

Hebridean Hostellers

Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust

www.gatliff.org.uk

Newsletter 48

July 2009



Dun Carloway, built in the 1st Century BC, is close to Garenin

Look, Listen and ... Leaf

The Islands Book Trust is regularly featured in these columns for three significant reasons. It is a membership-based organisation that encourages interest in islands, in general, and Scottish islands, in particular. Its programmes include talks, walks and trips to areas within the vicinities of the Gatliff hostels. The Trust's list of publications grows ever more extensive and appeals to many of our members.

The July outings on Saturdays 4 & 18 are to **Vallay**, across the sand causeway from North Uist, and to the **Former Settlements of Kinlochresort**, in that no-man's-land between Lewis and Harris. **Norman Johnson** will be leading the former; **Bill Lawson** the latter.

The August dates to note are Thursday 6 when Bill Lawson will talk on **Emigration from the Outer Hebrides** and Saturday 8 when he will lead a trip from the Nurse's Cottage on Berneray to **Pabbay**. Then from Monday 24 - Saturday 29 there will be the Fourth Hebridean Book Festival, **Faclan**.

A Three-Day Conference will be held at Leverburgh from Thursday 10 - Saturday 12 September on **Island Emigration**. This has been arranged as part of the 'The Year of Homecoming' events that are being promoted throughout Scotland.

Alasdair MacEachen will be presenting **Natural Gifts and Tenacious Memories** on Saturdays 3 October and 21 November at Griminish, North Uist. Thursday 22 October is a special occasion – the Sixth Annual Angus Macleod Memorial Lecture at Gravir, South Lochs. It will be given on **Crofting and a European Future** by the **Rt Hon Charles Kennedy MP**.

Then on Tuesday 17 November, **Colin Scott Mackenzie** will address the issues involving **Island Comparisons: Invidious or Otherwise**. This comprises 'Reflections on Life in the Western Isles, Orkney and Shetland.'

Careful planning is obviously required to incorporate these stimulating events into personal schedules, but reductions in fares on the CalMac crossings make island trips increasingly affordable. The finer details of the **timings and venues** of the Trust's programme are readily available on its informative website - www.theislandsbooktrust.com So too is the **range of books** – with accounts of their contents and ways of ordering them. They are ready to leaf through and to read thoroughly.

The Islands Book Trust

For Further Details

www.theislandsbooktrust.com

01851 820946

Bus Stopping Places

The bus services on the Islands have become rather **special** - for they do serve the Gatliff hostels rather well. The West Side Service on Lewis takes in Callanish and then the spur out to Garenin. The South Uist routes have a stop some 300 yards from the Howmore hostel by Rothan Cycles. A glimpse on the indicator board of a northbound bus at that junction could well show that its destination as 'Berneray - Gatliff YH'.

The Rhenigidale hostel is right at the end of the route and has special arrangements whereby a telephone call will ensure a seat on the service. One hosteller heading south towards Leverburgh thought that he had missed the bus on the main road. Then to his amazement the speeding vehicle stopped some 300 yards away and waited for him, alerted by a mobile phone call from the driver of the **connecting service** on which he was the passenger.

Flyers Are Off

For many years the Trust has published the flyer **Simple Hostels of the Outer Hebrides**. At one time it appeared annually and then, subsequently, when the fees changed. However, the usual print-run of 10,000 copies has become increasingly expensive and the number of virtual visitors to the website has risen dramatically. There are close on 50 a day during the Spring and Summer. Consequently, the GHHT has made a temporary halt to creating a paper trail to its doors and now relies on a number of strategically placed advertisements together with the website information.

One stroke of good fortune for the GHHT has been the composition of the **SYHA Guide** which includes entries on all affiliated hostels. In marketing terms, the premier place to be on a page is at the top right-hand corner. This is where the eye tends to be drawn. As it happens, all four Gatliff hostels have, by chance, been placed in this position. It has been determined by the alphabetical listing and not by a compositor's whim or a designer's favouritism.

Walking at the Top

The **Galson Estate Trust** (www.galsontrust.com) is entrusted with the management of 56,000 acres at the very north of Lewis. There is an interactive balance between a crofting lifestyle, the panoramic landscape and its diverse natural environment. Urras Oighreachd Ghabhsainn has a membership of over 1150 people, 75% of the 22 crofting townships.

A series of **conducted walks** are taking place, with Gatliff-hostel users particularly invited. In July, the Habost Machair and the Loch Stiapabhat Nature Reserve will feature together with Shader Village and the proposed wave power-station. In August the destinations will include the Butt of Lewis and Borve Village, while September's will be Dun Eistean and South Galson.

