

Hebridean Hostellers

Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust

www.gatliff.org.uk

Newsletter 74

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The First World War Grave of an Unknown Sailor of the Royal Navy at Howmore

Photograph courtesy of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission

From the Chair

Peter Clarke writes: ‘My happy memories of the islands provide a well of comfort during these dark winter nights. I so look forward to those quiet walks across the machair or along the beach. The gentle machair is wonderful at any time of the year, but is so beautifully perfumed when its green sward is studded with delicate flowers. The beaches are always exceptional, whether being lapped by gentle ripples or crashing waves energised by far-away storms.

When the wind comes from the north, which seems to be all too frequent these days, cutting through every layer of clothing, it is **comforting** to know that it won’t be long before the common room stove is glowing warmth. Stormy days are almost equally enjoyable as days of sunshine. When inside, I always find it pleasing to hear the rain outside. Indeed, the horizontal rain of the islands is uniquely memorable. I wonder why so few people have that experience on their bucket list!

In August I **celebrated** 50 years of travels in the islands by, once again, walking from Tarbert to Rhenigidale over the Postman’s Path. The tree on the track is still there but has lost a bough. There is now a gate across the path a short distance from Urgha (with another just before the bottom of the Zig Zags) and an electronic counter as you enter the fenced North Harris Native Habitat Restoration Project. More native woodland will be incorporated into the habitat mix. Over 185,000 saplings are being grown by local suppliers to be planted by the North Harris Trust staff and volunteers.

The AGM agreed to increase the amount of the minimum annual donation to £15 and Life Membership to £300 from 1st January 2024. If you are paying less than £15 by banker’s order, please ask your bank to increase the amount. Letters have been sent out; if you have **responded**, thank you.



Photograph by Peter Clarke.

Come On Board

There was a time when it was relatively common for individuals to aspire to undertake **voluntary** work for an organisation that had family connections or appeared attractive or even both. That inclination has now declined markedly and the future of many charities is sustained tenuously by members of the older generations. Please consider bucking the trend.

The Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust needs an injection of **younger** people, with ideas and with a sense of commitment to the cause of maintaining simple, affordable accommodation in a remote part of the British Isles to promote travel, awareness, participation in local communities and inspiration. New members are always appreciated; new trustees are particularly welcomed. Do find out more from Peter Clarke, at peter@gatliff.org.uk.

Seasonal Sensations

Any journey or stay in the Outer Hebrides can be sensational in that our senses are often bombarded by vigorous weather, distinctive aromas, contoured stones or just new sights. Set these memories against the pressures of finding presents for others as the festive season draws near. Here are three **recommendations** for retail outlets, with online facilities, close to our hostels.

There's that comparatively new gift shop, Coralbox run by Eilidh Carr (pictured), on the road from the Berneray ferry terminal to our hostel. Explore through coralbox.ecwid.com Then consider the former tourist office in Tarbert which now houses Essence of Harris, recommended by a Rhenigidale resident. Go to essenceofharris.co.uk To the north of Howmore is Hebridean Jewellery, where a member of our committee made a pleasing purchase. See what's on **offer** at hebrideanjewellery.co.uk



Beàrnaraigh na Hearadh

Susanne Barding, a Danish anthropologist living in the Faroes, visited Berneray from 1970 - 1974 and was struck by its long history and the apparent solidity of its Gaelic traditions. She produced a thesis for a doctorate, has visited the island subsequently and, with the assistance of a gifted translator, John Holmes, has enabled the Islands Book Trust to bring out an **illuminating** book in English.

So, it has been a long wait for an **authoritative** reference book on Berneray and, at its launch by the Islands Book Trust in the Community Hall, over one hundred copies were sold. Each has 608 pages and turns 3.25 lbs on the scales. So that's some weight. Do not be put off - for it is not a heavy read and at £20 is something of a bargain.

