

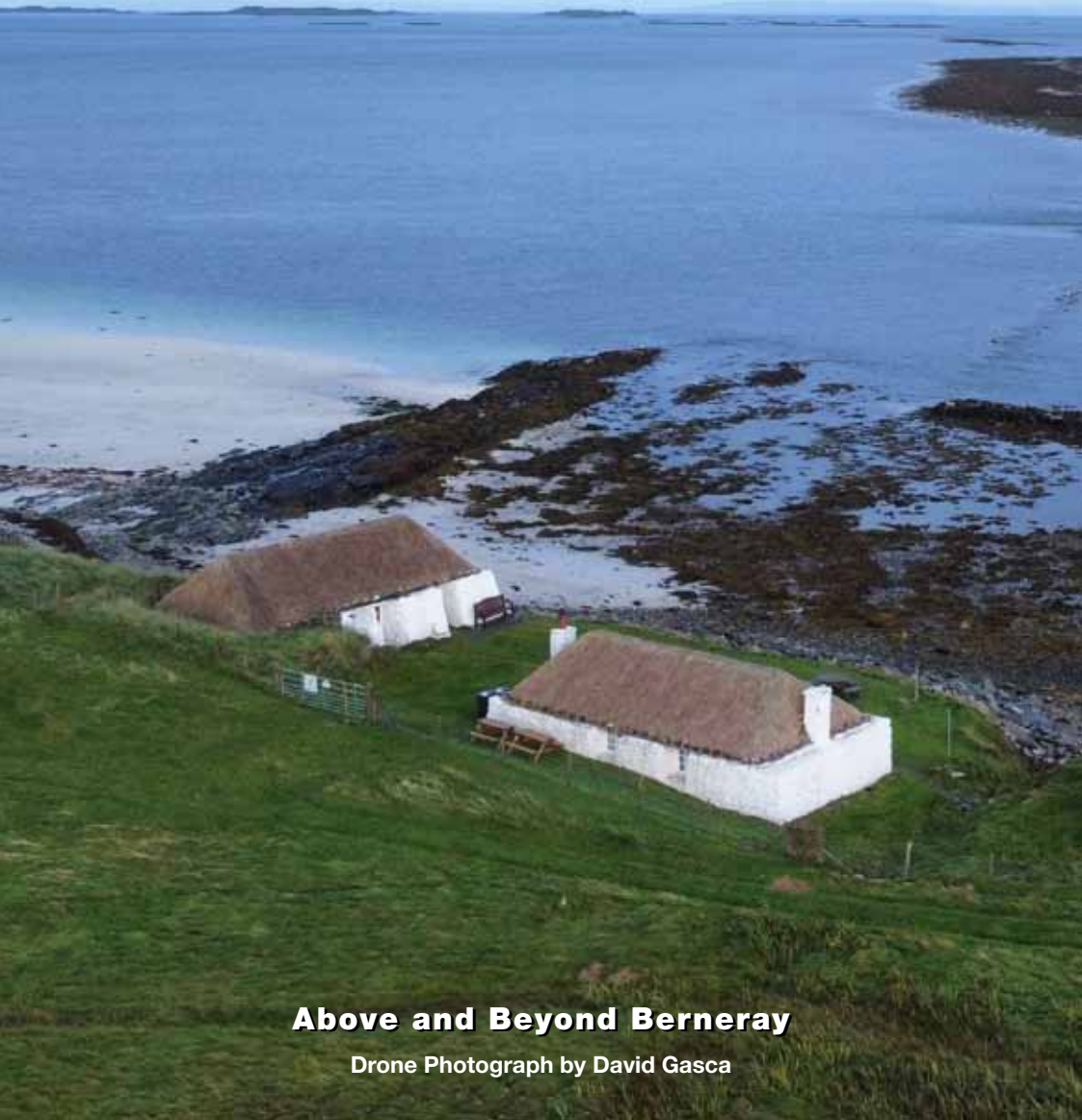
Hebridean Hostellers

Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust

www.gatliff.org.uk

Newsletter 70

Autumn 2021



Above and Beyond Berneray

Drone Photograph by David Gasca

From the Chair

Peter Clarke writes: Back in 2016, the Society of Ancient Buildings Scotland, generously grant-funded by Historic Environment Scotland, published a wonderful compendium by Zoe Herbert of all the **thatched buildings** in Scotland. Of the 331 buildings surveyed, only 221 were thatched. Of these, the Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust is responsible for three, the two buildings at Berneray hostel and the original hostel at Howmore. These two sites are both in Conservation Areas, which makes the task of looking after them very interesting.

