

Crofters' Newsletter 2007

Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust

www.gatliff.org.uk



The Rhenigidale Warden, Alasdair Mackay, photographed here by Paula Walker, welcomes visitors to the North Harris hostel.

Although I am proud of my Somerset roots, I have been privileged for the last 16 years to live in Devon. From my home it is only a short walk to the boundary of the Dartmoor National Park. When taking my dog for a walk on the southernmost hill of the Park, I experienced a gale that could feature on any Hebridean hill or shoreline. I feel fortunate to be able to access such wild and remote countryside, and am also proud to give something back by working for the National Park Authority.

I was also fortunate to have been part of the Schools' Hebridean Society with whom I first experienced the Outer Hebrides when 21 years old. The landscape, the people - especially the friends I made at Rhenigidale in 1985 and the music of Runrig, first heard in 1981 - inspired me to visit again and again. In 2002 I was given the opportunity to take up a role with the GHHT and, again, be able to give something back.

The Trust provides opportunities for travellers to experience more than just accommodation. I was on Berneray this year and particularly enjoyed the concert at the hall, the company of fellow-hostellers and information about the island from the stand-in warden. A trip to Howmore to unveil Arthur's seat was an occasion to remember a person who gave so much effort to ensure the running and survival of these unique hostels.

The end of the late Arthur Meaby's years of assistance and experience means that we are always looking for new volunteers to help carry on the work of the hostels. If you are interested, please get in touch.

To Berneray I went, so we go there first.

Jo Burgess - Editor Crofters' Newsletter

Berneray

On Good Friday 2006, Chris and Erika from Exmouth woke up to the kind of morning you dream of and later enjoyed a close up view of their first otter playing and fishing five-metres off shore and later again another otter eating a red gurnard. It was a day they never would forget.

Someone wrote a happy birthday song for HRH the Prince of Wales on 21 April. *[She too had brought her family here to a place that Prince Charles loves - for its culture, people and scenery - Jo]*

Honeymooners were here from London in May and so were cyclists from Portree High School and Kate from Edinburgh who heard and saw a corncrake. Visitors from

Holland wrote that they had never been somewhere so quiet while Julia from Ardgour had been planning to come for 10 years and thought it well worth the wait.

Em from Reading spent one of the happiest days of her life here on 6 June and returned two days later for the craic and swimming. Shirley from Carlisle wrote that although her body was going home, part of her soul is staying at the hostel.

Ursula from Germany quoted some Runrig, but obviously hadn't spotted the lyrics in the front of the logbook. In the Hebrides there is always a 'Big Sky' and nowhere more than the West Beach on Berneray and at Clachan Sands. Ursula saw the otter and heard the corncrake during her great stay.

Dave from Liverpool on this second visit, a detour from visiting friends at Dumfries, could see why it was Prince Charles' favourite island. Visitors from Germany spent two days here in absolutely fantastic weather and even better company, were stunned and blown away by the beauty of the place. They thanked all the people who make it possible for them to have this unique shelter from the storm.

Fi from Perth in Australia wrote that the huge beach had cured some of her homesickness. Visitors at the end of July enjoyed winking and watching the baby seals. Kate and friends left an illustrated poem entitled Scallop Sunday which ended

'Thank you Scallops for being martyrs / To our penchant for gourmet starters!

Lots of folk came to Berneray intending to stay one night and ending up spending more. Scott wrote that he loved the place especially being able to walk for miles on the beach without seeing anyone else's footprints. In September Josephine from Glasgow was here on her annual visit in memory of Graham and Helen celebrated her 25th Birthday here.

At the end of September the Crumbles from Nottinghamshire did not have enough flotsam or enthusiastic companions to have their planned Autumn Beach Olympics. Instead they enjoyed the company of kindred spirits, a glass of Shiraz and a chicken chasseur as well as endless views.

Visitors from NZ couldn't believe that the hostel only gets one star. In October medics from the Western Isles Hospital, Belgians and Ozzie and Simon from the Channel Islands kept each other company. Paolo on the other hand here at the end of October saw no other travellers, but did have seals for company. Toby from Cornwall enjoyed not just one otter, but a family with two pups and thought the place breathtakingly beautiful.

