

Hebridean Hostellers

Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust

www.gatliff.org.uk

Newsletter 61

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**The MV *Loch Portain* on the
Sound of Harris Service**

Photograph Courtesy of CalMac Ferries Ltd

From the Chairman

Peter Clarke writes: The recent wet and windy weather always makes me wish I was in the islands. There you can experience unadulterated maritime weather. All too often I find myself longing for these places. In the words of Hugh S Robertson in that wonderful island song, I will be *Westering home, and a song in the air, Light in the eye and it's goodbye to care. Laughter o' love and a welcoming there, Isle of my heart, my own one.*

The words refer to Islay, but they apply just as much to my feelings as I walk across the threshold of one of our hostels. I look forward to that walk along a deserted beach, either the wonderful curved beach just outside the door of Berneray hostel or along the miles of golden sand on the Atlantic shore of South Uist, a short walk from our Howmore hostel. I long for the silence and solitude of Loch Seaforth, just over the hill from Rhenigidale.

Thanks to the hostels we are all in the fortunate position of knowing that we can be in the islands whenever we can spare the time. The hostels are ready and waiting for us. The doors are always open, every day of the year. There is a warm welcome waiting, fuel for the fire and comfortable bed for the night. And long may we be able to visit Berneray, Howmore and Rhenigidale! This is the Trust's goal and with your help we will achieve it.

Numbers were up at all the hostels last year. Many cyclists are visiting as they make their way along the Hebridean Way Cycle Route. The opening of the associated walking route is promised for this Spring. We are looking to provide secure cycle-storage at all the hostels and welcome suggestions about how best we make cyclists aware of them.

We are looking forward to the AGM when we are back in Glasgow on Saturday 24 June. When the business is concluded, Zoe Herbert, the author of the report, *A Survey of Thatched Buildings in Scotland*, published recently by the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (Scotland), will speak. Berneray and Howmore hostels are among 221 significant buildings in Scotland currently classified as thatched.

Finally, Madeleine Bunting writes in her book, *Love of Country: A Hebridean Journey* (Granta), published last Autumn, 'In the Hebrides I appreciated many of the ways in which history is remembered and honoured, but two instances stand out. The Gatliff Trust runs three hostels in South Uist, Berneray and Harris. In all three I found a bed, a well-equipped kitchen a warm stove and an honesty box for the modest payment. All are old crofts beautifully restored in extraordinary places ... the other is Cleadale Crofting Museum, Isle of Eigg ... A share of the royalties go to both ... donations are welcome.' Thank you, Madeleine, for your wonderful endorsement and generosity.



Berneray, the third or eighth of the ten islands, according to the direction being travelled. Photograph by Julian Paren.

Maintain and Invite

On-going projects continue. A work-party at Howmore last November stripped out the interior of the Old Croft House that has been acquired. It was left to dry out, assisted a little by the bonfire of old wood to which local people were invited. It was the month for fireworks and these brought customary sparkle to the occasion. During March another group applied their skills to completing a concrete base at Rhenigidale in preparation for building a cycle-shed later in the year. This facility, together with creating a drying-room, will enable us to market ourselves as part of VisitScotland's 'Cyclists Welcome' scheme. If you feel able to help in this creative work, please accept our invitation and contact the Project Manager, John Joyce.

Cycling The Hebridean Way

The VisitScotland scheme mentioned above is particularly timely for the Western Isles where The Hebridean Way is now designed and signed as a route for cyclists. It has caught the imagination of many who view all, or part, of the 185 miles from Vatersay to the Butt of Lewis as a challenge. Janet Moss and Pete Martin, have called themselves 'The Offcomers', researched the island-chain, stayed at our hostels, and published *Cycling the Hebridean Way*.

For £14.00 they present a brilliantly-packaged book. It is sturdy, has spiral-bound covers which hold any of the 106 key pages with the all-important advice on places, supplies, services and accommodation en route as well as helpful and stimulating detours. The OS maps reassure that you are on the right track through the ten-island journey. Note the ISBN: 978-0-9956770-0-5 for your bookseller or go direct to www.theoffcomers.co.uk in order to acquire this cyclists' compendium and the first stages, the initial ones of preparation for a great ride, are complete!

£53 Million Generated

The GHHT is a member of the Outer Hebrides Tourism organisation and advertises on its website. Some £53 million per year in economic value is generated for the Western Isles and a thousand jobs are sustained through its 218,000 visitors who stay in 780 places of accommodation. This is an independent trade group that endeavours 'to develop, promote and sustain tourism'.

‘Landline’ and ‘Lifeline’

Robert Macfarlane’s first book, *Mountains of the Mind* (Penguin Random House), was published in 2003, followed by *The Wild Places* in 2007 (Penguin Random House). When preparing for his 2012 publication, *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot* (Hamish Hamilton), he wrote an item for the ‘The Walk File’ in the *Financial Times* and it focused on Rhenigidale. He drew readers’ attention to the settlement being established in the 1820s and to the Postman’s Path as being described as ‘the most beautiful path in Britain’, indicating that this was hard to refute.

