

Hebridean Hostellers

Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust

www.gatliff.org.uk

Newsletter 60

Autumn 2016



Berneray in Early September 2016

Photograph by Peter Clarke

50th Anniversary at Howmore

Peter Clarke writes: Saturday 10 September was a bright, but windy day. There had previously been a gale and so the weather was a relief. 35 guests, hostellers and trustees, celebrated the 50th Anniversary of the opening of the hostel at Howmore. They gave a very big thank you to our donors and supporters who had made the improvements to Howmore possible. £47,500 was raised and the work on the main hostel building and common room block is complete.

Back in the 1960s, Herbert Gatliff, our founder, stayed at Ben More House, Howmore, when he visited South Uist. At that time the hostel was a thatched-house on the common grazings occupied by an elderly lady. This was, in fact, Marie Ann MacDonald, described by Tommy MacDonald, local historian and Gaelic scholar (and husband of our warden, Betty), as 'a great Gaelic writer'.

After Mrs MacDonald died Herbert enquired of Mrs Catherine MacSween if it was possible for the empty building to become a hostel. This was ruled out as the house had been promised to another lady who, though living in Glasgow, was expected to return to South Uist.

Some time elapsed and Herbert received another letter from Mrs MacSween saying the house was available for use as a hostel on an informal and unofficial basis. Nothing could be put into writing because of the then strictures of crofting law. Consequently Herbert asked one of his protégés, Frank Martin (who at the time was 24 years of age) to write to Mrs MacSween to make all the practical arrangements.

Frank was already of renown within Hebridean hostelling circles as the man responsible for establishing the hostel on Scarp, opened in 1965 and closed in 1971 when the island was depopulated. He wrote on 17 January 1966 indicating, 'We intend to equip the house at Easter, and hope you will be able to help in several ways. The camp beds, blankets and the rest of the equipment will be sent to Howmore.' He then, in his thorough manner, went on to give a detailed inventory and the hostel opened as planned at Easter 1966, with Easter Sunday being on 10 April.

Since the hostel opened, it has recorded 44,426 overnights to the end of 2015 (25% of the total overnights at all hostels including those which have closed). Mrs MacSween became the warden and Betty MacDonald, her daughter, took over as warden when she retired.

We thank all who made it a very successful day: John Joyce for organising the event; Tommy for his perceptive historical talk; Betty for her delicious cakes, salads and special extras; Maclean's Bakery for the sandwiches; Betty and her daughters, Sarah and Trina, (and Tommy!) for their help in the kitchen.



*Iain Stephen Morrison, Editor of Am Pàipear, talking with Tommy MacDonald outside the Howmore Hostel
Photograph by Peter Clarke*

Maintenance Matters and Future Projects

John Joyce writes: There will be a work-party over the first two weeks of November to attend to jobs that have to be done at quieter times. Obviously some work requires particular skills, but some do not and can be undertaken by enthusiastic volunteers who are always welcome. So do come if you feel a mind to do so.

Work on the further building at Howmore will be part of a project that will take a number of years to come to fruition, but it will be necessary first to remove all the old wood panelling and strip out the inside in order that accurate measurements and assessments can be made. Preparations will be underway on an existing building to develop cycle-storage and drying-room facilities.

Rhenigidale will see the fitting of a new Morsø stove in the common room, the laying down of a concrete base for cycle storage, developing the camping pitches, gardening and clearing the site. At Berneray, paving and the outside requires ongoing attention. There is also always work to do inside if the weather is 'inclement'! Please contact me - with details on the back cover.

From One Treasurer to Another

Philip Lawson, MBE, is a retired headmaster whose aptitude for work has continued long since he left paid employment. At the Executive Committee's meeting at Kildonan, South Uist, in September, he was able to reflect that exactly ten years previously, in the same room, he had taken on the role of Treasurer of the GHHT. He had become actively engaged with the Gatliff organisation back in 1988.

For 21 years he held office with the SYHA, first as Chairman and then Honorary President. This led to his being President of the European Union Federation of Youth Hostel Associations and the Vice-President of the International Youth Hostel Federation. So from a global dimension he has given remarkable and much appreciated service to the minutiae of financial transactions on Scottish islands.

His successor, Stuart Colley, who lives in Salisbury, has been involved with the management of the Elenydd Wilderness Hostels in mid-Wales. Stuart has a degree in Astrophysics and has worked in Antarctica. So he brings wide geographical experience to the business of continuing to make the Trust viable, its reserves protected and as productive as possible in the current low-interest climate.

A Centenary Celebrated

We congratulate Len Clark, the author of the biography of Herbert Gatliff, on his 100th birthday, celebrated at his Surrey home. Len was a Chairman of the YHA, Vice-President of the Open Spaces Society, a member of the South Downs Conservation Board and an enthusiast for the work of the Gatliff Trust and its hostels.

