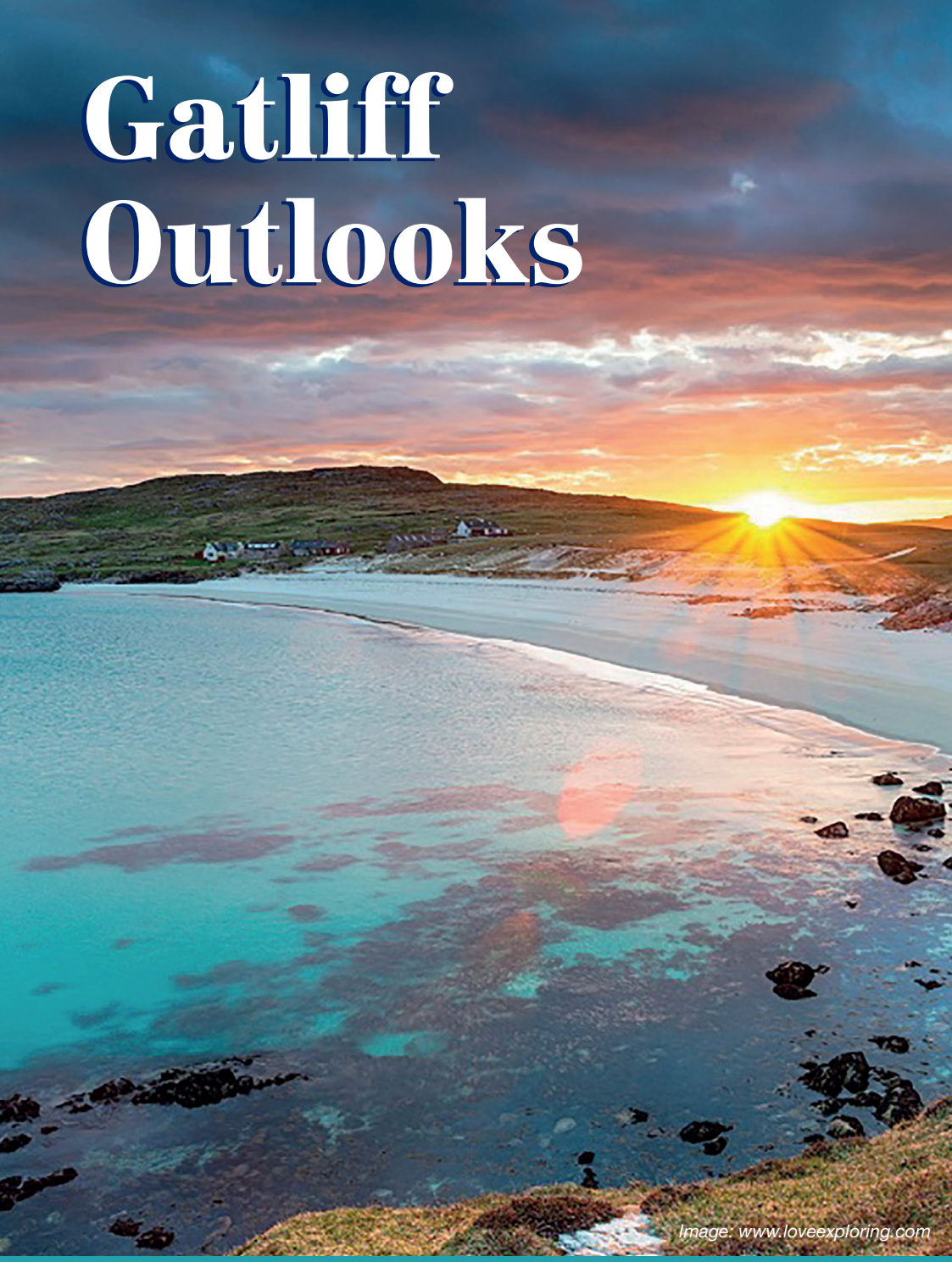
Gatliff Outlooks



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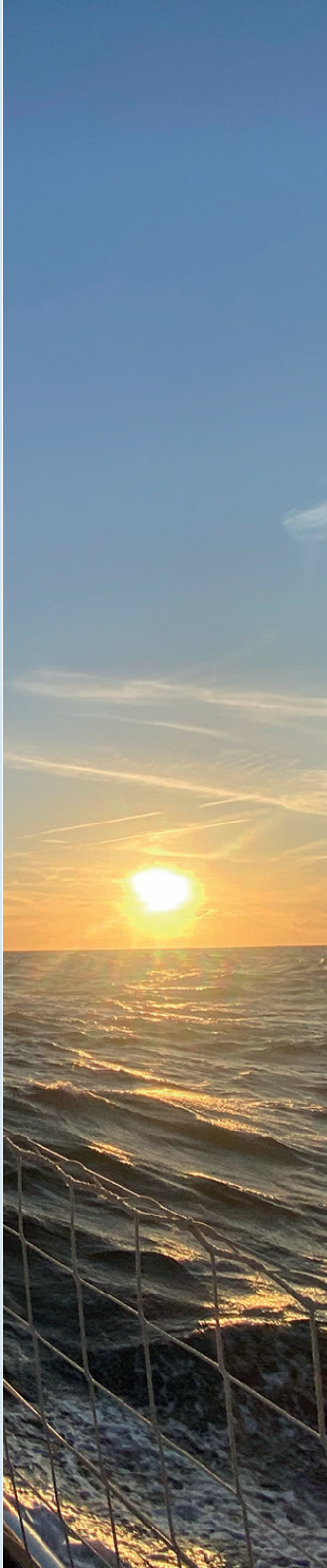
Gatliff Young Writers' Award 2024

Gatliff Outlooks
Authors, Contents and Photos



Preface by John Humphries

Editor of *Hebridean Hostellers* and Former Editor and Owner of *Scottish Islands Explorer*

Herbert Gatliff was a maverick among the influential forces of his generation. He may have been educated at Rugby School, a member of the Coldstream Guards during the First World War and a high-level civil servant in the Ministry of Town & Country Planning, but he had a direct appeal to people, particularly those young both in age and outlook.

In fact, 'outlook' is a word that resounds. His age-span from 1897 until 1977 was in the latter part of the Outdoor Movement to which he subscribed and formulated ideas. The trends stretched from the pioneering of cycling to the increasing appeal of hiking and camping as activities, to visiting the countryside and coast by car then on to considering hostels and bothies as alternative forms of accommodation.

His specific contributions, which started in the 1930s, involved strong support helping to set up the fledgling Youth Hostel movement in England & Wales, of which he eventually became a Vice-President, and, from 1962, of founding simple hostels in a relatively depopulated part of Britain, the Outer Hebrides.

Eventually, this grew to a chain of six hostels. Although three have now closed, distinctive outlooks featured in all - over sea, machair, moor and distant horizons. One of the guiding principles was to create, especially for the young, inexpensive places in which to stay and from which to explore.

As Tim Porter explains in his Introduction, Herbert Gatliff encouraged people to develop a sense of internal adventure. He was aware of the demands of ambition, status, position and achievement, but looked, for ultimate success, to individuals adopting a mindset that fostered the adventurous outlook. This compilation of articles is a 21st Century attempt to capture something of that spirit.

Their order submitted is random, although the winning work of the competition for the Gatliff Young Writers' Award, promoted by the Gatliff Trust and *Scottish Islands Explorer* magazine in 2024, is presented as the final piece. Please relax, read and re-create a world where individuals are encouraged to express something of the internal feelings that they have experienced through external stimuli.

Introduction by Tim Porter
Competition Adjudicator

In 1965, I was a discontented teenager, unhappy at school, unsure of who I was or where I was going. But chance had already led me into youth hostelling, where I had discovered adventure, inspiration and (for the first time) people like me!

That year the YHA ran an essay competition and, as a result, I found myself suddenly in the orbit of Herbert Gatliff. He wrote to me out of the blue, with no explanation as to who he was or what he did. It's no exaggeration to say, my life changed from that moment.

Herbert's way of introducing himself was in line with his philosophy of life. He made you feel included, but included in what? - well, that was up to you. His protégés would boldly go into the outdoors, but what we did there was our affair.

We'd send him our writings and he'd get them duplicated and circulated through the hostelling world to be read by anybody or nobody, and as we got to know one another, a large network formed which holds together to this day. Herbert's wish for each of us (though he never said it in as many words) was to have an adventure as much as a career, and to carry that principle into every aspect of life.

Herbert's mentorship might have been seen as a way into journalism or travel writing. But not necessarily so - for me it led first to music and theatre, later to adult education and freelance lecturing. Each of us took his or her own path, but I think all of us would agree, without Herbert we would not have that lifelong sense of adventure in everything and everyone … and of nothing being unworthy of notice.

Herbert died in 1977, but his spirit lives on! And nothing demonstrates that fact as strongly as these entries to the Gatliff Trust / *Scottish Islands Explorer* Award to Young Writers. Each one of them is a true Gatliffian exploit! No disrespect to Munro Completists or Groat's End Record Breakers, but their way isn't the only way. There's nothing pre-packaged about the offerings included here.

Herbert Gatliff, to the right, talking to two of his supporters.

Jacob Garrick, for instance, shows how a journey undertaken at will can be its own reward; in the Middle Ages, this was regarded as the purest form of pilgrimage. **Holly Pollard, Spencer Mason** and **Eliza Lawrence** have responded to the same impulse, illustrating how pilgrimage doesn't have to be religious, especially when it's concerned with healing and personal enlightenment.

A journey from darkness to light is another powerful theme, as **Elizabeth Warden** demonstrates so effectively.

Mental health issues are explored by several of the writers, as are the problems arising from the Covid pandemic. Herbert Gatliff would have appreciated this candour; he himself turned to the outdoors in times of stress and understood the cleansing power of a quest.

Jake Egelnick is one of several writers who describe significant encounters with isolated communities. The Gatliff Hebridean Hostels rely on co-operation with those who live and work locally, so it's good to know that our writers appreciate what we can all learn from such contacts. And, of course, there's the liberating effect of meeting like minds from across the globe. It's one of the greatest effects that hostelling has to offer.

Of all Gatliffian concepts, however, the most important is that adventure lurks where least expected. For **Sam Brown**, it came over the washing-up in his local youth hostel. For **Esther Kearney**, it came during a single day's cycling. And **Autumn Clarke** discovered that even the process of applying for university had all the elements of Gatliffian adventure.

Discomfort also has its part to play. **Hannah Green's** week in the North Pennines was no bed of roses: but she turned it to good account and engaged with the local history while she was at it. **Eva Ressel** is another writer for whom history deepens the sense of place, as witness her haunting account of Ensay in the Outer Hebrides.

Political awareness figures in most of these writers' work, broadening for some, sharpening for others, as the the effects of experience take hold. **Felix Bill**, for example, relates how his visit to Scotland stirred him to activism in the cause of land access in England. Others speak out boldly for the disadvantaged young and the ravaged planet.

There's a spectrum of styles, from poetic to terse. Also, a multitude of influences - Aristotle, Dylan Thomas, Gavin Maxwell – all of these are named as sources of inspiration, and it's clear there are plenty of others. Not least is Gatliff himself, whose words have clearly found a mark. **Tessa Guthrie** has put it well when she writes of 'Gatliff's mission to create space'. Our mission as trustees of his legacy is to extend that space, and these thirteen inspiring pieces of writing will surely help to bring this about.

The First Night of Forever by Autumn Clarke

Even in the city centre, where light-pollution tinges the darkness with its orange hew, all the stars in Oxford's night sky somehow feel like lucky ones. At least to me, they do. Perhaps this is an over-identification on my part. I first visited Oxford following my application to the University.