He suggested that the path in question should have been regarded as a ‘landline’ (the means of communication) as well as a ‘lifeline’ (the means of survival). Earlier this year Paul Murton presented his series on BBC Two, *Grand Tours of the Scottish Islands*. It was both informative and pleasurable that the programme on Lewis and Harris gave good coverage to the ‘Path’ and to the efforts of Kenny MacKay who, for many years, was the ‘Postman’. His life, times and book were featured in the last edition of *Hebridean Hostellers*.



The Rhenigidale Hostel.
Photograph by Julian Paren.

Encounters of a Significant Kind

Soon there will be further reasons to celebrate the continued existence of Rhenigidale, a place which, in the usual pattern of human settlements, should have expired long ago. It is almost 200 years since some people evicted from the deer forests of North Harris set down roots there, in a relatively sheltered bay on locally-important seaways. When tracks for carts were converted to roads for vehicles, some 80 years later, the residents completely missed out. Little happened until 1965 when Herbert Gatliff established his first hostel there.

This brought total strangers into the village as visitors. One resident, in particular, realised that to survive it needed a phone (later an internet) link and a road. Kenny MacKay petitioned the authorities successfully and these taken-for-granted-facilities-elsewhere eventually arrived. Len Clark, now in his 101st year, published the biography, *Herbert Gatliff: An English Eccentric*, in 1995. Why not dip into it through the website - www.gatliff.org.uk - where an on-line version has been formatted for Kindles, tablets and smartphones – and then purchase a copy for £3.00 through the link to the publisher, Northampton Square?

Machair

Our Uist hostels at Howmore, in the South, and Berneray, in the North, attract visitors for many reasons. One of them is that here are places to stay that are close to that relatively-rare natural habitat, machair. It is a magnet for wildflower-enthusiasts and a paradise for birdwatchers and, at Howmore in particular, it goes on for miles. Those who are walking The Hebridean Way will see plenty of this terrain on the Atlantic shores of South Uist.

But what is machair? Mavis Gulliver explains: 'It is a Gaelic word for the flat land that lies above the shore. First adopted in the 1940s by naturalists, it is now a recognised scientific term. The beaches and dunes of the Hebrides are partly composed of mollusc shells broken down by wave action. Wind deposits this shell-rich sand beyond the dunes. It is one of the rarest habitats in Europe and occurs mainly in the Outer Hebrides.'

She and her husband, Richard, are experts on many wildlife topics. In an article in *Scottish Islands Explorer* magazine, she writes: 'At its summer best the machair is a miracle. All winter long it endures the worst of Hebridean weather. It lies dormant through gales when salt-laden winds tear across the Atlantic Ocean. Every loose blade of grass is stripped and yet more sand is added to a substrate that has its origins in the sea.

In wet winters, burns that run through the machair fill to overflowing. They gouge their way down to the bedrock and return sand to the sea in a headlong rush. At the landward end of the machair plain, the land becomes marshy or dotted with pools. It is then that birds flock in, winter visitors boosting the numbers of resident birds that feed on invertebrates.'



Adjacent to the potato patch on Barra, annual plants flower on land left fallow after last year's potato harvest. Photograph by Mavis Gulliver.



Near the scattered settlement of Peninerine on South Uist, Mavis Gulliver admires Long-headed poppies in fallow machair. Beyond the fence, sheep are grazing. Photograph by Richard Gulliver.

Changes in agricultural practices have led to a decline in the abundance of wildflowers in the machair. At one time this type of land was integral for the growing of crops and the grazing of animals. Crofters depend more on supermarkets for their supply of food and their livestock do not necessarily fertilise the surrounding land. The abundance of Alpine-style meadows is now not so evident in the Hebrides, but the phenomenon of the machair is worth seeing ... and where better to stay?

Shipping Services

To say that most users of the Gatliff Hostels depend on the services of CalMac Ferries Ltd is something of an understatement. However, it is easy to overlook what is on offer and how innovations are consistently being rolled out. Four things come to mind: the new *MV Loch Seaforth* on the Ullapool - Stornoway run; the shortest and least turbulent routes from Uig to Tarbert and Lochmaddy; the picturesque journey from Mallaig to Lochboisdale; the range of lower prices created by RET, the Road Equivalent Tariff, a Scottish Government initiative of a distance-based fare structure.

The Sound of Harris

Berneray has been occupied since the Bronze Age, and possibly earlier, but nothing happened in its evolution compared with the construction of the causeway to the rest of North Uist in 1999. New ferry terminals for large CalMac vessels replaced the one across the narrow strait to Newtonferry. It meant the end of the foot-passenger and supply-boat, the *Endeavour of Berneray*, operated by Neil and Domhnall Angie Macaskill.