Visions, Locations and Projection

Walking and cycling for leisure were activities that became increasingly popular in the late 19th Century. Many people were drawn to youth hostels when they appeared throughout Europe in the 1920s & '30s. They were inspired by such individuals as Herbert Gatliff, made their mark and became part of social history in encouraging ordinary people to travel, stay, enjoy and flourish in what was, to them, new environments.

The particular vision of Gatliff was to enable young people of limited means to experience different places and cultures. He first visited the Western Isles in 1947 and within 15 years had established the first of his hostels there. His gift of encouragement influenced many, including such stalwarts as Frank Martin, Arthur Meaby, Peter Clarke, Roger Clifton and John Joyce.

Local and distinctive customs throughout Britain appealed to the founder of the Gatliff hostels, although the Scots Gaelic traditions were a common thread in the places that he and others selected for their location. The community at Rhenigidale was, in many ways, symbolic as his first acquisition - for it was literally isolated, without road links to neighbouring settlements.

Howmore was a Protestant enclave on the Catholic island of South Uist. Scarp was just five years from being depopulated by way of year-round occupation. Claddach Baleshare, North Uist, another relatively short-lived hostel, was in an unusually flat and water-locked area. Berneray stood out on the shoreline while the former Garenin hostel was the first building to be restored in an abandoned village.

Another common thread is the sea, visible from each hostel whether still operating or closed. Rhenigidale has a nearby bay and decayed quay; Howmore has only the machair between it and the Atlantic Ocean; Berneray, on the Sound of Harris, is, perhaps, Britain's closest hostel to a beach, with the sound of lapping water being a constant feature.

Few places offering accommodation in Scotland are completely free of 'light pollution' - for installations and townships have a tendency to shine for a long distance at night. However, enthusiasts for 'dark skies' are generally pleased by what they do not see around the hostels, while those people who appreciate the long hours of daylight in the summer months are seldom disappointed.

A glance through the visitors' books will soon show the international appeal of the hostels. Naturally Canadians and New Zealanders, aware of their ancestry, often come. Of the Europeans, the Germans, Dutch and Scandinavians are among the more frequent to stay. It is often somewhat daunting to realise just how well-informed overseas guests can be.

In the accommodation business, there is a paradox. More expensive hotel rates usually offer for hostellers that 'discount' element, privacy. Less expensive ones often provide that 'premium' product, sociability. The atmosphere in the Gatliff hostels is usually convivial, with the different enthusiasms of individuals providing conversational connections that often lead to friendships.

Interests are wide - from wildlife observers to Gaelic-learners; kayakers to cyclists; 'islomaniacs' to 'Marilyn-baggers'; ornithologists to 'twitchers'; those in pursuit of relaxation to those wanting the challenges of endurance. Then there is the commitment of parents introducing their children to the pleasures of the islands. The age-ranges help the young to be more informed and the old to be more spirited.

A most useful aspect of the hostels is that they are all served by public transport. Buses pass the Howmore junction regularly with some displaying the 'Berneray YH' sign, and even Rhenigidale has a timetabled service, although the operator requires to be alerted the day before anticipated travel. So the car can be, with planning and timetable-reading skills, redundant.



*The old Croft House adjacent to the hostel is ready for restoration.
Photograph by Peter Clarke.*

The visions of the Gatliff trustees today may not be as widespread and intense as those of the hostelling pioneers in the early part of the last century, but they are preparing initiatives. The next projection concerns the recently-acquired The Old Croft House that is to become part of the Howmore complex of buildings. The night skies are certainly dark, but the future is bright.

Kenneth MacKay: Rhenigidale A Community's Fight for Survival

Acair 9780861524105 £12.00

Peter Clarke writes: Kenny MacKay will be familiar to many hostellers who have visited Rhenigidale. He is often around and about the village or dealing with his sheep somewhere on the hills. He also acts as hostel warden when Kate is away. For many years Kenny has worked to chronicle Rhenigidale's story - of a life or death struggle with powers unknown but with a happy ending. The road arrived in 1991 and the village has survived.

His book is a must for all hostellers who know and love our hostel. It delivers real insight into the village, which has been our host since 1962, and speaks volumes for the iron will of Kenny and the local folk who fight for the survival of their community. Acquiring the road was a vital factor.

The other day I was staying at the hostel and met David Bibby from Lancashire. He had first visited in 1989, when there was no road. He well remembers walking in along the Postman's Path and asked, "How did the road happen?" The book tells how first Roddy MacInnes, Kenny's uncle and the warden of the hostel until 1985, started the fight. When Roddy died in 1986, Kenny carried forward the campaign to its conclusion.