In December the Stornoway Canoe Club canoed here from Leverburgh in the squalls. They enjoyed a glorious sunrise over the Cuillins and a calm day for the paddle back. A happy new year was celebrated here by a long list of folk including Keith from Kendal. Geoff and Vaneesh enjoyed showers roaring in from Pabbay and afternoon sun streaming in over North Uist – the result was a fantastic rainbow. Finally on 7 January, Lee from Australia, but living in Italy, was sorry to leave. *[Aren't we all ?]*

Howmore

John and Hilary from Cornwall on their fourth visit enjoyed nature's sounds – wind, sea and birds and nothing else to disturb the peace and tranquillity. They were glad things remained unchanged.

Rich, here in May, wrote: 'Of my country I shall never tire, / When she speaks to me in acres wild.' Jeanette from Sydney, Australia like others wrote that Howmore was an amazing place and that she had met wonderful people. Cindy also from Australia had forgotten to write in the Garenin book, but on a visit drawn by the stones and the Norse history, she sought inspiration for a new body of work of oil paintings. She found it in the layers of history unfolding, the stories from locals and travellers and the scenery of Garenin and at Howmore where irises push up to the sky, reaching for the sun.

A cyclist with an indecipherable name wrote 'You can wax lyrical about the scenery, beaches, lochs, moor and hills – the raging seas, the malevolent skies and rainbows, but what really makes a place is the people – whether they are local or just passing through.'

Young hostellers, Charlotte and James, didn't want to leave and Maggie enjoyed her long stay making lots of friends. In June, Donald from NZ and John from Australia had to abort an attempt on Beinn Mhor due to thick black clouds, but they still enjoyed walking across the heather and cotton grass moors.

Em -- the Southern Fairy, enjoyed great cycling, sunsets, swimming with firemen and had a holiday which was a hilarious adventure. She went home with incredible memories, a huge sense of spiritual wellbeing, sunburnt and with some natty tartan trousers!

Hugh and Stuart got to the top of Bheinn Mhor and looked forward to coming over at Christmas and Hogmanay. James saw a Hebridean wren in the dorm and a hosteller wrote that he had added 'soot specialist' to his CV as he had successfully attempted to sort out the stove when all present were fumigated.

Anne and Tom from Cumbria were here at the end of June when Tom completed the 'Grahams' with a long day on the three mountains. Mike was here in July carrying the baton for the Western leg of the John Muir Trust 2006 journey. Robin and Laura enjoyed, among other things, a challenging 18 holes on the golf course. Brian and Graham, unexpectedly here because their plane could not take off from Barra, felt proud and privileged to stay in an important part of the nation's cultural and architectural heritage.

Visitors from Israel particularly enjoyed the food at the Agricultural Show. Frank and companion came here having climbed Bheinn Mhor, stayed at the bothy on the East coast and walked out across the rough terrain from Loch Skipport. Pdraig from County Clare wrote in Gaelic that with hostellers from America, Wales, Brittany,

Scotland and Zimbabwe, they enjoyed the music.

Rachel a trainee historian wrote 'like rare moments of sunshine, small pockets of happiness emerge in unexpected places'. She pondered on the merits of the log book as an archive and advised to get away from this contrived source of information by going to sit by the sea.

Ronnie from Glasgow enjoyed whisky and a sing-song with friendly people. Maria from the Netherlands appreciated the wind on the roof and the cows coming home in the evening slowly followed by the dog. She enjoyed the simplicity and freedom. Martin wrote 'The more I visit this place the less I need to travel'. Gareth bagged his first 'Marilyn.'

In November a visitor from Switzerland enjoyed it and someone else wrote – 'Hostel joke: Is there a draught here ? There is a draught everywhere'! Jorg and Sonke were here for the solstice and Jane was here again for Hogmanay. Lots of locals called in and they met someone whose parents were her neighbours in London 30 years ago. Jane wrote of Izaack that his violin was perfect and that the high winds were enjoyed on the beach.

