

# ***Hebridean Hostellers***

**Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust**

**[www.gatliff.org.uk](http://www.gatliff.org.uk)**

**Newsletter 68**

**Autumn 2020**

**Inland from Toddun, Above the Rhenigidale Road**

Photograph by Julian Paren

# From the Chair

**Peter Clarke writes:** ‘It is a damp November day and the leaves are falling fast. But this year, unlike any in the past, there are no happy memories of Summer hostelling to keep a glow in my heart. As an optimist, I live in hope that those days will be back before too long. That is my **goal**. If we cannot run our usual free and easy regime is it worth opening at all? The income would certainly help us pay the electricity bill and we do have to keep the heating on to prevent damp and mould.

As I write, the islands have, for the moment at least, been placed in the Scottish Government’s Tier One of **protective** measures. This means that family groups of up to six people from a maximum of two households can stay, so long as they follow social distancing and good hygiene practices. Our hostels do not meet the social distancing regulations and so it is not easy to know how best to go forward. With England back in lockdown, the Scottish Government is discouraging unnecessary travel especially from high infection areas.

I am, at least, in the fortunate position of having been able to visit all the hostels during the Summer. This was to check on the buildings and to have socially-distanced chats with the wardens. They are all in good heart. The magic and love are still in the air at the hostels, but the grass is longer. There are no hostellers to converse with in the common room, none sitting outside enjoying the sunshine, no friendships are being made or renewed, no memories being accrued. I left with a **tear** in my eye.

Jackie (of Berneray) has lost her beloved husband, **Farquhar**. He had long been involved with the hostels and is recalled by older hostellers when on the passenger launch, the *Endeavour of Berneray*, which plied the Sound of Harris before CalMac’s service started in 1996. In 1988, when rebuilding the Annexe, there was difficulty moving a massive flat stone from the corner of the building. He came along, picked it up, almost as if it were a tissue, and put it down in the wall where it has rested ever since. Rest in peace, dear Farquar.

We have lost members in the past couple of years (none as far as I know owing to the virus) some of whom have left us **legacies**. These members are honoured in our Annual Report. Alan Wells of Shirehampton, Bristol is the latest. “A systems analyst at British Aerospace,” his brother and sister told me, “he simply fell in love with Scotland, and the Outer Hebrides would satisfy his thirst for wild places.” We have also been remembered by the late Dave Major of Tebay, Cumbria.

To each one of you, member or supporter, on behalf of all the Trustees, I offer my heartfelt thanks. Thank you for your encouragement and support. These are dark days, but with your support we will see it through. Please stick with us. We **need** you more than we have ever needed you before.’

# A Wealth of Material and Experiences

**Richard Genner** edited *Hebridean Hostellers* for five years from 1989. Earlier this Summer he became interested in past issues of the now online journals of such organisations as the Scottish Mountaineering Club, the Cairngorm Club and The Yorkshire Ramblers' Club. His focus was on activities and attitudes and, in particular, about the use of bothies before the Mountain Bothies Association was set up in 1965.

The Yorkshire Ramblers' Club (YRC) is, despite its name, a society promoting walking, climbing, caving, expeditions abroad and even paragliding. An article relevant to us, *A Summer Camp in Lewis*, published in 1949, about a **1947** trip to Lewis, caught Richard's attention - for that was the year Herbert Gatliff, accompanied by Sir John Cadbury, made his initial visit to the Outer Hebrides. He was smitten and 15 years later opened his first hostel, in Rhenigidale, North Harris.

From Alasdair Matheson's piece in the YRC Journal comes a **wealth** of information about the attractions of simple accommodation in a scenic location enhanced by the generosity of local people. The start made by him, his companion and a dog was not propitious - with there being no beds available in Stornoway, a night spent in a Morris 8 crammed with gear and supplies parked on an unknown road, enveloped in sea mist with no idea of what lay ahead.

Their journey to Carloway took them across rolling moors, past lochans and shielings, townships and crofts to the Atlantic Ocean. The destination was Dalmore with its beach that shimmered in the heat and reflected those Hebridean seashore colours of turquoise and emerald. Here were great white gannets, oyster-catchers, guillemots, terns, great northern divers, a rolling school of porpoises and, once, a lone whale. They were close to the Gatliff hostel-to-be at **Garenin**.

The machair or dune grass was a riot of wild-flowers and, with three weeks of sunshine, the crofters' crops changed colour as harvesting approached. Their nearest neighbours lived in a blackhouse with tapering drystone walls six feet thick at the base and turf-with-straw roofs held down by ropes. The smell of the interior peat fires recurred throughout the island and in one's memory. The kindness and generosity of the Gaelic-speaking residents also became **embedded** in the mind.

