

Hebridean Hostellers

Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust

www.gatliff.org.uk

Newsletter 77

Spring 2025



Rhenigidale and Toddun

Photograph by Julian Paren

From the Chair

Peter Clarke writes: Is this spring at last? Fair weather or foul to come, a summer hostelling season beckons. Do make the most of it!

The hostel overnight figures for 2024 point to 2025 being a **splendid** year to visit the hostels and stay a while.

Hostel Overnights	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Berneray	2,387	37	0	490	1,086	1,487
Howmore	1,550	47	0	426	1,107	1,294
Rhenigidale	934	51	0	254	479	690
Total	4,871	135	0	1,170	2,672	3,471

While hostel numbers are **rising**, they have still to reach the pre-Covid numbers of 2019. Trustees and Wardens will be pleased if their efforts are rewarded with higher hostel overnights in 2025. However, this is not their only motive. The quality of experiences, such as peace and quiet, matters significantly to visitors, who are welcome to stay a while, three or four nights, for example.

Visitors could appreciate the music of the breeze, with our no-bookings policy meaning the hostel bed is theirs for the duration of a stay. Here's time to adjust to the tempo of island life and its surprises, perhaps, **inspirations** which can be shared through the hostel-logbook or an article to the Editor.

After a very successful spring work party, which visited all the hostels to prepare them for the new season, what are you **waiting** for?

For many years, we have subscribed to the Visit Scotland Quality Assurance Scheme and have been **pleased** that we achieved two-star status based on assessments made by independent inspectors. This scheme has now ended and all signage and references to it at the hostels and on our website removed, as required.

It is currently unclear what, if anything, will be devised to provide external accreditation of quality standards. In the meantime, trustees have **resolved** to continue to adhere to the high standards we have always adopted and rely upon inspections by wardens, hostellers and trustees.

Hostelling Scotland will run its 'own audit/quality checks to keep everything on top form' until alternative external assessments are devised. We are members of Visit Outer Hebrides (Outer Hebrides Tourism), which has adopted the AA registration scheme for hotels. This is inappropriate for the hostels. In this new context, feedback on your **experiences** at our hostels is more important than ever!



Working at Howmore by Alistair Cant

Gatliff Outlooks

Last year, the Gatliff Trust and the magazine, *Scottish Islands Explorer*, sponsored an Award for Young Writers. The adjudicators felt that publication of all 13 entries, which were required to emphasise Herbert Gatliff's notion of the need for a sense of **adventure**, should be published. Follow the www.gatliff.org.uk drop-down menu to 'Gatliff Outlooks', which will be available after 15 May. Do read and direct others to the stimulating online section.

Walking and Talking

If you should be near Howmore or Rhenigidale during the Summer, here are two potentially **exciting** events. Alasdair MacEachen will be leading a walk from Loch Skipport Pier on Saturday 7 June at 10.00 to the Ushenish Lighthouse. It involves a five-mile each-way trek along the trackless deserted coast of the Minch side of South Uist, with stout footwear and a sustaining picnic advised.

On Saturday 12 July at 11.00, Marc Calhoun will be undertaking a two-mile each-way walk to the Sron Smearasmal beehive dwellings in North Harris. Details of both **excursions** to seldom-visited places are to be found on the website of The Islands Book Trust and its section islandsbooktrust.org/pages/events-1.



Photo by Marc Calhoun

An t-Eilean / The Island

Stephen Moss writes: 'This is a four-part murder mystery, set in Harris and first shown on BBC Alba. The 'murder' takes place in Amhuinnsuidhe Castle and involves a rich, but dysfunctional, family. The dialogue is in Gaelic with English sub-titles and the **drama** is currently available on BBC iPlayer or via the website: www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0026zqh

The atmospheric, aerial shots of the mountains and coasts are really **stunning**. The makers must have learned from the success of previous Scandi Noir dramas, where impressive landscapes often feature prominently. It will be interesting to see its impact on tourism in the Outer Hebrides, particularly after winning the drama and entertainment prize at Prix Circom 2025, the international television awards.