I often wonder about the history of thatched buildings. I believe that the Berneray house was a cotters house. The **occupants** may have worked on the island's crofts and / or fished, but they gained no rights under the Crofters Holdings (Scotland) Act 1886, the first Act of Parliament which recognised crofters. The occupants of the house at Howmore were in a worse position, as they were squatting on the Common Grazing. In other words, they had no legal right to stay on the land. In England, plenty of squatters on common land were evicted when parishes were enclosed.

I am no expert on thatched houses, but my time spent studying the reconstructed houses at the Highland Folk Museum's outdoor site at Newtonmore convinced me that many of the ruins we see in the islands today were a simple consequence of people having to **move** from time to time. They left the stone walls but took the roof timbers, for hewn wood was precious. The family then built and thatched a new home elsewhere.

We should not lose sight of this fact. I therefore cannot help wondering if it is possible for people today to re-learn some of these vernacular building skills which had been picked up by trial and error. Indeed, I believe this methodology is still in use. If we can encourage such a skill base, it could save the Trust a great deal of money and be a major contribution to securing the future of the thatched buildings in our **care**.'



A fogbow, sometimes called a white rainbow, seen from Garenin, Lewis. Photograph by Carol Ashdown.

New Articles of Association

'I must add a word of thanks to all those who attended the Extraordinary General Meeting or voted by proxy. Your resounding **endorsement** of the new Articles was a well-earned reward for all the hard work which has gone into the exercise over the past year. Particular thanks are owed to Alan Busson, our Company Secretary, who steered through the new Articles.'

Howmore Marker

The Church of Scotland at Howmore, yards from the hostel, has long been a navigation marker for shipping on the Atlantic side of South Uist. It has recently been refurbished and is now not just the island's only Protestant church, but includes an **interpretative centre** for the several strands of the Christian religion that feature in the long and remarkable history of the village.



*Photograph by M J Richardson -
Geograph, Creative Commons Licence.*

Tommy Tosh

When Claddach Baleshare, North Uist, opened in 1982 as the fifth Gatliff hostel, Catriona Tosh was warden. She was ably supported by her husband, Tommy, who had originally moved to the Hebrides to undertake building work. He continued, after her death in 2012, to live close to the former hostel, which had ceased to operate in 1993, and died on 14 September 2020. His contributions are much **appreciated**.

Dwellings of the Past

Gatliff hostel-users can think of themselves as being adventurers in simple accommodation, remotely distant. A new book puts matters in perspective. The so-called '**Beehive Dwellings**', many of which are to be found in south-west Lewis, resembled stone igloos with a turf coat. They were home to hunter-gatherers from the 8th Century AD until the last occupants left in the second half of the 19th Century.

Marc Calhoun's *Beehive Dwellings of the Hebrides: A Photographic Record*, published by Stornoway-based Acair [9-781-789070077-4] at £20 has fine features - paper and print quality, photographic reproduction, layout, sheer weight and, of course, content. The last both details and illustrates **a way of life** that has disappeared, with the shelters used by monks, pilgrims, farmers and their livestock fast eroding.

Herbert Gatliff Revived

The volunteer archivist of the Youth Hostels Association of England & Wales, **John Martin**, has compiled a remarkable document giving fascinating details of all the organisation's hostels, past and present. Take a search engine, enter Y900003, bring up your favourites and 'read all about them'. Then, to find out more about our founder, press Ctrl and F, and type Gatliff in the top right-hand box.

Some six references to **Herbert Gatliff** will appear, relating to the four hostels featured below. Three of the entries were written by him in 1934 for *Southern Pathfinder*. His maverick tendencies, penetrating observations, genial approach and enthusiastic ways are certainly evident. So, after almost 90 years, the personality of a committed innovator is revived in this document and these edited extractions.



Herbert Gatliff 1897 - 1977.

Nether Wallop 1933 to 1940. Stockbridge and Salisbury Road (A30), Hampshire. 'A very different place is Nether Wallop. Remember first that it is neither Nether nor Wallop, but high on the open hills, three miles out by a road that runs right over the roof of the Downs unflinchingly into the south-west wind. It was a wet wind when we walked into it that July evening at an hour when I had hoped to be at supper. But, at last, we found the hostel, and in it that spirit of good cheer that befits a hostel whose warden is an old sailor. Soon we were passably dry and set to work to cook our supper from the ample stocks we had laid in from the grocer in the last village just as he was closing. The hostel (an old army hutment) is not a spacious one; indeed, there is (or was) almost need of a notice 'Cooking facilities for thin hostellers and small eggs only.' Still, we fed well and slept well, and next morning were well rewarded for our wetting; the rain-washed air was keen like wine, and full of the golden sparkle of sunrise in an unclouded sky, and all around us the long soft sweep of the hills.' *Southern Pathfinder* - Spring 1934.

