

Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust

Crofters' Newsletter 2009



www.gatliff.org.uk

The Butt of Lewis Lighthouse stands high at the northerly end of the Isle of Lewis and withstands high winds from all directions.

The nearest Gatliff Hostel is at Garenin, well situated for those wanting to visit the Standing Stones at Callanish as well as this impressive, elevated stonework.

From the Editor - Jo Burgess

I was fortunate enough to be in the islands in May and wrote in the Berneray log-book: 'Sunshine, wildlife and good company – the best R & R I could have wished for.' I enjoyed great views of St Kilda, the sight of a Great Northern Diver, an otter, gannets and eider on the West Beach, a short exchange in Gaelic with Annie and Jessie the former wardens, an excellent walk to Aird a Mhorain with a paddle along Traigh Udal before heading to Rhenigidale.

I reached the hostel after an amazing walk along the path and out to the trig point on Uiseval above Scalpay, enjoying the sight of deer, a golden plover, a cuckoo and sunshine. Kenny and Moira insisted I stayed with them and it was good to catch up with Alisdair, Cathy and Angus all friends since 1985 when I led an SHS expedition to Rhenigidale. I am always happy to be in the village although these days it is not so 'far from the crowded river' thanks to the road.

I am always sad to leave, but it was good to look back at Uiseval from the ferry and know I'd been up there. Roll on the next time! As I was on Berneray first, I will begin by introducing the entries from there.

Berneray

Calum was here on the first and last ferry of the day in February due to stormy seas. He described an umbrella of stars and the hypnotic flashes of morning lights. Alex was here on his 9th birthday and thought it was a great hut in a fantastic location.

Sam was here for the second time and enjoyed the warmth, fun on the beach including sand-dune jumping, hot water in the shower and sleeping very well. The James family saw otters and seals. Richard, who I first met in 1980, was here with his family and enjoyed the toaster, sun, wind, distant snow and sea.

Gavin from Australia wished he could stay longer. Ian and Cathie, rejuvenated by their visit, were a little sad to leave. Caroline and Ian, who were camping, liked seeing the otters playing and in May, Mairi and Yve were totally relaxed - helped by lovely company and some whisky.

Candy and Juliet rested their weary bones after cycling through North Uist. A four-night stay gave June the opportunity to reflect on what really counts. The Stornoway Canoe Club appreciated the stone grate and insulation on their way back from Mingulay and Barra.

Tim was here kite-surfing and Jacob went swimming at Glachan Sands. Pat and Eddie were cycling and like so many others found that the place got under their skin. Cyclists from Leeds University cycled 61 miles to get here and thought it awesome.

Visitors from New Zealand returned five years after their last visit. The Thomsons from Glasgow recommended the soup at the Ardmaree Stores and

the west beach while a Runrig fan wrote Every River (which I often find myself singing when I am walking in the islands).

In July, Lesley from British Columbia found the dancing fun at the Community Hall. Sandy and Pat found it a wild and windy place, but the good company made up for it. Marsha from USA found it a great place to recover from her chest cold and was assisted by the convivial company.

Although it was busy, cyclists heading north described it as one of Europe's most beautiful stopping off places and were delighted to see a dolphin. Visitors came from Slovenia and Greece. Barbara found it a truly beautiful place – 'somewhere to recharge batteries and be at peace with yourself'.

Hostellers from Croatia left many kisses! Aimee, aged seven, was delighted by the beach and hostel and would love to come again, while Emma, aged 15, found it peaceful. Chris recommended smoked salmon toasties at the Ardmaree tearoom.

Elizabeth and Philip, frequent visitors from Cumbria agreed with others that the hostels should be kept the way they are – unique and special. Guy and Helen caught their lunch, but were not sure what fish it was – apart from being small and tasty.

The hostel was full on 25 August with cyclists staying on because of the high winds. In September, Carol and Moss, the dog, had lost all track of dates. Carol wrote that 'In the early hours the sky was a mass of stars – a fabulous sight'.