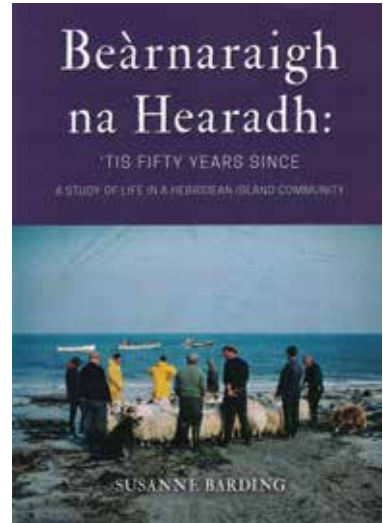
The hard work of islanders at sea and on their crofts plus the distinctive Gaelic culture, as well as a number of restrictive social conventions, deservedly drew attention, for they mirrored **patterns** in other European islands of the North Atlantic. In June 1970, when Susanne arrived, there were 131 residents living in an ageing community that had been declining throughout the century and yet was still 100% Gaelic-speaking.

The general availability of telephones came in 1970; depopulation led to the conversions of buildings to holiday-homes; in 1979 the conversion of a blackhouse to the **Gatliff** hostel drew visitors, with some 66,000 overnights in 44 years; CalMac's vehicular Sound of Harris ferry service began in 1996; three years later the all-important causeway was constructed. Broadband came in 2006.

Berneray has had a **human** presence for thousands of years with standing stones, of Pictish origin showing prehistoric activity. The Viking era and the eventual formation of estates saw the infusion of practices that produced conditions which could not be sustained. The 1841 population of 700 was too many, particularly when disasters such as potato blight occurred.

Eviction and emigration disrupted life on an unimaginable scale. However, the introduction of the Education Acts in the 1870s brought some stability. The book focuses on life histories covering decades, the traditions of story-telling, explanations of islanders' values and their identity, which has drawn **praise** for friendliness, hospitality and good humour.

The appropriateness of its sub-title, *'Tis Fifty Years Since*, was apparent to many present at the launch with Susanne Barding, who has admirably fulfilled the cover statement - 'A Study of Life in a Hebridean Island Community'. Do **acquire** through www.islandsbooktrust.org or phone 07930-801899.



Into the Unknown

Would there be a group of **adventurers** willing to charter a boat from Rhenigidale in the Spring or Summer of 2024? The plan is to explore a number of lochs and settlements rarely seen since the time of depopulation. On the list would be Molinginish, once having a side-school linked with Rhenigidale; Loch Resort as far as Kenmore, occupied within living memory; Valamus, a former



Molinginish, photographed by Julian Paren, in the 1980s.

hub in The Pairc; Lochs Claidh and Bhrollum, formerly giving major access to that remote and trackless area; Malhagery, once possibly the most remote shepherd's house in Britain. If you are interested, with an individual fee of around £100 for a full day's trip from our oldest hostel, please inform editor@gatliff.org

In Times Gone By

The telephone in the house (pictured) immediately by the harbour, had the number 'Rhenigidale 1'. With the coming of the road to the settlement, BT laid a cable and on 5 March 1990, the UK's **last** single digit phone number disappeared. Here was what was known as an 'attended call office' - that is,

within the property where the phone was to be found, in this case the croft of Mrs Morag MacInnes - and the operator (in Inverness) connected you to the number required. At the end of the call 'the attendant', Morag, was called back and told how much money to collect.



Julian Paren's panorama of Rhenigidale harbour.

‘Go West, Young Man’

When you are next travelling the A859 between Lewis and Harris, obviously be prepared to take the road near the Clisham summit east towards Maraig and Rhenigidale. This newsletter item **recommends** your going west at the junction with the B887 towards Amhuinnsuidhe and Husinish. The road along Loch Siar and the waters around Scarp and the entrance to Loch Resort are well worth seeing.

However, for the **intrepid**, who need to be young at heart as well as agile of foot, the hinterland extending up to the Morsgail Forest is a compelling area, with a centre of focus on Kinlochresort and Luachair. Here there was a primitive bridge linking Lewis and Harris and a settlement or two that served the vast estate



*The ruined former side-school at Luachair - ready to be a bothy?
Photograph by Marc Calhoun.*

owned by the Bulmer family, of cider-making renown.

Alasdair Mackay, the late warden of the Rhenigidale hostel, had relatives, a gamekeeper cousin and his wife, living there in the 1940s. His custom was to walk over the **trackless** terrain to Brenish on the long remote road out of Uig, West Lewis, to visit his mother between Christmas and the New Year. He set off in 1947, became trapped by the worst weather for that time of year in the 20th Century, and returned to greet his wife, six weeks later!

