



Newsletter 27

November 1998

GATLIFF HEBRIDEAN HOSTELS TRUST

Welcome to this autumn edition of the Newsletter. As you may recall in the May edition, I said that predictions were for an Indian summer. Well, it looks as if the only thing we had in common with that was the fact that many people used canoes as their main mode of transport. During the recent spell of wet weather this Newsletter has received tidings of some sad but also some happy news. The sad news is that Graham MacDonald (the Treasurer of GHHT), however I am delighted to report on the happy marriage of our Membership Secretary.

GRAHAM MACDONALD

Peter Clarke, the Chairman writes: It is with sadness that I write of the sudden death of our Treasurer Graham MacDonald. He passed away in his sleep in July, on the day he was due to travel to Berneray to take part in the annual 'It's a Knockout' competition. It came as a shock to us all. Arthur Meaby and Jim McFarlane represented us at the funeral and Arthur was also present in September when Graham's ashes were laid to rest on Berneray. Over 30 islanders attended the ceremony and a reception was held in the Community Centre - a tribute to the esteem in which Graham was held on Berneray.

I first met Graham on Berneray at the 'It's a Knockout' competition. This afternoon of competition and fun takes place at the end of Berneray week and is a 'must' if you love Berneray. Graham was taking part and I was immediately impressed by his verve and energy. His love of the island and hostel was obvious. He led the hostel team to victory three years running.

He was invited to become a Trustee and he readily agreed to be our Treasurer. He tackled the job with his usual energy and commitment and soon had the job buttoned down. Nothing was too much trouble, anything to advance the cause of his beloved hostels. He was a shining example. We will miss him.

Graham was 43 - young, far too young to go. As I think of him today, I am glad that he is at peace on the island he loved, the island that loved him. Thank you Graham for all you did for us.

MEMBERSHIP JOINED

I am delighted to announce the marriage of Jim McCulloch (previous Membership Secretary) to Fran Paxton (present Membership Secretary). It appears they had more to pass on than the GHHT information! They were married at Lochmaddy, N. Uist on 4th September, then a reception was held on the beach at Sollas. Now that she has become a married woman, Fran has passed over the post of Membership Secretary to Brian Harwood, perhaps to concentrate on increasing their own

membership!!! We wish them every happiness. Fran is staying on the committee of GHHT as Training Officer - a post to help train leaders for work parties.

MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY

Bryan Harwood joined GHHT at our last AGM and although living in England at present, he is eager for us to mention that he has been happily married for forty years to a Scot, originally from Skye, and honeymooned in Torridon. They spend at least one holiday a year in Scotland. His interest in GHHT started with his friendship to Alan Gardner a friend of Herbert Gatliff and is enhanced by his affinity for Scotland. He has spent the last ten years working in the voluntary/charity sector and has a strong interest in Natural History and the preservation of the rural environment. Welcome aboard Bryan.

HOSTEL OVERNIGHTS

Once again the weather seems to have had a great impact on our overnights. This has not been a very good year. The figures to the end of September were (bednights):

Berneray - 1328, Garenin - 1707, Howmore - 1079, Rhenigidale - 782

We are not alone in the downturn, the SYHA have seen their numbers drop by 40,000 in the last two years, only ten out of their seventy hostels are in profit, sounding the death knell for the hostels at Tighnabruiaich, Falkland, Lochmaddy and Stockinish. With the closure of the last two, the SYHA will not have any hostels in the Western Isles, which just leaves ourselves and the private bunkhouses. It would appear that 1999 looks no better for Scotland, because bookings for winter holidays overseas in September are up 15% on the same period last year, operators are already reporting a 25% increase on overseas holidays for 1999.

Peter Clarke comments on the closure of SYHA hostels in W Isles:

'The SYHA have bowed to the pressure of competition from bunk houses and closed their hostels at Lochmaddy and Stockinish. This is a sad blow to the islands. It will leave the GHHT hostels as the flag bearer for the voluntary not-for-profit youth hostels in the islands.

The SYHA closed because increased competition from bunk houses has meant steady attrition of hosteller numbers. We have suffered too, losing nearly one quarter of our overnights since 1996. This is against a background of static or declining visitor numbers. Scotland as a whole has been suffering lower visitor numbers in recent years.

We have repeatedly called upon the island authorities to think about new bunk house proposals strategically based on market realities. We are not against any islander trying to earn a living and we have always accepted that we live in a market economy. We are willing to compete and are dedicated to meeting Scottish Tourist Board and IYHF standards. We also meet local fire and environmental health standards.

How can it make sense to provide a huge grant to build a new bunk house, when there is a youth hostel with empty beds just down the road? Where are all the new hostellers to come from to fill the extra beds. Are the business plans submitted with grant applications examined critically?

We believe that most hostellers are attracted to the islands by GHHT publicity or the IYHF or SYHA handbooks. Once in the islands however, hostellers may be distracted by 'bunkhouse' signs stuck at road ends or via word on the grapevine. Fair enough, but the closure of Lochmaddy and Stockinish proves that unbridled competition ends in tears.

