

Hebridean Hostellers

Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust

www.gatliff.org.uk

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Gatliff Trustees and Volunteers at Howmore in September 2015

Meg Richards, Julian Paren, Frances Passey, John Joyce, Dave Matthews, Katherine Martin, John Humphries, Stuart Colley, Peter Clarke and Philip Lawson

Photograph by Miriam Langeveld

‘To Keep the Hostels in Good Heart’

When ten people - the Chairman of the Gatliff Trust and Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust, six fellow-trustees, housekeeper and two volunteers - met in the Outer Hebrides during early September, they had one aim. This was to help develop the three Gatliff Hostels – at Rhenigidale, Berneray and Howmore – and the ethos which they encapsulate.

Six of those present - the majority - had at least met the visionary founder of the hostels, Herbert Gatliff (1897 - 1977), and three knew him well. He was not a man easily forgotten, for he had a way with words, a way of getting things done and a way of enlisting both the assistance and commitment of others to the causes that meant so much to him.

Herbert Gatliff was born in Stafford, grew up in Shropshire and Herefordshire, educated at Rugby School and Balliol College, Oxford, and commissioned, albeit briefly during 1917, in the Coldstream Guards. He joined the Civil Service becoming an Assistant Secretary in the Treasury and, after the Second World War, an established figure in the new Ministry of Town and Country Planning.



Two words in the last sentence require examination. Although ‘established’ in one sense, he was not a member of the ‘Establishment’ - despite his education and chosen profession. His heart was in the ‘Country’ and, in particular, the ‘Outdoor Movement’ which flourished during the first half of the 20th Century. His work in developing the fledgling youth hostel organisation was crucial.

Youth hostelling became an integral part of British life from the beginning of the 1930s and within 20 years, despite the deprivations of war and the austerity which followed it, a network of hostels was created. The emphasis was on youth and on encouraging them to travel, reside and meet one another. The concepts were both romantic and practical.

Gatliff became an enthusiast for small hostels where he felt the aims of the movement were appreciated more fully. When he first went to the Western Isles, in 1947, he was immediately attracted by its environment. When he grew alarmed by trends, he urged the YHA (England & Wales) about ‘not going cosy’. His advice was unheeded and so he set about setting up simple hostels in the Hebrides.

He explored opportunities and commissioned individuals to gauge feasibility, find sites, enlist local people, construct and complete buildings so that the first hostels were running in his lifetime. Even during his years of decline in central London, he focused attention on an abiding passion, summed up in his own words, ‘to keep the hostels in good heart’. His successors endeavour to fulfil his wish.

Rhenigidale

The group of trustees and volunteers appropriately arrived first at Rhenigidale. It is the first hostel that Herbert Gatliff established, some 53 years ago, and the hostellers who used it in the early days were to begin the overnight-stay count. It has progressed - when all hostels are counted - to over 165,000. This marks a significant level of interest and indicates a serious contribution to the local economy.

A child of primary-school age looked out from a back garden when the ten of us were passing on our way to a business session at the Old Schoolhouse. She

exclaimed, "There are millions going by!" We were in fact preparing for the visits of just thousands expected in the next five years. Kate Langley, the warden, had previously toured the hostel discussing what she felt was needed.

Kate and her husband, Tim, were taken by the trustees to the Harris Hotel for an evening meal. They, like Herbert Gatliff, are 'incomers' who give much to the community. While staying in the village we had the pleasure of a visit by long-time resident, Kenny MacKay, who saw and assisted with the innovations of the hostel, the telephone, road and broadband.

Free-time inevitably led to walking with some taking the zig-zag stretch of the Postman's Path, well-used by Kenny in his era of collecting and delivering mail. Others headed in the direction of Loch Seaforth to Nostar and to the isolated Seaforth Cottage with its recent renovations. They have been aided by the restored and impressive metal ramp that resembles a sea-side roller-coaster.

A highlight was the unexpected arrival of a group (pictured above) from the Heb Hostel in Kenneth Street, Stornoway. They included some first-time visitors to the Western Isles who were bemused by the location of a settlement at the end of an arduous walk. Christine Mackinnon, the hostel owner, and her mother, Jean, originally from Raasay, were accustomed to such places.

Rhenigidale was assessed and future work will include rendering and painting, improvements to the toilet and shower, greater use of the outbuilding for storage and, possibly, bicycle provision. Advice and action from a volunteer with specific knowledge of land management and the control of plants would be much appreciated. It is hoped to include the hostel in events during next year's Harris Mountain Festival.



