

# *Hebridean Hostellers*

**Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust**

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

**Newsletter 69**

**Spring 2021**



●  
**Rhenigidale**

●  
**Berneray**



●  
**Howmore**



**Miniatures  
as Memorabilia**

*Unable to Visit?  
Let the Hostels  
Come to You!*

# From the Chair

**Peter Clarke writes:** ‘Now at last is there a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel? Will we be able to **open** the hostels soon? I hope so. But let me be clear, we can only open when it is declared safe for strangers to mingle freely indoors without the need for social distancing or face-masks. It is good that the easing of lockdown restrictions has started. I hope it is not another false dawn.

Of course, we closed the hostels for good reason. It was the **right** decision and remains the right decision to remain closed, although it is hard to bear. I have been fortunate enough to pay another visit to Berneray and Howmore and am pleased to report that all is well. Sadly, I did not have time to get to Rhenigidale.

Two members, Jerry Knott from Kent and Diane Butcher from Cumbria, helped with some useful work in the grounds of Howmore hostel. The sun was shining, but there was a biting breeze. I am grateful to both for breaking into their holidays. I shall be in the Outer Hebrides for most of July. If you are **planning** a visit to the islands and can spare a day or two, please get in touch. There is plenty to do.

In late April / early May the islands were **quiet**. I saw one or two cyclists, mostly with tents on their panniers. The ferries were empty too. Social distancing measures were in place. While on Berneray I took the opportunity to pay my respects to the wardens from 1978 to 1996, twin sisters Annie and Jessie. They are buried side-by-side in Berneray cemetery. Jessie passed away in 2009, Annie in 2014. May they rest in peace.’

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## Honours List

The 2021 New Year’s Honours List carried the names of two people closely associated with the Gatliff Trust, announcing their **MBE** (Member of the Order of the British Empire) Awards. Peter Clarke, of Alexandra Park, North London, received his for services to the Outer Hebrides, with his promotion of our hostels together with the publication of his book, *The Outer Hebrides The Timeless Way*, which inspired The Hebridean Way. He was also honoured for his work with the community of Tottenham.

Kenneth MacKay, of Rhenigidale, had his many years of work in the village **recognised**. He was the postman from 1975 - 87, when walking to and from Tarbert was required; a driving force in acquiring road access and a telephone link to the village; the author of *Rhenigidale: A Community’s Fight for Survival*; and his assisting Herbert Gatliff in establishing the first of his hostels there in 1962.

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However, we know that his interests in the hostels will continue for he remains a Gatliff trustee. There is one word associated with both the building requirements in the Western Isles and the character of those individuals responsible for them - ‘staunchness’. We are **indebted** to John for his many undertakings and achievements that have brought permanence and pleasure to those who cherish the Gatliff ideals and to those who appreciate comforts, which on stark coasts do not come into being by chance.

# John Joyce Retiring as Project Manager

Every **successful** organisation requires inspiration, dedication and perspiration. There have been six hostels devised and constructed during the seven-decade Gatliff history and these have owed their existence to a number of steadfast individuals. The founder, Herbert Gatliff, commissioned those such as Arthur Meaby and Frank Martin to bring his ideas to reality. He also had the foresight to acquire the attention of younger men and to set them on a path of commitment to his causes.

Such a person was John Joyce who, when 22, got talking to Gatliff, the hostelling **stalwart** 50 years his senior, on a railway station platform after a Southern YHA meeting in 1969. They were drawn to each other and in a regular series of meetings discussed a wide range of topics from philosophy, literature, politics and wilder open spaces to basic hostelling issues.

John and his wife-to-be, Maggie, first **experienced** a Hebridean hostel stay in the Summer of '72. He returned to work on Rhenigidale, an assignment noted at the Gatliff Trust's 35th Meeting of Trustees at the Cambridge Youth Hostel on Saturday 6 June 1974, attended by Herbert Gatliff, Bernard Selwyn and Frank Martin. The entry begins, 'John Joyce and eight friends had gone by minibus...'



All the materials and supplies had to be brought in by boat. This project involving repairs, anchoring the Elsan hut and decoration of the Common Room, was to be the first of many. He **investigated** the ruins of the Garenin village at Gatliff's behest and this led eventually to John's half-brother, the late Alan Gay, undertaking much of the interior work at the new hostel there in 1991.

In 1985, John undertook the ambitious roofing project at Berneray which led to further volunteer work parties. Visitors tend to remember the hostels in idyllic summery conditions, while John's assignments often involved volunteers working in the quiet month of November when wind, rain and darkness were the norm. He recalls those conditions as the formidable background to the re-modelling of the Howmore hostel. For **endurance** alone he deserves the appreciation of those merely taking overnight stays.

John originally worked in insurance, but in 1971 decided to qualify, through evening classes, for admission to a Psychology Degree and postgrad courses at the North East London Polytechnic and the University of Aston. After a period mostly working for the Virgin Group and becoming a father, a career in primary school education opened with his **specialising** in science co-ordinating and then home-tutoring excluded children.

