

Hebridean Hostellers

Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust

www.gatliff.org.uk

Newsletter 73

Spring 2023

Berneray's Fabled West Beach

Photographed by Ruth Thompson

From the Chair

Peter Clarke writes: I am looking forward to visiting the islands in the Summer and hope for better weather than last. There is nothing like a warm summer's evening with only a light breeze. I also hope that the hostels get back to the way they were pre-Covid, with bustling, happy people, enjoying their locality and one another's company.

Thanks to the excellent **bus** services it is easy for hostellers to reach Benbecula, Eriskay and the rest of South Uist from Howmore. Likewise, North Uist is accessible by bus from Berneray, its off-shore island. Remember that the north-south spinal route through Uist terminates at the Berneray Youth Hostel. Rhenigidale is more remote, but with planning it is possible to see a lot of Harris by bus when staying at our hostel, especially during school terms.

All the bus timetables are on the Council's web site - www.cne-siar.gov.uk - via a link high up on the home page. Sadly, the ferries leave visitors in a state of **uncertainty** because of potential cancellations owing to mechanical breakdowns as well as to bad weather.

CalMac do their best to maintain the service. Remember that CalMac are not responsible for the poor management of the ferry construction programme. They only lease the boats from a Scottish Government company, Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd (CMAL). If you want to **complain**, write to the Minister of Transport; do not moan to staff on board the boats.

Foot passengers (walkers and cyclists) are at least certain to find **space** in the passenger lounges. There is a finite capacity on the vehicle deck, so restrictions caused by cancellations do cause difficulties for car drivers and freight operators.

We wish Betty MacDonald and Jackie MacLeod well in their **retirement**.

Betty took over from her mother, Mrs Catherine MacSween, at Howmore in 2000. Jackie became warden at Berneray in 2007, but she had served as assistant warden to Alison Gibbs for a while beforehand. We welcome Sara MacDonald, Betty's daughter, at Howmore and Ruth Thompson at Berneray.



Sand, Sea and Sky on Berneray captured by Ruth Thompson

Book to Work ... Not Shirk!

If you have that volunteering spirit, relish the thought of a paintbrush in hand and have your diary close at hand, literally, then make a note now. A **Work Party** for Rhenigidale has been organised from Monday 22 until Friday 26 April 2024, with the focus on painting the outside of the hostel, all woodwork in the grounds, the stairs and shower. For anyone with an aversion to paint, then there are numerous ancillary jobs waiting attention. Alan Busson, details on back page, is keen to hear from you.

Spring Forth

Two of our three hostels had new wardens appointed this spring. A long family tradition dating back to the time of Herbert Gatliff has been maintained at Howmore, where **Sara MacDonald**, daughter of Betty and granddaughter of Kate MacSween, is now responsible for visitors at the hostel, now in its 58th year, on the west coast of South Uist.

Ruth Thompson grew up on a farm near Tamora in New South Wales. She is well prepared for contingencies produced at Berneray for its warden and hostellers, has taught in schools in Sydney, Bristol and Orkney, lived close to the Sound of Harris during this decade and has been a regular visitor to the island during the last one. Her travels worldwide have included some backpack hostels and basic bunkhouses.



John Humphries, Editor of Hebridean Hostellers, and Ruth Thompson, new Warden of Berneray, photographed by Alasdair MacEachen

Festivities Kept Alive ... Just

John Humphries writes: I recall chatting with the late **David Turner** (1948 - 2010), who was a GHHT trustee for all too short a time. He originated from Grimsby, taught Technical Drawing in Wandsworth, spent his Summer holidays in the Outer Hebrides and was a mainstay of the Christmas and Hogmanay festivities at Berneray, where he knew so many hostellers and islanders.

After the Covid lockdown and Jackie's retirement, I wanted to keep this festive **custom** alive and became, for a fortnight, the acting, resident warden at Berneray. I arrived before the season started, but between Christmas Eve and the Bank Holiday Tuesday I had not seen a human being for 72 hours. Then at exactly 12 noon the door opened and I was elevated by visitors from hostel hermit to host.

Jude and Jena had undertaken a remarkable journey by public transport from Germany, which they left on Boxing Day, flying to Glasgow and on to Barra. Accommodation was acquired there and next day the CalMac ferry was sailing to Eriskay. The bus service was off and so a taxi was called to take them right to the hostel, where Jude brought **memories** from previous winter stays and of David Turner.