Applying there was the only spontaneous thing I had done on my failed gap-year. 'How does one *fail* their gap-year?' I hear you ask. A global pandemic, that's how. I'm sure we can all agree that if you truly want to embark on a journey of self-discovery, being stuck inside your home for two and a half years is a far greater method of unearthing your unconscious than a trip to Bali, any day.

I initially applied to Oxford as a bit of a social experiment. I imagined myself as a Louis Theroux-type documentarian going undercover as an Oxford applicant, looking to investigate what the posh people were *really* like.

Contained in a more private thought was my silent hope that visiting Oxford, even if just for the short duration of the interview stage, would be my opportunity to fulfil a promise I had made to myself in much earlier teens. If I could just get to a place so vastly different to that of my starting point, then I could categorically prove that I had survived my past. Having landed in foster care aged 13, I grew up acutely aware of the odds that were up against me. I felt as though I was living on borrowed time.

Though I remained in a similar region for most of my young life, being fostered meant I lived in many places, with many different people. All families have their own mad methods for getting by, though the madness of those methods remains largely unconscious until an outsider like myself becomes a most intimate witness.

Where I was taught one thing in one place, I was taught another to replace it, just as fast. The everchanging and unwritten laws of the kind of family life I had experienced embedded within me an attraction to chaos. Of course, beneath this was an ultimate need for stability. And though I had been in constant search of connection and security as a young person, I had never considered that a relationship of this kind might be formed with a place, as opposed to a person.

The first time I travelled to Oxford, then, was to sit the university entry exams. "Come on…I've got a quota to fill!" I joked to Cara. Cara is my "pseudo-adoptive" mum, who very kindly took me in when my final foster placement broke down. We got in the car and the sat-nav map beamed at us: ENTER YOUR DESTINATION. Who knew that a sat-nav could be so provocatively existential? 'So, is it spelt S-U-M-M-E-R ville then or…?' Cara inquired. 'Err, let me check. No, it's, um…S-O-M-E-R ville,' I replied.

The journey took just over an hour; not too far, but far enough. Straying too far away from the warm family home Cara had only just welcomed me into didn't feel quite right.

I needed to maintain that closeness – to know that home was just an hour away – but I also needed to venture out far enough to be adequately challenged.

Though my first glimpse of Oxford consisted mostly of writing in a room alone all day, before I left, I saw, for the very first time, those notorious dreaming spires. As the sun was beginning to shut its weary eye, those spiky, dark silhouettes stood stiff against the autumn sky. There was something so deeply confronting about that initial experience, and I desperately wanted more of it.

It was a good job I passed the entry tests, because what had begun as a quirky social experiment quickly developed into a love-affair with the city itself. Oxford had come to represent a true break away from the past, and I soon realised that I was going to have to take it all very seriously now. What does one wear? How does one act? And the most daunting of all, how does one use all those knives and forks that the posh people have at their dinner parties?

Obscuring the reality of "who I really was" had become a speciality of mine. In school, I had learnt to maintain the persona of a quiet, well-behaved student who just happened to "live with an aunty because…?" Well, this is where the story tended to end. I always hoped I would never get far enough into the conversation to need to explain my familial separation. There was no aunty back at home. I was a child of the state, a recipient of "corporate parenting." Being fostered felt highly stigmatising growing up, and I had often been indirectly encouraged to create an alternative narrative for myself.

As you can imagine, I was elated when I found out I made it to interviews. I took the first opportunity I could to arrange a trip to Oxford's very own Wetherspoons pub with an old friend who lived in the area. "My first ever independent pint!" I exclaimed, albeit silently, within the private confines of my adolescent mind. That first Oxford night contained a plethora of new experiences.

The place was magical and inviting; utterly unlike anything I had previously experienced. I quickly learnt that Oxford has its own, quirky language (BOP, stands for Badly Organised Party; "Rad-Cam" refers colloquially to the Radcliffe Camera.) Friday nights were to be spent debating with your friends over whether you'll go to Plush bar, or ATIK nightclub. The right answer to that question is to always go to both. In amongst all that youthful chaos, however, was my first experience of true 'joy in good woodland.' This beautiful phrase, written in a letter by Herbert Gatliff, so well describes the solace I found when walking alongside Oxford's canal, aimless, nervous and dazed by the prospect of adulthood.

It has been somewhat uncanny to have since learnt of Gatliff's own connection to Oxford. Over one-hundred years ago, Gatliff set his foot upon the same Oxford pathways that I would later walk. He, too, embarked on that all-important excursion to university amidst the political unease of that earlier 'unprecedented time' - the First World War. The parallels don't end there. As an altruist whose charitable nature

manifested as a need to embrace and support young people, particularly those less fortunate, Gatliff's advocacy will have certainly helped to shape the ethos and operation of the many charities for the young which supported me when I was in care.

If you hadn't gathered already, my initial love affair with Oxford was able to continue to bloom fruitfully, as I was successful at interview. To everyone who asks, I reply honestly that it was 'the best of times and the worst of times.' Like any old home, there are dark and winding nooks and crannies hidden behind Oxford's grand impressions. There are small alcoves in which many a private moment has been had, and many a heart broken. Yet, as I learnt that first night, Oxford is a city that promises, always, to heal your broken heart and then return you to the beautiful ordinariness of things.

The Bodleian Library, photographed by Tim Wildsmith, is where some of Herbert Gatliff's extensive archives are stored.

A House Without Mirrors by Eva Ressel

About three miles off the south end of Harris, there is the small island of Ensay. Here, facing the sound, a lone grey Edwardian house juts out of the loam. To my knowledge nobody has lived in it properly for well over 80 years - people have come for months at a time, and certainly John David, the last sole owner, had intentions of retiring there. The problem is that everything that's inviting about this house during summertime relates in some obscure way to its inhospitality during wintertime.

The startling coolness of the sea, the thin breeze that dances around a bedroom, the film of sand that invariably resettles across the floor - these things are not foreboding in themselves, but suggest a certain structural weakness that one simply can't afford in a Hebridean winter.

John David, a paediatric surgeon who practised in Ghana, first laid eyes on Ensay House in 1934 while on a bicycling holiday in Harris. So the story goes, he spied its silhouette from across the sound in Leverburgh and asked a local fisherman to take him across. In those days, the house was used, as its architect no doubt intended, for a laird's seat. When John knocked, a butler in full tails answered the door and showed him into the sitting room for tea with the house's owner.

While he returned to Ghana in body, his heart stayed in Ensay with this almost perversely lonely house - and when by chance he saw it for sale in a magazine, he promptly returned to the Hebrides and bought it on the spot. After his death in 1979, his family found that John, never having had children himself, intended the house to be given to the first niece or nephew who could raise a specific sum of money.

What purpose this sum served I no longer remember, but I do recall that it was too large for any of the cousins (at the time mostly teenagers) to get their hands on individually. Nobody came forward with the money, and so the generation above - John's siblings - stepped in and raised the sum between them, gifting it to the cousins on the condition that they share the house and maintain it themselves.

A Cornishman once said to me that the thing that shocked him most when he came to England for university was that the placenames made sense. In England, towns and cities are named with English sounds and syllables - Newmarket, Broadway, Stow-on-the-Wold. The Cornish, on the other hand, grow up with place names that come from a dying language, which, with its bounty of zeds and kays, is markedly divorced from what's spoken in the Truro corner shops and Falmouth pubs today.

Before I came to Ensay, I knew nothing of the Hebrides, save a distant recollection of some islands' names - Eriskay, Taransay, Berneray, Islay - like the refrain of a half-forgotten lullaby. The isolation of the Outer Hebrides has been a mixed blessing: while it has sheltered communities from over-tourism, it has also prevented exploration of these islands by people without extravagant means. When, in 1961, Herbert Gatliff founded the

Gatliff Trust, these islands were still frontiers or, as Gatliff put it, the ‘end of Europe’.

The Trust was designed to encourage young people to enjoy the British countryside through the maintenance of crofters’ hostels and financial support of specific trips. Gatliff was roughly contemporary with John, and they may well have stumbled across each other as Gatliff worked to open a hostel on South Uist. Not many people would choose to live like Herbert Gatliff and John David, in a blatantly hostile land. These are hard places, but for the two men it was an easy decision for both saw their reflection in the land.

Over the course of their slow and diligent restoration of Ensay House, John’s family procured and sent over a Marshall range cooker, a three-metre-high water tank and - most baffling of all, a full-sized pool table, but somehow not a single mirror. After spending five days exclusively bathing in the sea, my hair had crisped up and I had burnt all along the bridge of my nose and cheeks, but I had no idea until I received the developed photos two weeks later.

In the house I lodge in, down a side street in Holborn, I can’t escape myself, I am always aware of the shadowy double of myself creeping down the hallways, framed in the big mirrors like an anxious familiar. In the mirror, we see ourselves where we are not. The lucky people who have found their mirror in the land they inhabit, like Herbert Gatliff, John David and now his family, don’t need them anymore.

Ensay House, Chapel and Standing Stone by Marc Calhoun.

Greg's Hut by Hannah Green

I don't know what we would have done without Greg's Hut. Disoriented from the long, marshy descent from Cross Fell, we were looking for it in entirely the wrong place, scouring the slopes below with growing panic that it might not be here after all - or if it was, that it was a crumbling ruin.

Greg was lagging. The clouds were starting to close in. Over a week, we'd walked from Ribblehead to Middleton in bouts of pouring rain and sudden humid spells. The hay meadows around Middleton were in full bloom, and the flowers blinked up at us wetly as we made our squelching progress up hill and down dale.

Greg, Harvey and I conversed about jobs, partners and families, hunkering down in a damp tent for reconstituted meals each night, starting each day with a hot coffee and unutterably sweet cereal bar as the sun struggled to rise. All was well, until we unwittingly came face to face with our foe: two discounted egg and cress sandwiches, an apparently innocent bargain from Middleton Co-op, enjoyed with relish by the boys.

Harvey, probably the fittest and strongest of the three of us, went down first. He began dragging his feet on the climb up out of Middleton the next morning as we followed the river up past thundering High Force, up and up through the bald hills to Cow Green reservoir.

We only realised how ill he was over the course of an unspeakably bad night of wild camping by High Cup Nick. He nobly dragged himself into Dufton the next morning where we said our sad goodbyes before Greg and I continued the steep climb straight back up to Highcross Fell, the day fresh and windy, the dales unfolding beneath us.

Greg's Hut, Cross Fell, Alston Moor near the Pennine Way, is the highest bothy in England.

It was when Greg mentioned how tough the climb was that I started to feel a small nagging concern. I am a city dweller, but Greg is out in the Peaks most weekends and now I was putting him to shame, outpacing him along the seemingly endless expanse of heather and bog cotton. By the time we reached the top of Highcross Fell and started our descent, it became clear that the discounted egg and cress had claimed their second victim.

Greg is a real outdoorsman who can pitch a tent in any weather and frequently spends nights out in the depths of winter. But we knew that we needed real shelter, somewhere warm and safe to ride out the worst of the eggs' revenge. We had seen the small bothy, aptly named Greg's Hut, on the map and been curious. We scoured the landscape for any sign as the cloud lowered, until finally we saw it, a small grey lighthouse in the vast expanse of wet heather.

Inside, after a steep trudge down the hillside, we found an empty, slightly damp space, and through an interior door a raised sleeping platform and joy … a wood stove. We ate a hurried meal of dehydrated macaroni cheese, which contained a huge salt intake, and lit the fire before Greg crawled into his sleeping bag. Any hopes I might have had for companionable conversation faded as Greg promptly fell asleep. It was 7pm. There was no phone signal.

