

Hebridean Hostellers

Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust

www.gatliff.org.uk

Newsletter 72

Autumn 2022



Marc Calhoun photographed Scarp's former post office, shop and phone box, with Primrose Cottage above and the ruins of the hostel below.

From the Chair

Peter Clarke writes: It is wonderful to report that the hostels **reopened** on Friday 1 July 2022. The first hosteller arrived by bus at Rhenigidale at 9.15 in the morning of that day! We made a slow start, judged by the number of overnights during the summer. I suspect that this was largely because people had made other arrangements before we had announced an opening date. Let us hope that next summer the weather is better and that our numbers are up.

Of course, our hostels are not just about numbers. They are about giving those who seek it the **opportunity** to stay awhile to get to know the islands. These have been difficult years in the history of the hostels, but thanks are due to the superb support, encouragement and understanding by members and visitors. We survived!

All being well we shall be replacing all the doors and windows at Berneray in 2023. The design will be traditional, but the windows will be double-glazed and easier to open for ventilation. Our boundary fence has been fixed, the loft work has been done, so at long last we are making **progress** on the list of work anticipated by the Berneray improvements appeal in 2019.

Finally, I am pleased to announce that our **AGM** in 2023 will be held at the Glasgow Youth Hostel on Saturday 24 June at 10.00. Please put the date in your diary and plan a hostel-focused weekend in Glasgow next summer.



Scarp Hostel in 1969. Photo by Frank Martin; courtesy of Kathy Martin

Scarp and Saltire

The cover photograph by Marc Calhoun accompanied his *Scottish Islands Explorer* article (August / September 2022) focusing on the short-lived Scarp hostel and its visitors' book. The item will be incorporated in the second edition of his *Exploring the Isles of the West* to be published in 2023. Marc's *Beehive Dwellings of the Hebrides: A Photographic Record*, published by Acair, has been short-listed for the Saltire Literary Awards.

Work that Generated Fun

Our hostels, unused since 2020, received a 2022 Spring Clean by work-parties. A myriad of tasks was undertaken, including the following **improvements**. Both Berneray and Howmore cookers were checked and new elements fitted. Electrical remedial work and numerous other tasks were completed in all the hostels.

Berneray's main building exterior was scraped, washed and painted, a boundary fence built as well as a new pulley installed above the fireplace. The path steps and guttering were cleared at Rhenigidale, where the benches were stripped and primed. **Many thanks** to the teams for applying skills, providing good company and generating fun. This Summer's re-opening was made even more appealing.

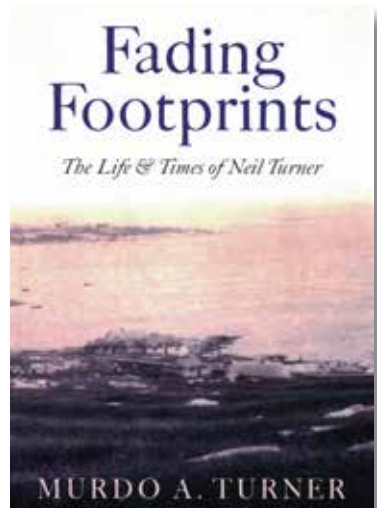
Qualities Maintained

Visit Scotland's Quality Assurance Reports are designed to inform visitors of standards and to provide advice to managements on how to market, develop and adapt their businesses. Berneray, Howmore and Rhenigidale hostels have had their two-star status renewed. Appreciation is due to wardens, work-parties and those hostellers who maintain the **customs** of clearing and cleaning.

Fading Footprints

Longfellow's line - 'Footprints in the sands of time' - is a timely reminder of the need to collect memories and store records about both ordinary and extraordinary people of the past. ***Fading Footprints: The Life and Times of Neil Turner 1896 - 1960*** does just this. The biography by Neil's son, Murdo, traces a career in school-teaching, which started in Rhenigidale in 1923 and continued locally until 1958.

Positions of **responsibility** in Grimsay and Lochportain, North Uist, led to 13 years at Drinishader, South Harris. Neil's work enabled many pupils to go places as well as communities to get on. £15 will secure a highly-informative book and £5 p&p for up to two copies, with cheques payable to the Berneray Historical Society from Nurse's Cottage, Berneray HS6 5BD. Funds raised will exclusively benefit the Society.