Collecting for High Achievers

The Western Isles can be an area in which to indulge in '**peak-bagging**' or alternatively to avoid such passions. It depends on whether the classification systems appeal. One hostel visitor claimed to have climbed all 284 Munros (Scottish mountains over 3000') between 1985 - 90 when he switched to a 19-year 'collection' of the Corbetts (those from 2500 - 2999'). Of these only one, An Cliseam, is in the Outer Hebrides. Was he interested in the Grahams (2000 - 2499' peaks to the north of the Highland line)? Of these there are just four in the Isles – three on Harris and Beinn Mhor, relatively close to the Howmore Hostel in South Uist. What about the 74 Marilyns in the same area, with their distinctive 500' 'ascents' all-round ? His answer was both emphatic and negative. He had finished with 'bagging' and indicated that he was now enjoying mountains for the scenery, exercise, company and refreshing elevations that they provide.

Migration to the Web

The **Crofters' Newsletter** – a compendium of observations made by visitors – has been circulated each year for quite a time ... in paper form. It has been printed and distributed by the traditional methods and has become an increasingly expensive item. Its format, though largely unchanged, will now be hosted on the website, with relatively few copies being produced to post. This dual form of production is a result of the new technologies available.

Another innovation will be the improved **content management system** of the website, enabling changes to be implemented quickly and parts to be downloaded for the benefit of users. 2009 has seen another surge in the number of website visitors – with well over a thousand recorded monthly and the daily totals often in excess of fifty.

Problems of Attraction

When people's preferences for specific parts of the Western Isles are gauged in surveys, the islands of Harris, Barra and Berneray usually score highly. The creation of the causeway and the introduction of a CalMac ferry service to Berneray made it a **natural half-way point** for visitors endeavouring to see the complete island chain.

The number of camper vans has increased significantly with a subsequent increased demand for the facilities of water-filling and waste-disposal. This led to some enterprising owners using the **day-rate** at the hostel just to give access to basic services. Consequently this rate has been discontinued at Berneray where the camping fees are levied, even for occasional users.

Jessie Macleod (1924 - 2009)

Jessie Barbara MacKillop

was, with her twin sister **Annie**, born on the island of Berneray and grew up on their parents' croft known as Baile. Their father died when the girls were only 13 and they left school the following year. Their hard-working, competent and trustworthy ways were evident and they quickly found employment in the hotel industry. Jessie served in the Falls of Lora Hotel, near Oban, and in the Rodel Hotel, Harris.

In August 1951 she married retired merchant seaman, **Duncan Macleod**, and lived at Beasdaire, within sight of her childhood home. Their son, **Calum**, was born two years later. Duncan's enthusiasm for genealogy, recounting tales of his travels and reciting poetry led their house becoming a venue for visitors and for legendary sessions of story-telling and of hospitality. Jessie's cooking skills and generosity of spirit were appreciated by many.

Her genial and caring ways were particularly evident when the **Berneray Hostel** was opened and she and her sister shared wardening duties from 1978-96. Her welcoming ways led to some contacts with hostellers being sustained over many years. She shared with them the roots of her island community as well as her own care for the land and livestock, and, in return, enjoyed learning about their different cultures in the UK, Europe and beyond.

Jessie always encouraged Calum to attain high levels of education and was delighted when he became a Church of Scotland minister. She felt honoured to be asked to knit gifts for **Prince Charles** and **Princess Diana**; to be part of the Twins Gathering when she and Annie were the oldest surviving identical twins in the Western Isles; to be filmed having the Prince to tea during the filming of the documentary, *Prince Among Islands*.

On 23 April she broke her femur, was taken to the hospital on Benbecula, airlifted to the Western Infirmary in Glasgow where she died, unexpectedly, two days later. **Peter Clarke**, the GHHT Chairman, attended her funeral on Berneray and conveyed condolences to Annie, Calum and Ada, and her three grandchildren. He expressed the appreciation for her remarkable ways of making people feel both at home and on holiday in our hostel.



Miscellany

Irvine Butterfield, the hill walker, author, photographer and conservationist, died in May aged 72. He had succeeded in raising awareness of and enthusiasms for the Highlands and Islands. His obituary in *The Times* included this memorable paragraph – 'One tribute judged him to be a voice not crying in the wilderness, but crying for the wilderness'.

Two girls from the French-speaking part of Canada entered the **Howmore Hostel**, saw what was on offer and made sounds that suggested delight. A seasoned visitor in the Common Room advised caution with the remark, "This place is not that fancy." The reply was immediate and decisive – "The time has come to break away from fanciness!"

The **Heritage Paths Project** is progressing with the input of Scotways and Scottish Natural Heritage. The maps will soon be generally available in print form and the website www.heritagepaths.co.uk is an exciting way to see what is on offer. Peter Clarke's *The Timeless Way* has been a most useful single source for historic paths throughout the Western Isles.

During the month of June there has been a **Golden Eagle Nest Watch** from a site close to the Griminish Pier road on North Uist. This has been promoted by the RSPB Scotland staff and it could be well worth while getting in touch with them to see whether this type of contact with nature remains available. Initiatives of all sorts are on-going.

