening Rhenigidale by 1 July, and opening the new hostel at Garenin by 1 June. There are also maintenance jobs to complete at Howmore and Berneray.' (Editor: Richard Genner) [*No pressure!*]

... and now Thirty-five

'**Tommy and Catriona Tosh** suggested we give information about crofting in Uist. At Claddach Baleshare where they are wardens of our hostel, they have a 24-acre croft with 80-head of sheep and two beef cattle brought in for fattening. Chickens are also kept for domestic supply' (Editor: Peter Clarke) [*Some workload*]



The derelict Claddach Baleshare Hostel - John Humphries.

Tom Abbott

For seven months during 2019, Tom Abbott followed in the footsteps of his father, John, and explored the **Outer Hebrides**. His journey which started and finished in Barra involved four days of solitary camping on Mingulay, visits to remote parts of South Uist, Lewis and Harris and prolonged stays at our three hostels. His aim involved arousing memories, raising funds and making friends.

In 1962, **John Abbott**, the educationalist, founded the Schools Hebridean Society which introduced school-pupils to outdoor activities in the Highlands and, mainly, Islands for 27 years. He personally led the first, to Gometra, three years later at Loch Cravadale in North Harris and in 1967 at Aird Bheag, on the shores of Loch Hamnavay, Lewis.

The camps led by a variety of organisers, totalled 124 over the years, including six at **Rhenigidale** - in '66, '67, '74, '76, '80 and '85. However, a part of Tom's purpose has been to undertake research for a book on memory in relation to landscape, contacts and events, with an interest in how these are created, recalled and often fade with old age.

Alas, John's health is gradually declining with the onset of Alzheimer's and associated mobility problems. Tom's work has assisted him in re-establishing some elements of his lifetime of service to the young and will help both him and others with fund-raising for **Alzheimer's Research UK**. Over £2000 has been collected through this journey with donations by islanders, visitors and hostel users.

A number of devotees of the Gatliff hostels were introduced to the area and its attractions through the **Schools Hebridean Society**. If you would like to make a contribution to the cause promoted by Tom, please donate directly to Alzheimer's Research UK, providing a reference to his work. To make contact with him, the best way is via the tag @the_oh_expedition through Instagram.



Tom Abbott