

# Hebridean Hostellers

Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust

[www.gatliff.org.uk](http://www.gatliff.org.uk)

Newsletter 79

Spring 2026



**'Go West; Return Refreshed'**

**CalMac Ferry to Lochmaddy Photographed by Tom Willett**

## From the Chair

**Peter Clarke** writes: I am writing this in Uist in the sunshine, shortly after the happy celebration of 60 years at Howmore. Indeed, the sun was shining all week on the work-party Alan Busson led through the islands. Lots of work was done with much camaraderie. "The **spirit** of Herbert Gatliff lives", he told me. Sadly, duty then called me to draft the Annual Report. Alan's remark inspired me.

Herbert Gatliff's inspiration certainly lives on. The outcomes he wanted, when he set up the Gatliff Trust in 1961, to support the hostels at Rhenigidale (1962), Scarp (1965) and Howmore (1966) remain relevant today.



*Rhenigidale Hostel, freshly-painted by the 2026 work-party, in profile and photographed by Ann Brooks*

He wanted a stay at one of these small, simple, self-catering hostels to encourage all, but especially younger people of limited means, to **explore** the Outer Hebrides at their own pace.

He did not want it to cost the Earth or for them to be under pressure to get somewhere to a deadline or move on to a timetable. He told me that he hoped these stays would deliver positive **life-changing** moments for hostellers; they did for me!

Yes, a deeper understanding of the isles, their natural environment, live Gaelic culture, crofting and fishing communities were important, but he wanted younger hostellers to realise that there were other worlds beyond their current understanding. He wished to widen their horizons, help develop self-reliance and foster **independence** of spirit. He recognised the importance of these attributes in making the most of education, training and opportunities.

He was ahead of his time in promoting independent travel - walking, cycling and the use of public transport - today cost-effective and consistent with a green and 'carbon neutral' approach to our world. It was not coincidental that the late Frank Martin (Gatliff Trustee 1969-2011, Secretary and then Chair from 1977 to 2006) moved the first '**environmental**' motion at an Annual Conference of the International Youth Hostelling Federation (IYHF) in 1962.

I am sorry that the Gatliff Trust is no more. It was removed from the Register of Charities in England and Wales on 12 March 2026, but Herbert's **inspiration** lives on. All the Gatliff Trust's funds were transferred to the Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust and have been placed in a Gatliff Inspiration Fund.

# Sixty Years and Celebrating

Howmore Hostel commemorated its 60 years of activity on Saturday 25 April 2026. It was a suitably sunny day and visitors were able to sit outside when sheltered from the wind. Peter Clarke welcomed everyone and noted that the main object of the GHHT is to help all, especially young people of limited means, to a greater knowledge of the Western Isles. This is achieved through sound basic accommodation, in partnership with islanders, and since Spring 1966 Howmore has had **54,491** overnights.

Sara Macdonald is the third generation warden, after her mother, Betty, and grandmother, Catherine. Peter praised the **contributions** of the local community, in general, and of Jenni, in particular, who gives a generous portion of the sale of her knitted goods in the hostel. A good number of Howmore and South Uist residents attended, as well as four directors and the 2026 voluntary work party. An excellent buffet was provided by MacLean's Bakery of Benbecula and the cake was cut by Betty and Tommy Macdonald, on what happened to be their wedding anniversary.



*Photo by Linda Davis*

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## Balivanich Bank Branch

The GHHT holds an account at the Bank of Scotland's Balivanich branch in Benbecula. Alas, its **closure** has been announced and is still to go ahead, despite our writing to Sir Robin Budenberg CBE, Chairman of the Lloyds Banking Group plc and our Secretary's comments made at the company's AGM being particularly well-received. The prospect is that there will be no immediate local alternatives in a remote, rural island community for personal or business banking. If you have any critical insights, then contact a Benbecula campaigner, Vanessa Langley, on 07854 023830.

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## What's My Line?

Tom Butler lives on Skye and was thatching close to Berneray hostel. He works for what is one of the two companies providing and renewing the natural roofing of buildings in the Highland & Islands. The latest consignment of reeds came from ... wait for it ... China! Previous employment took him to winter over on St Kilda, where he was employed as what could have featured in a long-ceased television series - What's My Line? - as an industrial abseiler. Pre-1930, the 1400' high sea-cliffs were climbed by **agile** islanders.

