

Crofters' Newsletter 2008

Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust

www.gatliff.org.uk



This North Harris Estate track leads to a vast tract of land that is full of natural features, though empty of human settlements.

Although I was on Skye in 2007, I did not get to the outer islands so felt slightly envious reading this year's entries in the log books. Many of the comments, however, brought back happy memories, especially those from John and others who had been to Rhenigidale before the road was built. I walked to the village on a rainy misty day in April 1985 to do my 'reccie' for the SHS Expedition in the Summer. Things in Rhenigidale were very different then, but thankfully the road and changes it brought have not altered the essence of the place. The scenery and the wildlife are as spectacular as ever and the villagers as welcoming.

I am looking forward to being on Berneray and at Rhenigidale later this year. Although the first part of my journey from Devon will be by air, I am eagerly anticipating the remainder by rail from Mallaig and the ferry journey to Skye - from where I hope to glimpse Knoydart. Here I had my first west coast experience with the Schools' Hebridean Society in 1980. Then a year later I was on Rum where I climbed its own special Cullin. I especially look forward to the ferry journey across the Minch to the Weavers Point and Lochmaddy and once again being able to walk on the shores of the mighty Atlantic. There is nothing to compare with that particular pleasure.

Jo Burgess - Editor Crofters' Newsletter

Berneray

Natural surroundings ... abundant wildlife ... some naturism

In March a visitor appreciated the warmth of the hostel when the wind was raging outside. In April, Alan met some fantastic people and enjoyed communing with the seals. Others liked watching the sun rise while sea otters played in the sea. It was described as 'a divine place with deafening silence'.

Graham and Dr Kathy from Edinburgh quoted some Runrig: 'There's a south by south-westerly force 8 coming in strong, cross the continental shelf from the cold grey Malin beyond.' They loved wandering the island, but failed to find the King's Stone and Stone Circle.

Nick and Jan appreciated the machair flowers, skinny-dipping and seeing as well as hearing a corncrake. They were also grateful for the Co-op staying open because they arrived just as it was closing and really liked hearing Gaelic being spoken.

Members of the North Peak and South Pennine Rough Stuff Fellowship were assisted by exceptionally good weather, the help of local police and a wonderful grannie who gave unstinting help when one of them had a severe problem with a bike wheel.

In July, Deb and Tony saw gannets, arctic terns, arctic skuas, fulmars, short-eared owls, a hen harrier, white-tailed eagles, red-necked phalaropes and a corncrake. Someone wrote 'Watching the patterns in the flow and ebb of the tides and witnessing one of the most glorious, literally breathtaking, sunsets in my memory'.

Paul Edwards from Devon was stimulated by Berneray Week and the fellowship of the hostellers, writing, 'This was a very special snapshot in time and one I will remember – Feumaidh me cabhag air mo thilleadh'.

Axel wrote in Gaelic and English that he too had found fulfilment in Berneray Week and yearned for a job in the Gaidhealtachd – 'Maybe I will stay in this place forever'. Nudist swimmers stayed at the end of July. Katherine found it a heavenly place to relax alone or with friends.

Lynn from Canada saw a full rainbow reflected in the sea and a partial arch. At the end of August the weather wasn't good, but German visitors loved the silence at night. Laurie from New York wrote that Uist has been everything and more, writing 'Moran taing airson a'taig-hosta'.

Christine and David also on their honeymoon were also previous visitors. Caroline was here for her daughters 9th birthday. Ian on his 4th visit is still to see an otter and stayed six instead of his two planned nights. In October a visitor sang the praises of the most beautiful beaches on Scotland's west side.

Lewis was here for the first time in 13 years and wrote 'still perfect'. Another hosteller wrote that they hadn't got the vocabulary for the natural surroundings – 'just look out of that window'. Valerie and her children came for Christmas when they were able to sit outside in the sunshine.

By Boxing Day it was cold and windy, but the family found it warm and cosy in the hostel. Matt came for the New Year and was delighted by fine weather and good company. Another visitor wrote 'Great peace, great island, great people - always a joy to come to. PS The warden has fantastic hair.'

Howmore

A leaky roof did not dispel feelings of warmth

In March Jon was here having had a hard cycle against strong winds, towing a heavy trailer with a tuba in it ! If you wish to know more visit www.innertuba.org.uk He was surprised and grateful when Betty appeared and lit the fire.

Visitors from Australia enjoyed sunshine and a swim one day and almost drowned the day after. Chris was back after 25 years when he was part of the team launching science-research rockets. He enjoyed celebrating with colleagues, but most of all enjoyed cycling in brilliant sunshine.

In April Bill from Yorkshire was pleased to find things a lot better at the hostel than last year and Paul and Debbie thanked Betty for a wonderful warm stay. A Canadian lady was heart-broken to be leaving the place that was home to her people some 200 years ago.

