

THE GATLIFF TRUST

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Hon:Secretary
Malcolm Campbell
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London, N.W.1.

May, 1970.

Dear Hosteller,

This letter is to tell those who have visited the unofficial youth hostels in the Outer Hebrides provided by crofters with our help how they did in 1969, and the prospects for this summer and the future.

LAST SUMMER.

Bednights at the three hostels in 1969 were about 635 (Howmore 293, Scarp 146, and Rhenigidale 196) enjoyed by 179 visitors, (Howmore 91, Scarp 48 and Rhenigidale 70, which add up to 209, but four were at all three hostels and twenty-two more at two). Bednights were 200 Scots, 378 English, Welsh and Manx and 57 others, visitors being 55, 99 and 25 respectively.

There was apparently one more bednight than in 1968, but this increase should not be regarded with undue optimism as the total on one sheet in red ink differs from the miscellaneous details in black, and it is also open to question whether use of a hostel by a washed out camper in the small hours as an umbrella or island should be classified as a bednight. What is more significant is that Scarp in spite of all its difficulties and bad weather did agreeably better than in 1968 while the other two dropped a bit. The Nicolson expedition to Rhenigidale seems to have been not quite so big, and there was a bit less long-period stay at Howmore, but it may be too that those who go to Scarp are so determined to go that they get there anyhow, while some who would go to Howmore or Rhenigidale from the mainland or Stockinish are discouraged by continued wet windy weather.

There were no outstanding events during the summer. A Nicolson working party did excellent work at Rhenigidale in the spring and several visitors repaired damaged beds, Ian Millar took a biological party to Scarp. Bernard Selwyn, one of our original Trustees who was over in 1962 and Frank Martin who found the Scarp hostel in 1964, now also a Trustee, were at all three hostels in July and Michael Gerrish and Noel Yarwood later. Other visitors included Adrian Ebrill, Secretary of An Oige (Irish Y.H.A.), John Graham, Chairman of the Ramblers' Association, Scottish Area, Bernard Heath, founder of the Mountain Bothies Association, and Cyril Kermode, a very active C.T.C. Councillor. Comment was rather less lengthy and exuberant than in 1968, and unillustrated, but as before much emphasised the beauty and peace (in fine weather) of the landscape, the welcome given by the people of the three places, and the intimate character of the hostels. Worth remembering are the schoolboy who reckoned Rhenigidale a five-star bothy, the West Indian girl who wrote of Howmore "I'm glad 'peace on earth' is not just mythical or illusory", the English girl with her who at Rhenigidale "became

aware of gradually emerging into the perfect, quiet and belonging" and the older hosteller who wrote of it as " a very splended reminder of things which too many of us have forgotten."

For those who have often visited the Outer Isles and known the hostels for some years all this was hardly news. But for most visitors the hostels, and for many the whole Outer Hebrides, were a new, maybe an intensely new, experience. Those who run great bodies like the Y.H.A.'s. are often inclined to spend more effort on new jobs that are news to them than on existing ones that are new to hostellers, which is far more important. "Not till the fire is sinking in the grate, Seek we dynamically to expand."

FUTURE PROSPECTS

In the autumn there was some news, that from Howmore fairly good, that from Scarp not so good.

We decided the time had come to put in electricity at Howmore, partly because it is safer. Mrs. MacSween has met the cost of connection which is of course an improvement of the house. We had expected to meet the whole cost of internal wiring and equipment, but it would have been a heavy charge on our margin and we were very glad to receive a special donation to meet the excess over the margin we already had available. The job has not yet been done, but we hope it will be before the summer. We call this fairly good news, because some of you may feel that while more light is welcome to make Nescafé and cook beans (the main diet of hostellers nowadays) it may be rather too bright for fireside conversation or meditation appropriate to South Uist. If you can suggest minor improvements to meet this point, we will be happy to consider them. (The supreme success in this line was the lighting of the hostel, now alas lost, at Chaldon in Surrey).

The news from Scarp was not so good. We heard in October that part of the roof had fallen in, and the house was no longer habitable. We were not clear which part, or whether it was due to Act of God (wind) or act of cow (grazing) - the hostel is believed to be the only inhabited house in Britain (except perhaps flats in the Barbican in the City of London) that has grazing grass on the roof. At Easter however Michael Gerrish and two friends went over with a lot of polythene, found it was only the barn end that had fallen in, probably by act of sheep, not cow, and made the hostel part weatherproof for at any rate another summer, though perhaps after that the walls will fall in or out. While more people are leaving the island, one or two are likely to remain all the year round, at any rate for some years. We are considering whether we should try to get the use of some other building.

GENERAL CONCLUSION.

The total bednights of these three hostels (600+) would hardly be held by the Y.H.A.'s to justify the establishment of one official hostel, even of the simplest kind, and yet they are not only unique as hostels but enable hostellers to reach and live a little while in places of outstanding characters, and beauty. There is need of more such hostels in the islands, Lewis, Barra, Coll, Jura, outliers of

Orkney and Shetland. We could ourselves, provide a modest subsidy for two or three more if anyone can find them. But the problem is far wider than that. The landscape and local life of Britain is extraordinarily varied. And the desire for small and intimate hostels is widespread. It is not that they are the only real hostels, very far from it. Glen Nevis and Bruntsfield, York and Carter Lane are real hostels too. But often it is the small remote hostels that in casual talk at the big ones provide those special memories most intensely remembered.

The Y.H.A.'s cannot provide standard hostels of this kind in these places. If they were given a hundred they would be bankrupted by running them as such. Indeed such hostels probably do not want to be official. The problem is whether the Y.H.A.'s can find some means of recognising them and what they stand for, independent adventure and an intense sense of the values of place and people that can be encouraged by them.

In the past, while there have always been those who walked and thought alone, much of this sense of values has been associated with nations, churches and other great institutions. Far more of the young today have a far more intense sense of those values, than 50 or 100 years ago. Many schools and teachers are passionately and successfully teaching the young to appreciate them. But many, perhaps most, of the young of today are much further aware from institutions of all kinds, have far less social consciousness than in the past. The Y.H.A.'s by keeping contact with their adventure fringes have perhaps a unique opportunity of bridging this most serious gap. If you think they could be doing more, write not to us, but to them thinking your own thoughts in your words, to say so.

But also if you have detailed suggestions or experiences that might be of interest to us, and particularly if this summer you are either going to be at these hostels again, or could look for others, let us know. Frank Martin, 6 Alexandra Road, Wimbledon, London.S.W.19. is the Trustee now specially responsible for our Hebrides interests. He can usually at a few days' notice arrange to see in Central London any of you who live in or near London or are passing through.

Yours sincerely,

Hon: Secretary.