## Cosy Usually Comes with Cost

The word 'cosy' should never be used lightly, especially in the wind-swept Hebrides. **Heating** invariably involves cost, particularly in houses used communally. However, the air-source heat pump, fitted at Rhenigidale in February, replaces the storage heaters in the dormitories, the Rointe heater in the common room and supplies a new mixer shower. It is effective, an attraction and economical. Warmth radiates and the Morso stove will, for much of the year, have just visual appeal rather than a vital function. Feel for yourself.

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## A Challenge to Explorers

Rhenigidale has its distant **outposts**. One lonely croft, Little Nostar, on the coast below the Tosgaram Ridge towards Maaruig, is recorded as existing in 1800. It passed to the MacInnes family in the 1860s, after Donald & Chirsty MacKenzie and their seven surviving children emigrated to Collingwood, Ontario. Then in 1962 it was acquired by Kenneth MacKay, now 91, and author of the acclaimed *Rhenigidale: A Community's Fight for Survival*.

Kenny explained how he went daily to milk the one cow on the barren land which he wanted to improve. So, a **tractor** was purchased and somehow shipped up Loch Seaforth and landed to begin work. The venture proved to be short-lived and the Ferguson remains abandoned in its fields. An appeal is made for a recent image of the decaying machine, particularly its tyre-treads, to appear in the next issue.



# The Three Rs: Renewals, Repairs and Refurbishment

The April '26 Work-party, consisting of Ann Brooks, Alistair Cant, Bob Cross, Moray Rollo and Ron Gretton (assisted by Trustees - Linda Davis, Christine Fletcher and Alan Busson), carried out a multitude of renewals, repairs and refurbishment at all three hostels. Much was achieved in only five-and-a-half days with so many different skills required to complete tasks. As usual the participants got on well and a lot of fun was had by all. There is always so much work that is required at each hostel every year - parallels with painting the Forth Railway Bridge come to mind. There will of course be a work-party in April 2027 - if you are interested, please contact Alan Busson - alanbusson@hotmail.com

Highlights of the work **undertaken** ... at Rhenigidale, new washing-line poles were concreted in (the old poles having corroded); all external woodwork creosoted; anti-corrosion paint applied to the fire escape; the shower and entrance painted; and the foul drain outlet rebuilt and improved. Berneray had new door-handles fitted; a full clean of the dormitories, common room and kitchen; external fencing improved; and the stove painted. Howmore had a full clean in both the kitchen/common room and dormitories, with window frames being filled and painted, The shower room and adjoining toilet were also painted and a weather-bar fitted to the external common room door.



*The 2026 Work-party at Berneray*

## Loads Lighter

A Howmore hosteller, Nigel Jennison, is editor of award-winning bulletins for the Association of Lightweight Campers, founded in 1901 by a group of cyclists to explore new carrying techniques, identify low-cost pitches and arrange meetings for fellow-travellers. There were several Hebridean Way cyclists / campers at the hostel and two towed canine-carriers intrigued. The term - 'it's a dog's life' - was once exclusively pejorative, suggesting a miserable unhappy existence. No longer!

## A Variety of Threads

On the table in the Howmore common room is a box containing **knitwear** goods produced locally by Jenni Foote. Some are purely decorative, many useful to hostellers and all items sold bring 20% to our funds. Jenni's preference is to use pure wool from the fleeces of rare breeds and recently she has started to spin her own yarn. So here, Hebridean is joined by Cheviot, Blue-faced Leicester and Zwartbles, a breed from Friesland, north Netherlands.

Do make contact with The Knitting Jenni through the email [theknittingjenni@gmail.com](mailto:theknittingjenni@gmail.com) and Instagram @theknittingjenni or better still warmly welcome her when she arrives for her customary evening visit to the hostel. Her **initiatives** promote crafts, give pleasure, are useful and provide charitable income. Assignments can be arranged for delivery.



*Photo by Jenni Foote*

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## Far From Extinct

Brian Timms, a virologist by training, and an **ornithologist** who is a world-expert on avian 'flu', was staying at the Berneray hostel during April. The 86-year-old, who undertakes work for the World Health Organisation, returned one evening having counted 37 corn buntings on his trekking around the island. Considering that the species has become extinct in Wales and Ireland, this was something of a revelation.