Visitors in May were on their first visit to 'these turquoise shores' and found them an unforgettable sight. One wrote, 'My happiest dreams will always be here'. Wendy loved the hostel and the island and 'The most friendly people in Britain'.

In June a hosteller indicated that this was the best place he had ever camped at with 'The view to the edge of the world in one direction and imposing mountains in the other'. Nick and Jan thought it was lovely to hear the corncrake and watch drumming snipe displaying.

A hosteller from Stockport was here for Midsummer's Day and had the hostel to himself, enjoying the quietness and the calm. Morag from Glasgow enjoyed lively company, good chat and a great bed ... and could have stayed longer if she didn't have to go and sing with ... Rod Stewart at Hampden Park !

In August Sandra enjoyed pea-pod wine, swimming in the sea, visiting the church and the generosity of the congregation, but didn't enjoy the tick she acquired while out walking. The company of some fine people was an extra bonus. Another hosteller found it a 'Special place that will be a point on my life's journey that will be forever remembered'.

Robert from Aberdeen was marooned, due to a severe northerly gale, with people from Sweden, Hungary, Cornwall, Holland and Glasgow. The place was full in August when Emma and Jishe from Holland stayed, so they ended up on mattresses in the living room.

Dagma and Jomek cyclists from Poland found Howmore the true oasis of quietness, beauty and inspiration. Ian from Australia had hitched the length of the islands and was off 'Back to the mainland to discover the meaning of chaos'.

Susanna from London enjoyed the beach, rainbows, the company and the smell of burning peat. Robert had shared the Usinish bothy, on the island's Minch side, with rats and ravenous midges. He wrote that Howmore was the Ritz in comparison.

Frank wrote that 'Everything shone like diamonds across the lovely yellow, green and blue landscape', that he watched the birds dance on the beach, the sun set in a blaze of gloriousness reflected in the tide line and had walked through the crofts with the round stacks of hay bales and piles of peat.

David, Julie, Tom and Jane, among others, came for the New Year and someone

wrote of 'The one that got away'. They loved the folk singing, fiddling, crosswords, a bonfire, fireworks, whisky on the beach, toasting the new baby and year, listening to Radio Nan Gael and meeting loads of natives and incomers.

Miriam enjoyed a great view from the top of Beinn Mhor, maybe even getting a glimpse of St Kilda, or was that a New Year illusion ?

Garenin

Despite bad weather, enjoyment prevailed

In January visitors from Germany came expecting the wettest and worst weather and experienced astonishingly attractive conditions during many trips around discovering the islands. David from London found it all so very peaceful.

In February a family from Edinburgh found they had the place to themselves. They were 'stranded' because the weather had meant all flights were full as the ferries were cancelled. The musician in the group was keen to come back for that 'edge-of-the-Atlantic' feeling that he found inspirational and elemental.

In March Carola from Germany relished the sunshine, storms, an eclipse and a warm welcome in the church. Judith from Somerset found the scenery spectacular, the language soft and sweet, the people friendly and the weather different ... writing 'At least the storms blow over quickly!'

Visitors from Germany recalled the hail and snow storms as well as the fire. Visitors from South Africa, celebrating their 20th wedding anniversary, felt that nothing had prepared them for the beauty of Lewis. They looked forward to coming again and staying longer.

Hostellers from California noted the 'gnociss scenery' and felt the island and the hostel were amazing and not to be missed. Bill from Yorkshire was back in April and made his customary appeal to hostellers of the need to leave the place in a better condition than when they arrived.

Another visitor came to Garenin over Easter, having missed the ferry back to Ullapool, and 'Found guests, weather, surroundings and the warden to be one - a good feeling'. Pete arrived by push bike from London and wrote that 'Each day is an extra day for me and that Peace is the only way'.

Gary and Martin cycled here fully laden against strong winds from Tarbert and the hostel offered them sanctuary, peace, hospitality and a home-from-home. In May the hostel was home to Jerome from France who was on a placement in Stornoway. He loved it because every day was different.

Peter from London - 'a universe away' - felt the usual warm welcome and companionable atmosphere. In June an Italian living in Switzerland came here to

escape and found that nature and landscape filled her with positive energy. 'I leave a part of me here, but I take with me a part of this place.'

In July Nick from London also found it a fine place to escape from the pressures of life and discover an attractive meeting place. Beryl and Alan felt that the Gatliff Hostels were excellent with helpful, informative wardens. Others from Milngavie were entranced by the whole experience.

Chris and Claire from England arrived here in a gale to be supplied by the other family staying with soup and sandwiches from the cafe. They'd seen a basking shark off Great Bernera. Mike and Alison cycled from Barra in ten days.

Kate from Australia and Calum from Scotland came on their honeymoon. Elizabeth and Philip, on their fourth visit, always like the talk while they cook and eat their meals. Alex from Munich, on a second visit, this time with her fiancé, shared the good company, wine, whisky and lots of laughter.