So Jena was introduced to hostelling and their presence introduced companionship, laughter and cooking skills as well as New Year's Eve swimming. The Hogmanay spirit was **rekindled** and it would be so good for the tradition to be retained. Please consider marking your diary for the full works - from Saturday 23 December 2023 until Wednesday 3 January 2024. You should not be alone!

Trends

Over the years trends have been established in **hostel use**. A primary factor is that of light and darkness. The winter months, with daylight restricted to as little as six hours a day, attract few. Springtime stirs people's urges to get out and go places. May is a favourable month with light, increasing warmth and an absence of midges. June holidays are seen by many adults as being largely child-free.

Scottish school-holidays begin earlier than those of England and Wales and consequently the age-range of guests is wider in July. The 'Indian Summer' phenomenon can be a draw in the later autumnal months and then there is that long-standing custom, curtailed by Covid, of the festive migrants who anticipate hostel **camaraderie** in late December and early January. See above.



Hostel Going

Ways and Means of Reaching the Hostels

Getting to and from our hostels has never been easy. Although there are current problems, linked to ageing ferry services and cancellation cultures, a major benefit has been the roll-on-roll-off mechanisation and the improved harbour facilities. Herbert Gatliff would not have recognised either the turnaround times or the volumes of vehicles, including lorries, cars and bicycles.

Yet be aware and be wary when booking tickets. To newcomers, distances can be **deceptive** and, of course, weather is frequently variable. Here is an island chain which can be temporarily broken, with the mainland links between Oban in the south and Ullapool in the north involving hundreds of miles. Even though the Skye Bridge has eliminated ferry delays, it has not dented the 90 minutes needed to cross the island to Uig.

Be positive about hostel accommodation close to the CalMac ports at Stornoway, Ullapool, Uig, Tarbert, Leverburgh, Berneray, Mallaig, Lochboisdale, Castlebay and Oban. However, it's one thing to have a car with a bunkhouse 'just around the corner' and being a prospective foot passenger. This is where time spent in **reconnaissance** is never wasted.

As a **rule of thumb**, travel to Rhenigidale is either from the north on the Ullapool to Stornoway ferry or from the south from Uig to Tarbert. Berneray has the Uig to Lochmaddy service and the even closer Sound of Harris route. Howmore has three crossings, the seasonal Mallaig to Lochboisdale, the Oban to Lochboisdale and the Barra to Eriskay.

The fastest and most expensive means is to travel by plane from Glasgow to Barra (landing on the beach); to Balivanich, at the main settlement on Benbecula; to Stornoway, the capital of the Western Isles. Once you arrive, there are either car or bicycle rental arrangements to negotiate or the **intricacies** of public transport with buses.

Cycling should take account of the prevailing south-west winds; bussing really demands a degree in timetabling! The latter said, the bus services are **reliable** and tenacious in bad weather. They run by arrangement to Rhenigidale, just down the road from Howmore and right to the Berneray Hostel, out on a limb, with the mini-bus coming and going throughout the lockdown carrying no passengers.

An **advantage** of travelling by bus is that a ticket - or a pass for Scottish residents - always includes the trip and often 'theatre', with the genial exchanges between driver and passengers, stopping and picking up in apparently deserted places and the deft inclusion of all types of luggage and shopping. There are also specials, such as the Thursday morning run from Berneray to the Sollas Co-op.

Hitch-hiking is a mode of transport virtually defunct in the UK, except in the Highlands & Islands. It is acceptable and you are, to a degree, protected by being offered lifts only by confident people and, more likely than not, by individuals who are local or visitors to the Gatliff hostels. You certainly need to be risk tolerant, rather than risk averse, and ready for a holiday with a difference.

Keeping Customs

It's difficult to estimate when the traditions of Gaelic and Norse **storytelling** were in their heyday. Whatever, they are centuries old and have been cultural features of northern communities accustomed to cold winds and limited hours of daylight in the winter months. The point is that people gathered for warmth, companionship and entertainment provided by ... themselves.

To be accurate, it was that relatively small group of **gifted** speakers who could bring topics to life whether connected with day-to-day anecdotes or the intricacies of full-scale sagas. Contemporary media publications and productions do depend on storylines and the willingness of audiences to suspend disbelief. However, the flickering of screens has long replaced the flickering light of fire and moon.

In many ways the Gatliff common room has become a modern venue for an old craft. People, usually total strangers from a range of global backgrounds, meet and tell one another about their journeys, holiday aspirations, acquired knowledge of the vicinity and themselves. It is essentially a shared **experience** and one in which dominance is an asset, not an excuse to bore.