Greg incapacitated, I was alone as the sun set, the wind quite literally whistling, windows humming with the stronger gusts. The moon rose, the sky paled. Beside me, Greg shivered even in the heat of the dying fire, and I imagined carrying him down to Alston on my shoulders. Maybe I could drag him on a stretcher made out of our rucksacks. What was I going to tell his mother?

Taking in my surroundings, I realised that a lot of love had been placed into this simple structure. The timbers in the eaves above me were fresh, the uneven stonewalls painted a clean white. Padding around the bothy, I found a damp laminated booklet. Someone had cobbled together the history of this lonely outpost, which, I learned, had been built in the early 1800s to house miners and serve as a blacksmith's shop for a nearby lead mine. There were pictures of hard-faced miners, dozens of whom would have hunkered down together for a week at a time.

I read about the way they worked, damming up streams before unleashing the water to wash away the topsoil, revealing mineral seams underneath. I thought about the songs they would have sung, the rustling, sighing noises of the night-time up here. I read a story of a coffin stuck on the hillsides yards away from the bothy in a snowstorm. Dufton did not have a churchyard and the dead had to be carried across the fell. I checked that the door was firmly bolted.

And who was the Greg, of Greg's hut? In the bundle of papers, there was a small painting of a man who looked like my grandfather: John Gregory, a member of the Mercian climbing club who had died in a climbing accident in the Alps in 1968. Maintained by the Greg's Hut Association and the Mountain Bothies Association, this place is carefully maintained with the same spirit of Herbert Gatliff, a commitment to opening up the outdoors and creating little shelters in the toughest, most beautiful environments.

Like the Berneray, Howmore and Rhenigidale hostels, this bothy has provided respite to countless weary heads. Flicking through the visitors' book, it seemed that this refuge had been slept in almost every night that summer, with walkers from all around the world crossing paths and making connections. Feeling alone and yet so much part of something, I tried to sleep.

The woodsmoke permeated my sleeping bag with Greg tossing and turning on the loudest of inflatable sleeping mats beside me. We survived the night, although when he feverishly arose for the sixth time in the predawn darkness I began to think maybe death wouldn't be so bad after all. As we made our slow descent, I kept looking back over my shoulder until the little grey building was out of sight. Thank you, I thought.

Thank you to all the anonymous hands who had hauled the stones up the heather hillside; thank you to whoever sat behind the controls of machinery that put a functioning roof back on. If Greg had been well, we would have made it down the hill before nightfall, or even pitched our tent in the quiet lee of a wall somewhere. I would never have seen the faces of those miners, felt the presence of the people who worked these hills, hills that now seem so still and natural.

That morning, I saw the landscape anew - not an ageless moor after all, but once a place of noise, industry and violence as water blasted the sides of the hills away. Without groups such as the Footpaths Preservation Society, the Ramblers Association or indeed the Youth Hostel Association and many of the independent hostels like Gatliff's legacy in the Outer Hebrides, countless compelling places we take for granted would still be off-limits. The beauty of the British Isles is for everyone, and groups such as Right to Roam and many independent organisations, such as Greg's Hut Association, continue both crusading ardently and persevering quietly. They deserve our thanks.

How Island-visiting Became Life-changing by Felix Bill

Staffa lingers in the mind long after the Hebridean Overture fades out over the ferry's sound system. The swell and surge of a sea barely tame enough to sail, broken by some towering dark monument on the horizon. Then as you get closer, great plumes of sea spray in snapshot silhouette, brilliant white against the basalt of the island. Caverns looming infinite, a cutting wind thick with salt, the screaming of sea birds above the landing place.

If you're a kid with London dirt still trapped under your fingernails, you recognise Fingal's Cave instinctively. It's a cityscape, ranks of hexagonal high-rise blocks built so close above the city's lower rooftops that there's no space to breathe. Soot-blacked stone, endless sharp-edged buildings disappearing into the gloom at the back of the cave, crisp hexagonal flagstones underfoot.

It is, and yet it isn't. There's a bleak grandeur to Staffa that London's never replicated, a sense of permanence, of presence, that no human civilisation can hope to match. The island is a mesmerising accident of volcanic activity more mathematically perfect than anything in the urban world I come from. A work of geometric predestination where myths grow between slabs of ancient stone and giants seem a likelier explanation than geology.

My exposure to the wild people and stories native to the Isles opened my eyes to a world beyond the cities I had grown up in, once brimming with history I'd never heard and ways of life I didn't know. None of the trip would have been possible without the Scottish 'right to roam' legislation that gives walkers mostly unfettered access to the countryside, provided we respect it.

These rights are a gift fought for by The Commons, Open Spaces and Footpaths Preservation Society, The Ramblers' Association, and many others that Herbert Gatliff was involved with. In England, the fight continues with today's 'Right to Roam' movement, but in Scotland one is already free to explore and discover the beauty, the sheer mathematical perfection, of the world that's waiting out there for those with eyes to see it.

For me, going to Mull was a life-changing experience in more ways than one, and I understand far better now Gatliff's desire for 'greater knowledge, love, and care of the countryside' for all, regardless of their financial means. The long journey to Fingal's cave had started months before with an attempt to balance the equations of affordability and exploration. Trains are more expensive than planes, but neither plane nor coach will reliably let you take a push bike aboard, so I started there.

London to Glasgow on the challenging Avanti west coast service, bike spaces booked far in advance in the vain hope it might allow the journey to go more smoothly. From Glasgow, Scotrail took me to Oban, followed by a ferry crossing to Craignure. From there, I took to my pedals, riding west with a head full of dreams and formulae, a map of the island stuffed unceremoniously into those big pockets you get on the inside of outdoorsy coats, and a tent lashed to the rack of my bike.

I had been expecting something more along the lines of moor, mountain, and hill, but that first day I cycled south on a long tree-lined road in green-gold sunlight. I sped down the long sloping road hardly touching my pedals, heading towards The Old Post Office tearoom of Lochbuie on the south coast. That night I set up my tent somewhere along the beach, the very 'lightweight camper' Gatliff so supported in their seeking of 'remote lonely places in the hills'. Yet I could not bring myself to sleep. How could I even try, when for the first time I could see the night sky in all its glory?

In London, night is the brown-mauve of a bruise. On Mull, a universe of stars opened out before me. A blue-black void aglow with tiny points of white light, every one of them a star system burning up unthinkable distances from Earth. Four streaked down, following the sun over the western horizon as I watched, but I was too spellbound to think in wishes. In that strange, interminable moment, there was nothing beyond what I was already experiencing that I could think to ask for. Even now I can see those four stars in my mind's eye, falling still.

Like Gatliff, I am a fan of both the camping-stove and bicycle and like to keep them where I can get to them easily, in case an opportunity for impromptu camping happens to arise. Likewise, my love of the Hebrides was strong enough to move me to activism. Mull made something of a campaigner out of me. In fact, I became heavily involved in the current English land access movement on my return to London.

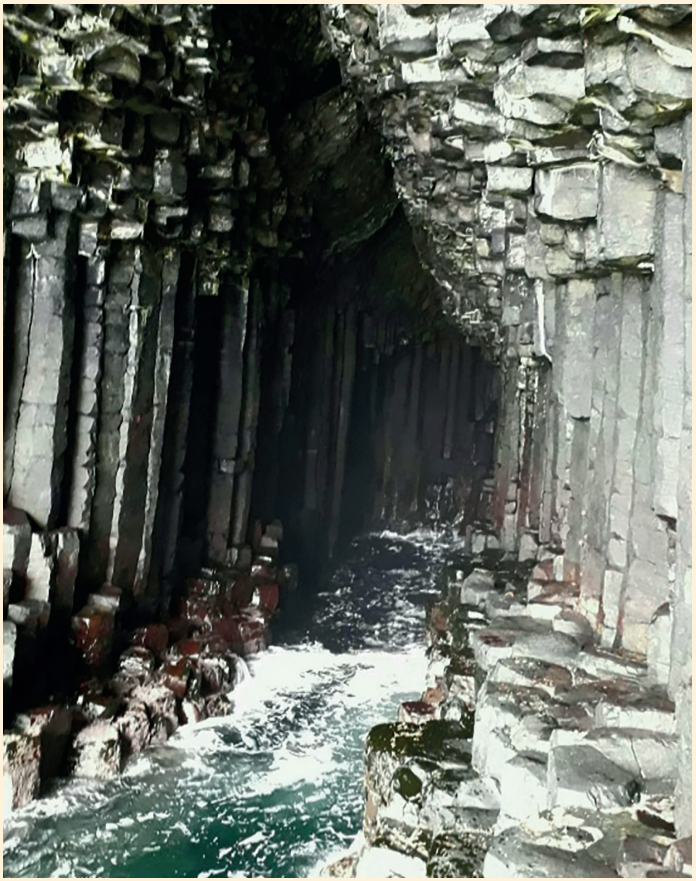
For me, going to the inner isles transformed the great outdoors from distant concept to tangible reality. It wasn't just a love of the wilds I discovered on that trip though, or the movements active today that fight to protect and access them. Visiting Mull sparked my interest in the many myths of the Highlands and Islands, as well as the lives of those living there now.

In the hills, I met a lone walker who told me the legend of Glen More's headless horseman, his laughter audible in the wind as the careful listener travels through his Glen. Out at sea, the legends swim even closer to the surface; selkies, swimming alongside the boat in their seal forms on our trip out to Staffa. The island itself, the remains of a Giant's bridge. The true history of Staffa is stranger still.

Sheep farmers who took flocks out by boat to graze on Staffa's grassy heights. Painters en route to Iceland, following whispers and legends to a local cave of great

beauty. Romantic era naturalist Joseph Banks, forced to admit that ‘this piece of architecture, formed by nature, far surpasses that of the Louvre’. Mendelssohn, moved to compose *Die Hebriden,* the overture that brought the island fame.

However, despite their fascinating stories and histories, Mull, Iona and Staffa are by no means trapped in their own past. Mull is alive, a place with a beating heart. The island’s lone archivist, who offers eagle-spotting tours in summer, runs a hospitable and well-stocked cafe next door to the archive. I happened to reach it a scant half hour before closing times on both my journeys and the cups of tea consumed there were almost mythical. The 96 bus, which arrived in my hour of need like some red-armoured knight of old, provides an accessible transport option for the camper without a van, and allows visitors on a budget to travel to this beautiful stretch of the world easily. Bikes were allowed on board; something for which I was profoundly thankful.



Fingal’s Cave, Staffa.

On Iona the campsite has all the modern cleaning facilities a weary traveller might want, and the town itself has many points of interest. I was halfway in love with the islands on that first step I took off the ferry and spent my trip falling the rest of the way. I will never forget the people or the island. They will always remain a part of my mind. I would encourage everyone who possibly can to visit Mull, Iona, and Staffa at least once in their lives. Doing so changed mine.

Summer Wandering in the Highlands and Islands by Jacob Garrick

In late May, with a Hebridean summer almost in sight, the job I'd been working on for the previous year had at last come to an end. It had been a construction job. A renovation not too far from Stornoway where I'd been employed as a joiner. I had no real plan for what was to come next, but having saved what little I could, I was determined not to surrender the best part of the year to the world of work.

It was towards the end of that job that I came across the author Gavin Maxwell. A few months before on a trip to the mainland I'd bought a number of his books in Leakey's Bookshop, Inverness, at which time I knew only his name and vaguely remembered an association with otters. I became immersed in his writing - the ways he described the coast south of Glenelg where he'd lived for so many years and of his time exploring the waters around Skye in his more bloody days as a basking shark-hunter.