Geoff from Kent and Vaneesh from Delhi arrived here after an exciting landing on the beach at Barra and were looking forward to their first full Hebridean day of Geoff's first trip since 1994.

Garenin

An anonymous visitor early in the year remained awestruck by the beach, the moonlight, the cliffs, Callanish and recommended the 'Stones and Sacred Landscape' Exhibition.

Liz arrived by bike in February and wrote that it was worth the cycle ride from Stornoway and felt it was a good place to unwind. She too enjoyed the exhibition, the stones and Carloway before whizzing back on the bike with the wind behind her.

Visitors from South Australia in April wrote 'Let Lewis seep into you. It will' Jerome from France discovered 'The Heb' night club in Stornoway then travelled north to the Butt of Lewis finding it a beautiful land. He claimed insufficient words to describe Garenin, but wrote that 'Wonderful is a little word. I have found heaven on earth'. The Canadians in turn had discovered the hostels on the net, found them better than expected and Colin very helpful. They enjoyed the storm, the coal fire, heard Gaelic psalm-singing at the Church and found that no radio, television or telephone was a real treat in today's world.

Visitors from Exmouth planned to visit all the hostels, but wrote 'That if we never left this place, we'd have had the holiday that we were looking for'. Hugh from Edinburgh wrote that the hostels were not so much rustic, but more five-star with location, accommodation, facilities and hospitality from Colin. He enjoyed with two

others a goose egg-omelette made by a fellow hosteller.

Bill from Yorkshire pointed out the need to enter into the spirit of hostelling by doing some household-tasks during your stay. He also pointed out the hazards of walking even along the coast without adequate equipment and letting someone know where you have gone. Someone wrote beside his advice that if everyone did what he suggested, no one would walk anywhere.

Even locals visiting the hostel with friends were mesmerised by the waves and found the atmosphere amazing and headed home with regret. Another visitor wished there had been some peat to burn on the fire to complete the blackhouse experience.

Jeanette was here for the Beltane full moon at Callanish and described the moon as having 'range of colours from silver, blue, orange till the alchemy of the night gave us liquid gold'. Returning to Garenin in the early hours, nature gave them one last gift -- a beautiful rainbow on the horizon'. She felt blessed and was returning to her own world filled with joys and wisdom of antiquity.

John, just on Lewis for one night, saw a female hen-harrier along the coast. Jamie was here from Canada and an anonymous visitor recommended a good little store in Bragar and the fish and chip shop at the 'Edge of the World' in Habost. They also recommended driftwood (once dry) for kindling.

Caroline from Newcastle was on Lewis for the first time in July and found it ruggedly beautiful, with a slower pace of life, a sense of being closer to the land and to the past. She particularly enjoyed the sunsets over the water. Jo from Sutherland loved being back, despite the wind and also recommended the Blue Pig Gallery. Others stayed taking refuge from the wind and rain and Swedish visitors wrote that they enjoyed their stay despite the weather and appreciated meeting local people at the Sunday service.

In October there were visitors from Spain, Uruguay and New Zealand and Sophie from Australia helped the atmosphere by teaching other hostellers Gaelic songs and recommended taking the coastal path to the right of the burn among the feannagan (runrigs) and having a dip. She wrote that it's a great way to wake up! No wonder she called herself the wandering mermaid.

In November, visitors from London and Australia played chess, while the wind and rain blew outside. Elvis and Cait described it as majestic and the folks who bless these blustery islands as amazing.

Geoff from Kent especially liked the fact the hostels are open all year. 'The challenge of the winter weather and the gloriousness of the sun when it breaks through is nothing to the shelter of a thick roof'. Vaneesh from India felt that one star was not enough for these hostels.

Rhenigidale

A hosteller who picked up a book of Shelley and Keats in the Arts Café in Geocrab found various apt passages and was grateful to have reached a land 'where megaliths stand in places of tower blocks and humans beat in time with the song of the earth'. Dawn from Leurbost wrote 'Take a walk across this barren land, take a walk below this open sky...'