Herbert Gatliff and a Hostelling Initiative

Dave Goulder and Friends have published a book, ***A Torriddon Portfolio: Rebel Hostel in the Glen 1967 - 1973***, which will be appearing at the same time as this newsletter. It focuses on the creation of a hostel, similar to those of the Gatliff Trust, run by Dave from 1967 until 1973, his now former wife, Liz Dyer, and another made-redundant-hostel-warden, the late Bill Wallace. Copies may be acquired through www.davegoulder.co.uk

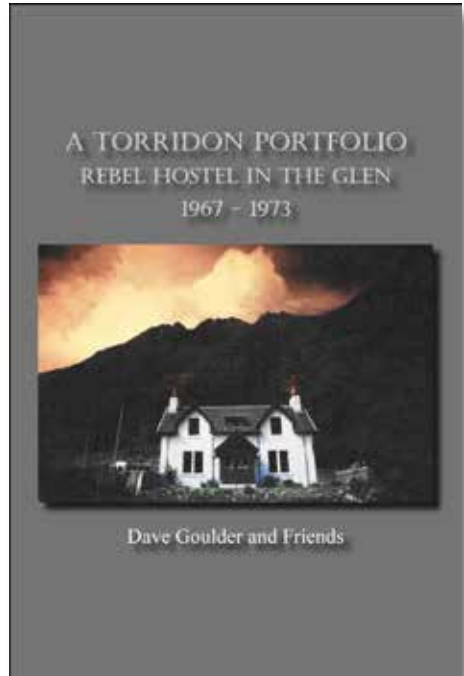
Glen Cottage was the natural successor to the old Achnashellach Hostel, run by Dave Goulder from 1962, one of eight or nine houses scattered along a five-mile stretch of the Inverness - Kyle of Lochalsh road. His employers, the SYHA, who did not like the way their rules were being bent, sacked him and appointed another warden to run the hostel for its last year of life.

The Torriddon Estate, just over the hill from Achnashellach, had been donated to the National Trust with at least one building suitable for a hostel in its grounds. Glen Cottage, in the Torriddon Glen itself, was situated at the foot of Liathach, one of the area's most spectacular mountains. They proposed a management plan and succeeded in securing a six-year lease on what appeared to be an **ideal hostel**.

Like the Achnashellach hostel, Glen Cottage had no electricity, but it did have running water with an open range to supply heat and hot water. Surrounded as it was by mature trees, there was plenty of fallen timber to provide fuel. It also had an outbuilding that could serve as extra accommodation. The team set about **restoration** work that would attract both hostellers and mountaineers.

The very name 'Torriddon' can make a climber go weak at the knees. It did not take long for the uphill brigade to discover the hostel's facilities and although still in first gear, the **enterprise** had started. Word spread quickly, for this was something different: a hostel with no strings attached, no curfew hour, open all day, family accommodation in the same dormitory and no membership required.

One of the early visitors informed **Herbert Gatliff** of what was being done and this resulted in one of his very individual letters. Scrawled tightly over several small pages, it at first appeared completely unintelligible, a cross between handwriting and runic figures. Liz, however, could make some sense of it, if she took the paperwork to a quiet corner and concentrated hard.



Herbert became fully behind the project and its aim to do on the mainland what he and his helpers had done in the islands, with an independent hostel open to all with no rules apart from the application of plain common sense. He offered **financial** assistance with basic equipment, such as camp-beds, gas-cylinders and paint plus the full support of his team in the Western Isles.

It was the first of many letters, written from his base at a small hotel, Era House, in Lexham Gardens, Kensington. He had what could be called 'a bothy of a room' in which he lived or camped out in, with his primus stove. Alas,

neither Dave, Liz nor Bill ever met the generous Herbert, whose aspirations and achievements were captured by **Keith Pennyfather** in his *By Mountain and Machair*, published by the Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust in 1988.



Herbert Gatliff talking with Bill Brunton, Honorary Secretary to the YHA Hostels Advisory Committee, and his wife, at Edmundbyers Youth Hostel, County Durham, in May 1946. Photograph quality restored by Julian Paren.

Heritage Paths that Access Hostels

ScotWays, The Scottish Rights of Way and Access Society, has been safeguarding paths since 1845 and is probably the world's oldest organisation of this type. It has recently installed a new website at www.scotways.com and readers are urged to click onto the 'Heritage Paths' section, where those ancient tracks of the Western Isles give Gatliff hostels both **appeal** and access.

A Hitchcock Finale?

The father of Alfred Hitchcock, the late film director, purchased the 27,000-acre Bays of Harris Estate, including the island of **Berneray**, for a reported £5,000 following the death in 1925 of Lord Leverhulme. It is now valued at over £1 million and has been the subject of a Community Buyout proposal on behalf of its 700 or so residents. 63% voted for; 37% against. Rob Hitchcock, Alfred's son, accepted that matters could well proceed with the family's Stornoway factors being replaced by community-based estate managers, as in 75% of the Western Isles.

Bernard Heath 1928 - 2022

The national press carried full obituaries following the death on 31 March of **Bernard Heath** (93), the inspirational force behind the Mountain Bothies Association. The MBA's Summer 2022 Newsletter has a fine compilation of eight pages of truly touching tributes, observations and memories. The Spring 2022 issue of *Hebridean Hostellers* contains an obituary of his remarkable wife, Betty.

They were both admirers of the resourceful skills of Herbert Gatliff, sharing his enthusiasm for the **Outdoor Movement** and for converting buildings to retain a human presence in the landscape. Bernard, whose concept originated from a chance remark in a visitors' book, was keen to encourage volunteers and maintain good relations with landowners, factors and gamekeepers.