A specific initiative, by **CalMac**, has certainly proved popular and that's the Road Equivalent Tariff which has reduced the fares on the mainland crossings to the Western Isles. Consequences of this have been an increase in the bookings for vehicles. So trying to get a space for a car, without a reservation, can be a little like securing a bed at a Gatliff hostel – a matter of chance!

Visitor Numbers

HOSTEL OVERNIGHT FIGURES

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Berneray	1505	1858	2056	1896	2201	2311	2226	2147
Garenin	1225	1316	1522	1631	1577	1620	1301	948
Howmore	1034	1222	1627	1561	1552	1805	1727	1595
Rhenigidale	767	803	892	956	1178	1010	1035	919
TOTALS	4531	5199	6097	6044	6508	6746	6289	5609

The decline in the number of visitors in 2008 was, perhaps, caused by uncertain economic conditions, poor Summer weather in the Outer Hebrides, operational difficulties at Garenin and a two-month closure of Howmore for renovations. An upturn has certainly been evident during the first half of 2009.

From the Hebridean Hostellers Issue of Five Years Ago

'The more exciting route [to Garenin] is to take the **Pentland Road** and travel over terrain without a house in sight. The peat bogs, once extensively worked by local residents, and the ruins testify to former settlements. Even the access to Carloway itself is by a road-system based on the old workings of a mineral railway. The Pentland route itself may look formidable from the map, but it is a metalled road with plenty of passing places.' (Editor: John Humphries) *[Some old routes never fade away]*

and of Ten Years Ago

Well the secret is out. Uist has nearly a third more men than women and the figure is increasing. It appears that whilst the menfolk on the island have more than enough work to do with farming and fishing, the women are not happy having nothing more appealing to do than pack prawns or keep house. It is reported that most young women who grow up on Uist can't wait until they have saved up enough for the air fare to Glasgow to leave and find work there. In fact, it has been brought to the attention of the European Parliament which has given the island a '**love grant**' to try to improve the employment opportunities for women and induce them to stay. (Editor: Jim McFarlane) *[A case of Euro-Selections?]*

and Fifteen

'The National Bank of Scotland, now part of the Royal Bank, came up with the ideal solution: it took the bank to the weavers. A commodious Studebaker van left by our American allies was bought and converted into a **bank-on-wheels**. On Tuesday 5 November 1946, the mobile bank had barely left Stornoway when it encountered its very first customers. It was a success from then on.' (Editor: Richard Genner) *[Had they only continued to attract hard cash.]*

and Twenty

'A **new body**, the Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust, is now in existence managing the crofters' hostels. Is this just the onward march of bureaucracy or is it a step in the direction of more and better hostels in the Outer Hebrides? (Editor: Richard Genner) *[We are still there providing a service.]*

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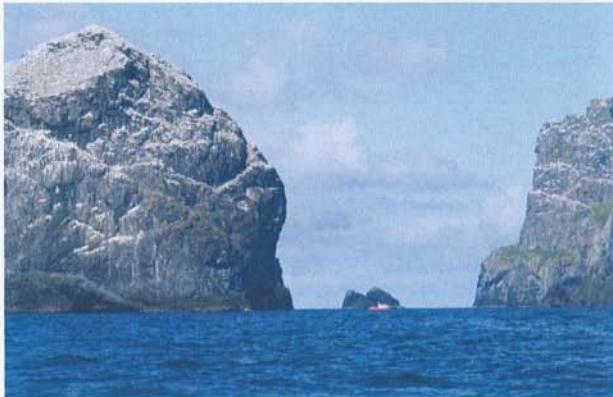
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Garenin	- Lewis
Rhenigidale	- North Harris
Berneray	- North Uist
Howmore	- South Uist



Protection and Promotion

Jo Burgess, the Editor of the *Crofters' Newsletter*, fulfilled a long-held ambition in May and visited the St Kilda Group. She was able to land on Hirta as well as take a close view of Boreray and the Stacks. Her photograph shows the latter uninhabitable rocks with the distant island from which its resident population was evacuated in 1930.



The World Heritage Site status conferred on these iconic islands has meant that their protection is of paramount importance. There has been some speculation recently about a commemorative and interpretation centre being founded somewhere relevant and accessible in the Western Isles. This would increase the current steady promotion of these islands that are a long way off-shore.

GAMA Award Winner



Laura Helyer, a St Andrews post-graduate student, has won funding from the Gatliff Trust and the Islands Book Trust for creative writing and academic research this Summer. She will be based at the Angus Macleod Archive at Kershader, staying at the Ravenspoint Hostel and visiting the Gatliff Hostels.

A synopsis of her work will be published at the end of this year and will direct readers to a print-on-demand book that she will produce. The life and times of **Angus Macleod** will be featured in a biographical poem, similar in context to Ruth Padel's recently acclaimed work about Charles Darwin.

Laura will also be analysing some of the changes he recorded. As she says, "Topics I would like to cover include waulking songs, crofting as a way of life, the Clearances, land reform and Gaelic psalm-singing, but I imagine once I am in the **islands and immersed** in the material there will be many more!"