

Crofters' Newsletter 2012

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Howmore - a hub of churches, crofts ... and a hostel

Jo Burgess Introduces the Comments Made by Hostellers in the Log-books during 2011

For me 2011 was a year when I did not get to the islands or enjoy the live music of Runrig because they were having a year off. Without either to look forward to, a big part of my 'raison d'être' was missing, but **memories** and the music, as well as *Scottish Islands Explorer* magazine kept me going.

It is good to read that **so many have fallen in love** with the islands and that the hostels continue to bring such pleasure, meeting the needs of travellers whose needs are simple.

I still hope that one day I will hear again from some of the young people who were with me at Rhenigidale in 1985 on the Schools' Hebridean Society Expedition. It **changed my life** and I will always be grateful to Roddy, Alasdair, Cathie, Kenny, Moira and all the others who made us so welcome. When I need to be 'far from the crowded river' the path is one of the places I go.



Light on Howmore and the mountains of South Uist beyond

Here are **some items** from the log books from south to north.

Howmore

The Hamiltons met people they had last met here in 2009 and wrote that Betty's Banoffee Pie is heavenly. Ken arrived after a 13-mile trudge along the beach from Eriskay. Jan used Howmore as a base to explore the whole area by bike and walked the 3000-footers being blessed with a week's wonderful weather. Hostellers from Inverness enjoyed an **international supper** and heard the corncrakes on a walk to the local beach.

In May the hostel was a break from camping, the wind and rain and hostellers enjoyed excellent birding. Bob, Allan and Gordon climbed Beinn Mhor before returning to the comfort of the hostel and good company. When Jonathan arrived from the north cycling against the gale, he enjoyed seeing sparrows flying backwards. Victoria and Peter received congratulations on their **engagement** and by the end of the month there was lots of sun for Maggie, Clive and Judy.

In June, Jonathan quoted Thomas Hardy - *Life should not be measured by its extent, but by its intensity.* Cherry from France was back again and found it good **to meet new people** and re-meet fellow hostellers. Andrew aged 46½ who cycled here from Stornoway wrote: 'Life is short - Break the rules - Forgive quickly - Kiss slowly - Laugh uncontrollably and never regret anything that makes you smile.'

Meg from California had fine weather after rain, hail and snow, climbing Hecla in clear sun with no wind. Ann last visited 19 years ago when the toilet was outside. Alan on his third visit recommended *Night Falls on Ardnamuchan* by Alasdair Maclean. Harry climbed Hatharsal and wrote - 'Remember there is nothing as relentless as a Hebridean peat bog, but it was worth it for the fantastic views.' He found it a **great pleasure** to be back with a cheerful crowd of fellow-hostellers and the warm welcome from Betty who happened to be at the gate.

Chris recommended the Howmore to Daliburgh coastal walk taking in some interesting **archaeological sites** including a leaning stone (NF734337), an Iron Age broch (NF713298) and the Hallan roundhouses (NF732220). At 12 miles it will take at least four hours and the last bus leaves Daliburgh at 17.20 from the bus stop near the Borrowdale Hotel.

Fi and Gille were here for two weeks caterpillar hunting on the machair, but enjoyed a walk up Hatharsal despite getting wet feet. Roland from Switzerland stayed either side of hiking to the **Uisinis Bothy**. Jo and Vicky arrived in July in lovely weather and left in slightly more Scottish weather having met great people. Ashleigh and Chris had a fine stay and flew their kite on the beach. Susan, Mandy and Isabella made pancakes. The Pollocks thought there was a good selection of board games and at the end of July someone saw a baby seal.

Chris and Elspeth thanked Betty for a cosy shelter, clean and welcoming. They had a great stay with **fellow-explorers** of the Hebrides. Thomas from Bavaria spent three nights here and wrote it was a pleasure to chat to helpful people like Betty and Tommy. Lukas from the Czech Republic stayed to rest his problematic knee having arrived from the north. He met very friendly individuals and hoped to come back.

In August a hosteller from France wrote, 'Scotland is a place where to find rest, peace and healing. The Outer Hebrides will remain a **special place** in my heart' (*I agree wholeheartedly* - Jo)

Rebecca on her first trip to the Outer Hebrides **hitched** for the first time and met many interesting people. She was heading to 'wherever the howling gale takes me.' Alex and Miriam had cycled north with lots of side-trips to buy things (including tweed from DJ MacKay at 6 Luskentyre) and were heading home hoping that they could keep some Hebridean peace in their hearts.

