



NEWSLETTER 21

NOVEMBER 1995

HEBRIDEAN HOSTELLERS AND GATLIFF HEBRIDEAN HOSTELS TRUST

Well, what a wonderful summer that was, I hope we have many more like it. Hostels nights were slightly up on this time last year, probably due to such fine weather.

RHENIGIDALE - The path from Tarbert to the hostel has been widened and improved. The three bridges have been renewed, making this a very pleasant (though still arduous) walk indeed. Funding for this work came from Scottish Natural Heritage, Countryside Commission and the Gatliff Trust. You will be pleased to know that I shall be taking new chairs up to the hostel this winter for your comfort!

GARENIN - Apologies to any hostellers who have used this hostel since the summer. It was belatedly drawn to our notice that the stove has been virtually out of commission since then, due to misuse of the stove. It is in such a state of disrepair that an entire new stove has had to be built specially for us - which will hopefully stand up to the rigours of the hostels. This will be delivered and fitted this winter. It will include a small oven and the manufacturers have said we can cook pancakes on the top! There will also be new chairs arriving this winter and the shower will be replaced by an electric one.

BERNERAY - Heaters have been installed in the annexe and main dormitory. The shower will be upgraded to a 7kw unit, ensuring HOT water - a relief to those of us who have misguidedly jumped into its icy depths before now! There will also be new mattresses and pillows arriving this winter. Once there you won't want to leave!

HOWMORE - The reed beds for the sanitation appear to be working well. Work is continuing on the hostel itself and a new stove is being delivered this winter. Unfortunately, the work on the roof has been slightly delayed due to emergency commitments by the workers who had undertaken the job. We may have to use the new store area as emergency accommodation on a temporary basis.

LET BATTLE COMMENCE

The Chess Festival on Lewis which attracted over 400 players and brought the Lewis chessmen to their homeland is over. Due to its succes it is planned to make it an annual event. The final game has started between the holders The British Museum and the challengers,

Western Isles Council. The prize being the Lewis chessmen. The council wish the pieces to remain on Lewis and there is talk of not returning the chess men. This would be a bad move as the pieces were given in good faith and there is a written agreement over the length of the loan, conservation of the pieces and their display. Not to return the pieces, would make it impossible for them to be brought back to Lewis - an alternative to this would be to ask the British Museum to loan the men from Easter to November rather than have them locked up in a vault. This has attracted more than 15,000 people to the island and greatly boosted the tourist economy. I believe this match will go on for some time!

A BRIDGE TOO DEAR

Monday October 16th saw the official opening of the Skye Bridge from Kyle of Lochalsh to Kyleakin, replacing the Caledonian MacBrayne ferry service. As soon as the ribbon was cut the protestations of the islanders became even louder. They were not objecting to the bridge but to the excessively high tolls that were being charged to use the bridge. The tolls are slightly cheaper than the ferry fare thus allowing the bridge to be paid for within fifteen to twenty years. Which is fine in principle until you realise that the inhabitants of Skye and habitual users of the bridge were not aware of how high the tolls were to be. They were under the impression that the charge would be something similar to that of the Erskine Bridge and Forth Bridge, which are both under a pound each way - rather different from the approximate charge of £5.00 for a single trip on the Skye Bridge!! The reason that the CalMac fares were similarly high for this route is because they were subsidising the fares on other less travelled routes around the islands.

A few islanders have been objecting to the high fares by simply driving across the bridge without paying the toll. Another form of protest raised has been to try and raise enough money to fund a ferry to take up the old CalMac route in competition with the bridge thus making the pay-back time longer than the estimated fifteen to twenty years. With the removal of the ferry there is a monopoly on the route to Skye being taken by the bridge.

With the upgrading of the road from Fort William to Mallaig, there is another alternative route over the sea to Skye and that is from Mallaig to Armadale (summer only for vehicles). Still on the subject of ferries it has come to my attention that there is a new ferry named Isle of Lewis plying the waters between Stornoway and Ullapool. This is causing some consternation amongst the islanders who remember the words of the famous Bran Seer who predicted that the Isle of Lewis would sink with the loss of many lives. At the time people took this with a pinch of salt for how could an island sink! Now, however, since the launching of this new ferry in July a few alarm bells are ringing. In fact, the ferry is quicker than before and has shaved 45 minutes off the journey time.

LIGHTS ON IN LEWIS

The 133 year old lighthouse located at the Butt of Lewis in the most northerly of the Hebridean Islands has become something of an attraction over the years not only to tourists but to huge flocks of migrating birds. As well as the local varieties (including corncrake)

there are kittiwakes, fulmers, geese, redwings etc who all head for the warmth of the 750,000 candle power beam and use it as a stopover on the migratory path. Unless their droppings are cleared away regularly (a dangerous job with winds reaching 80 mph) the normal visibility of 25 miles can be reduced to virtually nothing in a matter of days. To assist the two lighthouse keepers in reducing the amount of birds landing on and around the glass two plastic eagle owls have been introduced. They are bolted on to the front of the windows around the beam and proved highly successful in keeping birds away by tricking them into sending distress signals out to other birds. However, this was short lived when the birds realised that they were not being attacked by the two eagle owls! One can now see the two eagle owls bolted to the front of the lighthouse surrounded by hundreds of friendly birds.

This is a line drawing of how the hostel at Howmore will look when all work is completed. The building to the left is new and comprises washing areas and common room, the building beyond is the existing hostel which will be sleeping accommodation and the building on the right is to be the Store and cycle shed.



NEW ADDITION TO CALLANISH STONES

A prehistoric burial chamber has been discovered near to the famous Standing Stones at Callanish. The chamber pre-dates the pyramids in age and is actually an integral part of the Callanish site. It was discovered by accident when bulldozers moved in to lay foundations for a new road. Work on the road has been suspended until the full importance of this discovery has been ascertained. The argument put forward by the local council is that it will be too costly to re-route the road and therefore proposes the chamber be removed and rebuilt nearby. What is so absurd about all this is that the cost of moving this archeological discovery will far exceed the cost of re-routing the road.

STANDING ORDERS

Thank you to all who have now made the change to our new bank, the bulk of whom have also increased their annual donations. If you are still to sign the new order, please do so soon. As most of the orders are due to pay out in the first quarter of 1996 and unless amended will pay into an account which is now closed.

MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY

We would like to thank Sandy Mitchell for her efforts over the past year as membership secretary and wish her success in the future. She will of course be aiding and abetting Jim McFarlane in his work on the Newsletter and is a frequent visitor to the islands. Jim McCulloch will be taking over the duties and all enquiries should be sent to him at the address below.

AGM

Despite the low attendance of non-committee member's at this year's AGM we had a successful day. It was agreed that Pam Moncur should be in charge of publicity and promotion of the Gatliff Hebridean Hostellers Trust to heighten our profile nationally. We wish her success in this post.

It was also agreed that there would be a small increase in overnight charges at the hostels which keeps us in line with the SYHA charges for grade 3 hostels. Therefore as of 1st January 1996 an overnight charge will be £4.20 (camping charges remain at £2.00 per night).

Many thanks to Mr Bill Johnston for letting us use his excellent drawings in this issue of the Newsletter. Anyone who fancies seeing their artwork in print or has any input for the Newsletter please send to Jim McFarlane at the address below.

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