

# ***Hebridean Hostellers***

**Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust**

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

**Newsletter 71**

**Spring 2022**



**Silver Lining in Evidence above Howmore**

Photograph by Peter Clarke

# From the Chair

**Peter Clarke writes:** Two long years ago, on 18 March 2020, the doors of the hostels closed in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, now it looks pretty certain that we will be able to **re-open** in the late Spring or early Summer. The date will be announced on the home page of our website as soon as it is available.

The hostel organisers (Christine Fletcher: Berneray) (Alan Busson: Rhenigidale) and (myself: Howmore) are working on the details. These will be broadcast when we announce the date of opening. Our **goal** is to ensure that the hostels operate just as they have always done. One thing we are clear about is that we will not be taking any bookings, as before.

Covid has not gone away. Consequently, I ask all hostellers to remain **cautious** and act with their usual respect towards fellow-users. With the greatest regret, we will not be able to permit camping or provide facilities for campers at Berneray. Our plot is simply too small. Nor are we able to provide facilities for wild campers from pitches elsewhere on the island.

We have never been able to authorise camping on the land surrounding the hostel. This is croft land, including that around the ruin adjacent to the south side of the hostel. The croft changed hands just before the pandemic and the new crofters are actively developing their own **enterprises**. We wish them well.

These have been difficult years in the history of the **Gatliff** movement, but we have pulled through thanks to your superb support, understanding and encouragement. Thank you. The Trust is financially sound. The Trustees are focused and determined to make sure that the hostels are as cosy and convenient as they have always been.

Can it really be true that we are working towards re-opening? Yes, but I am still pinching myself. The idea fills me with joy, so I hope I am not disappointed. Incidentally, we are no longer using Facebook to convey these messages. We have closed our account on this strand of the internet, although **delighted** to anticipate re-opening our accommodation facilities in reality.

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## Memento Vivere

After some two years of global preoccupation with a pandemic, losses, closures and restrictions, why not celebrate the forthcoming re-opening of our hostels with a Memento Vivere, which recalls the pleasures of life? These miniatures, featured in the Spring 2021 issue, are **reminders** of places treasured as part of the Outdoor Movement and of destinations providing comfort, company and conviviality. Contact Iain Dingwall on [iaindingwallcreative@gmail.com](mailto:iaindingwallcreative@gmail.com)



# Net Zero

The Government's Net Zero Strategy sets out policies and proposals for **decarbonising** all sectors of the UK economy by 2050. It requires that any remaining carbon dioxide emissions are balanced by absorption through natural sinks, like forests, and by new technologies. It lists a series of ambitions relating to areas such as green transport, greener buildings and protection of the natural environment.

The obvious issues for the hostels relate to the amount of **electricity** consumed, its origins and the use of fossil fuel in the stoves. The Government is encouraging the introduction of heat pumps, with a view to reducing gas emissions and/or ensuring they are balanced, for example, by carbon offsetting. It is not yet clear whether heat pumps will be a feasible option for the hostels.

Perhaps, funding will be made available to charities for such installations? Meanwhile, The Western Isles are one of seven 'Climate Beacons' funded by the Scottish Government, Creative Scotland and Museum Galleries Scotland. This may well offer an **opportunity** for the GHHT to engage with local initiatives relating to the significant Climate Change and Net Zero issues.

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# Rescue Services

The Gatliff Trust **donates** to causes that its founder, Herbert Gatliff, would have supported. Outdoor activities were close to his heart and the Braemar Mountain Rescue Association was recently presented with a cheque for £1500. Its Treasurer, Derek Edge, is pictured here with our Company Secretary, Alan Busson, who reports that the Association has widely publicised the gift.

They have a team of 35 members, eight of whom are serving police officers, attend around **40 callouts** per year and their headquarters house part of the Scottish Avalanche Service, which provides daily reports. They receive limited funding from the Scottish Government but are dependent on voluntary donations to acquire and service sophisticated rescue equipment.



*Carol Busson photographed the presentation to Derek Edge (left) by her husband, Alan.*

## *Seeking Simple Shelter*

We don't know a lot about the history of our hostel buildings before **Herbert Gatliff** took an interest. Who lived in Howmore as the 19th Century became the 20th? Why was Berneray built on such a beautiful sea-shore, but weather-prone spot? How did the timber, plaster, paint, nails, the whole range of material to build a house, get to the then extremely isolated Rhenigidale?

Some detailed research will tell us more, but how much more? We do know that our buildings were homes not long before they became hostels and that only relatively limited structural work was required. An attractive consequence is that the transitions **bequeathed** a homely feeling. This is a factor that has led to the often-used phrase of 'hostels of destination'.