Buxted 1931 to 1934. Alternative name: **Lepham's Bridge**, Coopers Green, Uckfield, Sussex. There were 76 bednights between May and September 1931. It closed in 1934, after Christmas as it did not conform to standards laid down. 'Another hostel that will always live in my mind is Lepham's Bridge. We came to it, a party of 15, after 25 miles' walking on that August bank holiday Sunday when the heat was beyond 90 in the shade. Hour after hour we had walked on in the hot, fresh sunshine, regretful that we could find no lake to bathe in, but still cheerful. In the fading evening light, as the air grew cool and a light mist rose on the streams, we came over Ashdown Forest and by valley and woodland, stumbling at last in the dim twilight away from the path through a copse and field to the hostel. There we found a scene almost, one felt, as it must have been in the days when the pilgrims went to Canterbury.

By the glimmer of oil-lamps we could see hostellers crowded on every bench, drinking tea and eating tomatoes and eggs and cheese - there was hardly space to cook or eat anything more elaborate - and in the doorway Mr Martin handing out blankets and stores. Somehow, we found our sleeping quarters - we latecomers were put on stretchers in the barn - and our supper. And when we were fed and rested a little, Mrs Martin came in and played, and we sang fitfully and not very tunefully maybe, but with our hearts full of the afterglow of sunset. Some of the old songs, one above all, 'Annie Laurie', I shall never forget; it was one of those rare moments when time stands still. And so to bed in the barn. I hope I may go to Lephams again many times. It will never be one of those neat and orderly places dear to committees. You cannot expect the mechanical perfections of a Corner House in a range of outbuildings grouped round a farmyard, where you fetch water from a pump and when the kitchen is overfull do the rest of your cooking on a fire of old wood in the yard. But Lephams when it is full has a gaiety of its own; it hums merrily like a slightly disordered beehive, as 'Jack' Hobbs with his busy smile flits to and fro.' *Southern Pathfinder* - Spring 1934.

Winchester 1931 to 2005. The City Mill, 1 Water Lane (formerly 4 Bridge Street), Winchester, Hampshire SO23 0EJ. 'Over all Joey, best of wardens, rules with brisk understanding. Lights out is no empty command at Winchester. Gently, but surely, we are marshalled to bed; one or two of the more restless spirits murmuring maybe of the tyranny of woman, but obedient withal; no bedside gossip here; soon the voices of hostellers are stilled, and only the voice of the river goes on filling every corner and every minute.' *Southern Pathfinder* - Spring 1934.

Overton 1962 to 1992. The Old Infants School, Red Lion Lane, Overton, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG25 3HH. 'It was hoped to open here at Easter 1962, though everything depended on the weather and the builder. A 30-bed self-catering establishment, it replaced Hannington Hostel, and took some of its equipment from there. An official opening, conducted by Herbert Gatliff, followed on 21 July 1962. London Region reports that carefully laid plans 'all went splendidly astray'. It started with a downpour of rain, continued with the delay of the Regional Chairman in a traffic jam so that an unbriefed deputy had to act as MC and ended when someone forgot to put on the kettles for tea.

However, everyone seemed to enjoy the event. The report concludes 'At least the local people cannot have gone away under the misconception that we are an efficient organisation'. [*Youth Hosteller*] In the dormitory the space between one of the beds and a partition was so narrow that any plump person would not be able to get into the dormitory.' From the Official Opening Report.



What would Herbert Gatliff have made of the hostel at Garenin, opened in 1991 and closed in 2011? Photograph by Carol Ashdown.

The Courtship by Craft of Three Isabella Ms

We rightly look with some amazement at the location of **Rhenigidale** and ponder that around one hundred years after the invention of the internal combustion engine to power vehicles, the settlement was, finally, linked to the national road network. Petitioning for the connection was raised in the 1930s and vehicle access achieved with a four-wheel-drive track in the late 1980s.

1990, when the population had fallen to eleven, saw the metalled road completed and traffic. At the same time the telephone system was updated, so that the only local phone - with the number Rhenigidale 1 - was replaced with more instruments in several houses. Mains electricity had been introduced some ten years earlier. So, as the Millennium approached, Rhenigidale was **ready**.

Looking to the 19th Century, and to the life of one man in particular, a fundamental difference is apparent.