Photograph by Julian Paren

Berneray

The party of Gatliff trustees looked at the Berneray Hostel from the starboard side of the Sound of Harris ferry. Within minutes of landing they were there, appreciating why this sea-shore hostel attracts the highest number of visitors. It is something of a hub - at the middle division of the Outer Hebrides, at the end of one stage of the spinal bus route, with a location that is five-star.

There was a local and international mix of hostellers, including Andrew from South Harris; André, a Breton, living in Paris; Miriam, staying earlier at Rhenigidale, from the Netherlands. Her work in development and education took her to 18 countries throughout the world. They had been welcomed by Jackie Macleod, the warden, who was our guest for a meal at the Lochmaddy Hotel.

Gatliff business was interrupted by the arrival of a party of 16 students of art and design on further and higher education courses at Lews Castle College, University of the Highlands and Islands. They spent much of the day on the beach drawing and exploring the spectacular environment; some of the time using the hostel for refreshment breaks and briefings by their tutors - Anne, Dennis and Michelle.

When the time came for us to take a break, the destinations of individuals were somewhat identical - a part of the coast of the island. Its advantage is that segments are accessible so that walks can be undertaken in stages. The east beach, used by the students, is attractive while the west beach is stunning and considered to be an iconic Hebridean feature.

Coming back to reality, observations and surveys of the facilities led to conclusions that future work-projects should include a kitchen refit, a new or refurbished floor in the Common Room and improvement to the shower. This is the most exposed of our hostels to the outside elements and to the wear and tear of a constant stream of visitors.

On departing, André wished us 'Bon continuation!' It was an apt phrase for the resolve of the trustees is to continue the work and effectiveness of the GHHT. The future crossed remarkably with the past at this time, when a casual visitor to the hostel happened to meet Jackie and explained that, as a young man, he had worked in London as a civil servant with Herbert Gatliff. There's 'continuation' for you!



Photograph by Julian Paren

Howmore

Most of the party had read about the way in which John Joyce, the Gatliff's Project Manager, led a team that transformed the Howmore Hostel by creating space for a full-sized kitchen, dividing a large dormitory into three comfortable bunkrooms and installing a new shower, washing and toilet facilities. Now it was time for all to see and experience the changes for themselves.



Photograph by Julian Paren

The outing to the Borrodale Hotel with Betty (née MacSween) and Tommy MacDonald was by the Hebridean Transport Company's bus driven by the owner, Donnie, brother of Tommy. It served as a reminder of how two families in the village - the MacSweens and MacDonalds - first met Herbert Gatliff in the 1960s and helped him set up and maintain the hostel. Next year will be its 50th anniversary.

Visitors included Jim and John, two cyclists from the Coatbridge area. They represented an increasing number of hostellers who cycle the Hebridean spinal route and indicated why they return to these parts. This included the joy of landscape and a special solitude, together with the considerate behaviour of vehicle drivers. Only midges deterred them.

One of the business sessions in which Betty, the warden, was pointing out the state and potential of the facilities was briefly interrupted when a group passed on its way to the adjacent medieval, ruined priory. Once again we were reminded how each hostel has something above and beyond itself to recommend visitors not necessarily intending to stay overnight.

Free time led to individuals striking out in different directions. Some strolled to the machair; others strode towards Ben Mhor and Lochskipport; while those keen to access the internet were happy to drive to the Kildonan Museum, Craft Shop and Café. Smartphones came into their own at the hostel with stronger signals received there than at Rhenigidale and Howmore.

A future requirement of the hostel will be maintaining the roofing of its several buildings, which are directly exposed to the Atlantic winds. Howmore Church, a few yards away towards the sea, is protected by its white-harled exterior surface that is practical and enduring. Its tower is a landmark used by west coast fishermen. In the same way the hostel will be a significant destination for Hebridean Way travellers.



Photograph by Peter Clarke

Leaflets

Julian Paren has recently produced a new leaflet which features the hostels and welcomes new and returning hostellers. These will be made available in places of information, accommodation, transportation as well as venues for events. If you can assist in taking these to distribute or display, please contact the Editor via details on the back cover.

Another Community Buy-out?

Rhenigidale is situated in an area owned through a community buy-out since 2003 by the North Harris Trust. Its 800 residents and 124 crofts are in Tarbert, East and West Loch Tarbert, and along the shores of Loch Seaforth. Howmore, as most of South Uist, Benbecula and Eriskay, has been managed by Storas Uibhist (Gaelic for 'The store of wealth on Uist') since 2006. A prospective buy-out of the Bays of Harris Estate, which includes Berneray, may happen shortly if negotiations with its current owners, the Hitchcock family, are completed. The demographics of Harris are changing with there being 329 deaths and 99 births during the 2001 - 2009 period.