**Richard Genner**, editor of this newsletter from 1988 until 1994, has used, renovated and maintained bothies all his adult life. Many of the bothies cared for by the Mountain Bothies Association were in near move-in condition when they came under MBA stewardship, but an equal number required extensive renovation as the trustees of the now 57-year-old organisation realised.

Collapsed roofs and unsteady walls, rotten or 'gone-up-the-lum' floors featured. 'The building's blind eyes looked across the moor,' is how one MBA member feelingly described a windowless structure. However, after the First World War, many of these structures were used as basic accommodation for those **exploring** hills and mountainous regions as they opened up through the Outdoor Movement.

Richard spent some of lockdown time exploring such pre-MBA use of bothies and found more accounts than he expected, in no small part thanks to the number of mountaineering, climbing and hillwalking clubs that have put their full back-catalogue of newsletters and journals **online**. *Hebridean Hostellers* also enjoys that modern dimension.

He comments that they are very interesting publications to read, to discern as the years roll by, how clubs developed, how the hills were opened up and how social attitudes and behaviours



*The Uisinis Bothy, South Uist - photographed by Allan MacDonald - was built after the First World War to help shepherding activities on the remote east side of the island. Its renovation and re-roofing by the MBA took place over five days around New Year's Day 1980. The local weather was cold, dry and clear, without the heavy snow of the mainland. Some work-party members had memorable journeys home.*

changed. With a **wealth** of material discovered about the previous use of bothies - written accounts and photographs - he felt it a waste to let literary efforts of the past slip back into obscurity.

He has collated these accounts into a 'digital book' entitled *Seeking Simple Shelter*, seven .pdf files structured as a hard-back book might be. The most recently added chapter covers the use of bothy-style shelters overseas. This 'book' is both insightful and informative. If you are **inquisitive** about what Richard admits is a niche interest, do contact him on rgatrg11@gmail.com to request a copy.

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## Betty Heath 1932 - 2021

The Summer 2021 edition of the Mountain Bothies Association Journal has a full obituary (on which this is based) by Richard Genner and a number of tributes relating to the Association's founding-member, the remarkable **Betty Heath**. She was a full supporter of the Gatliff hostels and its founder, Herbert Gatliff.

Elizabeth Sheila Taylor grew up in Prestwick and Kilmarnock. Her family was prosperous, with her father running a successful stationery business and her great-grandfather being the illustrious Johnnie Walker of whisky fame. In some ways her **upbringing** had both royal and aristocratic aspects, for her schooling was mainly through teaching by a governess.

She worked as a Milk Officer as part of the government's effort to modernise farming following the Second World War. Despite, or because of, the comforts of her childhood, she used bothies while enjoying the freedoms of the Scottish hills. Her attending the inaugural meeting of the Mountain Bothies Association in Dallmellington in 1965 turned out to be of the utmost personal **significance**.

It was here that she met Bernard Heath for the first time and also became a **founding-member** of the MBA. Five years later they were married and were very active members of the young Association. They settled in Thurso, where Bernard taught at the College, and she was instrumental in fully assisting him as General Secretary of the MBA. Her love of what was termed the 'BBC' - Bernard, Bothies and Cats - never left her.

At a juncture in their lives, they set up a successful business dealing in metallic scrap and growing vegetables at their Dunnet home. Her last outdoor adventure is believed to be two nights' wild camping near Cape Wrath two years before her death. Bernard lives on, but his life is severely curtailed by dementia. Their joint work has left the world a better place through a thriving and **much-loved** organisation.



*Bernard and Betty Heath after being awarded the British Empire Medal in 1991. Photograph by Denis Mollison.*



# Accommodation at Claddach Baleshare

The main intersection on North Uist is at Clachan where the A867 from Lochmaddy joins the A865 section which arches across the north of the island. Claddach Baleshare, the fifth Gatliff hostel which operated for eleven years from 1982, is immediately to the south, where a minor road heads west to the 380-yards-long causeway, opened in 1962, across the sandy stretch of **coastline** to the comparatively flat Baleshare, which rises to 40ft with a population of around 50.

**Dr John McLeod**, of Lochmaddy, had spotted an opportunity for the Trust when he realised that the elderly resident of Ford House, close to the causeway, was moving into a council house. Visitors during the first year were accommodated here, with Catriona Tosh as warden. However, plans for permanency were dashed when the house was sold.

It was then the turn of Catriona to see an **opportunity** by recommending that the hostel move into a building on the croft occupied by her and husband, Tommy, who had come from Dumbarton.