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## Showcasing Artistic Uist

A **distinctive** gallery is run by Louise Cook at the start of the Locheport Road, North Uist, overlooking the sea loch of Oban a' Chlachain and features the work of 30 local artists. Louise recalls enchanting childhood times at her grandmother's croft nearby. Here are original works across different media, including acrylic, watercolours, pastels, photographic and giclée prints as well as sterling silver jewellery and red deer antler crafts.

Shoreline Stoneware Pottery ([www.shoreline-stoneware.co.uk](http://www.shoreline-stoneware.co.uk) / 01876 580697) shows how landscape, in particular the Atlantic coast, has shaped her ceramics. Uist Craft Producers is a separate gallery, part of the Kildonan Museum complex close to Howmore, where her work and those of other islanders with creative **flair** are displayed. You are assured of a warm welcome at both outlets.

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

The 2021 New Year's Honour List included two people closely associated with the Gatliff Trust receiving their **MBEs**, Peter Clarke of Alexandra Park, North London, and Kenneth MacKay of Rhenigidale, North Harris.' (Editor: John Humphries) [*Accolades and awards for appreciated activities*]

## and of Ten Years Ago ...

'The Howmore appeal is **complete**. We have raised the whole of the £47,000 required' (Editor: John Humphries) [*Generosity leads to gratitude*]

## Fifteen ...

'The number of visitors to the Gatliff website has increased somewhat **dramatically** this year. In the first two months of 2011 the average daily rate of visits was over 100.' (Editor: John Humphries) [*New technologies were surging*]

## Twenty ...

'The Cumbrian-based artist and sculptor, Martin Norris, was a visitor to Rhenigidale last May. He brought his kayak, ventured into Loch Seaforth and, as ever, was looking for **inspiration** for his work.' (Editor: John Humphries) [*He left shaken by his escapades*]

## Twenty-five ...

'It has been decided to leave the sand be and that we shall install some fencing around the end of the (Berneray) building to keep the **sheep** off the roof.' (Editor: Lawrence Washington) [*All contingencies need attention*]



*Berneray Rocks by Tom Willett*

## Thirty ...

'The new ferry service linking North Uist and Harris is purpose-built for **CalMac** and designed to carry 150 passengers and 18 cars.' (Editor: Jim McFarlane) [*Panoramic views of the Sound of Harris*]

## Thirty-five ...

'Hebridean Economics - Local government is the biggest employer with 2,275 jobs, followed by fisheries with 1,408 and construction with 1,197. Tourism generates £4 million and **231** jobs.' (Editor: Richard Genner) [*Tourism has certainly expanded*]

## ... and Forty

'The road has not reached Rhenigidale and looks unlikely to reach it in the near future. It is about half-way there. The money has run out and the prospect of further funding looks **bleak**.' (Editor: Peter Clarke) [*Now in its 36th year*]

Rhenigidale – North Harris

Berneray – North Uist

Howmore – South Uist



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## Resurrection

In the last edition, the closure of *Scottish Islands Explorer* was reported. However, the bi-monthly publication will be **revived** this summer as an annual or twice-yearly print and online publication by the Isle of Lewis-based publisher, The Islands Book Trust. If you would like a copy of the resurrected magazine, which will include a 2,500-word profile of Herbert Gatliff and his achievements, send your name, address and email to [editor@gatliff.org.uk](mailto:editor@gatliff.org.uk)

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## Treats in Store

The east side of South Uist is mainly isolated, empty and compelling, with vehicular access along the metalled road to Loch Skipport, once a small, thriving, island-port. Here is a new dimension for visitors, Long Island Retreats & Larder, which provides **authentic** island experiences. First go online through [www.longislandretreats.co.uk](http://www.longislandretreats.co.uk), then plan to meet DJ (Donald John) and Lindsay with their passion for the land, livestock and crofting life.



They have sixth generation involvement with this culture and offer croft and island tours, self-catering accommodation and food (lamb, hogget, mutton, beef and pork) supplied directly to customers. Add to these **attractions** advice on photography by Lindsay, a professional. Just a short distance north of Howmore is a world waiting to be explored. Make your first internet steps in this direction now; to be followed by a culinary treat, then a personal visit.

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