Hebridean Hostellers

Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust

www.gatliff.org.uk

Newsletter 80 Autumn 2026

The western shore of South Uist at Howmore
Sky / Sea / Stones / Seaweed / Sand
Photograph by Julian Paren

From the Chair

Peter Clarke writes: 'It's been a busy season at the hostels, despite the background of poor weather in the Islands. "We haven't really had a **summer**," I was told by a friend, "although there have been some glorious days". The AGM in July went well in Penrith, where the Parish Rooms did us proud. All resolutions were adopted and Directors or Trustees were re-elected. We are back there next year on 10 July.

All the Directors / Trustees have important **roles** which either engage directly with the hostels and / or make things work smoothly behind the scenes. There are ten members, with our Articles of Association allowing for twelve. The Chair co-ordinates, encourages and supports the overall work of the Trust, while continually thinking about how to deliver its mission.

Secretary, Alan Busson, is a retired professional Company Secretary who is **vigilant** about procedures, powers and company law; and Treasurer, Stuart Colley, looks after the cash, making sure our dreams are properly costed and funded. We enjoy the twice-yearly work of John Humphries, the Editor of this newsletter, who started with issue 35 and now presents number 80.

There are three Hostel Organisers: Alan Busson (Rhenigidale), Linda Davis (Howmore) and Christine Fletcher (Berneray). They **liaise** with the wardens and deal with day-to-day matters such as broken door handles, people who don't pay and so on. WhatsApp enables them to work as a team. Alan leads the Spring work parties, with next year's starting on the week of either 12 or 19 April.

There is a Schemes Sub-Committee, which is a **collective** effort on the building projects and repair / upgrading work by Tony Burton, Alan Busson, Peter Clarke, Dave Fisher and Nick Hughes. Hostel organisers are always invited too. The team is responsible for the planning and execution of works and the seeking of planning permissions and building warrants.

Alterations at Berneray and Howmore hostels have to take account of their locations within Conservation Areas, while both Berneray's buildings are listed by Historic Environment Scotland (HES) giving an additional dynamic. Finally, Neil Milton, our Compliance Officer, makes sure that all safety certificates are up-to-date. My next job is to negotiate with NFU Mutual. Annual insurance was almost £13k in 2025 (£10k in 2024) and I will be doing my **best** to keep costs down.'

Fluctuating Numbers

A visit to **Rhenigidale** involves a journey through ancient landscapes to a relatively new settlement. It was founded some 200 years ago, having become the home for crofters displaced in the Clearances. A century later the population was about 100, but shortage of cultivable land led to just six residents in 1959. There had been 15 children in the village primary school during the Second World War, but most of them subsequently migrated elsewhere. Adult numbers have increased to 15 with the coming of electricity supplies, internet connection, the road and … the hostel.

Make for the Machair

The Howmore - Drimsdale track is specifically recommended for seeing a wide **variety** of machair flowers, which flourish on the broken shell sand. The most colourful and diverse display is normally in July and early August, including orchids and restharrow. The great yellow bumblebee is scarce, but occasionally seen, as is the elusive corncrake, a summer visitor. The fertility of the machair has been enhanced by rotational cultivation and grazing. Our hostel is admirably located.

Photograph by Julian Paren

Watch the Website for Details of Closure

The imminent rethatching of Berneray and Howmore hostels means that both will have to be temporarily closed over parts of the winter and/or spring. However, the dates will be dependent on a variety of factors, including weather, labour and the condition of timber and membranes below the surface. The plans are for work to be carried out at Berneray from early November over a period of four months and at Howmore for six to eight weeks. So, checking with the Gatliff website for specific times of closure is vital to avoid disappointment. Let us celebrate completion with visits to see the machair in the forthcoming summer and for a festive escapade as 2027 merges into 2028.

Phases of Island Life

The development of social, domestic and personal life on islands is often imperceptible. On **St Kilda** it has been remarkably recorded, for much change occurred in a short time. Neolithic living conditions prevailed for many centuries and then suddenly came technological innovations affecting agriculture, housing and hygiene. Religious revivals and the arrival of tourists were also factors.

The publication for £15 by The Islands Book Trust (https://islandsbooktrust.org) of *St Kilda Transformed*, a new edition of the Revd J B Mackenzie's *Episode in the Life of Revd Neil Mackenzie at St Kilda* (1911), has just appeared. It features what is termed the '**pivotal stay**' of the former's father between 1829 - 1843. During this phase, he and his wife, Elizabeth, introduced life-changing innovations to everyday existence, although of their ten (out of twelve) children born there, three died within three weeks of being born.