Now retirement from his Project Manager commitments beckons. He looks forward to more time **pursuing** his interest in art, writing and outdoor activities and to travelling with Maggie to different parts of the world, especially south-east Asia as their son lives in Singapore. He aims to follow in her wake with her pastime of wild swimming. So, his taking the London to Scotland journey will be occasional, not frequent.

# Paul Absolon and Jerry Knott on Highs

**Paul Absolon writes:** ‘My mate, Jerry, introduced me to the Western Isles - and the Gatliff hostels - back in 2013. We have been several times since, but for 2019 we wished to do something a little different. So, we left our bikes at home. Our plan was to climb the highest points on each of the nine main islands in a week.

Having arrived in Stornoway, first up was **Mealaisbhal**, the highest point in Lewis at 574m. Parking off the road to Brèinis, it’s an easy route to the summit. There are great views looking across the miles of wilderness to the mountains to the South. A bonus was time spent on the beautiful and deserted beach at Mangersta; then it was on to Rhenigidale for the night.

Next was **Clisham**, the highest point of Harris at 799m, with snow on the summit. It’s a straightforward climb, but beware of the boggy bits (Don’t ask me how I know!). The top provided wonderful views interspersed with the occasional snow flurry. A drive to a lunchtime ferry across the Sound of Harris (surely one of the world’s iconic ferry crossings?) and we were at Berneray.

Here we cheated. We had visited **Beinn Shèible** (only 93m!) - an easy walk from the hostel - in a previous year, on a sparkling clear day, and had great views of St Kilda. Instead, we had a lazy afternoon sitting out front watching great northern divers, seals and other assorted wildlife. The hostel was bustling - a contrast to the quiet night at Rhenigidale.

At Drim Sidnish, Loch Euphort, there is a small parking area. From here it’s a delightful six-and-half mile round trip to the top of **Eabhal**, at 347m the highest spot in North Uist. The summit’s panorama was a blue and green tapestry of long coast and numerous lochs - the Western isles epitomised - although the stepping-stones near the start are best not tried at a high tide.

Lunch and a pint of Ossian at the Westford Inn (a must-visit on every trip) and we were on the road to Benbecula. Its highest point is **Ruabhal**, only 124m high, a gentle stroll. In the late afternoon we reached Howmore with corncrakes calling, snipe drumming and sunset from the beach. It was idyllic.

**Beinn Mhor**, at 620m the South Uist summit, is not as high as Clisham, but makes up for it in drama. It’s an eight-mile walk with an easy start culminating in a great final ridge that is easier than it looks. We were accompanied on the last steps by several soaring eagles. At the summit we looked back at neighbouring Hecla and in the distance across the sea, Skye.

It was back to a busy Howmore for the night. A new arrival asked me for ‘the wi-fi code’. I had to disappoint her. Three more heights to go and our ambition was to do these in one day. Eriskay was first, with **Ben Scrien** at 186m. From the road there is a bit of cross-country, then a path to the summit. Again, it was a beautiful day looking across the Sound of Barra with the ferry on its way.

We were shortly on Barra, where **Heabhal** (384m) awaited us. It is a very steep climb to ‘Our Lady of the Sea’, the Madonna and child statue near the top, where a path winds its way round the final ascent and the summit affords great views across Castlebay to the southernmost islands.

Arriving in Castlebay, we dropped off our gear at the Tigh na Mara Guest House and headed out for an early meal at the Café Kisimul. This set us up for our final climb, **Heiseabhal Mòr** at 190m on Vatersay. An hour's walk, no real path, but the trig point was easy to find. As we descended the sun was setting. The next day the ferry took us back to Oban.

We enjoyed this alternative way to **experience** the islands and explore what they have to offer. We celebrated each hilltop with a tot of single malt - with the exception of Beinn Shèible, of course. Here the dram was imbibed on the Berneray beach.

Now we are looking forward to the next time, when we can visit the Gatliff hostels again. There is always going to be something to **discover** in these unique and beguiling places 'out on the edge.' We are drawn back year after year.'



*Berneray - prominent seascape and distant landscape photographed by Peter Clarke*

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## From the Letter of the Week

The final paragraph of the letter of Carol Rutherford, from Derbyshire, in the Travel on Sunday section of the *Sunday Telegraph* - 2 May 2021 - will not surprise regular readers of this newsletter:

‘Our lodging in **Berneray** was the Gatliff Hebridean Trust hostel: basic traditional black houses, right on another spectacular beach. The incomparable experience eclipsed the privations (at £16 per night). My new friend promised more such beaches. He was right. The following day, after taking the ferry to Harris, I rounded a bend and saw Luskentyre Beach before me. I cried.’

# Miniatures (on the Front Cover) as Memorabilia

The Gatliff hostels may have experienced, during the recent lockdowns, their first static phase. From being open 24/7 for many years to having to be fitted with padlocks is, thankfully, a new and temporary feature. However, the dynamic behind these simple hostels in the Hebrides continues. One aspect is an **initiative** to present miniatures that will serve as memorabilia for visitors as well as devotees.

