

Crofters' Newsletter 2010



I was fortunate to be in the islands at the end of May 2009 when I had the great privilege of crossing part of the mighty Atlantic to enjoy the stunning scenery and wildlife of St Kilda. My day there was only possible due to the kind loan of a car by friends in Rhenigidale. While in the village I enjoyed a lovely evening catching up with Alasdair and Cathy, a couple of wet walks and, as always, I felt far from the crowded river when walking the path.

I was also on Berneray in better weather and hired a bike from Gloria and Splash to cycle the couple of miles down to Clachan Sands. Having not been on a bike for a while, it made me appreciate the efforts of those who cycle to the hostels. While cycling I liked hearing and then seeing a cuckoo. On a Runrig note, I enjoyed the lyrics carved into the windows of the new Lochmaddy ferry terminal.

It was good to read that so many people enjoyed the hostels again this year and that the weather, wildlife and scenery of the islands are proving to be the tonic that I have always found them. My return to the HebCelt Festival in July meant another trip to Rhenigidale. So its log-book extracts will feature first.

Jo Burgess - Editor of *Crofters' Newsletter*

Rhenigidale

A Runrig fan had written song titles by the lyrics in the front of the logbook and it was nice to know that enthusiasts are reaching the hostels.

Andy was here in March and walked the track in a blizzard. Rosie found Rhenigidale offered a warm welcome and enjoyed both the space and listening to both the raindrops on the roof and to the raven. Steven was here for the first time in 28 years and thought the changes were all for the better.

In April one hosteller had been in the South Harris hills, another had been to Boreray, St Kilda. Jo and Mike were here at Easter having cycled from Drinishader and noted that little had changed since their last visit in 1992 and for them the weather was good.

Roger Clifton was here for the first time in 40 years sharing memories of Roddy and wrote that nothing beats the magic of the path. Caroline and Geoff described the scenery as infectious and inspiring and wrote that the cycle ride from Tarbert was challenging, but worthwhile.

In May gale force winds and lashing rain put paid to Joanna, Richard and James plans to camp, but led to them making the hostel their base. They made it up Toddun, had a nose-to-nose meeting with an otter, saw sea eagles and completed the Clisham horseshoe.

Bill had the place to himself and Pete enjoyed the quiet atmospheric beauty of the place and swam. He went in search of otters and found 'another wild mammal – similar size but much larger ears. We stalked one and got close up view - though it was quite elusive. Looking it up in my reference book of British wildlife I am pretty certain I have spotted a rabbit'!

Julie said thanks for keeping this simple hostel and Michael wrote of the pleasure of meeting Alasdair. Sarah and Phil were having trouble with the midges and Toby enjoyed lovely views of the Shiantis.

James arrived in June having had a lengthy bike battle up hill and down dale and after ten days of glorious sun and wind. It was raining so the fire warmed the cockles and he felt satisfied.

Stacey from New Zealand, also cycling, wrote that anyone coming out here with a bike laden with panniers is truly committed. Another visitor climbed Toddun and enjoyed the views especially the sight of an eagle when they were sat by the summit cairn. They also enjoyed deer running and leaping below them on their descent.

Toddun was described as a little jewel of a hill. Brian and John with a combined age of 145 years made it to the top of Clisham and Sophie from Australia who has been coming here for 22 years said it was the first time she had seen sunshine and heat.

Tom, aged 12, who was cycling on a tandem reckoned the hostel should have three-stars. Keith enjoyed the ridge beside Loch Seaforth, but will have to come back for a swim. David and Claudia from Germany thought the hostel the highlight of their extensive Scotland trip and at the end of August it provided a warm and friendly haven from the rain.

Peter thought Rhenigiadale the best of the hostels and enjoyed meeting Alasdair and a visitor from the Czech Republic found it a perfect end to their Scotland tour. Rachel and Nick found it magical.

In October Heather and Zara found the hostel a perfect base and in November and December there was a handful of hostellers happy to find the hostel open, dry and warm.