Si and Nicola, as others did, recommend going out on the walk to Dalmore Beach. While in, however, they hoovered up and got rid of some cobwebs. Den and Nick found it a cosy haven after the exhilaration of watching the wild and frothy sea at the Butt of Lewis.

In October a visitor wrote about 'having had, years ago, the privilege of seeing the green flash at sunset, the place will always keep its magic.' An anonymous hosteller found the hills around great for aimless wandering and free thinking.

In November a group of doctors, nurses, occupational therapists and physios enjoyed a celidh in a neighbouring house, and were visited by Alfie the dog.

In December Bob from Leeds said it really felt like the end of the world, but found the warmest hostel welcome yet.

Rbenigidale

More came to stay; many did not wish to go away

Judith appreciated the warmth, welcome and shower in February, while in April Simon, Judith, Freda and Christi enjoyed the views, warm room and particularly the bench in front of the hostel. For Chris and family from Skye the peace between neighbours mattered; others just liked the new efficient stove.

Mireille from Quebec was stimulated by the walk from Tarbert as well as the peace and comfort of the hostel. The Turnbull family from Laxdale were here to celebrate Ellie's 13th birthday and left six mini-hot-water-bottles as a small gift. Other visitors from Spain thought it was a wonderful place.

Phil from North Wales was here 14 years ago and loved it while in May a visitor from Bretagne was here 'avec notre 2CV'. Bill from Skye thought it was a brilliant place. To Mary and Dave from Ontario the views of the coastline and waterfalls on the walk in made an impression.

Bill, Ray and John, who arrived by motorbike on a stormy night, enjoyed their best night's sleep for ages and came back a day or two later after Force 8 winds on Lewis. Paul and Nia from Bath were here for a very special wedding night, preferably without stormy conditions.

Murdo from Edinburgh was running, having come from Urgha via Maaruig, and then heading back along the path for the first time in 20 years. John had been blown here on a bike from Berneray by a gale and was very impressed by the stove inside and the sea eagles overhead.

John was here in 1976 doing a reconnaissance for a Schools' Hebridean Society Expedition and wrote how supportive Roddy was and how everything had to be organised by post as there was no phone at that time. [*When I did the same thing in 1985 there was only one phone and the number was Rhenigidale 1 - Jo*] John and Margaret were pleased to see the village viable and the hostel in great shape.

Cyclists from the Netherlands were here for the longest day and found it a special place to stay. Cyclists from Edinburgh felt rescued mentally and physically by the hostel after a gruelling ride from Callanish and found it a magical place.

In July Greg from Australia wrote 'A magic place no five-star tourist will ever experience'. Tommy was here after 20 years, when he was 12, and wrote that it must have left an impression as he is now living in Knoydart, where there is no road access from the rest of the UK mainland.

George from Leeds was tempted to ring the office to say "Not coming back!" Eileen was here after a gap of 34 years and hoped she'd be back before another 34 had passed. Maureen was here with her daughter and didn't want to go back to work either.

In August Sarah from New Zealand and Alistair from Scotland found the place filled to the gunnels with soggy travellers sheltering from the Scottish summer. With the fire blazing, the place resembled a Chinese laundry. They didn't have much luck with fishing, but took photos that can be found on www.bigalibaphotography.co.uk.

Hostellers from Bedfordshire found the most obvious difference from their last visit in 1980 was ... a road and cars ... but were very glad to be back. A hosteller from Poland wrote that this hostel was their favourite in Scotland ... so far! Marilyn-baggers were here ... bagging Toddun.

Rosi and Ben from Leipzig found it a wonderful 'oasis' in midst of a most magnificent, though ironically very wet, setting. They enjoyed the path even though there were waterfalls everywhere. James travelled from Huisinish, arrived at

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



dusk and was struck by the beauty of the place in the morning.

Paul and Nia were back having spent their wedding night here in May. Phil felt that Rhenigidale was near enough to heaven ... for now. He was back after visiting Callanish and its outlying stone circles where he observed lichen growing on the stones and appreciated the good light for the sunset.

The Stornoway Running Club was here again on their 'Flett Trek' - feeling poetic and once again braving the icy Minch to cleanse off the Old Year. Dave from Hampshire, also on foot, enjoyed 'a good walk over the path, with the watery sun and cold wind on my back.'

The Outer Hebrides The Timeless Way

by Peter Clarke

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HOSTEL OVERNIGHT FIGURES

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Berneray	1602	1505	1858	2056	1896	2201	2311	2226
Garenin	1329	1225	1316	1522	1631	1577	1620	1301
Howmore	923	1034	1222	1627	1561	1552	1805	1727
Rhenigidale	824	767	803	892	956	1178	1010	1035
TOTALS	4678	4531	5199	6097	6044	6508	6746	6289