It is nonsense, for example, for the Uist and Benbecula local plan (a Statutory Document) to propose the establishment of seven new bunkhouses at a variety of

locations. This was despite our reasoned arguments against, which were acknowledged but never answered. Now there are only bunk houses in South Harris, we wait to see how many can survive. Perhaps our view will only gain local support when one or more of the bunkhouses close (one has already gone near Stornoway).

We have always valued your support and it will never be taken for granted. We are in the islands to stay and will meet competition from whatever quarters. We are the market leaders, our prices are 3-4 pounds lower than the bunkhouses, we have steadily improved our hostels, yet retained their unique character. All hostel income is used to improve facilities and support the hostels. All Trustees are hostellers who draw only minimal expenses. We will continue to look to our laurels and with your valued support we will continue to improve the hostels and extend the chain.

We will survive and hope to prosper. As a charity our sole aim is to provide and maintain hostels in the islands to allow young people, especially those of limited means, to experience and come to love the unique environment and culture of the islands. We intend to continue to fulfil that aim just as our founder, Herbert Gatliff intended."

ISLAND NO MORE

The causeway to Berneray has been completed - if this is good or bad for the island, only time will tell. For the locals, we can't really call them islanders any more, it will mean access to N Uist and not having to set their return by the ferry timetables. I hope there is more to be gained than lost. I have always known Berneray as an island and have many happy memories and the happiest moment of all was when I met my girlfriend Sandy whilst on holiday there. There was always something magical about the island when the last ferry sailed away and you were left to yourself.

AFTER EWE

Cal-Mac the inter island ferry company, had suspicions raised by staff who reported a lot of 'holidaying sheep'. It turns out the crofers had stumbled onto a loophole in Cal-Mac's fares policy whereby if they take their sheep to market or to sell on the mainland they could get a discount on the ferry fare. Thus families travelling on the ferries to take their holidays would bring along a sheep with them to get this discounted fare, and on their return, days or weeks later, would say that the price was too low and they had decided not to sell after all.

The company brought in the scheme, charging just 2.35 an animal and no charge for the vehicle, as long as the crofter - and at least one animal - was just going to market!!!

SEA YOU AT ATE

At the top of a 600ft cliff on the most westerly tip of the Isle of Lewis at Aird Uig is the most remote french restaurant in Britain. In less than two months four Government ministers, lairds, knights and more than 1000 other customers have made the trek along a four mile single track road to Bonaventure. The french chef and his irish girlfriend liked the challenge of taking the fish fresh from the sea and the venison from the hills and turning them into cordon bleu cuisine. The restaurant is 40 miles from Stornoway and was once a Cold War look-out post!!

SCALPAY OPEN AGAIN

Tony Blair officially opened the new bridge in Scalpay recently and the other VIP who was to meet him and be with him on this historic occasion was Scalpay's oldest resident Christina Morrison, but at 102 years old she preferred to stay in beside the fire instead of braving the weather. She had already been the first

person to traverse the bridge last December in a vintage car and she said this was Scalpay's day and there was no need for her to be in the limelight again.

There was much gathering of press and it's accompanying paraphernalia at the opening of the new bridge by the prime minister and hopefully it might finally prove that with this vital transportation link, there is more to the Highlands and Islands than Celtic twilight, off-beat stories and climbing hills.

It is true that there is not the abject poverty on Scalpay that there is in inner cities, but the islanders' needs are just as demanding if they are to survive. Social exclusion is as relevant in Scalpay as anywhere else. The depopulation has to be reversed - perhaps it is not a coincidence that two families have already returned since the bridge was built! Scalpay is a community that deserves to survive, it's people are resilient and hard-working. Gaelic is still the first language of the 350 strong community - against all the odds!

THE LAST LINK

Tony Blair has pledged to consider the possibility of a causeway to the island of Eriskay, the final link-up in the inter-island network, thus delighting residents of Eriskay. Mr Blair conceded that the islands composed a very special set of circumstances and in this case transportation was the key to setting up a proper modern infrastructure.

BARRA - CHAIRMAN'S COMMENT

Thank you for all your suggestions on charities we might approach for the appeal. We need all the help we can get with the appeal both in suggesting charities we might approach and on the admin side. If you know of any charities which we might approach please let me know. Specifically do you work for a company which runs a charitable trust? Do you live in a town or City with a charitable trust? It doesn't matter whether they give small grants or large grants. The important thing is that such trusts are much more sympathetic to appeals if they come from their own employees or local residents.

We also need admin assistance with appeals both in London and Scotland. If you can help in either direction please let me know. Peter Clarke.

DOGFIIGHT FOR A BONE

Many visitors to the islands have travelled to Lakefield House on West Lewis, to see the extraordinary, enormous jaw bone of a whale which was washed ashore at Bragor. It measures 82ft high and 24ft in diameter and is in a dangerous state of erosion from the elements. There have been two options open to the fate of the jaw bone, it is either left in situ which is what the local community would prefer, or as a Harris-based sculptor envisages could be encased in bronze and moved 100 yards from it's current position to a raised hillock on the township's common grazing land. This latter idea has snowballed into it now being called a Millenium Arch and involves Lottery funding. The fight continues!

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Useful Names and Addresses

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