

Hebridean Hostellers

Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust

www.gatliff.org.uk

Newsletter 78

Autumn 2025



Berneray: Onshore Shelter and Sanctuary

From the Chair

Peter Clarke writes: I paid another happy visit to our three hostels in August. The weather was mostly good, but there were many rainy days and worse. Storm Floris made its presence felt, as did Storm Amy in October. The hostels became places of refuge, which were welcomed by everyone who took shelter.

So I was not surprised to find two hostellers drying their tents at Berneray during a week of ample warm rain and occasional sunshine - are these the 'sunny periods' we hear so much about on weather forecasts? On my very first visit to Rhenigidale in 1973 the rain persisted all day, but **endear**ed the hostel to me. I recorded in my diary:

*I lay in bed in my sleeping bag and felt cosy, as if at **home**. I listened to the sound of the rain, I heard people leaving to catch ferries, farewells being said. I smelled bacon being fried. I heard the sound of a fog horn. I viewed mistiness through the kitchen window. Somehow I was engulfed by the tranquillity of the place, which made me reflect on my life in London. I could easily understand the many praiseworthy stories in the House Book and the magic worked on visitors. Most people came for a night, then stayed for a couple or more. A few for longer. (I stayed for five days.)*

There is only one phone in the village, in the postman's house (*Notice at the phone: Please keep your calls short. This phone is connected to the exchange by radio. Long calls run down the batteries and interrupt the service.*) Later that day, 8.40pm - the fire is casting its warm glow; a Tilley lamp and a candle **light** the common room.

Among the items **discussed** at our Directors' (Trustees') meeting at Edinburgh in October were our insurance policy for 2026 (premium £12,947.65) and hostel fees. After looking at multi-year operating income and expenditure projections, we agreed to raise the overnight charge to £25 for adults and £12.50 for under 18s from January 2026, with camping at £15 & £7.50 respectively.

We reviewed plans for **hostel improvements** and set up a 'Schemes Subcommittee' to oversee them. On the list for Berneray are the installation of a bike shed, improvement of the drainage at the back of the building and the installation of a second shower. At Rhenigidale quotations have been obtained for the installation of an air-source heat pump, while at Howmore a quotation is to be obtained for renewing the roof of the old croft house.

The **60th anniversary** of the opening of Howmore falls in Spring 2026 and plans for celebrating this, with the date to be decided, were put forward. There was also discussion of the quality of hostellers' experiences within the context of our Wardens' agreements and we concluded by considering how younger free spirits could be attracted to experience the hostels in the future.



*Rhenigidale in August 2025
by Peter Clarke*

Off to Work and Party We Went

The two decades, the 1960s & 70s, saw foundations created for the Gatliff hostels. Sites and buildings were secured either by Herbert Gatliff or by friends such as Peter Clarke, Roger Clifton and Frank Martin. By the 1980s, overnight stays had multiplied at Rhenigidale, Howmore, Claddach Baleshare and Berneray, while one hostel, on Scarp, had closed. Awareness of, and **enthusiasm** for them, had grown.

This newsletter, *Hebridean Hostellers*, was started in 1984 in order to promote and harness popular support for this **fledgling** chain of hostels in the Outer Hebrides. In the first issue, John Joyce drew attention to an Easter work-party for decorating, repairing and cleaning. Altering the front door was needed to stop the ingress of rain.



The Scarp Hostel - too late for work-party attention

The second issue reported projects on a more **ambitious** scale, anticipating that following, the temporary closure of Berneray, a new roof and porch would be constructed by the Spring of '86. The editor wrote, 'Work-parties are the only certain means of carrying out the work.' Local builders were booked up on housing projects throughout the island.

Strong, resourceful personalities, such as John Joyce and Arthur Meaby, were able to **co-ordinate** many volunteers with supplies, deliveries, schedules and accommodation. Occasionally, there were outside organisations willing to participate, such as a group from the Prince of Wales Community Venture in Sunderland.

By the end of the decade there were times when three separate weeks of work were undertaken in the Spring and two fortnights in the Summer. John Murdo Webb led a Rhenigidale party including Scandinavians, who had somehow heard of the activities in a remote British settlement and were ready to travel, contribute and give a Nordic dimension to a Gaelic enclave.