Some hostellers were stranded for a few hours because the ferry left early owing to tidal conditions, for there are occasions when freak conditions prevail. Mick advised that if in doubt phone 01876 500337 or 01859 502444 to check.

Arthur from the Netherlands was here for the first time since 1971. Steve from Arran had cycled the Golden Road and found it great, but windy. In October Indra let the morning ferry go without her so she could experience the crazy changeable weather and the warmth of the hostel.

Girls from Hermitage Academy in Helensburgh stayed here before heading to Sgoil Lionnaclet to play in a Scottish Cup Basketball match, and were thrilled by the amazing location.

In November a hosteller saw an eagle on top of the trig point on the hill and several porpoises just offshore on the west side. Sarah was here from London for three weeks over Christmas and New Year and Jorg wrote, 'I seriously don't know why I don't come here more often'.

Rhenigidale

Debs and Steve found the hostel a wonderful haven on a cold windy night in February, while lads from Yorkshire described it as a place of outstanding beauty. Also in this month the 'tooth fairy' visited Rhenigidale when Alex, aged nine, lost a tooth. Four Czech buddies found it a homely atmosphere.

In March Tanya and Ricky from New Zealand were on their third hostel and found it warm, comfortable, affordable as well as far more atmospheric and special than other options. In April, Alistair wrote 'a little piece of heaven'. Lads from Strathclyde University thought it absolutely perfect.

A hosteller from Toulouse particularly appreciated the simplicity. Visitors from Inverness and Glasgow thought the hostels *the* place to stay when in the Western Isles. In May it was peaceful and visitors came from New Zealand and Wales.

Tim from Reading wrote 'to find a place like this truly warms your heart. The people you meet and who run the hostels go a long way to restoring my faith in humanity'. Betty from Preston wrote that the fire in particular took her back to her childhood.

The Bowlers from Sheffield camped and had a wonderful time. Jane from Glasgow, although a member of the Trust for years, was visiting the hostels for the first time and loved the experience of the different places and meeting interesting people.

Tom from Midlothian was stimulated by Toddun in dry conditions and saw a pair of eagles, cuckoos, golden plover, dunlin, a few deer and porpoises on the Loch. Alistair from Paris wrote in French that the warden was perfect (once he understood his accent) and thanked him.

The warden had to give fire-making lessons to Lesley and Claire who wrote 'Don't change anything about the hostel – it is full of character and lovely as it is'. In June, Jennie and Andrew arrived here having absorbed great views from the top of Clisham.

Robert from Glasgow walked in at night. Mary from Cape Town wrote that 'You can tell it's been enjoyed and remembered and returned to' and 'is the kind of place I was looking for'. John was here following Peter Clarke's *Timeless Way* and was glad he didn't give Rhenigidale a miss.

Ivan was last here in 1981 and wrote that it was good to find the hostel unspoilt and so well cared for. 'View from the windows not what it was though'. A hosteller saw corncrakes while hitching here and saw eagles around Toddun and enjoyed scrambling on Lewisian gneiss on the hills.

Susan and Andy enjoyed some lovely views from the hills at the back on the Loch Seaforth side. Lucy was here during incredible wild weather. The hostel

'warmed our bones and hearts' once again proving that the place can be a real haven.

In July Lesley went up Toddun with her new Rhenigidale friend, Becky. I think it was Becky who wrote how her boots started their life here in 2002 and on this occasion they again went up Toddun. So they will rest here for emergency use having served her well.

A visitor from Tallin in Estonia was here in July, but their Estonian remains untranslated. Another hosteller wrote that the hostel is the best, the weather was great, the walks spectacular, a concert by the Harris choir and the company memorable with chats, a dram and the hostel fire.

Jean from Scalpay left a detailed log of her stay – the highlights being outdoor music from a Swiss accordionist, a procession of sailing ships going up the Minch, looking like ghostly galleons in the mist, and a raven chasing an eagle over Mulla.

Visitors were here from Australia on 1 August and found it a lovely peaceful secluded spot. Philip from Glasgow wrote that it was one of the nicest places he'd been. Theresa made bread and was visiting her fourth hostel and loved the remoteness of Rhenigidale, the quality and thoughtfulness of the fittings.