Completion was assisted by his building skills. The arrangement for the continued use of the accommodation was essentially on an informal basis and so capital investment could not be made by the charity.

Annual overnight numbers started at 186 and exceeded 400 only four times. During its final year, it was just two visitors short of 500. Despite the abundant local wildlife and the **fabled** white sands of Baleshare, the hostel was not considered to be a place of destination, but rather a stop-over. Despite the warm welcome of the Toshes, it was not a viable project.

Tommy and Catriona built modern holiday-homes close to their house, Sea Breezes, offered bed-and-breakfast and so continued in the **hospitality** business. She died in 2012 and he, following two years with dementia, in 2020, aged 80. His work had been with the builders, D Macdonald & Co, on Benbecula and some of his active 15 years of retirement were spent grass-cutting, a much-in-demand service.

Had the Gatliff enterprise continued, then it could have made a convenient stopping place on the Hebridean Way. Since our closure, a nearby bunkhouse, My Grandfather's House, has come and gone, while last year, Baleshare Bothies opened new-style residency with two pods close to the beach. It is reassuring that **traditions** continue on the North Uist shore.



*From the island post box, close to Ford House, on Baleshare, photographed by Alasdair MacEachen.*

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

'Janet Moss and Pete Martin, have called themselves 'The Offcomers', researched the island-chain, stayed at our hostels and published **Cycling the Hebridean Way**.' (Editor: John Humphries) [*Still available on Amazon at £14 / Go Smile and support the GHHT*]

## and of Ten Years Ago ...

'74% of people support charities during their lifetime, but only 7% do so in their wills. The HMRC is attempting to change this imbalance with its **Legacy 10** scheme that reduces Inheritance Tax from 40% to 36%.' (Editor: John Humphries) [*Please prompt a recall of this before making your next tax return*]



*Cyclists en route to Rhenigidale, from the cover of the January 2008 issue.*

## Fifteen ...

'A leader in *The Guardian* emphasises the appeal of islands, put the Hebrides into context and focused on a **favourite** Gatliff hostel.' (Editor: John Humphries) [*And that hostel was ... Berneray*]

## Twenty ...

'Rhenigidale Hostel **40th Anniversary** Monday 3 June 2002 - With a whole day of events organised to celebrate this milestone in the history of the Gatliff Hostels we just needed someone to organise the weather.' (Editor: Lawrence Washington) [*Good times and favourable weather prevalent throughout the day*]

## Twenty-five ...

'Neil Pinkett, one of our regular hostellers, has been commissioned by the Chairman to write a booklet of **walks** around the Rhenigidale hostel.' (Editor: Jim McFarlane) [*Contact the current editor to acquire a copy still in stock and relevant*]

## Thirty ...

'In late September a group of volunteers from North Walsall Unemployed Support Group formed a **workparty** to tackle a list of tasks at Rhenigidale and Garenin hostels.' (Editor: Richard Genner) [*Not destinations for the work-shy*]

## ... and Thirty-five

'Success! £10,000 has been raised for the Berneray Appeal. One person the Trust would like to thank especially is Andrew Gannon who walked the entire **Pennine Way** to raise money.' (Editor: Francesca Fraser Darling) [*Long distances appeal to some*]

Rhenigidale – North Harris

Berneray – North Uist

Howmore – South Uist



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## Encourage, Inspire and ... Win?

Herbert Gatliff contacted, encouraged and inspired a number of young people in the 1950s and '60s. Among them was Tim Porter, whose life and career were shaped by our founder's influence. The Gatliff Trust will on 23 April be considering his suggestions to revive interest in **adventuring** by offering a prize. If you have anything to add or even prospective funding, please contact the Editor.

**Tim Porter writes:** 'Are you an independent adventurer? One of those who would like to make their own way in the world? To get off the beaten track on your terms? If so, you will probably have found the pandemic a bit of a challenge! Cut off from the opportunities for hostelling, backpacking, wild camping and free-ranging travel, how have you coped?

Being the person you are, you will have found something exciting for sure, and we would like to hear what. If you have kept adventure in your life, while observing all of the safety measures, then your experience could be an inspiration to everyone. If you think you have it in you to tell us about it, in any **medium** you like, then the Gatliff Trust is considering offering a prize.

Our founder was an inspirational figure and an original thinker. He would have seen the pandemic as a challenge rather than an obstacle. In his lifetime he led by example and demonstrated that a start in life can involve the simplest of means, the thinnest of resources and the ability to put experiences into words. We would like to help you find **your own version** of Herbert's theory of adventure.'