45 Years On



Dieter Goebel writes:
'I have 'travelled' for fun again. This time using Google and its Street View, I was able to **recreate** my hitch-hiking around Scotland in 1980. That journey made a marked impression upon me, not only because of the landscape, but on account of the friendliness of the

Scottish people. Alas, I have never returned, but to my pleasure discovered that the hostel at Howmore is both in use and in good condition.

I had stayed there for some nights and well **remember** the old lady who was warden and who served as a 'guard' at that special hostel. I took photographs of several features, including the male dormitory with no beds, just sleeping bags on the floor. In the kitchen area there was an oven fired by peat and driftwood. The gas bottle, neglected by the supplier, was almost empty.

Electric current, available for heating, could be acquired with a 5p coin. So guests had discussions, sometimes heated, about whether the coldest individuals should be the ones to pay for the next round. Whatever, I am happy, from here at home near Flensburg, to see how well the property has been repaired and maintained, **delighted** that guests are still welcomed and accommodated.'



Film Footage Found

Take a search engine and enter 'Faodail Film Footage Youtube' and you will be transported in time through silent films collected mainly from North Uist in a project from 2015. 'Faodail' means 'found by chance' and these four 15-minute episodes of everyday life in the Outer Hebrides are **authentic** as well as a precious legacy. Berneray is well-represented.

A Love Letter to Berneray

Dr Jude M Przyborski of Marburg, Germany writes: 'I think it was when David (Turner) asked my mum and me to get into the back of the post van that I realised I had ended up somewhere very different.

Gone are the days of the postbus, and alas, David is no longer with us, but I keep coming back to the Islands. For over 20 years 'I have been trying to make regular visits to the hostel on Berneray, always at the end of the year when the island is most peaceful, when I can just enjoy the **pure** pleasure of existing.

Here, the most important questions every day were - *What are we going to eat tonight, and how are we going to go about buying the ingredients?* In this place, you need little, and after the first few nights, you realise that minimalism isn't restrictive - it's **liberating**.

There is not enough space here to tell all the **stories** or to speak of the Christmas Dinner and Cèilidh at the community hall; the traditional New Year's Day dip followed by a walk along the beach in shirt-sleeves; heating stones in the oven to pre-warm my bed.

This is unnecessary now, I may add, for the **hostel heating** is more enthusiastic about its task than when I first visited. Then there's the Mayan calendar-like complexities of the bus and ferry timetables; the sharing of whisky with friends and strangers alike; the otter coming to visit while I was drinking my morning coffee; the beaten-up Scrabble set that is still there 20 years later.

So many things have changed in my life since I came to Berneray for the first time. People have come and gone. I have changed. The Islands, too, have evolved - whether out of necessity or forces beyond their control. Yet, some things remain **constant**, such as the unexpectedly (from a modern perspective) generous spirit of the Islanders, their willingness to help if you're stranded, to bundle you, dripping wet, into a car, rather than let you endure a cold, lonely walk.

Every visit is a reminder that, in a world so focused on more, sometimes less is exactly what you need. This is my **happy** place.'



A Future Festive Destination for You?

The **custom** of hostellers spending Christmas and Hogmanay at Berneray is still alive. Take a chance and celebrate with company in a fabled coastal setting at the end of '25, with a new service, food and liquor delivered by the Co-op in Creagorry, South Uist.

Let's See, Let's Go

'Seallam' is the Scottish Gaelic term for 'let's see' and the former name of the **genealogical** centre at Northton, South Harris. Its new title is 'Hebrides People' although it continues to specialise in ancestry, landscapes and the history of the Western Isles. Here is a fine collection of island books and local products for sale with displays featuring geology, original settlers, St Kildans and emigration.

Hay's Way

Katharine Hay, the Rural Affairs Correspondent of *The Scotsman*, has seen many things for herself by walking around and through much of the nation. For a couple of days last October, she had no need to wild-camp for journeying brought her to our Berneray hostel where she stayed, able to relish the comforts and facilities of kitchen / common room plus bathroom and bed-with-a-view.



Hostels and Bothies

Youth hostelling was a concept that came to **fruition** in 1909 through the work of Richard Schirrmann in Germany. 20 years later, the first British hostels appeared. Bothies, from the Gaelic 'bothan', were huts or small cottages which housed shepherds or were mountain refuges often used in the summer where higher grazing was employed. The Mountain Bothies Association continues to prosper.