These were in many ways **halcyon** days for this type of voluntary work, because Health and Safety notions were not enshrined by law. References to electrical and plumbing work undertaken then, look dated now that professional qualifications are required. However, during the following four decades, plenty has been achieved by those providing what was termed, so accurately, 'The Wall of Support'.

Work-Party Drives and Effects

What are the attributes that lead people to volunteer for charitable projects in general and work-party involvement in particular? A leading one must be a wish to associate with the organisation and to feel an **affinity** with its aims. Another must be a sense of commitment to move away, albeit temporarily, from personal domestic and professional routines.

There is that readiness to use individual skills which can contribute to the efforts of a work-force and, of course, the enjoyment of the convivial aspects of being in a team. Added to these, the Gatliff dimension does provide interesting challenges in highly-scenic venues. Assistance to the cause helps to continue the established quality of a distinctive brand of hostelling.

The term 'simple hostelling' is sometimes used of the Gatliff tradition and it harks back to the earliest days of the Outdoor **Movement**, when each visitor had a chore, either given or self-selected, to perform on a daily basis. 'Messing in' was part of the experience. Obviously, some of the skills need to be accredited, but much construction-work is labour-intensive rather than technically demanding.

Let's try to make 2026 a vintage year for volunteering. The hostels need our help and there will be a common theme, caused by persistent strong winds, high rainfall and the constant proximity of the sea, namely **water**. Rhenigidale needs further protection from it; Berneray has a steady flow from its rear embankment and the wish for a second shower; Howmore's roofing requires attention. In addition to this work which will largely be carried out by contractors, there is plenty for volunteers to do.



A coastal house exposed to the elements, as depicted by artist Charles Simpson, was sold by Panter and Hall's art gallery in London

The Howmore Family-Tradition

In the year 2000, Betty Macdonald succeeded her mother, Catherine MacSween, as warden of Howmore, following 34 years of service since the hostel opened. Betty retired at the end of 2022, and as a belated post-Covid token for her work, GHHT trustees, Christine Fletcher and Linda Davis, presented her with plant pots last May. Now Betty's daughter, Sara, is in charge of this South Uist **family-run** 'institution'.



Trends and Targeting

All organisations, in general, and accommodation-providers, in particular, are influenced by trends such as increasing regulation. Some **fashions** enhance; some undermine. Hostelling was primarily established in the 1920s by those promoting the 'Outdoor Movement' and inexpensive travel, especially for young people.

The Gatliff hostels have evolved to satisfy changing demands and maintain simple, acceptable standards. In the era of Booking.com, Airbnb and campervans, the hostels remain steadfast to their founder's intentions. The trustees have kept the fabric and customs of the hostels intact and alive. But it is essential for our ongoing **viability** that the young of age and spirit continue to find us and embrace our unique hostels.

Please **respond** by emailing the Editor (see back page) with practical ideas and innovations about how to interest those with a spirit of adventure in our offering in the Outer Hebrides.

Take the Webcam to Berneray

A Berneray webcam takes you right there. The link brings live scenes, weather, wildlife, the rise and fall of the tide and even, on occasions, the Northern Lights. A camera lens sweeps across the Bays Loch from the harbour to the distant hostel buildings. This **innovation** has been devised by Eilidh Carr, who owns the Coralbox Gift Shop. Its dropdown menu features panoramic views with local products.



Condolences

The GHHT and *Hebridean Hostellers* extend condolences to Tommy & Betty Macdonald of Howmore on the death on 12 August of their son, **Seumas**, aged 48, after a very short illness. He was a Security Officer at the Raigmore Hospital in Inverness and National Treatment Centre - Highland in Inverness and leaves a widow, Sam, and children, Connor, Chloe, Callum and Iona.

Throughout his life he was aware of the family **connections** with the hostel, where his grandmother, Catherine, was its first warden from 1965, succeeded by his mother, Betty, and now by his sister, Sara. He grew up in the house (formerly the Howmore Primary School) connected to the cycle shop on the main road, where his father provided a service appreciated by many hostellers.