In September Ron from Vancouver walked Beinn Mhor, Beinn Corrodale and Hecla. Ken from Malaysia was cycle-camping and found the **hot water facilities** a godsend. Steve and Jen enjoyed great craic with others playing the fiddle and banjo. They had sore heads the next morning which meant no hill walking!

In October cyclists from Germany met Peter from Vienna and shared their fresh bread made in the oven.

In November, Ben, from Greenwich, having experienced ferocious winds, thought the place should be renamed '**Howl More**'. He particularly enjoyed Betty's banana loaf. Someone managed to cook a casserole, jacket potatoes, cherry pie and a birthday cake in the little oven.

Berneray

The first entry in the log book from George was 'as per usual **awestruck** by the place' - but he had no luck with the Aurora Borealis.

In February, Sophia, here on her fourth visit, with other music students from Benbecula wrote 'and right in the mouth of the elements - wind, sea and light all bringing me to life.' Students from Aberdeen, here in March, dried out around the fire and thought it a **fantastic place**. In April, Lesley and Eleanor found the hostel surprisingly busy and Linda and Pete thought they may have seen an otter. For Sam and Carole it was tough to move on after a 'banging time'.

In May, the midges were making Sue and Bridgie weep, but they found the hostel lovely and a **warm place** to stay. For others it was windy and there was no sign of the 'master fisherman'. Will, from Australia, came for one night and stayed six and wrote that it was one of the most beautiful spots in the islands and a cosy berth.

Visitors from Normandy experienced strong wind and had an excellent evening with some musicians. Peter and Victoria enjoyed **wonderful views** from the trig point, but by the end of May it was wet and windy so the cosy fire and a hot meal were welcome. By the next morning the sky was blue.

Lawrence had a memorable two nights with good company and **much hilarity** with the smoky fire. He recommended the cafe and shop. Jenny, from Australia, shared the smoky evening and loved the wild beaches, gannets crashing into the sea, little terns wheeling and fishing, oyster-catchers calling and seals snoozing. Dave came for a holiday and wanted to stay.

In June, Ruth was happy to be here and allow her son to be free to explore and make new friends. She was also lucky and saw the otters. Aing Ying, **from China**, enjoyed it very much. Cherry, from France, also fell in love with the island and another visitor saw a short-eared owl. Roland, from Switzerland, thought the hostel cosy. Teresa, from Vancouver, thought the place brilliant, amazing and spectacular. Pete, aged 7, and Matthew, aged 8, really liked the beach.

In July, the Burtles and Ashcrofts had a two-hour sand-castle competition and enjoyed breathtaking views from the hill. Carol, Eddy and Ruaridh saw the otters and their babies. Visitors from Belgium were

here on a **return trip** 14 years on and thought it hadn't changed a bit.

Pud and Bun left the following **poem**:

This is the first time we've come to stay / On the beautiful island of
Bernera
The lovely beaches were sunny and gold / But the sea was oh so cold
There are plenty of things to see and do / We went on walks and saw
wildlife too
And if the midges your way to waft / Get out some Avon Skin So Soft.

In August, visitors from **Switzerland** thought it beautiful. Ester loved the capsized otter on the blackhouse roof. Melanie met some lovely people and Louise was here from Corsica. By mid August it was wet and windy and Jennifer who had cycled from Benbecula had a warm welcome with the burning fire and bacon; and recommended a swim.

Yamauna from Tokyo wrote in **Japanese** (which I am grateful to a colleague from work for translating). He was travelling for three months by bike and had already been to Shetland and Orkney. His impression was that the hostel was very traditional and a simple cottage by the sea and he really liked it. He was here by himself on the first day and thought it would have been more fun if there were other guests especially as he missed a Japanese guest who had been staying the previous day. This was a shame.

Richard had a **tail-wind** from Barra for his bike ride and the sun was shining. Matthew wrote that when looked out from the top of Eaval, it metaphorically took the biscuit.

In September, Roland and Millie wrote that this place **is different** because it becomes home instantly and wrote, 'If the world ends this is where I will come.' Allan wrote that 'Dave's ashes found their home.' (*Mine will find theirs on Harris - Jo*).