**Iain Dingwall** is the creator and craftsman behind this move. He started work as a lithographic reproduction artist in the printing industry before moving into the graphic side of advertising. His career took him to becoming both an Art and Creative Director; while his outdoor interests led to rock-climbing in Scotland and England, hitch-hiking to high destinations and staying in bothies.

His grandmother was born and bred in Ceallan, North Uist, and, on a recent visit, he stayed at the Berneray hostel. Here he was **inspired** to make a model of the buildings. This interest in miniaturisation developed from his construction of house extensions, a stone jetty at his holiday home and, down in size, furniture as well as Christmas decorations.

With the creation of replicas of croft-houses, castles and lighthouses came bespoke requests. Iain's models are hand-crafted from wood, individually **unique** and, in our case, the buildings cost £15 each - so that's the price (with posting and packing additional) for Rhenigidale and Howmore, with Berneray at £30 (plus p&p). He looks forward to the 'Gatliff Challenge' - first with orders from our members.

For further details, please **contact** Iain on [iaindingwallcreative@gmail.com](mailto:iaindingwallcreative@gmail.com)



*Seven Howmore buildings, both ancient and modern, captured by Peter Clarke's camera*

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

‘Details of CalMac’s Summer sailings from **Mallaig to Lochboisdale**, South Uist, have been published. This improved service, the upgraded road from Fort William and the rail link from Glasgow, make Howmore more accessible.’ (Editor: John Humphries) [*Hope these services continue, post-lockdown*]

## **and of Ten Years Ago ...**

‘The number of visitors to the Gatliff **website** has increased somewhat dramatically this year. In the first two months of 2011 the average daily rate of visits was over 100. Out of 6132 visits, 4122 were by first-timers.’ (Editor: John Humphries) [*The revolution was gathering pace*]

## **Fifteen ...**

‘**Matthew Parris**, who writes the Another Voice column in *The Spectator*, described at length, his mid-November visit to the Western Isles, in general, and to Berneray in particular.’ (Editor: John Humphries) [*Let’s hope that his enthusiasm will continue to inspire others to stay this coming winter*]

## **Twenty ...**

‘The islands have been quiet so far this year, the outbreak of **Foot & Mouth Disease** clearly affecting the visitor numbers.’ (Editor: Lawrence Washington) [*Viral infections have made their impact previously*]

## **Twenty-five ...**

‘Len Clark has written a booklet, **Herbert Gatliff - An English Eccentric**, and it has just been published by the Gatliff Trust.’ (Editor: Jim McFarlane) [*Go to [gatliff.org.uk](http://gatliff.org.uk) and click onto ‘About’ for the drop-down menu on how to read and / or acquire the publication*]

## **Thirty ...**

‘Other volunteers from **North Ely Expeditions** went to Berneray and carried out maintenance at the hostel and, at long last, removed the last of the bunk beds from the Common Room to the Dormitory.’ (Editor: Richard Genner) [*Were meals and slumber jointly available for a time?*]

## **... and Thirty-five**

‘The road has not reached **Rhenigidale** and looks unlikely to reach it in the near future. It is about half-way there. The money has run out and the prospect of further funding looks bleak.’ (Editor: Peter Clarke) [*A case of looking on the bleak, rather than the bright, side*]



*Part of the Rhenigidale road, when completed.*

Rhenigidale – North Harris

Berneray – North Uist

Howmore – South Uist



## **GHHT - AGM Saturday 26 June 2021**

You may be a seasoned **Zoom-user** or a novice wanting to experience something that has certainly been an innovation in personal and business communications. The opportunity to meet fellow-Gatliff-enthusiasts presents itself from 09.45 on the Saturday close to Midsummer's Day. What's more, there's no need to leave home! Just submit the enclosed Attendance Form.

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## **'Divine' According to the 'Travel Bible'**

The Lonely Planet's Guide is acknowledged as being a 'Travel Bible'. The daily paper with a local edition covering the Western Islands, the Aberdeen-based *The Press and Journal*, presented an article based on how the Guide rated **Berneray's West Beach** as both 'divine' and the third-best in Europe, after Norway's Haukland Beach and Sardinia's Cala Goloritzè. It included:

'Here, the three-mile stretch of sand, within easy walking distance of the hostel, features white sand sliding gently into a turquoise sea. There are only 130 residents on the island and consequently plenty of space as well as long summer days for visitors to savour this **world-class** phenomenon. Among many admirers is the Prince of Wales, who has enjoyed staying on Berneray during the past 25 years.

He learnt crofting skills and appreciated the hospitality of Gloria MacKillop and her late husband, Donald Alick, known as 'Splash'. The island's way of life was close to his own philosophy and he 'exported' several crofting techniques to his organic farm at Highgrove. This was his **'treasure island'** and its many attributes may be shared by Gatliff hostellers.'

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