The knowledge of these boatmen was impressive - for the Sound of Harris is a particularly difficult stretch of water. Complexities are caused by the confined sea of The Minch meeting the immense dimensions of the Atlantic Ocean. These were carefully recorded, with the differences between the 'neap' (with a small range between low and high water) and 'spring' tides (with a large range) calculated by Henry C Otter, Captain of HMS *Porcupine*, as late as 1858.

Navigational observance is vital, for CalMac's *MV Loch Portain* plies at nine nautical miles an hour and has to take a circuitous route involving 20 changes of course per sailing. This can be a delight for some passengers in giving them the opportunity to see approaching and receding islands from different angles. There are even some passengers who enjoy the challenge of reading timetables in which regular schedules are disrupted owing to tidal movements.

The causeway and establishment of a vehicular ferry service across the Sound of Harris meant that the Berneray hostel became a significant accommodation-provider on the new 'spinal' route through the Western Isles. As the ships pass the terrace of the hostel, they make older hostellers realise that this is no longer a backwater, but the main shipping route directly connecting the northern group of islands with the southern ones.



MV Loch Portain. Photograph by Julian Paren.

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

'The Gatliff Trust may be 50 years old, but it is young compared with one of its devotees from the earliest days. Robert Wickenden, who will be 100 years-old on 4 April 2012, had first met Herbert Gatliff in the 1930s.'

(Editor: John Humphries) [*Longevity all-round*]

and of Ten Years Ago ...

'St Andrew's Day 2006 brought both strong winds to South Uist and much celebrating. In a £4.5 million deal, a 92,000 acre estate, owned by a sporting syndicate was sold on that day to the islanders of South Uist, Eriskay and Benbecula. This includes the land on which the Howmore hostel stands.'

(Editor: John Humphries)

[*All for the price of a large house in central London*]



Howmore from Teampull Mor.

Photograph by Julian Paren.

and Fifteen ...

'It is with regret that I have recently advised the Committee of my need to seriously scale down my involvement with the Trust as I am currently going through the joys of setting up my own business, a micro-brewery, which is demanding massive amounts of my time and commitment.'

(Editor: Lawrence Washington) [*Lawrence's Purple Moose Brewery, Porthmadog, continues to go from strength to strength*]

and Twenty ...

'Neil Pinkett, one of our regular hostellers, has been commissioned by the Chairman to write a booklet of walks around and from the Rhenigidale hostel.'

(Editor: Jim McFarlane) [*This invaluable publication remains available*]

Twenty-five ...

'The short glimpse of the hostel (on the television programme, *A Prince Among Islands*) was excellent. After Prince Charles spent so long extolling the virtues of restoring thatched houses, it was good to catch a glimpse, without commentary, of the only two restored thatched houses on the island. I am proud that our Trust has given so many young people the chance to stay in the traditional thatched black-house and get to know Berneray.'

(Editor: Richard Genner) [*Roofs remain intact*]

... and Thirty

'The total number of overnight visitors to the hostels for 1986 was 1,754. This is an increase of 854 on the previous year. Howmore had the highest number in '86 with 516, of whom 100 came from Scotland, 243 from the rest of the UK and 173 from abroad.'

(Editor: Francesca Fraser Darling) [*That's 33.5% from overseas*]

Rhenigidale – North Harris

Berneray – North Uist

Howmore – South Uist



Pass It On

The website www.gatliff.org.uk has been upgraded and now stands out with an attractive prominence. It is also available on tablets and smartphones which provide ideal platforms for those on the move and, perhaps, heading towards the Western Isles. There are essentially four dimensions to the site - with the answering of basic questions about the use of, and charges at, the hostels; a visual and auditory introduction to each of Berneray, Howmore and Rhenigidale; background details about Herbert Gatliff and the organisations which continue to serve his vision; 50 brief aspects on each area served to whet the appetite and encourage visitors. As 'Hector' - the schoolmaster in Alan Bennett's *The History Boys* observed - "Pass it on!" As time goes by, these hostels become an established part of British heritage in which an enthusiastic Englishman, a pioneer in the hosteling movement, took an enterprising path to found and inspire a chain of simple hostels in the Scottish islands.

Go Metropolitan

One of the paradoxes of the Gatliff Hostels is that while they attract thousands of visitors to their relatively remote locations, the organisations behind them usually hold their Annual General Meetings at metropolitan venues. This is obviously because of good transport links. So individuals will be driving, rail-travelling or flying to this year's cities of choice. The Gatliff Trust will hold its meeting at the M-Shed in the City Docks, Bristol, on Saturday 8 April. Then the SYHA Glasgow Hostel will be the place for the Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust on Saturday 24 June. Why not make these weekends away for Bristol and Glasgow appeal to visitors and both venues are in attractive districts?