I felt compelled to see for myself the places he'd clearly held so dear. So off I went, walking and camping. North along the east coast of Sleat on Skye until Kylerhea, ferried across the sound to Glenelg, and then south as far as the mouth of Loch Hourn, where the perfect secluded cove awaited me. Time stood still for a while as I camped on that beach. Days spent scouring the shore for driftwood and the odd washed-up curiosity, evenings sat by the fire as oystercatchers and arctic terns performed in front of me.

On the first night, I received an unexpected visitor. Hearing rather heavy footsteps outside my tent I unzipped the door, presuming it to be a fellow-walker. A huge stag greeted me, almost a silhouette in the remnants of the sunset. He stared quizzically but seemingly unfazed from about three metres away before turning to walk towards the shore, proceeding into the water until only his head and neck could be seen. He emerged on one patch of turf, fringed with seaweed.

The remainder of my stay was punctuated by visits from seals, two very shy otters and a pod of dolphins, as well as the return of the stag, this time shortly followed by several hinds. My brief adventure had surpassed what I had hoped for. Having no wish for the experience to end I decided to head north to Wester Ross.

I travelled along the coast from Shieldaig to Gairloch moving from cove to cove or what woods I could find. There was no desire in me to race so I moved slowly. Walking and reading, my ideal form of idleness. On this exposed stretch of heather-clad cliffs the weather was inescapable. Although fair for the most part, there were two full days when the rain fell continuously, being driven nearly horizontal by the accompanying wind.

I found a welcome retreat in Craig bothy, a former youth hostel not far from the coast between Diabaig and Red Point. The River Craig runs its last half mile through banks of birch and alder, a sheltered plain hidden below high crags on either side before reaching the sea at a large pebble beach looking out to the expanse of Applecross. A world apart, the now deserted village littered with the ruins of what once was, had a sense of poignancy to it which I can't imagine I will forget. I was there for three days, in which time I didn't see a soul. I continued until I reached Gairloch.

By this time I had decided to return to the Western Isles, to walk south through the Uists to Barra and then Vatersay. Throughout these walks a sort of simplicity seemed to develop. Finding water, food and a place to pitch the tent were suddenly all that really mattered. It was a refreshing sensation not to care about that which wasn't important.

It occurred to me whilst walking along one of North Uist's infinitely long stretches of sand that there was a comparison to be drawn between this simple act of walking and the gentler pace of life in the Outer Hebrides. Unsmothered by the noise and bustle found in much of the UK, there seems to remain an air of a simpler time, a time without unnecessary complication.

Tent, Rock and Hill Replicated at Diabaig.

I recently read of a chance meeting on Lewis several decades ago involving a then prominent MP, who, sitting for an industrial English constituency, recounted how in days as a civil servant living in London, her then boss, a man named Herbert Gatliff, had insisted on reading the *Stornoway Gazette*. His apparent intention being for her to see beyond the city and to learn what makes a community tick. I like to think Gatliff could see the virtues to be found in a smaller, simpler way of life.

In many ways it is thanks to people such as Herbert Gatliff that my recent wandering has been possible. Behind his unlikely disguise as a civil servant for over 30 years, later of quite high rank, he was an avid rambler. Through his active membership of countless organisations (by some accounts too active ...) he was an ardent supporter of the preservation and the public's access to the countryside, encouraging whoever he could, but particularly the young, to enjoy and appreciate the world beyond the towns and cities. One way in which he channelled this encouragement was the founding of a chain of crofters' hostels in the Outer Hebrides.

An un-easiness with the direction the Scottish Youth Hostel Association was taking, coupled with a fascination with the remote Western Isles, evidenced by walking trips every September throughout the 1950s and '60s, he saw an opportunity to assist those wanting to visit a wild fringe of Europe, whilst staying true to his principles of 'not going cosy'. Herbert Gatliff died on 19th April 1977, but his legacy continues in the Gatliff Trust and the three hostels still provide shelter for those exploring the Western Isles.

As I walked along the machair of South Uist in glorious sunshine there were moments when I had to remind myself of where I was. The blinding white sand against an alluring turquoise sea on one side; the sinister, barren peaks of Thacla, Beinn Choradail and Beinn Mhor on the other; and the lush green grass at my feet stretching into the distance. It wasn't the first time that I'd visited South Uist, but it still struck me as such an alien, but no doubt beautiful, place. The sort of landscape you would expect to see in a painting of artistic exaggeration, but never in reality.

I continued across the causeway to picturesque Eriskay from where I took the ferry to Barra. I was glad to have bought with me a copy of Compton Mackenzie's *Keep the Home Guard Turning*. Having the lyrical voices of his characters in my mind gave the island an extra dimension as I followed the coast until the final causeway.

Now on Vatersay, I followed the road until it ran out, and headed over the hills until I came to Eorasdail, the once rebel township of the Vatersay Raiders. Here I sat on the beach, a herd of cows keeping me company, and looked across the water to the now-empty island of Sandray.

'We will not shut the Windows of Life' - an observation by Herbert Gatliff, An English Eccentric - by Jake Egelnick

This line, regarding the ethos of a rambler, has stuck with and taunted me for the past year. Having lived freely as a student in Manchester with the Lake and Peak districts at my doorstep, I was abruptly brought home to London with the news that my father had been diagnosed with a terminal brain tumour.

A year later I am fatherless, having watched a man being forced to 'put away the adventure of youth and shut the windows,' (Herbert Gatliff) before he was ready to do so. In a letter he wrote to me soon after the diagnosis he said, 'Try and turn any negative energy into a positive for inspiration and know that somewhere up in the firmament of vaguely remembered star constellations I am looking down on you.'

We loved watching a night's sky together although we were altogether clueless as to what it was exactly, we could see. A few months after his passing, with all this in mind, I decided to draw back the curtains and once more open the windows of life which had remained shut for so long. I wanted to see the stars, unhindered by the four-hour glow of the city and remind myself that 'London was not Britain' (Gatliff) and in a similar way remind myself that there was so much more to life than the last year I'd endured.

So, I made a group chat with three good friends, bought a cheap roof box and drove them all to the Outer Hebrides, visiting on a side-trip the most remote pub in

Britain on the Knoydart peninsular. Why? Adventure, open space and fresh air, the faint sense of danger, the cold splashes of Atlantic waves during a morning swim, to name just a few, but really I wanted to open up those windows and feel the wind outside rush in.

On the ferry from Mallaig to Lochboisdale, staring out at a misty horizon, clutching a metal rail and trying hard to keep down the haggis and chips foolishly eaten minutes before an impending storm, the long days of home-bound care feel aeons away. The windows are open and life is splashing at your face.

It was at this moment, with a grey and ominous Beinn Mhor manifesting in the distance that I felt furthest from home while crashing into waves and trying very hard not to be sick. To those working on the ship the weather 'wasn't even too bad compared to the winter.' They went about their work, chatty and bantering, occasionally giving us a look of concern as we struggled to stand up or walk straight.

We arrived at South Uist with a notion of camping that vanished very quickly in the Hebridean winds that reached almost 30mph. The weather was like nothing I have or ever could experience at home. It created waves out of the once still lochs that line both sides of the A-road running through the island. We were driving, still sick, half-mad from the weather and hoping that there was room at the hostel we had googled.

We arrived at the hostel in Howmore, a small white building with a thatched roof held down by great stones. The car doors were almost blown off their hinges as we unloaded our gear and bundled our way through the hostel door. We were greeted by four hikers who were, unsurprisingly, cautious of a group of young lads arriving in the middle of a gale. But there is something in the people who go searching for 'the small

Cows on Vatersay Beach

remote places' (Gatliff) of life that goes beyond the traditional divisions of society.

Soon we were exchanging maps, routes and stories with a lingerie maker from Cheltenham, Margaret from Norwich, a Swiss lady who was heading south and a Mancunian heading north. 'Bishop and Blacksmith shall all be equally welcome provided they are young in heart and will share the washing up.' (Gatliff)

We had no tap water, as there had been an oil spill in the island's water supply. The only game we could all play was the baby boomer edition of Trivial Pursuit and none of us knew who had the number 2 hit single in June 1960. But we made do and had fun by doing so, a valuable motto for spending time outdoors. It is this acceptance of compromise, of letting go and accepting all that is imperfect that is so crucial to adventure as well as to the process of mourning

The next day we walked west and started to break absurd and personal records such as 'most westerly Tunnock's caramel wafer eaten' or 'northernmost rock thrown into the sea.' Though pointless, these records pushed us to walk further and further out to sea on a rocky peninsula that was surrounded by the Atlantic.

When the windows of life have been shut for you, it is always the return home that concerns you rather than how far you can go. Care and responsibilities call out to you and focus your attention on anything but the pure joy of just going. This 'going' led us to an encounter with a man who was picking whelks off the rocky headland west of Howmore. His name was Niall and he showed us a few of the black snails he was searching for and told us to watch out for the tide with an accent I'd never heard before. "I'm a Gaelic man me," he said before we said 'Tìoraidh' to each other. It was my first and only, however minimal, exchange in Gaelic.

That evening we set off with the fear that we'd got too cosy in the hostel and headed for Vatersay for a few nights beneath the stars, among a field of cows. Our main concern was which beach to overlook in order to best protect us from the wind. We tucked our tent beneath a mound that faced out to the sea and we were able to enjoy the golden sand of Traigh Shiar to ourselves.

Anyone who has cared for someone in the later stages of life will know that time and space are flipped entirely on their heads. Days, weeks, and months blur as you become inundated with chemo dates and steroid-fuelled obsessions.

When opening the windows of life, you can find yourself looking out over a beach with nothing but the Atlantic Ocean separating you from Canada. Natural time governs you, when it gets dark you sleep. Worries and concerns are reduced to a blissfully simple, yet nonetheless important, trio of water, food and shelter. If your windows of life have been slammed shut, remember they can and will open again someday.

Monoliths in the Waves - by Spencer Mason

"Keep a healthy level of scepticism to the orthodox route", Ian says. Keeping the oar song syncopated with the tap of his foot, his eyes, keen and lined, are focused on the wingspan we make of our shoulders, ensuring the motion is kept as circular and fluid as the waters we wade. His blue, Harris Tweed knit jumper flows around his solid stature, his grin unbothered by the breeze that batters us as we bob along the bay.

Ian is a poet and novelist, a true Islander in heart and tongue. He has bided in Lewis most of his days, he tells me. His first book, *Waypoints*, offers an exploration through the vastitudes of seafaring vessels which he has cultivated a keen admiration for, across his decades of travel. It is a quaint read, capturing the hearty and peaceful soul of the Western Isles in informative, evocative tales, filled with facts that are fuelled by the poetry in the air of these seemingly stoic lands.

A seal pup trails our ripples as the tiller is pulled aft, allowing a lifeboat to cut across our stream. The crew offer swelling grins, kindly waves. From my home on the east coast of the mainland, I have seen these sleekit beasts from calm distances, but none so sniffingly close as this mythical sea dog. Ian assures me again that they are no rare sight, though I wonder if the seal would hold more timidity were we using an engine beyond arm, wind, and hope. The salt spray is tantalising around my lips, the cold, a harsh kiss to my skin, the sun, a friend beckoning over the horizon.

A gust strikes. We adjust our rigging as machination, four bodies fused in one action. Though Blake and I are inexperienced, clumsy dancers in this chartered ballet, our lungs heave all ecstatic to be part of the choreography - and to not bring fatal mistakes. Aye, we let water submerge our toes, but the rush of not capsizing ourselves gifts us confidence enough. I look at Blake, her silhouette broadened by the life jacket, the blazing sun behind her casting a wild, black dance of her hair. She grins at me, acknowledging that my sea legs have improved since we took the ferry here - where the slightest, calm tide, echoed through my body as a choppy wonkiness and rippling nausea.