The one feature that does not usually appear is the contribution of a local person. That said, a somewhat lonely neighbour would occasionally take up residence at our now-closed Garenin Hostel and **lecture** unsuspecting guests on the pilgrimage routes to the Butt of Lewis. He had to be asked to leave by the warden before the hostellers took the opportunity to do so!

Some wardens had the gift of the **raconteur** and held the attention of their listeners when relating tales of islanders, such as those enduring life in remote settlements during challenging conditions. Often there would be a chance disclosure about someone's achievements. The piping voice of a visitor, for example, once announced at the Berneray Hostel, "Have you met the Marilyn-baggers?"

'Marilyn-bagging' or collecting ascents based on Alan Dawson's 1992 book *The Relative Hills of Britain* has its followers. Some hostellers present may have been encouraged to take up climbing the 1556 peaks of over 150 metres by the persuasive accounts deployed by their fellow-residents.



Where in the Hebridean world is a property approached by tracks, both foot and rail? It could make a good start for a story.

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

'Heidi Dore writes: 'The Outer Hebrides satisfies the deep and conflicting human need for solitude, space and freedom - and a longing for meaningful connections and **friendship**.' (Editor: John Humphries) [*Attributes encouraged by our hostels*]

and of Ten Years Ago ...

'Howmore's name derives from the Old Norse Tobha - 'mound' - and the Gaelic Mòr - 'large'. The village stood prominently on the machair and its church is still used as a **marker** by passing ships.'

(Editor: John Humphries) [*The hostel is a Hebridean Way marker*]



Howmore Church by Peter Clarke.

Fifteen ...

'One of the UK's rarest bees has established a stronghold in the sandy banks and dunes on Berneray. More than ten colonies of northern colletes or **mining bees** have been found on the island in, what is, the most northerly site in this country of the threatened species.'

(Editor: John Humphries) [*Are they still with us?*]

Twenty ...

'The total overnights approached the 5000 mark and the increase of almost 10% over the previous year indicated substantial progress following the particularly difficult times when UK tourism was affected generally by the **foot and mouth** outbreaks.' (Editor: John Humphries) [*There have always been vicissitudes*]

Twenty-five ...

'The Chairperson, Peter Clarke, is researching the possibility of a long-distance **walking route** through the islands. The aim is to establish a route from the Butt of Lewis to Vatersay, taking in all the inhabited islands, using old tracks and quiet roads.' (Editor: Jim McFarlane) [*Things come to pass*]

Thirty ...

'It is with considerable regret that the Gatliff Hebridean Trust and the Wardens, Catrina and Tommy Tosh, jointly announce that **Claddach Baleshare** hostel is closed with immediate effect.' (Editor: Richard Genner) [*It had to happen, but the chain was broken*]

... and Thirty-five

'From **1 April** 1988 the day-to-day management of the hostels will devolve to a new charitable organisation, incorporated as a company limited by guarantee ... the Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust.' (Editor: Francesca Fraser Darling) [*The start!*]

Rhenigidale – North Harris

Berneray – North Uist

Howmore – South Uist



Encourage a Winner Among Young Writers

The chances of a skilful young writer's item in *Hebridean Hostellers* being spotted and further work commissioned are remote. However, with the pulling **power** of a nationally-circulated magazine, there are possible openings. Several contributors to *Scottish Islands Explorer* have started their careers with an article in that publication. As we all know, one thing leads to another.

Add to this incentive, there is a £1000 inducement involved. Please direct a young writer (under 30 years of age) to this opportunity. The details will appear on the Gatliff website - www.gatliff.org.uk - and will focus on the creation of a 1250-word piece on the topic of **adventuring**. This was a key word in Herbert Gatliff's thinking about life and fulfilment.

Gatliff served in the First World War, was a pioneering force in the youth hostelling movement, set up his own distinctive brand of the activity and encouraged young people to develop their own sense of enquiry around specific places and cultures, such as the Scottish islands. Many social changes have occurred in the almost half-century since his death. Let's keep his precepts **alive!**

Say Goodbye to Zoom

The joys aroused by there being no longer such a need for Zoom are to be **celebrated**. In the case of the Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust that means, perhaps, attending the 2023 AGM in person at the Glasgow Youth Hostel on Saturday 24 June? Come and meet in person both the trustees and fellow-Gatliff enthusiasts in a grand former hotel, next to an attractive public park and in a vibrant city.