Honeymooners were here from the Czech Republic after visiting five years ago. Alison from Montreal was on a mission to 'convert' her husband to Scottish life. The shining and sparkling sea enchanted him, but the hordes of midges didn't impress so much!

Chris from Oxfordshire arrived from Berneray after a hard cycle ride that involved being against both the wind and the gradients. While here he walked up Toddun, disturbing, during his climb, two golden eagles feeding on a sheep carcass.

Repeat visitor Martha (14) was here with her Mum and brother and climbed the same hill, Toddun, from where she wrote that the weather was good and although the midges were out in force, St Kilda was very clear on the western horizon.

Janni wrote in Gaelic and a visitor from London described the path over the hill as a 'Rolls Royce of a path' and found the Outer Hebrides a different world – peaceful, beautiful, people trusting one another and treating one another with respect.

Arthur from the Netherlands wrote 'the rainbows are that nearby, I can nearly touch them with my hand'. Neville wrote that anything remotely capable of channelling water was doing its best to gush and thoroughly soak him coming here.

Alex from New Zealand wrote that it was a lovely to shelter from the Great Northern weather blast. Sue liked talking with amazing housemates and a

lesson in fire-starting skills from Alasdair and wrote 'the solitude here by the fire – the moon rising, the clouds and night sky: these I truly needed.'

The simplicity and utter quiet make the whole'. A Gatliff hosteller of twelve years standing came here finally to collect the set and couldn't believe why he had not come before, but wrote 'it came just at the right time for me – I am warm, relaxed and very happy'.

The Turnbulls from Stornoway came for a weekend and felt it great to be away from everything. Jorg, here just before Christmas wrote 'reading what everyone wrote and being here for the third time, it is clear that everything here should stay how it is – it is just perfect!'

Howmore

Maggie was here again in January and wrote that 'as usual my time here is never long enough. But I always carry a little piece of this place with me, and always try to leave a small part of me behind. This certainly makes it easier to return'.

Graham came in February when it was very windy and he saw an otter or two. They seemed to enjoy playing in the surf. He climbed up Bon Mhor where there was a bit of snow on the top of the ridge and there were a few deer around.

Both Calum and Clare appreciated the fire in February and five Czechs got to the top of Hecla. Bill from Pudsey, back again in April wrote about the need to plan walks sensibly. Andrew and Stephen enjoyed listening to the birds and island hopping.

In May a visitor who wrote 'Gle Mhath agus tapadh leat' (very good and thank you in Gaelic) enjoyed the hostel, a walk up Bheinn Mhor, seeing peat cutting and crofting. Visitors from Germany had to use sun-block, felt it was more like the Caribbean and were able to identify all the shells on the beach.

When Juliet from Birmingham came on the last day of her cycling tour she found the hostel packed and had great fun. Visitors from New Zealand who had spent ten days in the islands and stayed at all the hostels were heading home with plenty of memories and plenty of reasons to return.

Hugh camped and everyone made porridge. Tim wasn't sure of the date and never found out what the birds were. In June, Pat and Ed celebrated their 30th Wedding Anniversary here. Elizabeth loved the starlings, the gorgeous light and donated a tent peg.

A visitor who stayed in his camper van had the back door blown off its mountings and found himself in his underwear confronting the grinning face of a 'rugged local, herding his cows'. It didn't spoil his stay though. Elsa found herself crying because of the beauty.

Graham found it one of the best places to unwind and recharge. Julie and Malcolm enjoyed walks on the beach and to Kildonan museum, despite the wind. Charlie from Essex was around in July, found it a cracking place and asked why it had taken him 55 years to discover these stunning islands?

Benji was back for the second time and enjoyed a perfect sunset and great company. Morag had some bike problems and ate lots of chocolate hobnobs. Fiona, also cycling, found the weather to her liking, despite getting sunburnt, and appreciated the peace and stillness of the surroundings.