Back on land, I try not to scream my utter delight at Ian's composed stature, playing the experience of my first sail as something quietly, profoundly experienced. But man, am I made wild? Blake calls Stornoway home, whereas I find myself venturing into my first exploration of the island. Her indigenousness is evidenced by the return of sing-song sentences and rambling catchups in every establishment we find ourselves, fissuring my city girl image of her. Initially, I had worried my magnetism to the islands' most touristy landmarks would prove an eye-rolling nuisance. In fact, it offers her a

fresh perspective on why so many people pilgrimage across the planet to this expanse of peat, cliff and few trees.

She has never seen before the attraction of so many attractions, for they have always been within reach - and so, too close to bother trecking. We park, ours the only vehicle in sight. Days ago, it had been a fissure line of registration plates, all European or further, come for the Hebridean Celtic festival. Dividing loch, lake and bog, we leave trusty Ophelia the Fiat at the bottom of the briar. We climb, eschewing gravel as we race the day's first light. In mid-afternoon, the sight had been a wonder, but we knew we'd have to return in blackness to witness true awe.

Now, our lungs haggard in the hazy silk of twilight, the monoliths stand as a wonder unparalleled. In the thin cool, the Callanish stones glimmer, sentinels in the dark. Watchers of the sky and hillside, wrenching hearts from stomach to silence. A glint of pink peaks over the glen in the distance, boldening the stone silhouettes as something at once momentary, and timeless. It turns 4.00 am, and I would be nowhere else. Giddy, I seem to have left my coldness in the car.

We stick to the paths - the ground worn from the traipsing of tourists; we have learned the stones are sinking into the land that holds them erect. But wandering to the base of the centre monolith, placing my cheek upon its smooth, moon-catching might - I understand why so many flock each year to sit among such a spectacle.

Older than Stonehenge, the stones have attracted those with hearts of spiritualism and speculation for centuries. Forming a Celtic cross from view of the clouds, the local rumour goes that the stones were once giants, turned in their bouldering physique for refusing to convert to Christianity. Thousands of neo-travellers each year come to pay homage and wonder to this origin-story eluding sight. For two thousand years, an age still felt in the charged air surrounding the stones today, rituals were practised to lost ends.

Guesses have been made at star worshiping, a mechanism of recording the moon's calendar, and for a time, a tomb for the most honoured dead. With the stones' orientation having been modified over millennia, history remains an obsessive currency within the human mind, with many spending decades studying and striving to measure the present by what we know to have come before. But even more so fulfilling and enticing, it seems, are places of mystery such as this - where little fact can be certain, and mythology reigns supreme.

I wonder, watching the pink sun peel over peat bog and hillside, why it is the phenomenon of unknowing that offers such promise of understanding. The sun climbing and amorous, we are unable to see Cailleach na Mointeach, the Old Woman of the Moor - she but appears to viewers once every 18.6 years - but we can certainly sense her slumbering, within that crimson-tinged moss.

Aside from an American photographer (who asks that Blake and I move from our cradling by the stones so he may get his composition without us present), the site is entirely ours to breathe within. Were this Samhain however, or any other equinox, swarms of travellers might be found basking in the dusk or twilight, charging themselves with an ancestry they might not comprehend, but can feel. The locals, Blake tells me, tend to brand these bohemian adventurers as hippies and strange folk, straying so far from their own paths that they must bother someone else's heritage.

"But", she says, "even if travellers are just passing through, at least they're appreciating what is here. Some people can't see the luxuries of home when they've been surrounded by it so long." I am keen to agree, the silence surrounding us tells me that this is a landmark long forgotten by the ones who live directly under the watch of these stoic centurions. So too have we heard complaints of the golden road - bobbed across yesterday with lurching stomachs and giggling hearts - of the cost of such a coastal drive. But those views of Harris demand the cost, surely. Miles of ocean and a Gigantomachy of cliffs. And if the road is good enough for Kubrick, it's good enough to warrant the car sickness.

I strive to keep this lesson in mind, my feet surer on the ferry back to mainland - that while where I live may not always feel like home, it always keeps histories to be sought, and mysteries to be explored. Gazing back to the island, I already feel a hunger for more.

Callanish Stones

The Horizon by Holly Pollard

I do not believe that these men sit by the sea all day and all night so as not to miss the time when the whiting pass, the flounder rise or the cod come in to the shallower waters, as they claim. They just want to be in a place where they have the world behind them, and before them nothing but emptiness - from *The Rings of Saturn* by W G Sebald.

I live on a small sailboat. Almost every day, I slip toward some undisclosed horizon. Whole lands rise up, some imagined, some not. During these moments, I am often alone, on watch. An experience that has taken time to get used to. My mind likes to wander on that ledge, where the earth seems to meet the sky.

Accustomed to being surrounded, I was completely unfamiliar with such silence, hearing nothing but the gentle fall of water from the bow. My thoughts did not want to rest, preoccupied with threshing over the unimportant details of my past and future. I busied myself, looking for a precious earring I'd lost, only to later empty said drawer and find it not there.

I experienced the death of my grandfather, all over again, the phone call from the hospital after days of waiting, the ringing cries of grief I will never forget. It is not how I imagined he would die, had you asked me before.

I've built many homes on that horizon, future selves, my partner beside me, both characters aglow with the certainty of their happiness. It is as if, with each fresh turning, I might be able to solidify imaginings that are by nature, out of reach. Happily, we fool ourselves into longing or fear. It is a cliché, the world that exists beyond the horizon.

I have also learned that real life can, in fact, come out of it. With increasing frequency, the silent intensity of a moment bursts forward, an orchestral sky, each ephemeral wisp of cloud transfigured into something individual and fixed, a character known to me as a familiar face in a crowd. Slowly, oceans evolve, revealing countries. Entire mountain ranges give way, walls of rock decipher to become fields, roads - look, a village, over there! - places where life goes on.

Herbert Gatliff was a rambler, a person who takes long walks in the countryside. Like sailing, rambling is simply the exploratory action of moving slowly through a landscape. He writes of how it feels, 'to be at home with the wind on the lonely heath, and the dark woods and the night sky and the stars.' The fact that distance from the detail of the world can conjure introspection seems paradoxical, but there are many reasons why natural phenomena speak to our physical, emotional and conceptual selves, being the stuff which the ecologies of our bodies are also comprised. Such feelings often come to be validated by the science. Constructural law sheds light on why the branches of trees mirror those of nerve endings, lightning strikes, subway maps, cultural movements or tributaries in a river basin.

Since the early 1980s, the Forest Agency of Japan has recommended forest-bathing or Shinrinyoku for improved wellbeing. Psychologists found that The British Outdoor Movement - of which Gatliff was a leading proponent - helped to mediate some of the psychological and emotional after-effects of the First World War. In this way, our subjective experiences of nature, however trivial they may appear to us at first, should be given weight and value.

The horizon is not a real place. Its line is always defined in relation to who perceives it. These two factors are essential to its power. They are what captivate us. We stand, the world behind us, seemingly in the present, and look forward. Viewing the world at such a scale, we see things differently.

It is a phenomenon rendered repeatedly throughout Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*, an entire book following a walk through the county of Suffolk. Throughout, the horizon is steadfast and serves to document the changes that occur on his journey, time rises and sets there, characters are pitched in relation to it, fickle histories unravelled by its jarring consistency. Written from his hospital bed, it is strange yet completely reasonable that Sebald should turn to the horizon.

Watching out the window of an aeroplane can conjure such emotions, the horizon being at its most pronounced. Karl Ove Knausgaard describes it as a 'meditative, religiously-tinged experience of the now ... waves of connectedness and belonging to the world, and which perhaps say nothing other than 'I exist."

Perhaps the reason that expansive views of the horizon provoke such strong emotions within us, is because they draw parallels with the nature of our minds, or at least how we would like them to be. As we go about busy lives, we become shaped by the forces acting upon us, the places we move through, the people we encounter.

After spending a couple of hours with a good friend in a noisy restaurant, I become a good friend in return, but perhaps also a louder one. In being together, we confirm each other's existence whilst validating qualities we hope are reflected in ourselves. I must raise my voice in order to be heard, it is simply just an effect of the environment.

Situated in front of the horizon we feel no force. It says nothing of who we are and neither will it listen. We cannot hear footsteps on its surface, or travel across it. It does not recognise our viewing of it. It is not even a mirror, for it does not pass judgement on our appearance. Existing alongside such immense silence, we are able to reconcile our being, shaking loose the identities people attach to us, that we attach to ourselves.

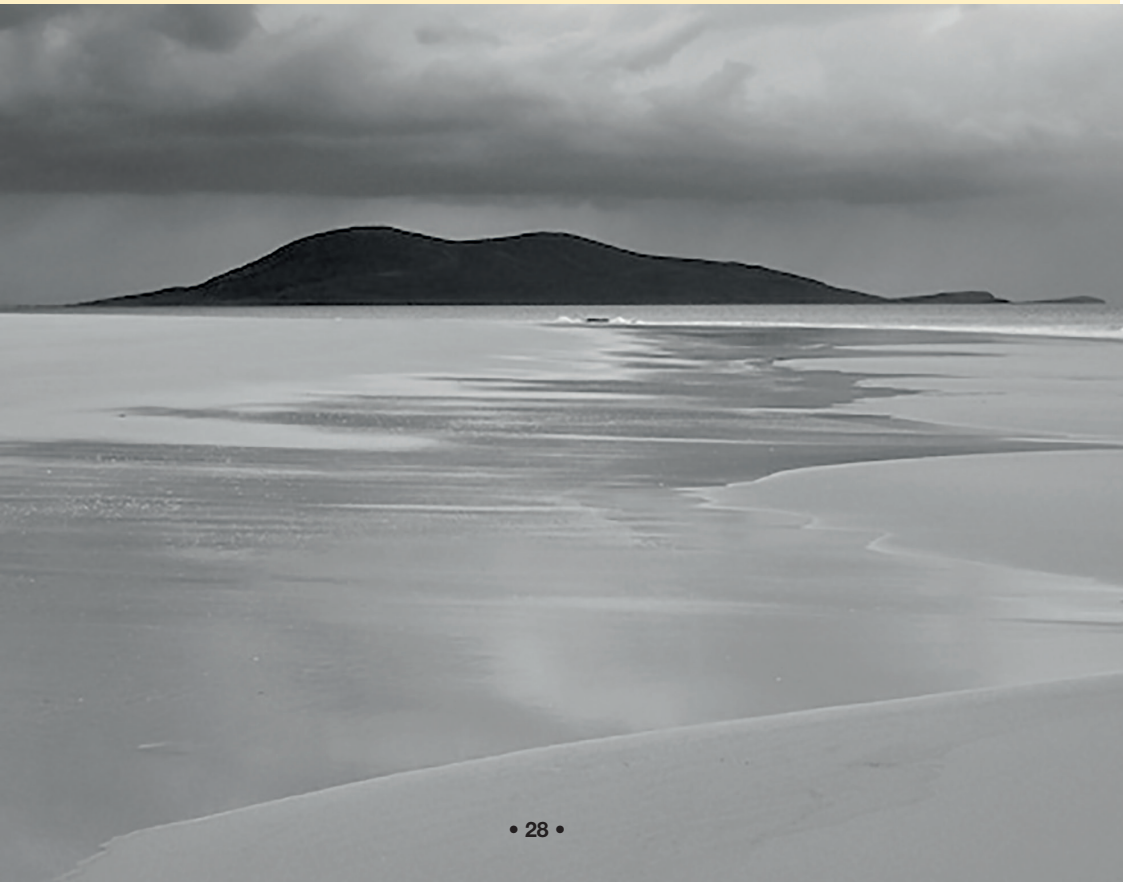
In the summer of 1968, *The Sunday Times* Golden Globe Race began - the first, around-the-world, solo, non-stop sailing competition. After over six months alone at sea, Bernard Moitessier was leading the race along the final stretch, certain glory

along with a £5,000 prize well within his grasp, when he decided to turn his boat around and head for Tahiti. He wrote in his log, “I am in very good health”. His book about these adventures is called *The Long Way*.