Hospitality on Berneray

Alasdair MacEachen relates how on Monday 15 November 1920, in the teeth of a Hebridean storm, the Faroese fishing smack *Puritan* was wrecked on a reef off the island of **Hermetray**, just out from Cheesebay at the north east corner of North Uist, and not far from Berneray. The smack, with a crew of eight, was returning home to the Faroe Islands following a journey to Fleetwood to deliver a cargo of salted fish.

Six of the crew perished and two managed to scramble ashore on the island of Hermetray where they were spotted two days later by the crew of a Berneray lobster fishing boat. The survivors were taken to **Berneray**, to a house just behind the hostel, where they received warmth and hospitality, and after one night at Lùdag, they were taken to Lochmaddy and then Leith for a ship home to Nólsoy.



A day later, news of the disaster reached Torshavn, the Faroese capital, where flags were lowered to half-mast. The Berneray fishermen shared a £50 reward from the **King of Denmark**. Dòmhnall Beag MacLean, Chair of the Berneray Historical Society, is photographed by Alasdair, showing the group the family house of Ailig Beag MacDonald at Lùdag, where shelter was provided.

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

'By September, the Western Isles had a total cumulative number of ten cases since the Covid **virus** outbreak of 2020. It was the lowest figure of any area in Scotland.' (Editor: John Humphries) [*Pandemic protection by remoteness?*]

and of Ten Years Ago ...

Robert Macfarlane, author of *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot*, ended his account of walking the Postman's Path from Rhenigidale with the sentence 'A storm blew in and over, and I walked the final miles along **shining** tracks and under rainbows.' (Editor: John Humphries) [*Worth following in his steps*]



*Tree on Postman's Path
by Peter Clarke*

Fifteen ...

Colin Stuart wrote of a visit to Rhenigidale in the Summer of '68 and referred to 'One very old man, crippled with arthritis, lived in the isolated cottage at **Nostar**.' (Editor: John Humphries) [*Any knowledge of this recluse?*]

Twenty ...

'Boreholes plunging 75 metres into the solid Lewis gneiss and bringing inexpensive **heating** to the Garenin blackhouse village settlement, in general, and to the hostel, in particular.' (Editor: John Humphries) [*Creature comfort from below*]

Twenty-five ...

'There is nothing like the companionship and sense of satisfaction experienced on a work party involving physical effort which makes a real **difference** at the hostels.' (Editor: Lawrence Washington) [*Some themes recur*]

Thirty ...

'Berneray - Heaters have been installed in the annexe and main dormitory. The shower will be upgraded to a 7kW unit, ensuring **HOT** water - a relief to those of us who have misguidedly jumped into its icy depths before now! There will also be new mattresses and pillows arriving this winter.' (Editor: Jim McFarlane) [*Luxury*]

Thirty-five ...

'The GHHT is one of the recipients of the balance of the (wound up) Schools Hebridean Society's funds and gratefully thanks the SHS directors for their contribution of **£2000**.' (Editor: Richard Genner) [*A farewell gesture*]

... and Forty

'Andrew Gannon's **work-party** at Easter took off the thatch and roof timbers. The ceiling of the sitting room collapsed. Later the ceiling of the passageway collapsed.' (Editor: Peter Clarke) [*Guess where*]

Rhenigidale – North Harris

Berneray – North Uist

Howmore – South Uist



Folded

Scottish Islands Explorer magazine was **founded** on 2 January 2000 on Fair Isle, where it was published for six years. Then it moved a long way south, to Sussex, before becoming settled in Suffolk, with an operating base in Kershader, Lewis, for almost ten years. It has been run from Stornoway since 2019, but its owners, faced with a diminishing circulation, folded the publication permanently in October 2025.

Last year the bi-monthly periodical jointly sponsored, with the Gatliff Trust, a competition for young writers that featured work based on the inspirational advice of Herbert Gatliff. The full range of entries for **Gatliff Outlooks** is available on the drop-down menu of our website, www.gatliff.org.uk



Photographic Plethora

A frequent supplier of photographs as well as helpful advice to *Hebridean Hostellers*, Julian Paren is a highly-active member of **Geograph Britain and Ireland**. This web-based project aims to collect representative photographs and information for every square kilometre, of which 283,289 have been featured so far. You can take part and a good way to start is to search around our hostels. Screens first; then cameras!