Fares Down

The Road Equivalent Tariff (RET) scheme will from this month be introduced on all CalMac crossings. So getting around the Outer Hebrides (on the Sounds of Barra and Harris services) will be at the same RET rate as getting there from the Mainland. This means an average reduction for passengers of 44% and for vehicles of 65%. Add to this the quietness and speed of the new MV *Loch Seaforth* and there is a good mix of business and pleasure to be had on these high seas with low rates.

Be Aware of Buses

There has been a change of operator on the spinal bus route from the ferry terminal on Eriskay to the hostel at Berneray. There was a time when bicycles and dogs could be carried, but these facilities are no longer available. It was always reassuring to see the sign on northbound buses of 'Berneray YH'. However, the Youth Hostel abbreviation has been dropped, although the destination is unchanged.

Upcoming Tenth Anniversary

The Elenydd Wilderness Hostels Trust was established in April 2006 and continues to maintain two former farmhouses as simple hostels, similar to those of the Gatliff cause. Dolgoch and Ty'n Cornel are situated in the Cambrian Mountains of Mid-Wales between Llanwrtyd Wells, Britain's smallest town, and Tregaron. Take your first steps to visit by clicking on www.elenydd-hostels.co.uk

From the *Hebridean Hostellers* Issue of Five Years Ago

Colin Stuart recalled a visit to the Gatliff hostel on **Scarp**: 'It was one of three or four really primitive turf-roofed houses, with an astonishing interior that was low, rough, dark and virtually windowless. It was like stepping back into an almost medieval life-style.' (Editor: John Humphries) [*Colin's account refers to a visit of 40 years ago previously*]



Anne Burgess - Geograph - Creative Commons Licence - writes: 'This was the Howmore Hostel in 1970. It was very basic, providing only shelter and bunks to sleep on. Cooking facilities were minimal. In those days one could take a car right to the very door. It's changed quite a bit since then.'

and of Ten Years Ago ...

'The life and work of the late **Arthur Meaby** will be commemorated and celebrated in two places later this year.

The AGM of the GHHT will be held at the Kildonan Museum on South Uist and attenders will remember Arthur when a seat is positioned at the nearby Howmore Hostel. Its inscription - 'For the Beauty of the Earth' - will recall his work.' (Editor: John Humphries) [*The seat remains positioned and is behind the trustees and volunteers on the front cover*]

and Fifteen

'The **GHHT website** is now up and running and can be found at www.gatliff.org.uk. Initial reaction has been very encouraging. The pages will be continually improved and updated over the coming months. Our thanks go to Hugh Lorimer for all the excellent work which he is putting into this particular project.' (Editor: Lawrence Washington) [*Into the realms of new technologies*]

and Twenty ...

'**Berneray** - Heaters have now 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!' (Editor: Jim McFarlane) [*Indeed, many stayed on accounting for high overnights*]

Twenty-five ...

'The road to **Rhenigidale** opened on 20 February 1990! It is undoubtedly due to Roddy MacInnes (Warden and owner of the Hostel from 1962 until his death in 1986) and Kenny Mackay, still resident in Rhenigidale, that the road was built. Let's hope that Rhenigidale enjoys and thrives on its new found access'. (Editor: Richard Genner) [*It does and Kenny remains a resident as well as a Gatliff enthusiast*]

... and now Thirty

'Are you thinking of running a marathon, swimming The Minch or doing a long-distance walk? If you are, would you get people to sponsor you for the Berneray Appeal?' (Editor: Peter Clarke) [*Some did and the Appeal prospered*]

Rhenigidale – North Harris
Berneray – North Uist
Howmore – South Uist



Appeal

The Project Manager, John Joyce, has every reason to be proud of the work that he and fellow-volunteers have undertaken and completed at the hostels, in general, and at Howmore, in particular. He will be heading north again to lead a work-party beginning on Monday 26 October. There is awareness of those who have gone 'missing in action' - by dropping off the lists either after, or even before, joining in. If you can see your way clear to giving of your time and talents at the end of this month and / or the beginning of next, please get in touch with John via his phone or email given below.

Dates

It's never too early to make a note of dates. Please consider the Gatliff Trust meeting at the St Pancras Hostel, London, from 10.00 on Saturday 24 October 2015. Dare it be suggested that seasonal shopping could also be incorporated into a weekend in the capital? The next GHHT meeting will be in Stirling on Saturday 12 March 2016 and so there's the opportunity for a long weekend in an historic part of Scotland. The AGMs of the Trusts are for the GT to be in Bristol on Saturday 23 April 2016 and the GHHT to be on Saturday 18 June 2016 at a venue to be announced..

**The Berneray Hostel will be closed for renovations for
three weeks from Monday 26 October 2015**