Garenin

Andrew was grateful for the warmth and shelter of the hostels in January when he was in the islands for much-needed solitude and reflection. Rosie left a long poem - *Sailing on the Minch* - including a line 'a land of simple wisdoms, broad beauty and generous landscape'.

In March, Summer returned from a long wind-blown walk with her face burning 'reflecting the glow I feel inside'. Solitude was a word she and others used in their musings. Another visitor wrote that they 'came here with a burden and am leaving this place with life'. Again despite meeting and enjoying the company of the warden and folk in the village, solitude was enjoyed.

Cat and Ellie battled on their bikes through hail-storms, wind-gusts and downpours. Donna and Kester had foraged mussels and cooked them in wine on a driftwood fire. Several including Anna said they would be back.

By April there was lots of sunshine. Ella, aged 10, enjoyed learning about the blackhouses, Chad from Portland, Oregon, was here for the second time with Emiko who thought the hostel the best experience on the best island.

John referred to rumours of Garenin closing and was saddened at the prospect. David had trouble opening tins and there were lots of references to the need for hostellers to clear up after themselves.

Lots of people enjoyed the walk along the cliffs to Dalmor Beach. Cliff and Suzanne recommended the inn between Shawbost and Bragar which is open seven days a week.

In June the weather was good and Paul visiting Lewis and Harris for the first time found the scenery stunning. Zoe saw a basking shark in July. Visitors from Canada enjoyed fabulous views and atmosphere. Hannah found it very cosy with great evenings with the best people ever.

In July the hostel was busy maybe due to the rain. Julie too found warmth in the company round the fire. Andrew meanwhile found it interesting to get an insight into crofting life and went to church on Sunday.

Some Spanish visitors were here in August. Dave came for one night and ended up staying a week. Jack and Holly enjoyed an amazing sunset and an Italian visitor enjoyed the shower. Carol and Moss were here in September and didn't want to leave 'a place of silence, stars and an ever changing sea'. She got lessons on a bodhran and in Gaelic and wrote that 'the hostel means so much to so many, a salve for the soul, a refuge to relax in and a gentle place that stays warmly in memories'.

Andy arrived 'done in' from all four seasons in one day on his ride from Rhenigidale. Anna recommended the museum at Arnol and in October visitors from Glasgow wrote this was the best holiday ever. A Canadian arrived on a stormy night and had the company of Issac and Maria from Spain.

Louise like others said she had the best nights' sleep in a long time and saw a Golden Eagle along the Pentland Road from about 40 feet away. Clare and Sam went surfing at Dalmor in November. Brian was here too in November with students from St Andrews while Nancy was here from Belgium.

Stephen visited in December taking photos and found it so wonderful he stayed an extra night. On 22 December Alan wrote 'beautiful and amazing as always, sun shining today and all's well with the world – can't get a better night's sleep anywhere else'.

Howmore

Jane, Isaack and Martin were here again for the New Year when the happiness was only spoilt by worry about the missing Simon McMillan, whose body sadly wasn't found until March.

Jo and Mike here in April got to the top of Beinn Mhor from where they enjoyed clear views all around the area. They also recommended two cafes – one before the causeway and one at Kirkibost in the community centre.

Paul and Rachel wrote 'this place is everything a hostel should be and a lot more besides'. Helen and David enjoyed a sunset of clear translucent shades of pink and blue, listening to curlews and new-born lambs when they had a memorable stay for their 25th wedding anniversary. Bill was here in April and found it busier than he had ever seen it.

Ian and Sue did Beinn Mhor, Corrodale and Hecla and saw dotterel, snow buntings and heard corncrakes. 'Four go mad in the Hebrides' also got up Beinn Mhor and enjoyed amazing views, golden eagles and supper on the beach with a 15 year-old Oban Single Malt.

In June songs were sung on the beach about the glorious Betty and some visitors found the place ideal for camping. In July poems were left on the subject of golf and rhyming foggy with soggy! Peter spotted an eagle being mobbed by gulls and a buzzard and wrote that the eagle looked huge in comparison.