The Shackletons, who came in August, wrote about the bonhomie of complete strangers appreciating one another's company, having memorable times and the rare pleasure of hearing corncrakes. However it was noted: 'I think it will be the monopoly game that my children will remember more'.

Scandinavian girls enjoyed skinny-dipping. Elizabeth and Philip were back for their 5th visit and went up Bheinn Mhor. Hostollers in September enjoyed the oven, the cat, puffins, geese and deer. Scott from Leeds wrote 'somehow the better for being so wild and wet outside'.

On 11 September, a gate had been provided in the fence between the road and the hostel. Monica and Joy were excited about travelling the islands without a car, cycling for the first time in 40 years, practising their fire-making skills and the company of Betty, Tommy and Mr Blue, the cat.

Carol and Moss, the dog, loved meeting 'the folk who value real life and experiences rather than falseness and consumerism'. Neville recommended a route offering good access to Bheinn Mhor, avoiding barbed wire. Bernard and Mary from Australia were catching up with old friends after 35 years.

A crowd, including individuals from Zimbabwe, were here for New Year, experienced good company, a lovely relaxed atmosphere and a bonfire on the beach. The weather certainly held during the festive season for it didn't start raining until 5 January.

Garenin

Debs and Steve from South Uist were glad to arrive after their tent blew down. The Hughes family enjoyed a stimulating walk over the cliff to Dalmore Bay and Dave had the hostel to himself in February and found it 'a bit like being on the Mary Celeste'.

French visitors wrote 'Longue vie au Garenin village'. Visitors from Germany were glad to find such a nice little hostel in this beautiful landscape with very friendly people and a fantastic warden. Peter and Lois from New Zealand met here one year ago and were returning after their wedding.

Tony and Len cycled here over the Pentland Road and had a cosy evening sharing fine malt, communing with the spirits of long departed residents!

Laura from Vancouver seeking shelter from the wailing wind and hail on a cold night realised why her ancestors fled to the balmy climes of Canada!

Joanna stayed two nights and had 'the best sleep for ages'. Bill wasn't able to light the stove and asked for an instruction sheet on the notice board. Lynda, Liz and Frances had cycled from Barra to the Butt and made use of 'these lovely hostels'.

Visitors came from Australia, Devon and France, the latter played Scrabble and hoped to be back one day. Ali, Clare and Bob also cycling from Barra to the Butt weren't looking forward to going home, but 'at least we can show off a great tan!'

Some May visitors said it was like a Viking village in the Bahamas! Peter and Andrea from New Zealand had two nights with 'sunsets never to be forgotten'. Grant left some instructions for the stove that will be copied and sent to the warden for display on the notice board.

Chris on his first trip to the islands began to understand what drove Arthur Meaby (the late Secretary of the GHHT) to devote so much time and effort to the creation and maintenance of the hostels. He found the islands quite different from anywhere else he'd been in Britain and Ireland.

Harry meanwhile thanked Lisa and Ann who took him 'to see the stones as the sun went down and the light caught the glint of mica on them, with the colour of the lichens making a picture to store in the memory'. Charlie from Essex had never seen so many orchids all in one area.

In August someone was brave enough to swim and Claire and Evan from Tasmania cooked the mackerel they caught off Carloway Pier. Marsha enjoyed the fantastic walks on the cliffs. Frequent hostellers from Cumbria hope the GHHT are able to keep the lease on the hostel.

Evan wrote 'there is something very special about islands, isolated by nature, often rugged and beautiful, always with their own unique cultures and traditions; and most importantly that feeling of being a living place: a space imbued with people's history, stories, legends and songs recreated every day by its people's lived experience and constantly, inescapably changing, because it is a growing living thing'.

In September visitors from Slovenia, France and Germany, Trinidad and Switzerland were in residence. One group found it engaging to stay in such historical surroundings with the walk taking in the shore from Tolstadh to Carlabhagh being particularly beautiful.

Gareth and Adele wrote in December that the power of the sea against the cliff is incredible. Jorg survived a lightning storm and found it special to feel the electricity in the air. Writing on 21 December he expressed the feelings of many - 'A new cycle begins and I hope nothing changes here'