The 112 indigenous residents were monoglot Gaelic speakers and she knew only English. Both male and female islanders had a distinctive lisp while the men were considered to be 'everlasting talkers'. The dress-sense of the women made them 'look like large insects'. Food and fuel supplies could be erratic and undelivered for up to a year. The structures of the old houses accommodated an amalgam of humans, cattle, manure and waste. **Fear** was felt frequently, including when brass bands arrived on ships!

Eventually the dark island of Hirta had relatively-modern buildings and electric light. Building innovations started in the first half of the 19th Century with the plans and input of the Revd J B Mackenzie. For those of us wanting to replicate something of the experience of living close to the seashore in the St Kildan style, the Berneray hostel offers a taigh-cèilidh or communal / social house, albeit with much greater comfort and many modern conveniences.

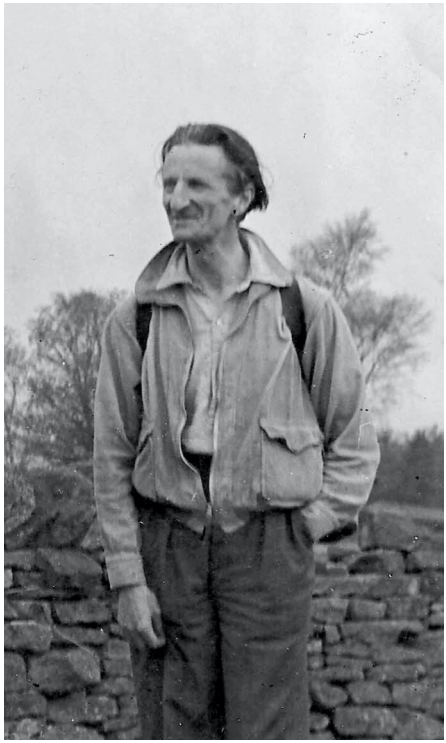
Returning to Readers

As this year approaches its end in late November, a publication that expired after 25 years will come to **life** again. *Scottish Islands Explorer,* which was founded on Fair Isle in January 2000, folded towards the end of 2025. The title has been acquired by The Islands Book Trust and the magazine will become an annual, ready to promote islands of the North Atlantic.

Scottish islands will remain its focal point, but with connections to comparable places in Ireland, Iceland and the Faroes. This will be a **substantial** undertaking bringing together in-depth articles, creative pieces about local cultures and contemporary challenges within a book of full colour, with 368 pages, soft covers, 64 contributors and 90,000 words. That's some assignment and deserves our firm support.

Volume One will be **structured** around Inheritance and Continuity / Islands in Transition, examining how language, labour, migration, memory, landscape and creative practice are carried between people, places and generations. Sections will feature water and weather, imagination and encounters as well as building the future. The editor is Allison Regan, who lives to the north of Stornoway.

John Humphries, the editor of *Hebridean Hostellers* and proprietor of *Scottish Islands Explorer* between 2010 and 2019, has written a 2,500-word profile of Herbert Gatliff for the resurrected publication. Do contact him by email for a free copy that should make good reading and, who knows, a **present** for the festive season?



Herbert Gatliff in 1946
Quality of original photograph restored by Julian Paren

Discoveries at Hand

Last year saw the 25th anniversary of the website **Undiscovered Scotland**. It was set up by former teacher, Maureen Lussy and her husband, Ken. It provides a wealth of resource information from books to events, products to tours. However, the role it plays for the GHHT is to feature our hostels together with comparable (and distinctly different) places of accommodation in all parts of the nation. Dip, dive and discover.

Philip Lawson MBE FEIS (1937 - 2026)

The death of Philip Lawson in June has robbed the GHHT of a **dedicated**, knowledgeable and highly-respected member who served as a Trustee from 1988 until 2019. His insights about the ways youth hostels operate and the work of voluntary organisations were invaluable. He first visited the Hebrides in 1960, appreciated our hostels, loved their vicinity and, of course, knew Herbert Gatliff well.

It was on his **initiative** that the Gatliff Hostels were first included in the handbook of the Scottish Youth Hostels Association. He served on its National Executive from 1966 to 2001 before becoming Vice-Chairman, Chairman and then Honorary President, a position he held until he died. He was also, for many years, President of the European Federation and Vice-President of the International Youth Hostelling Federation.