Every household made these visitors welcome with offers of potatoes, milk, eggs and fish as well as invitations for supper. Payment was not accepted. The home-based weaving industry was beginning to flourish. In the distance was the Butt of Lewis, the sands of Uig, the settlements of Bragar, Shawbost and Barvas; in the heavens were the dancing Northern Lights. To the Matheson party, however, much was centred on Dalmore. Herbert Gatliff was similarly **enchanted**, further south.

**Go to the website of The Yorkshire Ramblers' Club, the second oldest mountaineering club in England, [www.yrc.org.uk](http://www.yrc.org.uk), click onto 'Archive' and 'YRC Journal' before selecting the 1949 edition and the article, *A Summer Camp in Lewis*. Here is the full version as well as an introduction to the Club's remarkable resources from 1899. Begin your journey, back and beyond!**

# ***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 Uists 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'.

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## 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'.



Locations of the Gatliff Trust Hostels

## 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**.'

**See Page 12 for details of how to acquire sets of Julian Paren's photographs of the three hostels and their locations.**

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

'The **Road Equivalent Tariff (RET)** scheme will from this month be introduced on all CalMac crossings. So getting around the Outer Hebrides (on the Sounds of Barra and Harris services) will be at the same RET rate as getting there from the Mainland.' (Editor: John Humphries) [*Costs down; crossings as scenic*]

## and of Ten Years Ago ...

'**David Turner** (1948 - 2010) would regularly spend his Summer holidays touring the Outer Hebrides via various Gatliff hostels and invariably stayed at Berneray for the New Year. He seemed to know everyone on the islands.' (Editor: John Humphries) [*His trusteeship was short-lived, though his gift of good company long-remembered*]



*The Call of the CalMac Ferry was the cover photo of Edition 52*

## Fifteen ...

'Stocks of **Neil Pinkett's Walks from the Gatliff Hostel at Reinigeadal** are high and sales are slow, despite publicity in *Walk*, the *John Muir Trust Journal* and the Newsletter of the Mountain Bothies Association.' (Editor: John Humphries) [*The last few copies are still available - Contact the Editor for a copy at £3.00*]

## Twenty ...

'The GHHT website is now up and running and can be found at [www.gatliff.org.uk](http://www.gatliff.org.uk). Initial reaction has been very encouraging. The pages will be continually improved and updated over the coming months. Our thanks go to Hugh Lorimer for his excellent work.' (Editor: Lawrence Washington) [*The beginning of a revolution*]

## Twenty-five ...

'The **path** from the Tarbert road to the Rhenigidale hostel has been widened and improved. The three bridges have been renewed, making this a very pleasant (though still arduous) walk indeed.' (Editor: Jim McFarlane) [*A footpath with both a history and a devoted following*]

## Thirty ...

'Sadly, the **Garenin Hostel** did not open for business this Summer, to the disappointment of both ourselves and John & Pat MacGregor, the wardens in waiting.' (Editor: Richard Genner) [*Things came to pass, but disappointment featured throughout the hostel's history*]

## ... and now Thirty-five

'**John Joyce's** work-party in June built the new Berneray roof. It is boarded, felted and battened ready for thatch. The walls have been built up and sealed. All the internal partitions were removed and one wall was repointed. The corrugated iron porch has been demolished.' (Editor: Peter Clarke) [*The construction commitment continued*]

Rhenigidale – North Harris

Berneray – North Uist

Howmore – South Uist



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## Covid-19 in the Western Isles

By September, the Western Isles had a total cumulative number of ten cases since the Covid **virus** outbreak of 2020. It was the lowest figure for any area in Scotland. All involved mild symptoms with recovery at home. October saw 50 people affected in Eriskay, South Uist and Berneray, with the great majority not especially unwell. One person died of the condition, in a care home at Daliburgh, South Uist.

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## Use, Don't Lose

One legacy that each new generation acquires is the network of footpaths and rights of way throughout the British Isles. If they are not used or mapped, they can be lost. For the past 175 years, **ScotWays** - The Scottish Rights of Way and Access Society, of which the Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust is a 'supporter organisation', has been protecting and promoting. For up-to-date information - [www.scotways.com](http://www.scotways.com)

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## Cards to Collect

**Julian Paren** has produced a set of four postcards of the three hostels and their locations. Some are now in short supply and so if you would like to secure a set for £2 or two for £3, please contact the Newsletter Editor (below) with a cheque made out to the GHHT or an email request for banking details.

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## A Small Stream of Revenue from a Mighty River

With the approaching season of present-giving, it's worth remembering that **Amazon** will donate a small proportion of the price of goods purchased to the GHHT when 'Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust' is selected from the [smile.amazon.co.uk](http://smile.amazon.co.uk) website.