The leading expert on that part of the islands is the Seattle-based writer, Marc Calhoun, and a search engine will take you to learn of his insights and see his photographic images. It is a paradox for an American to be an authority on this seldom-visited part of the UK. Another **unexpected** feature surrounded Britain’s most dramatic rock overhang at nearby Sron Ulladale.

There was a time when this mountain challenge was given fine coverage in German guides and, consequently, attracted many climbers of that nationality. Whatever, it was once said to be ‘worth the attention of cragsmen in search of something new’ and much appreciated by those seeking **extremes**. Be aware that tidal conditions make mooring difficult in all stretches of Loch Resort.

It was just before Covid that there were strong **rumours** of a bothy being constructed or probably re-assembled from a basic ruined property close to Kinlochresort. Since lockdown ended, things have gone quiet about such a welcome facility. Obviously, the area is still accessible by finding tracks, being well-prepared to camp or bivouac and venturing way out west!

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

The Summer of '18 provided **perfect** conditions for staying in the Gatliff hostels. The weather was balmy and breezy, which was perfect for humans and repellent for midges.' (Editor: John Humphries) [*Climate control, for once?*]



The approach to Rhenigidale in perfect weather.

and of Ten Years Ago ...

'Herbert Gatliff's life was from Victorian days to the Elizabethan era. He was a Coldstream Guards' officer in the First World War and a pioneering member of the Outdoor Movement before the Second World War. However, the part of his life when he was at his most **influential** was when most men consider retirement.' (Editor: John Humphries) [*Here's a lesson for us all*]

Fifteen ...

'There were over a **hundred** people living there (Rhenigidale) at the beginning of the 20th Century. After the First World War, when 22 men returned from active service, many residents were required to leave and settle in Skye.' (Editor: John Humphries) [*Homes not fit for heroes?*]

Twenty ...

'Arthur Meaby, the Honorary Secretary, Treasurer and Maintenance Organiser of the GHHT, died at the age of **67**.' (Editor: John Humphries) [*The age when Herbert Gatliff was particularly active*]

Twenty-five ...

'With the **closure** of Lochmaddy and Stockinish, the SYHA will not have any hostels in the Western Isles, which just leaves ourselves and the private bunkhouses.' (Editor: Jim McFarlane) [*An example of the survival of the fittest, perhaps?*]

Thirty ...

'Andrew Wilson, a director of Western Ferries, one of CalMac's few rivals, says "**CalMac** has no incentive to save on vessels so it produces grandiloquent ships which require large crews.'" (Editor: Richard Genner) [*Vessels still needed*]

... and Thirty-five

'At Claddach Baleshare there are plans to build a thatched porch, to provide a new kitchen, shower and w.c. A septic tank will be installed. It is not known when this work will start.' (Editor: Francesca Fraser Darling) [*Some five years before closure*]

Rhenigidale – North Harris
Berneray – North Uist
Howmore – South Uist



Gatliff Inspired

Readers of this publication and of *Scottish Islands Explorer* magazine, staff and students at British schools of journalism plus watchers of the website CLIP, referring to Creative Lives - In Progress, were invited to participate in, or recommend others to, an article-writing competition for the Under 30s. Publication and a prize of £1000 were the **incentives**.

The final tally of entries was 13 and these all fulfilled something of Herbert Gatliff's keenness to encourage the exploration of a different area and culture, leading to discovering something inspiring either about that new locality and its individuals or about oneself or ... both. One of Gatliff's methods of gaining adherents was to offer certain young people research and writing **assignments** in the Outer Hebrides.

Learn more about the **results** and the readability of some, if not all, of the entries by occasionally visiting www.gatliff.org.uk - where it is intended to give full details before 2023 is over. Publication of the winning entry and, perhaps, other articles from the same source will be in *Scottish Islands Explorer* during 2024. The next issue of *Hebridean Hostellers* should be able to pinpoint when.

Look Up and Then Down

If the prospect of joining a work-party in an idyllic setting appeals and you are free from Monday 22 until Friday 26 April 2024, Rhenigidale calls. Look up the commitments in your diary; then, perhaps, look down to the Addresses below and email your intentions to Company Secretary, Alan Busson.