Visitors in February said it was beautiful and found the waterfall on the way to Molinginish easier to cross in dry weather.

In April there were hostellers here from Russia one of whom wrote 'It's great to find a nice little haven like that in a great place like this. Thanks a lot for giving shelter to us strangers in the night.'

Janni wrote to Alasdair 'Tha mi cho toiliche a bhith air ais anns an osdail bhreagha seo.'

Chris and Erika from Devon saw an eagle and found an antler on a stroll to Loch Seaforth. Andy from Bradford here in May saw the northern star, had met loads of interesting people, enjoyed hot weather, great sea colour greens, blues and turquoises and likened Rhenigidale to be being on a Norwegian fjord landscape with mountain views, taking you to another world with hostel being a great comfort at the end of the day.

Visitors from Poland wrote 'Just simply unbelievable peace'. Hamish from Oxfordshire saw an otter on his walk from Molinginish. Andrea wrote that this is her favourite hostel and like many others thanked Alasdair for making her so welcome.

In June Brent from Shropshire was in a group tackling the 'Marilyns' – 1554 relative hills set out in a book by Alan Dawson. He was on his way to the Shiants – his 18th island in 13 days and despite having been a member of the Trust for 17 years was on his first trip to the islands.

Alison loved the peace but wrote 'If only the midges didn't like it so much'. Louise and Adam saw an Arctic Hare on Toddun. Others saw Golden Plover and recommended the flowers on the machair at Howmore. Rhenigidale though was said to be the place for real peace.

Jean from Scalpay wrote 'Moran taing. Tha mi uamhasach toilichte a bhith air an frith-rathad agus ann a Reinigadal a rithist. A simple hostel in a remote place – so much appreciated'. Other visitors were here exploring by kayak and Reinhard from Cologne called in while walking from the Butt of Lewis to Vatersay. A visitor from Perth, Australia even went for a dip in the sea. A visitor had driven 3000km from Hungary to reach this beautiful place. Polish visitors wished they could stay longer. Visitors from Holland enjoyed watching the gannets fishing in the bay. Myke from Australia had visited first in 1967 when he helped bring new beds along the path – to and fro with 30kg loads! The walk in from Tarbert was a great memory booster for him. *[Any SHS members reading this will remember it well.]*

Garenin	-	Lewis
Rhenigidale	-	North Harris
Berneray	-	North Uist
Howmore	-	South Uist



The sheep disturbed campers in August and some enjoyed fishing trips. Others enjoyed good company and the walk/cycle ride to get here. Josie in September saw a robin and sea anemones. Andrew and Megan saw a white tailed sea eagle fishing in the loch. Later they saw golden eagles close up on Toddun. Many visitors including Lily and Stephen ended up staying longer than they intending to. Many others including Nicola and Simon who arrived in the dark, did not want to leave. Roddy, Paddy and Seth were here from Uig upgrading the footpath in December and even enjoyed some sunshine.

Finally, the Stornoway Running Club were here yet again for a swim, curry and mince pies – *[They surely are mad, but one year I will join them, except for the swim!]*

*Footnote for any hostellers who do not know the music of the renowned Scottish band, Runrig. Their lyrics are in the front of the hostel logbooks and feature there because the song writers, Calum and Rory Macdonald, come from North Uist and also have family on Scalpay. They write brilliant songs, many of them relating to life and the scenery of the islands. I recommend checking out the **30 Years Best of** or **Day of Days** CDs and DVD. There is now a great opportunity to see the band live in October on an extensive tour of the UK, from York to Plymouth finishing in London. Details are on their website. JB*

HOSTEL OVERNIGHT FIGURES

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Berneray	1779	1602	1505	1858	2056	1896	2201	2311
Garenin	1576	1329	1225	1316	1522	1631	1577	1620
Howmore	1071	923	1034	1222	1627	1561	1552	1805
Rhenigidale	800	824	767	803	892	956	1178	1010
TOTALS	5226	4678	4531	5199	6097	6044	6508	6746