He was a keen hill walker and a Board Member of the Scottish Rights of Way and Access Society for 30 years. His name was common currency in hostel common rooms in the late 1970s and 1980s. The astonishing thing about Philip was that few of the hundreds, if not thousands, of visitors whom he met ever knew how **senior** he was in the national and international movements.

He hostelled with customary modesty, wanting the simple values of equality, community and hospitality to be within the reach of all young people irrespective of class or creed. He became a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) in 2001 receiving the **honour** from the then Prince Charles at Buckingham Palace. The award was witnessed by Philip's wife, Diana.

He was born in Bathgate, the only child of John & Lilly Lawson, read Geography and Chemistry at Edinburgh University, and was attracted to hostelling by one of his lecturers, Jack Frame. Philip trained as a teacher at Moray House and after a secondary school appointment became a primary school deputy head. He spent the last 20 years of his career as **Head** of St Joseph's, Linlithgow.

During the 1980s he was made a Fellow of the Educational Institute of Scotland, (FEIS), the Institute's highest **award**. He spent much of his life caring for young people at school and in their leisure time, wanting them to attain the best for themselves in life and encouraging them, through his example and Christian faith, to love their neighbour and to admire their homeland. He is much missed.

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

'We need to be ready for re-opening, all being well in 2022, once the authorities have given us the go-ahead. The hostels have been **shuttered** for around two years.' (Editor: John Humphries) [*Covid came, to pass*]

and of Ten Years Ago …

Philip Lawson is a retired headmaster whose aptitude for work has continued long since he left paid employment.' (Editor: John Humphries) [*Obituary opposite*]

Fifteen …

'The Gatliff Hostel at **Garenin**, in the Carloway area, ceased to open for the Summer season.' (Editor: John Humphries) [*The first village building to be restored*]

Twenty …

'A group of '**Marilyn-Baggers**' impressed their fellow residents in May. They were led by GHHT member, Brent Lynam, and included the redoubtable Andrew Tibbetts, who looks forward to setting a new record in 2006 by 'bagging' between 430 - 440 peaks during the year.' (Editor: John Humphries) [*There are 1542 Marilyns listed*]

Twenty-five …

'This summer saw the completion of one of the major transport links in the Western Isles with the opening of the new 1.6km **causeway** from South Uist to Eriskay' (Editor: Lawrence Washington) [*The road from Howmore goes somewhat further*]

Eriskay Causeway
by Roderick MacLean

Thirty …

'One of the reasons for holding the AGM in Berneray, apart from its obvious appeal, was to make a presentation to **Annie MacKillop & Jessie MacLeod** who were retiring as wardens.' (Editor: Jim McFarlane) [*Hostellers welcomed for 18 years*]

Thirty-five …

'The Outer Hebrides faces a most uncertain time as winter approaches. Economic problems have been compounded by political difficulties, and the loss of £23 million by the local council in the failed bank **BCCI**.' (Editor: Richard Genner) [*The Bank of Credit and Commerce International once the world's 7th largest bank*]

… and Forty

'In his book *The White Island*, John Lister-Kaye wrote, 'The Hebrides is a **drug** to be shunned at all costs unless one is prepared for permanent addiction." (Editor: Peter Clarke) [*The GHHT could be classed as a major dealer in the substance!*]

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

Cumbria Calling … Again

Mention has been made in these columns of the recent GHHT AGMs that have been held in **Penrith**. We return there for the fourth consecutive time on 10 July 2027. Recommendations have been made for the town, with its road, rail and cycle routes plus its proximity to the Lake District National Park, the Borders and the former county of Westmoreland.

A number of the trustees have discovered a **simple** hostel, a former school that serves as a community centre to the village of Reagill, a couple of miles to the west of Shap. The beds are of the inflatable variety, the space is extensive and the kitchen well-equipped. At £12 (in 2026) the overnight fee was a bargain. Contact the Editor for details and further incentives to stay.

For the Long Term

Tax efficiency brings benefits to earners, their next-of-kin and **cherished** causes. Please consider the ways in which donations and legacies can be used, with Gift Aid and Inheritance Tax planning, to bring support and innovations to the Gatliff hostels. The prospect of our attractive accommodation serving like-minded travellers throughout this century is captivating.