External and internal exploration are inextricably linked. Such adventures - when the chaos of the self is at once simplified by and at harmony with the chaos of nature - are indescribable, the kind that must be experienced in order to be understood. Thankfully, there is always a horizon to be found, even if it is hidden from our immediate view. While open landscapes and mountain ranges are considered best, in reality, access to such vistas really comes down to matters of habit. We must remember to look.

On contemplating suitable manifestos for ‘The Club’, a youth hostel association focused on supporting young people’s exploration of the countryside, Gatliff writes, ‘The best might suggest that we always get lost’. On certain mornings at sea, when there is little wind, the air becomes cool and heavy. It clots to a grey noise and sticks to the surface of the water. Sky and sea blend, the horizon disappears, space is made visible. The trick of the light is exposed.

Explore ‘The Edge’ by Beka Globe at themissiohouse.co.uk/photography-1



Herbert Gatliff: How His Legacy Inspires Youth to Explore The Outdoors by Tessa Guthrie

The spirit of adventure has long been a driving force for humans. It compels us to seek out new experiences, explore uncharted territories, and discover the hidden gems of our world. Herbert Gatliff, a legendary figure in the Outdoor Movement, embodied this spirit in the purest form.

While his name is commonly associated with the Outer Hebrides and the simple youth hostels he founded, his legacy inspires countless individuals to venture beyond their comfort zone and embrace the thrill of exploring the unknown. Gatliff's love for the Scottish countryside and accessible youth travel is a beacon of light for young people wanting to explore Scotland.

There exists an inherent magnetism in places that are shrouded in mystery, untouched by the masses and far removed from the routines of daily life. Such places beckon the intrepid traveller to venture beyond the familiar and uncover the secrets they hold.

Scotland's magnetic charm lies in its diverse natural beauty. The Scottish Highlands, teeming with untamed landscapes, jagged mountains and serene lochs, are unlike anywhere else in the world. This region's dramatic scenery speaks to the wanderlust within all of us, motivating ventures beyond our established experiences, delving deeper into its mysteries.

My own adventure into the Scottish Highlands touched something deep within my soul. Before my exploration into the Highlands, I could count the number of times I had seen the sea on my fingers. I had grown up seeing photographs of the Highlands, accompanied by grand tales of kilted men galloping through the rolling hills on massive steeds. There was such mystery and magic surrounding the other-worldly landscapes and I could not wait to unveil the truth.

Scotland's allure often comes from the folklore and legend surrounding the country, where extraordinary phenomena captivate the imagination and stir a yearning to learn more. These feature such as the myth of the elusive Loch Ness Monster which supposedly resides deep within the endless aquatic pit to the legend of the Old Man of Storr and the giants which once roamed the Isle of Skye.

These mysteries have long drawn people to the Scottish Highlands with wonder and awe with the desire to uncover the truth about these myths. Besides such, Scotland's rugged landscapes have an irresistible allure that draws adventurists and nature enthusiasts alike.

For example, the compelling Isle of Skye in particular fascinated me. Its otherworldly landscapes covered with towering cliffs, vivid green valleys, and sparkling lochs, intrigued and elicited wild fantasies about scenery. As I trekked through the island's enchanting landscapes, I felt astonished, at one with nature as well as a profound connection to the dramatic terrain while exploring the scenery.

My journey through the Highlands inspired me to reconnect with nature and to push past the fear of the unknown. During my time in the Highlands, I stood on the edge of a cliff at Kilt Rocks as a rough autumn wind whipped at my hair. I wondered if a gust would come that was strong enough to cause me to plummet into the choppy and no doubt freezing waters below.

I sat on the mossy and damp ground and looked out to the towering stones surrounding the landscape. Their weather-worn faces peered out onto the ocean and I pondered the history the stones had seen. Their dark and mysterious nature called to me and pushed my curiosity further than before.

In Glen Coe, I walked through a stunning valley surrounded by massive mountains. The peaks had dustings of snow while the ground held onto bits of green and auburn. Sparkling, crystal-clear water wound its way through the peaks. I thought of the centuries of history that had taken place there and the stories that were still being imagined from its inspiring appearance. I felt connected to the past and curious to discover the secrets the mountains had.

I had never seen such a stunning and intriguing place. A place so steeped in tradition yet so wild and untamed. I was so inspired by the astonishing beauty of the Highlands and the freedom I felt there. The trip was so impactful that I gained the courage to push past my fears and be motivated to travel solo throughout Europe leading my newfound curiosity to explore the unfamiliar.

Like Gatliff, I hope to always be inspired by the wild and untamed natural landscape of our world. Aristotle once explained, 'In all things of nature there is something of the marvellous.' Throughout my life, I have always had a spiritual connection to nature. I have always found solace and intense comfort in the world's natural beauty. When outdoors, I find that my mind stills and worries cease; there is only amazement at the sheer fantastic nature of the world.

There has to be something greater than all of us that created such beauty, but in the modern world, it can be a challenge to remain connected to nature. There are always things to do or distractions that we justify preventing exploration. For young people especially, cost and accessibility often thwart having adventures in nature. Gatliff's mission to create space for these travellers through his founding of the Gatliff Trust is an inspiration for those travellers.

From a young age, Gatliff demonstrated a vigorous passion for creating space

for all people to enjoy nature through his dedication to the Youth Hostel Association, founded in 1931. The YHA aimed ‘to help all, especially young people of limited means, to a greater knowledge, love and care of the countryside, particularly by providing hostels or other simple accommodation for them in their travels.’

While his work with the YHA was significant, his biggest achievement was the founding of the Gatliff Trust in 1961, which aimed to ensure the enjoyment of nature in the English and Scottish countryside through youth hostels. Today, the Gatliff hostels in Berneray, Howmore, and Rhenigidale still host curious and committed travellers. His ideas of simple living within a community intrigue people, enabling them to experience the greatness of the Outer Hebrides.

Through the preservation of Gatliff’s ideals, we are reminded of the spirit of adventure that resides within us all. His spirit made a lasting impact on travellers. Whether we find ourselves in our backyard or on a windy cliff on a remote island in Scotland, we all share the desire to explore, discover and connect with the world around us. It is a call that motivates us to venture beyond the familiar, seek out new horizons and cherish the world we call home.

Creature comforts in remote Rhenigidale.

Thin Places by Eliza Lawrence

David Attenborough exclaimed that, 'No one will protect what they don't care about; and no one will care about what they have never experienced'. Herbert Gatliff and the Outdoor Movement of the 1990s have inspired me to adventure out of the big city and further understand the individual, community and healing power of nature, particularly for a younger generation that is confused and uncertain about its future.

For me, it was watching birds from the cliffs outside my hostel. I grew up hearing the wondrous poetry of the Carmarthenshire-based writer, Dylan Thomas. With the imagination of an eight-year-old, I would hear marvellous stories that are embedded in my psyche now, such as the tale of the symbolic white church at Tegfan that hung low on a cliff. There was a young girl in the 1900s (Gatliff's context) from inner city Liverpool who was sick and came to Pembrokeshire to live within the sea air and was subsequently healed and now this church remains.

The power of nature within this coastline has always been miraculous, inspirational, mythical, sublime and healing and still is, much like the Hebrides for Hebert Gatliff. This summer I went on an adventure, much like the little sick girl, to understand why this natural environment is so special and to heal myself. With a background in studying religion, a career in journalism and a passion for environmental activism I came to challenge and understand Pembrokeshire's sublime coastline with my words, filmmaking and photography.

I will argue that in the 'Climate Era' and mental health epidemic of my present context, there needs to exist a greater ecological stewardship, a sense of adventure within nature and spaces for the younger generations to have transformative connections in wilder lands. After lockdown I had become disillusioned, like many of my peers, of the vacuous 'opportunity overflow' and 'human-centred' atmosphere of London. I wanted to immerse myself in the power of nature's 'eco- therapy' and learn what 'belonging' and 'freedom' felt like for a young person in Pembrokeshire.

I spent a week in a special hostel called Pwll Deri, and then stayed in the outhouse hut of two artists who offered me free rent for help with their garden, artwork and marketing. Herbert Gatliff understood that there needed to be an incentive for young people to seek nature and so I will detail my own experience of spiritual tourism to try to encourage an urge to connect with nature and to persuade a greater need for spaces for young people within this magnetising environment. I will go further and also recognise that there needs to be spaces that are inclusive for different genders, sexualities, ages, races and nationalities.

My experience of the coastline is that it is largely white and middle-aged which can lead those who do not fit the norm to have a sense of distraction from the community. There

must always be a recognition of diversity and inclusion when it comes to these isolating places of natural beauty. The key factors of the late 19th/20th centuries that contributed to the Outdoor Movement are similar to the motivations today; health benefits, preservation of nature, increase in leisurely time and technological advancements. Since Covid there has also been an exodus out of the big cities with a rise in remote working and the cost of living crisis meaning people are second guessing how to live their lives.

Amongst my generation, we are challenging the hamster wheel of capitalism, a mental/physical health epidemic and the warped idea of success that the industrialisation of Gatliff's context has amalgamated. What once was shiny, is seemingly showing signs of superficial wear, as the countdown of environmental collapse ticks ferociously in my generation's ears. I studied religion at Edinburgh university and became increasingly aware that despite being 'agnostic' I felt that the meaning and purpose religion gave the older generation was something comforting and centering. However, amongst young people 7 in 10 in the UK are non-religious.

My experience trying to survive in the big city as a freelance writer in the last two years has been one of being a human doing rather than a human being. My meaning and purpose became about survival and economical gain and I suffered illness and a deterioration of mental health, complete with a large dose of climate anxiety. Seemingly, I craved the spiritual meaning attached to religion and wanted to restore my own sense of meaning, perhaps at St Non's Chapel, St David's.

After my mother started permanently living in Pembrokeshire, she became aware of the term 'Thin Place'. It is perfectly summed up in an article on Thin Places in Scotland and Ireland: 'Thin places probe to the core of the human heart and open the pathway that leads to satisfying the familiar hungers and yearnings common to all people on earth, the hunger to be connected, to be a part of something greater, to be loved, to find peace.' I climbed up everything, stared at the expanse and breathed an ozone purified air and I felt inspired again.

My time in Pembrokeshire, staying in the hostel led me to access a spiritual state of connection between body and mind which sponsored my creativity. My time in Pembrokeshire was made up of exploring nature and stopping to write under a tree, at a burial chamber, on a purple beached rock or overlooking a rewilded meadow. When I travelled back to London I felt that this new me could cope, thrive and be inspired by more internal and external stimuli, such as the standing rocks and Preseli hills.

Despite all its benefits I have always been dismayed at the lack of spaces for young people to thrive on the Pembrokeshire coastline. There are limited affordable hostels and when I spoke to a representative of the YHA (Youth Hostels Association) in Pembrokeshire they also recognised the limits to how many affordable spaces were available. There is a farm called Treginnis by St David's that is specifically for inner-city children which is hopeful. However, the spaces for 17+ visiting Pembrokeshire are

limited. Furthermore, the second home ownership within Pembrokeshire means houses are neglected in winter months and rented at bank-breaking prices in summer.