In November, Dave was here with the fire and some Jura whisky for company - cycling from Kyle of Lochalsh to Oban **en route for his wedding** - the solitude gave him time to think about his speech and his fiancée Kim who would love it here as much as he did, a lot.

Marie and the Hamiltons were here for Christmas - Force 8 gales, a roaring stove, fantastic sea, otter on the west beach, good company and puzzles to do – what more do you want and as Alan, back again for the New Year, wrote 'a great **resting place in a wild landscape**'.

Rhenigidale

The first entry in the log book was from Kat and Ivan who thought the views were stunning and wrote, 'The changing weather brings with it some wonders - we saw a perfect **double rainbow** yesterday - so close we could've reached either end! This is such a gorgeous place where hill and land become intermingled with water and the ocean'.

In April, Hannah wrote a small note of thanks and that she was more than impressed with the **cleanliness and cosiness** of the basic hostels and 'it is nice for a bunch of strangers to be able to sit around a fire and make conversation all night. Pete from London wrote that, as always, this was 'an oasis of tranquillity, warmth and sane company. Thanks to Alasdair, Roddy and the Gatliff Trust.' (*Hear, hear - Jo*).

Hayley, Tom and Sam thought it was a great place to stay at the end of such a dramatic road and a **haven from the elements**. They saw the coast in its full glory with the sun shining.

In May, Ed and Vick wrote 'what a wonderful **tranquil** place.' Jeff and Sue were here from Bridgend to remember their dear friend Carl John who passed away in 2008, but during the 1990s brought young people here to renovate the hostel and inspired them to do the same at Howmore and Berneray. At the end of May Maggie and John walked to Tarbert and got soaked to the skin.

In June, Meg from **California** sheltered from a storm in the hostel. Steve had a great walk out to Sron Ulladall on a sunny day then unfortunately ran into a sheep on his motorbike at the turning to the village. He expressed his gratitude to visitors who helped out at the scene and after and Alasdair for getting him back from Stornoway hospital.

In June, Alan, who was here in 1986 (no road) and again in 1991, wrote that although much has changed, **much stays the same**. Ann last came 19 years ago and wrote, 'Why have I left it so long to come back. The landscape of mountain and sea is indescribably beautiful.' Julia wrote 'the cosy fireplace is awesome with nice views and good kitchen equipment'. Pete saw three porpoises swimming around the headland. He and Jane stayed four nights and wrote, 'Well done Gatliff - you've got it just right'. When Ewan and co were here, there were Germans, Dutch, Czech, Swedish, Brits and them (Scottish) in the hostel.

In July, Pauline and Mike, cycling south to north, had three nights to

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



recover from the climb. They found the walk to Tarbert was stunning and got the bus back, but recommended checking the timetable leaflets.

Ashleigh and Chris had a very enjoyable stay - the fire kept them warm and they had good company with wonderful conversations and people who were once strangers become friends after one night's stay. Frazer came back to the home of his **ancestors** who used to own the croft house which is now the hostel. Jess and Jonathan were here in homage to their parents who visited before the road was built.

In August, Julian and Mary were here on their third visit and once again had an enjoyable experience. The Japanese cyclist was here too. Adam found the hostel a **sanctuary** from the daily aspects of everyday life. Timothy arrived here from Lochmaddy via Berneray, Tarbert and Hushinish where he spent some time on the beach.

Jessica and Simon were here 22 years ago and enjoyed a walk as far as the waterfall along the **Molinginish** path (which was a torrent) before having to turn back. Sue, inspired by the thought of the school-children walking the path in all weathers, walked it too and was eaten by the midges. Anthony thought it a cracking little hostel.

In September, Erika and Marc thanked Alasdair for his kindness and found it what they needed - with no signal on the mobile! The pollack fishing was great and for Warren, Vicki and a dog called Blue, it was a top **refuge** after two days of camping in the rain. Yvonne and Rich were two drowned rats when they were picked up by Alasdair.

In October the hostel was warm and cosy for Stuart, Sue, Brad and Issac who wrote that Alasdair must be one of the **best wardens** around because nothing was too much trouble for him.

In November, Fee was back also enjoying **conversation** around the fire with once strangers, now friends. She had lots of advice - 'Don't you quit and don't give up.' Someone, with an indecipherable name, was here having been given money by a small homeless charity to stay as an alternative to the streets of London. If you want to know more, his email is adwhite@online.ie