

THE GATLIFF TRUST

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HEBRIDEAN HOSTELS

This year the number of overnight visitors was rather less than in 1978 due, no doubt, to the appalling weather which was a scourge everywhere in Scotland during that summer. Throughout the Hebrides people were unable last autumn to bring home peats and the crops also suffered. The cost of coal and winter feed is extremely high due not least to the outrageous freight charges which remain grossly undersubsidised. There must have been hardship in many a Hebridean township this winter.

The highest number of overnight stays recorded in 1979 was at Rhenigidale where 452 were registered, the last being on 8th November. 372 and 355 over-nights were recorded at Howmore and Berneray respectively.

The weather, however, does not feature in the entries in the log books which remain as interesting and entertaining as ever! Indeed at Rhenigidale some brave souls including Sarah Dennis of Surrey went swimming in September. She says "Swam again - the water really is lovely, if you're prepared to persevere and overcome the pain barrier! Apart from anything else, it affords the locals great amusement!"

The youngest hosteller to make an entry in a log book must have been the Chairman Frank Martin's daughter, Sarah, aged 5 $\frac{3}{4}$. Elsewhere referred to by another visitor as "the charming Sarah", she writes (sic) "BY SARAH. I MET LORNA AND THERE ARE LOTS OF SHEEP HERE. LORNA IS THE ONLY ONE AT THIS SCHOOL." No prizes to readers for identifying Rhenigidale!

Mention must be made of Mick Halls of Ardentinny, Argyll, who canoed to Rhenigidale from Duntulm in Skye on 31st July. He writes "left 11.30, arrived here 16.30 good crossing until Sgurr Imoe then Force 2 W headwind gusting - hard work with tidal disturbance." A matter of fact record of an impressive and brave achievement!

Many people mention the warm and friendly atmosphere at the hostels, one such entry being that of Ian Kenny of Canberra who wrote "It's strange that this hostel, the furthest from home, should be the most like home. I am 13000 miles from home."

At Howmore the chief object of interest and by far the most mentioned character in any of the books was the Steller's Eider which could be seen off the coast near there. Mike Fay of Tunisia writes "I think the best way to tell him is 1) he's usually seen with the male common eiders, not females, 2) he's notably smaller, 3) his beak doesn't extend up his face, 4) you can see the knob on the back of his head, 5) the white patch on wing is not always present but if you watch him for a while you'll probably see it."

There were many other records of birds observed around the hostels. For example F.S. McGuire of Edinburgh notes seeing no less than nine golden eagles on Ben Mòr, South Uist on 30th June.

Apart from ornithological reports Howmore has entries varying from a very amusing cartoon by Tommy and Mike through a poem by 13 year old Tom Worthington and a fascinating description of Harris Tweed making by Cath Gibson of York to a lengthy description of the geology of the area written by a member of a party of 21 who came from the north and Midlands to study the rocks.

One entry by Austrian Eric Maier is a sober warning to anyone planning to walk over to the east coast of South Uist. On 31st July he writes "We lost our way and came down to the EAST COAST instead of Howmore. We had to follow the coast line down to Loch Eynort the whole way (Fortunately I had a map!) and arrived at civilisation twelve hours after we had left the hostel. Everybody should have a look at this part of the island - but under different conditions! If you want to avoid a 12 hours walk - never go without a compass!" The Berneray book contains a number of references to life in the community - a greatly reduced community as mentioned by June Caplan - "I've left a copy of Prebble's Highland Clearances on the shelf in case there are any visitors left who don't know it and who think the emptiness of the Highlands and Islands is 'romantic' - they can read about class war a little over a century ago and understand the agency of this emptiness."

One place which was obviously not empty was the local Church of Scotland (not the ruined Telford church described by Mary Harman). Cathy Hall of Surrey writes "Another opportunity I am glad not to have missed was going to church this morning. It was about $\frac{1}{2}/\frac{1}{2}$ Gaelic/English and very different to any other church service I have ever been to. No hymns were sung but instead Psalms were half sung, half chanted, led by a single man and completely unaccompanied. The sound produced was quite unique, a blend of Celtic sea shanty and plainsong. If you're interested in music then church is worth attending for that alone. Church gives a glimpse of a great tradition of Berneray life which must have remained much unchanged for centuries."

In contrast Dave Sanderson describes one of those memorable Berneray dances. "Went to a ceilidh on Friday night in the village hall. We run 'ceilidhs' down in Dorset but this was a proper one. The village hall is a former barn, on the edge of the machair at the south end of the island. The event was programmed to begin at 8.30pm and got started at 9. First the priest (minister Dave!) said a prayer. Then followed about 2 hours of singing - members of the audience standing and singing unaccompanied traditional songs in Gaelic. Over half the population of the island was there and a remarkable percent were able to sing well. Age range of singers was 6 to 60 and it was very good to see that the traditional culture is alive and well."

Indeed the log entries for 1979 seem again to reflect the Gatliff Trust's success in fulfilling its aims; Albert Winstanley who joined the YHA in 1932 bemoans the present day prevalence of "palatial hostels" and recalls hostelling in the 30s when "the few hostels available were of the simple type with the pioneering and adventure spirit there and we revelled in our visits and a wonderful sense of comradeship prevailed." He continues to say: "What a joy therefore to arrive at Berneray and to recapture a page of my joyful memories in finding such a jewel of a simple hostel. Yes indeed this is my ideal type of hostel. Heartiest thanks to the Gatliff Trust. This is capped by Nick Baker who wrote at Rhenigidale "Please do not change - progress is not always a good thing."

And how more appropriate to end than with the words of Angel Sutton of Ely, England in Howmore "and where else do you get miles of beach to yourself (apart from a few thousand birds)? And where else such magnificent sunsets painting the atlantic in colours that don't exist anywhere else? This evening I saw Tir nan Og, mountainous and misty under the sun, magic to the soul, enlightening to the mind."

Isobel Steel
Edinburgh, March 1980.