From London, Pembrokeshire takes 4 hours 20 minutes to reach, with a hefty ticket price and then a further hour bus ride (if it's running) which leads to further inaccessibility to those in the inner cities. Motivated by the same urgency that Gatliff felt, I want to dedicate my summers to encouraging a younger exploration of Pembrokeshire, starting with my friends who are suffocated and disillusioned with London. I want to explore all the hostels within Pembrokeshire and then hopefully begin creating workshops and environments for youth, with the benefits of adventuring in unexpected landscapes to find meaning in a crazy world!

When I think of nature and my 'Thin Place', I think of Pembrokeshire and I have regained a sense of adventure, meaning and positive mental and physical health - by spending my summer there in youth hostels and further Wwoof (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms) accommodation. For another young person it may be somewhere else, but I will leave you with this, something that Gatliff would be thoughtful of within his Hebridean landscape:

1. Discern your Thin place intentionally
2. Visit your Thin place regularly
3. Guard your Thin place fiercely
4. 'Create spaces within your thin place to thrive with others who have different stories/ contexts from yourself as you will also share in their Thin places too'. I wrote a poem and created a film called 'Thin Place' which can be found on YouTube under 'Eliza Lawrence: Thin Place', if you would like to explore it further.'

Pembrokeshire islets by Eliza Lawrence

A Grand Opportunity: How a writer's trip to the Highlands changed her perspective on living by Elizabeth Warden

The rain is vicious, attacking any bare skin. Light flickers beyond the downpour, insistent in its bayonetting of the dark. Water gushes a metre away. Each swell of the current boils beneath the surface before being shattered at crest by the onslaught of rain. The elements are at their worst, and so am I, my shoes on wet stones soaked through and my puffer jacket heavy and sodden. I imagine how much heavier it might feel to pursue my course into the river.

I am not in the Highlands. That trip is six months away. Between arriving in Oban on the west coast of Scotland and this moment of absconding from the psychiatric ward, I will be found, brought back, plied with ever more and ever stronger medication, discharged and then plod with feet just as heavy as they are at this moment, stood by the brutal Thames in my soaked trainers, through months of recovery.

One particular moment came back to me as I stood with my feet planted on the stern of a sailing yacht six months later, a confident grip on the helm, steering to the bright dot of Cassiopeia's elbow with the Isle of Eigg looming to starboard.

The moment is this: my first night on the ward, I sat by the window and peered through the holes in the metal covering and watched planes on the flightpath to and from Heathrow. I tracked them, jotted down their destinations and where they had come from on a piece of scrap paper begged from the nursing station. Reykjavik, Doha, Larnaca, Dubai, Barcelona, Funchal. The white lights at the wing tips, red ones on the underbelly - each plane a many-eyed miracle taking people away, bringing them home, full of adventure and freedom and a desire to keep living.

I watched the skies for hours and not a single star appeared, not even Orion and his belt to orientate me. London's hot plume of noxious dirt did what it had done every day for a year and blocked out the light.

Not so in the Highlands: the skies were so bright we could see the dolphins playing in our wake, catch the break of the water over their backs and the splash as they disappeared. "When was the last time you laughed for joy?" I asked my crewmates. I couldn't give an answer. I never took for granted the clear skies of the countryside, the childhood nights in Fife and Glencoe and the Yorkshire Moors, but how could I have understood what it felt like to not have them for months?

Now, above me the stars of the Northern hemisphere rolled in majesty as we sailed through the night from Tobermory around the Small Isles of the Hebrides. This was such a different darkness, such different water, to the hollow city versions of last October. This was inky, weighty. Darkness as man had always known, not the

fragile grey in the corner of an underpass beneath a bridge in one of the brightest, loudest cities in the world. The only torches that found me now were the red beams of my crewmates, not the fluorescence of searchlights, and the only way to find direction was to look to the stars.

It was my sister who told me about the sailing trip in Oban. It was running for its second year in the spring of 2022, organised by a charity called Our Isles and Oceans which was set up to help young people after the Covid-19 pandemic. The grand opportunity was this: a group of under-35s would be given the fully-funded experience of living on a 68-foot Clipper yacht for five days, learning how to sail and co-exist in the unusual setting. It was designed to push boundaries, expand horizons and get these young people out of their comfort zones. This is exactly what it did for me and nine other young men and women, all of us arriving unsure and seeking something, all of us departing friends, renewed by nature and a rediscovered zest for adventure.

It is hard to imagine what the great explorers and nature lovers of yesteryear would have to say about the Covid-19 pandemic and its concurrent lockdowns. By UK law: only an hour a day outside, for months.

Lockdowns did give nature a respite from tourists and pollution, as a representative from the Oban-based Scottish Association for Marine Science informed us. The Our Isles and Oceans charity is so named in the spirit of community, responsibility and sustainability: the Earth's isles and oceans are ours, all of ours, to experience and to protect.

This ethos has been staunchly defended throughout the generations long before I shrugged on my comically large backpack and made my way down to the docks in Oban, watched by the inscrutable McCaig's tower. From the formation of the Commons, Open Spaces and Footpaths Preservation Society in 1865, the National Trust in 1895 and the Ramblers Association of 1935, plus many others, it's clear that protecting the spaces so beloved by walkers, hikers, campers, runners and cyclists has always been a passionate part of many people's lives.

This was certainly the case for Herbert Gatliff, whose steadfast support of many of these societies formed the bedrock of his life. He too loved the Highlands of Scotland, drawn to the romance of the landscape. He focused his efforts on the Youth Hostels Association tradition of providing what would now be termed 'budget-friendly' accommodation for young outdoor enthusiasts in the isolated regions of the Outer Hebrides. His crofthouses eventually formed part of the Gatliff Trust, a society initially set up in 1961 to support the enjoyment and upkeep of the UK countryside for young people, and subsequently the Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust in 1988.

It is champions of the outdoors such as Gatliff and Our Isles and Oceans which allow the young to leave the comforts of home and seek adventures where they

wouldn't normally. These individuals and organisations understand the positive impact of nature on humanity's wellbeing. They help to alleviate the financial burden of accessing and thriving in these places. Vigorous activity, the feeling of crisp air on my face first thing in the morning and how the world looks when you're scanning the horizon from half-way up a mast did just as much for me in five days than five years of talking therapies and medication.

The rush to urban landscapes as young people grow up, seeking the opportunities and excitement of big city life, is so commonplace now that to question it seems futile. It's been the way for generations, and who am I to condemn it? I am not the first to say it, but perhaps, in this current epidemic of mental illness, a shift to getting back to basics - community, nature, exercise - might help more young people rediscover their desire for life.

I found myself viewing life from that vantage point as the sun rose at the end of our night sail. We had left Tobermory and its brightly painted houses the evening before, watched the sun set over the west of Scotland, shot arrows with Orion and reclined with Queen Cassiopeia until the sun rose again as we passed Rum and Eigg. The view was, and still is, vastly different from the one I saw through the metal cage of a psychiatric hospital window.

'As the sun rose at the end of our night sail'

Trying to Catch a Will-o'-the-Wisp when Rediscovering the Spirit of Adventure in the Lake District by Esther Kearney

Not for us the supreme effort of climbing the Himalayas, or wintering alone in Greenland … But we do learn to get away from the fireside and the armchair and the street lamp, not to lose ourselves in strange places, or better still to find ourselves when lost (for there is more joy over one pathfinder who loses his own way and finds it again, than over a score that have the way found for them), to stand together in difficulties, to greet the mud and the rain and the cold with a song, to be at home with the wind on the lonely heath, and the dark woods and the night sky and the stars. We learn not to 'go cosy'.
Herbert Gatliff, Famous Outdoorsman and Pioneer of the YHA.

In recent years, I have felt lost. Like a lone traveller led off the path by a will-o'-the-wisp. But the words spoken by Herbert Gatliff above ring true. There is a unique joy when someone who has gone astray regains their sense of whimsy and eagerness to explore the outdoors.

My alarm went off at five am, its persistent chirping making me question every decision I had made leading up to that moment. But it was all for a worthwhile cause, embarking on an unorthodox day trip from Nottingham to explore the Lake District by bicycle. Our itinerary included nine hours by rail with a bike and a strict deadline to do the cycle itself.

Outside, the day was crisp and dewy, and we were greeted by an early autumn freshness that kissed our upturned faces as we groggily began our adventure. The walk was slow and steady, the sky that rare shade of indigo you only witness in the early morning complemented by the appearance of the planet Venus.

Nottingham train station was quiet in the early hours, bare without the usual foot traffic that would undoubtedly be present later. We collected a comical number of train tickets in the foyer before proceeding through the barriers, bike in tow. I had opted to rent one at our destination as my trusty hybrid was currently in need of repair. It was unfortunate, but it did mean we only had to figure out how to transport one bike. These were the thoughts that ran through my mind as we pressed the button and waited for the lift. It took an age to arrive, groaning and creaking as though stretching its limbs, reluctantly readying itself for the day ahead.

Life may be a marathon, but that day was a sprint. The spur-of-the-moment adventure down to the Lakes had been my idea, but all would be lost without Ian. He was a veteran cyclist, meticulously planning routes and prepping the bikes. He brought things like repair kits, cereal bars, and spare inner tubes. I packed

other kinds of essentials: plasters, tissues, and a single plastic bag. These items were known to come in handy in a pinch, be it wiping up mud or ensuring we took our litter home with us. Together, we were a (mostly) well-oiled machine.

Towards the end of our train journey, we were approached by a woman. She asked Ian about his bike and where we were going for the day. I like to think the spirit of Herbert Gatliff was watching over us as we conversed. He was said to have enjoyed chatting with like-minded countryside ramblers whilst waiting for the train.

I love how a place like the Lake District brings people together. It's the little sigh joined with the ghost of a smile, distracted as they stare into the distance, reminiscing about their own memories.

Many trains and hours later, we arrived at Windermere station and headed down to the bike hire. After chatting with the amiable man behind the counter and signing all the paperwork, we set out. What then proceeded was a lot of hills. Downhill, uphill, downhill again, and so on and so forth. Windermere was beautiful and it didn't take long for the first highlight of our trip.

We were going through the town when we spotted a wild mushroom growing on the side of the road. It was a deep violet colour that tapered out into a lighter hue near the base of the cap, paired with a burnt umber underbelly. Ian took a photo, and we thought it might be an amethyst deceiver. However, later we concluded that it was more likely a lilac fibrecap given the colour of its gills and location. We had indeed been deceived.

After that brief diversion, we headed to the ferry to make our way across Windermere. The cars boarded first, then the pedestrians, and lastly the cyclists. We gazed out onto the lake, watching the shoreline recede as we drifted further and further out. Once we reached the other side, we got to partake in an extraordinarily fun phenomenon. One by one each cyclist rode off the boat and onto the track. We found ourselves caught up in what must have looked like a school of fluorescent fish as we followed the line of neon jerseys heading for the trail.

The rest of the bike ride was a green haze. The moss on the forest floor crept up onto the bark of the tall beech trees, undoubtedly creating a snug home for wildlife. We stopped multiple times to admire the water that glittered like silver on the horizon. The hilly landscape was a challenge, and I admit that I did cry out of frustration on numerous occasions.

I can still remember it vividly. My cheeks stung slightly from the cold breeze that came off the water as we flew down dirt tracks. I remember seeing the pointed top of a castle in the background which grew bigger and bigger as we approached it. The old stone was welcoming, and the pebbly slate walls embraced the grassy banks.