A former Editor of *Hebridean Hostellers*, Richard Genner, has compiled a comprehensive guide to these properties and his 2024 Appendix to *Seeking Simple Shelter* is available by contacting him through rgatrg11@gmail.com The Lone Shielin of Mark, a bothy in 'pathless moors' 12 miles south of Ballater, is well worth reading about in this **compelling** update to a directory of remote accommodation.

Fireside Skills

Coal-burning stoves and open fires rather than wood-burners, were features of virtually every home 75 years ago. Now the skills of keeping them alight, once a rite of passage for the young, are unknown to many within the younger generations. Consequently, a visit to hostels such as ours can present a novel **challenge** that needs to be overcome.

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

‘John Joyce writes: With the arrival of May, finally some **good** news came bursting out from the recent gloom. Berneray’s thatched roofs look resplendent in the Hebridean light with their natural appearance and colour of fresh marram grass.’ (Editor: John Humphries) [*Pandemic antidote*]



and of Ten Years Ago ...

‘The SYHA has recently **opened** a brand-new 60-bed hostel in Portree. By chance our Chairman, Peter Clarke, was the first paying-guest. He took refuge there on a wet and windy night on his way to the Western Isles, after the evening boat to Lochmaddy was cancelled.’ (Editor: John Humphries) [*Worth a Skye stopover still*]

Fifteen ...

‘Dr John Macleod (1935 - 2009) - At his funeral there was a remarkable sign of people’s **respect** for him, with over 165 cars bringing mourners.’ (Editor: John Humphries) [*He, brother-in-law of Roger Clifton, helped establish Berneray in 1977*]

Twenty ...

‘We have had website visitors from countries as **diverse** as Cameroon, Bangladesh, the Ukraine, Georgia, the Russian Federation, China, Korea, India, Brazil and Iceland.’ (Editor: John Humphries) [*World wide web indeed*]

Twenty-five ...

‘Brevig, Isle of Barra - Proposed Youth Hostel - It is with great **regret** that the GHHT announces its withdrawal from the project to create a 20-bed youth hostel at the old school.’ (Editor: Lawrence Washington) [*Barra continues to exert its attractions*]

Thirty ...

‘Completion of the Skye Bridge is estimated for the end of Summer 1995. If you should still prefer to **saïl** to Skye, then the alternatives are the ferry from Mallaig to Armadale run by CalMac or the privately-run Glenelg to Kylerhea ferry which runs in Summer only (not Sundays).’ (Editor: Jim McFarlane) [*Now Sunday services in operation*]

Thirty-five ...

‘The Executive Committee has accepted a gift of **Bibles** for the hostels from the Church of Scotland Presbytery of Uist.’ (Editor: Richard Genner) [*Were we overlooked by the Gideons?*]

... and Forty

‘During 1985 Tommy and Catrina Tosh are planning to build a porch to contain a sink and WC at Claddach Baleshare.’ (Editor: Peter Clarke) [*A short-lived facility*]

Rhenigidale – North Harris

Berneray – North Uist

Howmore – South Uist



Making That Difference

These days there are regulated professional standards of construction that apply to all buildings, from the low-lying bothy to the high-rise block. Many aspects of maintenance are also controlled. However, the function of the work-party continues to make that difference between a structure that survives the elements and one that is **cherished** by its users.

Look down this page for the Addresses and the Company Secretary's name. Do make contact with Alan Busson to **register** your interest in joining the 2026 work-parties. Commitment and care are required; expertise is not. Hostels need help to provide shelter and comfort for the next generation.



*The 2025 Howmore
Work-party
photographed by
Ian Mort*

A Mid-July Jaunt

The GHHT AGM will be held on Saturday 12 July, starting at 10.00, and once again in the Parish Rooms, **Penrith**, details of which are at <https://theroomspenrith.org.uk> This fine venue is in the centre of the town, which is ideally situated relatively near the border between England and Scotland. The boundary of the Lake District National Park is as close as three miles. Consider converting a business journey into a holiday jaunt.