His energies were prodigious, evident in cycling long distances, staying in many hostels, organising work-parties and creating happy memories through involvement. The bonds and banter with Betty showed them as selfless, modest and lovable people. During its 57 years, the MBA has provided basic accommodation and invigorating experiences on several million occasions. That's some **achievement**.

John Abbott 1939 - 2021

John Abbott (82) was an illustrious educationalist who introduced many young people to exploration and to the fostering of initiatives. His own education and teaching assignments involved boarding as well as day-schooling. From childhood interests in the books of Arthur Ransome, Thor Heyerdahl's *The Kon-Tiki Expedition* and Enid Blyton's Famous Five, he rated 'adventure' as a deep-seated human need.

His foundation of the **Schools Hebridean Society** in 1961 brought him into contact with the Gatliff Trust and eight camps took place at Rhenigidale from 1966 until 1990. He wrote of the hardships of remoteness, weather and insect-bites with words that resonate with many visitors, 'The Hebridean dawn will always follow - as clear, as unsullied, as full of colour and excitement as life itself.'

Donald Macleod 1936 - 2022

Something of an era ended with the death of **Donald Macleod** (86) last March. He was the youngest member of a family which occupied one of the last original blackhouses in the village of Garenin. He was first employed in a Fort William pulp mill, became a whaler and then a construction worker on mainland sites. A most notable contribution was as a star player of the Carloway football team.

In 1978 'D R', as he was affectionately known, moved to the last new-build house on the edge of the village to pursue crofting, weaving and the training of sheepdogs. In time he became **warden** of the Gatliff hostel and was renowned for his warm welcome as well as for being an informed guide to his Harris Tweed looms. Both locals and visitors appreciated his humour and ready laugh.

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

'So, if you can look back on experiences at any of the Gatliff hostels, do write about them and send them in - for social historians need to have direct access to material that is relevant and **authentic**.' (Editor: John Humphries) [*Keep items coming*]

and of Ten Years Ago ...

'It is hoped that an outside picnic table and seating will be set up as a **memorial** to the first warden, the late Mrs Catherine MacSween, mother of the current warden, Betty.' (Editor: John Humphries) [*The memorial plaque on the table at Howmore was restored this year*]

Fifteen ...

'Last September consultants for the Western Isles Council indicated that a five-kilometre '**green causeway**', linking North Uist and Harris, could be built to complete the spinal link between Eriskay and the Butt of Lewis.' (Editor: John Humphries) [*Consultants, like the rest of us, can consider and speculate*]

Twenty ...

'There are at least 17 hostels and bunkhouses in the Western Isles and each has its own identity. The four Gatliff residences have their own **distinctive** ethos and do not compete with the others on either geographical location or price. Gatliff promotes 'hostels of destination, not transition.'" (Editor: John Humphries) [*We may be down one, but the total is now around 25*]

Twenty-five ...

'In line with the other national SYHA and YHA hostels we are having to meet increasingly **more expensive** maintenance and upkeep charges. Therefore, as of 1st January 1998, the charges for overnight stays are: Adults - £4.65, Juniors (to 16) - £3.85, Camping - £2.30' (Editor: Jim McFarlane) [*Relentless pressures then as now*]

Thirty ...

'Various councillors, local dignitaries, members of the local communities, trustees, hostellers, hostel wardens were there for the **Garenin** hostel opening. Magnus Magnusson's words of support and encouragement reached the ears of most of the large crowd gathered outside the hostel, cameras clicked and tummies rumbled!' (Editor: Richard Genner) [*Sounds familiar*]



Photograph of Garenin by Iain Mackenzie

... and Thirty-five

'The Gatliff Trust's bid to buy **Rhenigidale** hostel has been successful.' (Editor: Francesca Fraser Darling) [*This purchase followed the death of Roddy MacInnes in 1986, some 26 years after he and Herbert Gatliff had first met*]

Rhenigidale – North Harris

Berneray – North Uist

Howmore – South Uist



A Grand Adventure Awaits the Young

In the last issue of *Hebridean Hostellers*, Tim Porter proposed ways for young, independent travellers to develop inspirational concepts along the lines of the schemes devised by Herbert Gatliff in the 1960s. The Gatliff Trust and *Scottish Islands Explorer* magazine will be promoting a competition early in 2023 with an award of **£1000** to those of under 30 years-of-age.

An article of 1250 words, with images, to encourage others to release their sense of adventure will be the chosen format to be published in *Scottish Islands Explorer*. **Details** will appear on the Gatliff website - www.gatliff.org.uk - as well as in emailed flyers to British universities and specialist colleges. The conditions will include references to the founder, locations and appeal of our hostels in the Western Isles.

A Festive Fortnight

Our seashore hostel, Berneray, has had to close, albeit on a temporary basis. Reopening times will be announced through www.gatliff.org.uk In past, pre-lockdown times, here was a venue enjoyed by seasoned hostellers wishing to celebrate Christmas and Hogmanay in a different way, in an impressive setting. This will still be possible with the hostel ready to **welcome** visitors from Wednesday 21 December 2022 until closing on Wednesday 4 January 2023. Be ready to celebrate in style!