Duncan Mackay (1809 - 1884), who descended from Scarp ancestry, came from Harris to Valamus as a drover. This small settlement is in the south of the vast deer park, The Pairc, with its interior deserted over the centuries.



Valamus, The Pairc, photographed by John Randall.

In **1833**, he moved to Orinsay, on the shore of Loch Shell, married Isabella MacLennan from that village and

took up residence with her at Shildenish, at the head of Loch Erisort, where their son Norman was born. He married again in 1837, to another Isabella, nee Montgomery, of Balallan, and they had four children. She died in 1857 and four years later he had met his third Isabella, nee Mackay (1831 - 1905).

She was from Rhenigidale, the daughter of Roderick Mackay and Catherine Macsween, and moved with her husband to Kershader where they had four children. Of the nine children belonging to Duncan, who died aged 73, four are recorded as surviving to adult years. It is remarkable that within 27 years he had met, courted and married **three** women bearing the same forename.

However, two features of life in that era are evident. Death stalked the locality, with childbirth an obstacle to survival and no guarantee of existence for either mother or infant. Secondly, how was a man able to get around such a large area of land? The answer is in sailing **craft** and rowing boats that negotiated the sea and loch routes between communities.

At least the *Margaret Rae*, which brought supplies from Tarbert to Rhenigidale and its storehouse for retail sales at nearby Gearraidh Lotaigear until the late 1980s, had a motor. It could travel independent of wind or manpower. Duncan Mackay had relied on simpler craft and, obviously, sound and successful techniques of **courtship**.

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

‘For many years **Kenny (MacKay)** has worked to chronicle Rhenigidale’s story - the life and death struggle with powers unknown but with a happy ending’
(Editor: John Humphries) [*Kenny ‘s MBE award acknowledged his lifelong work*]

and of Ten Years Ago ...

‘Every organisation founded by a dynamic individual needs key pivotal people to see that a transition takes place. Herbert Gatliff was a driving force ... It is thanks to **Frank Martin** that the Gatliff Trust and its hostels continue to thrive.’
(Editor: John Humphries) [*Frank died, aged 69, on 3 August 2011*]

Fifteen ...

‘CalMac’s new timetables have seen the introduction of **Sunday** services on the Leverburgh - Berneray ferry, So, for the first time ever cars and passengers can access Harris from North Uist and continue through to Lewis on Sundays.’
(Editor: John Humphries) [*Social changes come and ... come!*]

Twenty ...

‘This Summer saw the completion of one of the last major transport links in the Western Isles with the opening of the new 1.6km **causeway** from South Uist to Eriskay. Major construction work on the new terminal at Aird Mhor, Barra, began in the Autumn.’ (Editor: Lawrence Washington) [*Final sections in the chain.*]

Twenty-five ...

‘The new (Howmore) **annexe** was open from October and is proving a great success. The accommodation consists of common room, kitchen, disabled dormitory, washroom and shower.’ (Editor: Jim McFarlane)
[*Several changes ago.*]

Thirty ...

‘**Berneray** Hostel was rethatched earlier this year, just before the main season, by Donald Angie MacAskill, Berneray’s thatcher, but better known as its ferryman.’ (Editor: Richard Genner) [*Multi-tasking is an island attribute.*]

... and Thirty-five

‘There are plans to improve the hostel at **Claddach Baleshare** to provide space for the WC and a wash-room. Initially a stone porch was favoured, but now using a second building seems possible.’ (Editor: Peter Clarke) [*Closure came in ‘93.*]



Eriskay Causeway by Roderick MacLean.

To Be Ready to Restart

We need to be ready for re-opening, all being well in 2022 once the authorities have given us the **go-ahead**. The hostels will have been shuttered for around two years and work-parties will be required for basic preparing. If you are possibly able to assist, at times to be announced, please contact the Company Secretary.

A Portfolio to be Acquired?

In July, while routine maintenance work was being undertaken at Berneray, three visitors arrived. Erin, a young lady, had brought her mother and brother to see where, some years ago, she had researched topics for a thesis on land use. She expressed a willingness to supply a copy of her work for access through our website - to start what could be a portfolio of material associated with the islands.



Land and Sea Use on Berneray - drone photo by David Gasca.

Alas, she did not contact us again. However, it would be good if others, who have completed similar assignments, responded by submitting them. Herbert Gatliff aroused interest in his endeavours by subsidising such **activities**. Please dig out your papers, projects and theses; then contact the Editor.

The Amazon Smile

As the festive season involving present-giving draws near, do consider the way in which Amazon can present charities, including the Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust, with **donations** based upon customers' purchases. Go to their Smile section and see how with the effortless press of a computer key you can generate additional income for us.