Roddy MacInnes owned the empty croft house and agreed to let Herbert Gatliff turn it into a youth hostel in 1962. Roddy always spent time with hostellers to tell them about the need for the road. Kenny himself acknowledges the role hostellers played in the village, "Plenty came and stayed all summer in those days. They, mainly students, helped to mend fences, were very useful and definitely made a difference." Rhenigidale has had hostellers from all over the world thus spreading the message far and wide.

As one comes into the village today in the bus or by car, it is difficult to realise how remote the village once was in its yesterdays. It was either a three-hour-or-so walk over the hills to Tarbert or a boat trip to Scalpay and from there by vehicle to Tarbert. The Postman's Path was its lifeline.

The key piece in the jigsaw was when the Schools Hebridean Society, founded by John Abbot in 1962, chose Rhenigidale because the hostel provided back-up. Needless to say, Herbert, via the Gatliff Trust, had given a third of the funding to launch the Society. John Hutchinson, who visited on SHS expeditions in 1967 and 1974, surveyed a route for a possible road or jeep track. This was via the valley to the north of Toddun and across to Maaruig. SHS received £100 from the Highlands & Islands Development Board to assist with costs.

It was possible to walk out this way and I recall doing so in 1978 when it was necessary to scramble to a path across a wooden bridge over the river and on to the village of Maaruig, already connected to the main road by a single-track road. 'Main Road' sounds grand, but it was not so long ago that the highway from Tarbert was single-track for many miles. Also there was not such a good bus service; the only alternative to the bus was thumbing a lift.

John Hutchinson, speaking at the launch of the book at the Harris Hotel in August 2016, recalled this work. He said that he was both surprised and pleased that when the road engineers at the local council (Comhairle Nan Eilean Siar) decided to go ahead with the project they not only chose his route, but were using his map!



Kenny MacKay at his book launch Photograph by Peter Clarke.

From the Hebridean Hostellers Issue of Five Years Ago ...

‘The Rhenigidale Hostel will be a focal point during the last full week of September. The North Harris Trust will be promoting its inaugural Isle of Harris Mountain Festival.’

(Editor: John Humphries) [*Both still going strong*]

and of Ten Years Ago ...

Many Gatliff visitors have special memories of their stay in the Outer Hebrides. A German couple, Olaf and Iris Keck, decided to make the places (Rhenigidale, Huishinish, Scarista and Garenin) become the venues for their wedding.’

(Editor: John Humphries) [*Beach-weddings are a feature in Scotland*]

and Fifteen ...

‘At the recent Members’ Forum in York it was suggested that maybe some members would be prepared to receive the Hebridean Hostellers newsletter by email rather than hard copy.’

(Editor: Lawrence Washington) [*The digital revolution had started*]

and Twenty ...

‘The Government has agreed to fund the shortfall of £2.36m of the £8.6m cost to build the causeway between North Uist and Berneray.’

(Editor: Jim McFarlane) [*Things turned out well*]

Twenty-five ...

‘New Hostels ... enquiries were directed to GHHT from southern South Uist, western North Uist and the Isle of Tiree, the latter offering an exciting expansion of Hebridean Hostels into the Inner Hebrides.’

(Editor: Richard Genner) [*No harm in visualising*]

... and now Thirty

‘The road has not reached Rhenigidale and looks unlikely to reach it in the near future. It is about half way there. The money has run out and the prospect for further funding looks bleak.’

(Editor: Peter Clarke) [*After pressure for extra cash, completion in four years!*]

Rhenigidale Overnights

In 1962, when the hostel opened, 161 bednights were recorded and the following year saw an increase to 240. The new decade opened with a slump to 101, but by 1978 a record 597 was listed. As the last stages of the road were being completed in 1989, there was a tally of only 118, but the 1991 figures surged to 1010 and in 1992, 20 years after the establishment of the hostel, came the significant total of 1234.

Rhenigidale – North Harris

Berneray – North Uist

Howmore – South Uist



Web Sensations

Thanks to the work of Julian Paren, the website www.gatliff.org.uk has audio-visual presentations, lasting around nine minutes each, of the three hostels. Alternatively you can access and download these acclaimed features on youtube by putting the words 'youtube on berneray / howmore / rhenigidale hostel' into a search engine. These are fine combinations of sights and sounds, deserve a large audience, just as the producer of them deserves our appreciation.

London Calling

Saturday 29 October 2016 at 10.30 will see coffee being served at the St Paul's YHA Hostel, Carter Lane, London EC4V 5AB. for those attending a Meeting of the Gatliff Trust. Visitors are certainly welcome to attend and to find out more of the work of an organisation devoted to furthering the interests of its founder.

Seasonal Appeal

There are always a number of hostellers who enjoy spending Christmas and the New Year at our hostels. Berneray has the greatest appeal with its coastal position, large kitchen and dining area as well as walks that are both scenic and flat. A factor this year will be that new overnight rates of £15 per adult and £10 per adult for camping will not apply until 1 January 2017. The Junior fee is held at £8.