After a few hours, we hit the halfway point and stopped for lunch. We locked our bikes up and traversed the idyllic town of Ambleside, bustling with weekend activity. Eventually, we found a nice country pub and ordered fish and chips. We chatted with our neighbours and stroked the head of a friendly Labrador under the wooden picnic table. Ian then showed me the map and then we talked about everything and anything that weighed on our minds.

I have always said it, but some of our best conversations have been when we've been cycling. There's something about being in the great outdoors, winding down unknown paths, occasionally getting lost, that really gets you thinking about the philosophy of life. He also knows me better than I know myself at times and beckoned me towards Fred's Bookshop with an amused smile when he saw my eyes alight on the sign.

He waited outside, readying the bikes for the next length of our journey, whilst I went inside and poured over the shelves that were crammed full of stories waiting patiently to be read. I eventually settled on a copy of Italo Calvino's, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*. The title seemed strangely fitting. I thought about it during the last leg of our bike ride and flicked through it on the journey home, before falling into a deep slumber, lulled by the rhythmic heartbeat of the train.

That day the spirit of adventure could be found in every rural wanderer that passed us by. All of whom follow in the footsteps of those like Gatliff who fought to retain and appreciate the beauty of the countryside. I achieved what I set out to do. I persisted and pushed myself outside my comfort zone rather than 'going cosy'. Some days we need the fireside, and the comfort of falling asleep on a dreary day, but we should strive to strike a balance between this and satiating our innate curiosity for the natural world.

Esther and Ian at the beginning of their ride'

Adventuring at Places, with People and within Oneself by Sam Brown

Everyone fears the question. It's the one question you get asked at many an interview, at inductions and on courses: "So, tell us an interesting fact about yourself." As the teacher, trainer or educator goes around the room, and you hear the banal responses of your peers - "I have three dogs", "I enjoy long walks on the beach", "I collect old postcards" - you start to panic. Is there anything interesting about me? Anything unique? What am I going to say?

You reach into the furthest corners of your mind, desperate for something original to say about yourself. Thankfully, in situations such as these, I have a prepared answer - "My first job was in a castle." I grew up near a village in the Forest of Dean called St Briavels, and this small settlement has a castle. A crumbling moat surrounds the medieval castle, its gardens and a large gateway tucked away on the side of the road is like a discarded piece of litter. If you were to push on those hard wooden doors, inside you would find a youth hostel.

St Briavels Castle has had an interesting and sordid history. Originally built in the 11th century as a hunting lodge and administrative centre, the castle moved in and out of favour with the various monarchs of English history before turning into a debtors' prison during the Regency era. The poor, desperate, and destitute were left to rot in squalid conditions to fund the extravagance of a privileged few. Nothing ever changes.

The castle fell into disrepair, but after the Second World War, the Youth Hostel Association took over management of the castle, bolstering the British tradition of turning sites of horror into cheap accommodation. Since 1948, St Briavels Castle has welcomed people from across the country, living up to Herbert Gatliff's ambitions and dreams. Most visitors were city-people, from London, from Manchester, from Edinburgh, from wherever, who wanted to experience some of Gloucestershire's countryside culture, whether eating raw onions at Newent or rolling cheese down Cooper's Hill.

I started working at St Briavels Castle in 2017 when I was 16 years old. Like many young people looking for work, I was immediately stationed at the kitchen sink, with my yellow sponge and gloves. I was a shy and precocious child, ripped away from my bedroom to clean other people's plates and cutlery. Believe me, the smell and texture of chicken skin stuck to an oven tray, mixing and squirming in a sink full of soap and hot water was a unique experience.

I met many people, from many walks of life, during my adventures at the St Briavels Youth Hostel. An asylum seeker from Rwanda, who escaped their country's bloody and violent civil war; a 90-year-old English cyclist with memories of the Blitz; a

Canadian couple protesting Donald Trump's visit to the UK. The Forest of Dean is not known for its cultural heterogeneity. But in a brief pocket of a small village that few have ever heard of, a minor local attraction has turned into something of an international hotspot.

On one occasion, a school group from India stumbled upon the castle during their trip to Wales, hopeful that somebody was available to give them a tour. They didn't speak English. I didn't speak Hindi. Nonetheless, I donned a period cloak-and-gown and began an extremely complex game of charades, taking thirty Indian schoolgirls on a journey through English monarchical history, from William the Conqueror to Elizabeth II, using nothing but body language. It was an impressive, and frequently embarrassing, feat. But they sent a postcard to the castle, from India, praising me for the tour. At least, I think it was praise - it was written in Hindi!

Many came to St Briavels because they wanted to escape to the tranquillity of the Welsh and English countryside. I didn't understand it at first. I felt as though I were trapped in the countryside, not liberated by it. When I went on holiday, I visited cities. I had enough soil and dirt at home; I longed for steel and concrete. But as I got older, and (arguably) wiser, and as different people came and went from the youth hostel, I started to see my home through the eyes of strangers.

Visitors told me that they had travelled across the country, or across the world, to hike on the hills of South-west England; to traverse the border of Wales; or to see the beauty of the River Wye, the same River Wye that Herbert Gatliff's gravestone overlooks. On their advice, I decided to look at my home anew. Much like Gatliff, I discovered a passion for the landscape of rural Britain. My regular commute to work - down a long, turning road - the fields of Gloucestershire peeking out over the horizon were transformed into a painting.

I even began to youth hostel myself, travelling west towards Wales, east towards London and north to the Lake District, that still, beautiful paradise near and dear to Herbert Gatliff's heart. However, as Gatliff encountered in Ennerdale, sites of natural beauty must often meet the harsh realities of the modern world.

In the early 2010s, the government attempted to privatise publicly owned land in the Forest of Dean, including land near St Briavels Castle. A campaign group, 'Hands off our Forest', was organised to fight this. Tom Cousins, a local artist and supporter of HOOF, painted the exterior walls of the pub near my house in solidarity, presenting those driving past it with a simple message - KEEP IT PUBLIC.

Much like HOOF, youth hostelling has had to balance its left-wing principles with the UK's right-wing economic system. Providing inexpensive accommodation for those of limited means has met the necessities of cutbacks and profit margins. We've gone from marginal fees for using a shared kitchen in Gatliff's time to alcohol licences for youth hostels in the 2010s. After Brexit, COVID-19 and the cost-of-living crisis, it seems that young people with a chance to escape to the countryside has become less

and less of a priority. Even HOOF eventually withered away, the sign of solidarity at my local pub painted over. As I said - nothing ever changes.

Despite the challenges facing hostels in the 21st century, Gatliff's dream of affordable and available travel accommodation for young people remains alive. It certainly remains alive to me. Without affordable access to youth hostels, I would have been unable to venture outside the Forest of Dean. Now, I walk on new ground. Hostels are open across the UK, helping to promote a greater knowledge, love and care for the British countryside, whether it's a castle in South Gloucestershire or a remote settlement, such as Rhenigidale, in North Harris.

What I learnt, during my adventures at the youth hostel, is that, with new eyes, something ordinary can become something extraordinary. To hike, to camp, or even just to walk in a place you've known for so long as home introduces a different perspective. Home can become something new. Home can become a holiday. Home can become an adventure. That's why, when the finger is pointed in my direction, and I'm asked, "Tell us an interesting fact about yourself," I can proudly respond, "My first job was in a castle."

Taking the plunge near Rhenigidale

Connecting

This online publication has brought you into contact with 13 writers who were under 30 years of age when their articles were submitted for the Gatliff Trust / *Scottish Islands Explorer* Young Writers' Award.

If you wish to contact the writers or adjudicators, please do so via editor@gatliff.org.uk and every effort will be made to forward messages.

Feel free to find out more about the organisations behind the Award - at www.gatliff.org.uk and at https://scottishislandsexplorer.com

The first Gatliff Hostel was set up in Rhenigidale, north Harris, in 1962. *Scottish Islands Explorer*, the bi-monthly magazine, was founded on Fair Isle between Orkney and Shetland in 2000.

Over the years there have been six Gatliff hostels but currenty there are only three: Berneray, North Uist; Howmore, South Uist; and Rhenigidale, north Harris. These have close links with the Hebridean Way, routes for cyclists and walkers.The magazine is now published from offices in Stornoway, Isle of Lewis, close to where the Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust (GHHT) has its registered office.

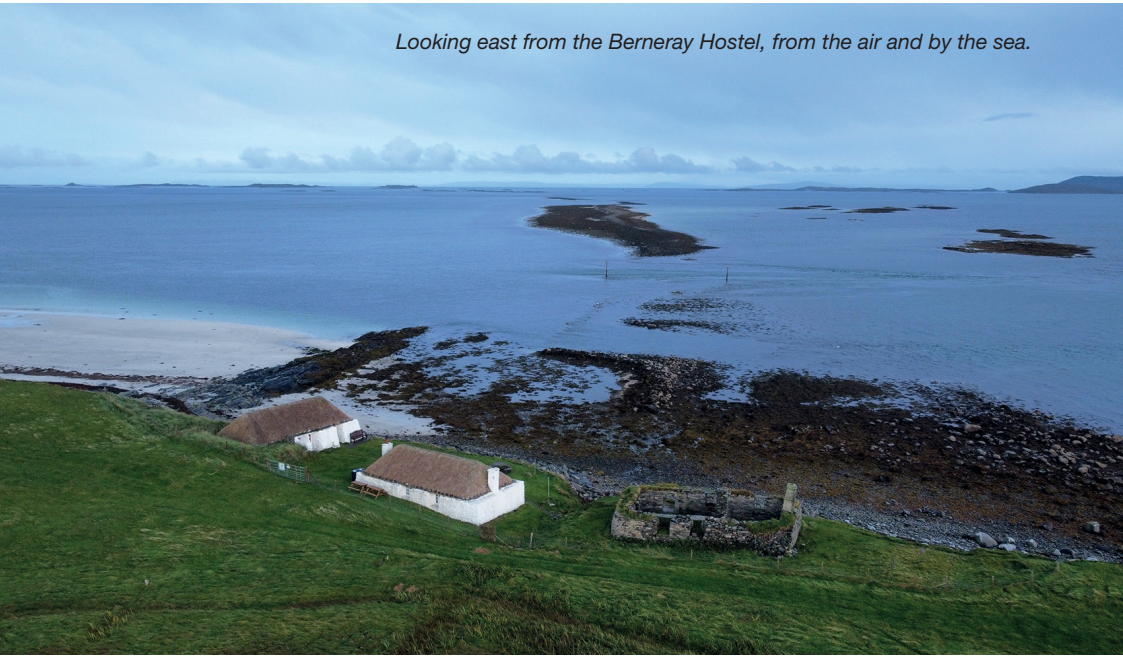
Looking north from the Berneray Hostel, from the air and by the sea.

The Gatliff Trust (GT) founded in 1961 by Herbert Gatliff, has recently decided to cease operations prior to closing. This Award was one of the last beneficiaries of the GT. The GHHT, founded in 1988 by the GT, is going strong as an independent Scottish charity.

A biography of Herbert Gatliff by Len Clark is available as a pdf through the Gatliff website (address above) or as a booklet by contacting editor@gatliff.org.uk

If you have been impressed by the views of these writers or wish to join the GHHT (£15 pa) or wish to receive the twice-yearly newsletter, *Hebridean Hostellers*, please email membership@gatliff.org.uk or follow the links on www.gatliff.org.uk

Thank you for your interest and for, at least, telling others about these people who, in the past and present, have responded to the challenges of approaching life with a sense of adventure.



Looking east from the Berneray Hostel, from the air and by the sea.