Jessy from Belgium found the 'middle-of-nowhere' stole her heart because everything was back-to-basics and the landscape was beautiful. Liam writing in Gaelic wrote that he had a wonderful sleep and that the company was 'sgoinneil - spirited'. Guy felt the communal area was a bit small but still enjoyed his stay.

Joe and Jenny came to camp on their honeymoon, but it being the end of July the tent suffered a force 8 gale so they stayed in a bunk instead. They kept eying up Beinn Mhorr, but failed to find the energy! Sheila wrote of her intention to leave some knitted hand-warmers with Betty for people who find they need gloves. For a small donation they will be available from October.

Dave enjoyed great company but was forced into his car from his bunk by the French National Snoring team! He also wrote that Betty's cakes are World Class. Jane and Issack were back in August and reported a multitude of nationalities staying, including Italians, Israelis, French Canadians, Columbians and Japanese and on 4th August there was a record attendance of 36.

Visitors from Stockport here in September also enjoyed a fantastic sunset and Sue enjoyed the noise of the waves crashing onto the beach. Gill wrote 'worst of weather; best of times'. Some Germans had great success living off the land - a road-kill rabbit and a grey seal. In October there were lots of greylag geese, wrens, whooper swans and a few snipe. John wrote it was both a magical hostel and spot.

In November, Stewart had the place to himself and enjoyed a fabulous sunset and peace and quiet. A few days later someone wrote to watch out for the red flags as they were in a dream and walked by them. Raju came here to read *Wuthering Heights* and enjoyed seeing Peregrine and a couple of goshawks. He walked in constant rain and low cloud to the imagined bothy where Cathy died!

Milo had an unplanned stay at the end of a six-week journey walking and camping through Orkney and the Outer Hebrides, due to ferocious gales and cancelled ferries. He enjoyed the copy of *Wuthering Heights* he presumed was left by Raju where he discovered in a footnote the origins of his name.

The crowd were back for New Year and it was too cold for the beach. Stuart, Jo and Seth the dog were also here, saw otters and enjoyed the icy lochs. Check out 'Howmore Crew' on Facebook.

Berneray

A visitor came in January doing research on the impact of the causeway and found the hostel warm and tidy - a testament to the volunteers and warden.

Visitors next wrote in the book in April when they were celebrating Niall's 41st birthday and had good craic, comfortable beds and enjoyed the company of those working on the hostel. Vicki and Billy were here on the third night of their honeymoon and found it an excellent place to stay.

Richard, the thatcher, who was here doing his work for four weeks wrote that because the English wheat straw he was using still had a lot of grain in it, he expected the roof to look like a wheat field when he comes back in July.

Phil from Northumberland was here after 15 years, when things were very different with no causeway and no direct ferries. His brother, Ron, was warden of Earls Court hostel and worked with Herbert Gatliff. Ron's philosophy was that the big city hostels could make the profits necessary to maintain the network of small, simple hostels. As Phil wrote, Ron and Herbert did a good job for us.

Alison was celebrating 25 years of hostelling and wrote how many things have changed but this hostel is timeless and this place is great. John from Swindon found lots of changes 29 years after his last visit – no grass in the middle of the roads and Sunday being no different to any other day.

In October, Andrew and Graham were here 24 years after being on a work-party when Annie and Jessie offered them kind hospitality, and wrote it was pleasing to see the hostel in such good order. Although they noted changes they felt it still had the same charm.

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



Many wrote of comfortable sleep and not being able to wait to come again. Lynn arrived on a dark and windy night but wrote 'Never worry about the weather as the first light of day brings the magnificent peace and tranquillity that is Berneray'. Having come to this hostel since she was 8 years old, she never tires of it and was sad to leave after a perfect bonfire party on the beach, thanking Berneray for always making her feel at home.

Milo was here in November and wrote that he will leave here a wiser being than before and pondering whether the vague crimson flickering was the aurora or just his imagination. Jose, here in January, quoted Chris who said, "You come for a night, but you stay for a lifetime."

Front cover photograph of Howmore by John Joyce, who supervised the renovations to the hostel's dormitory annexe

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