

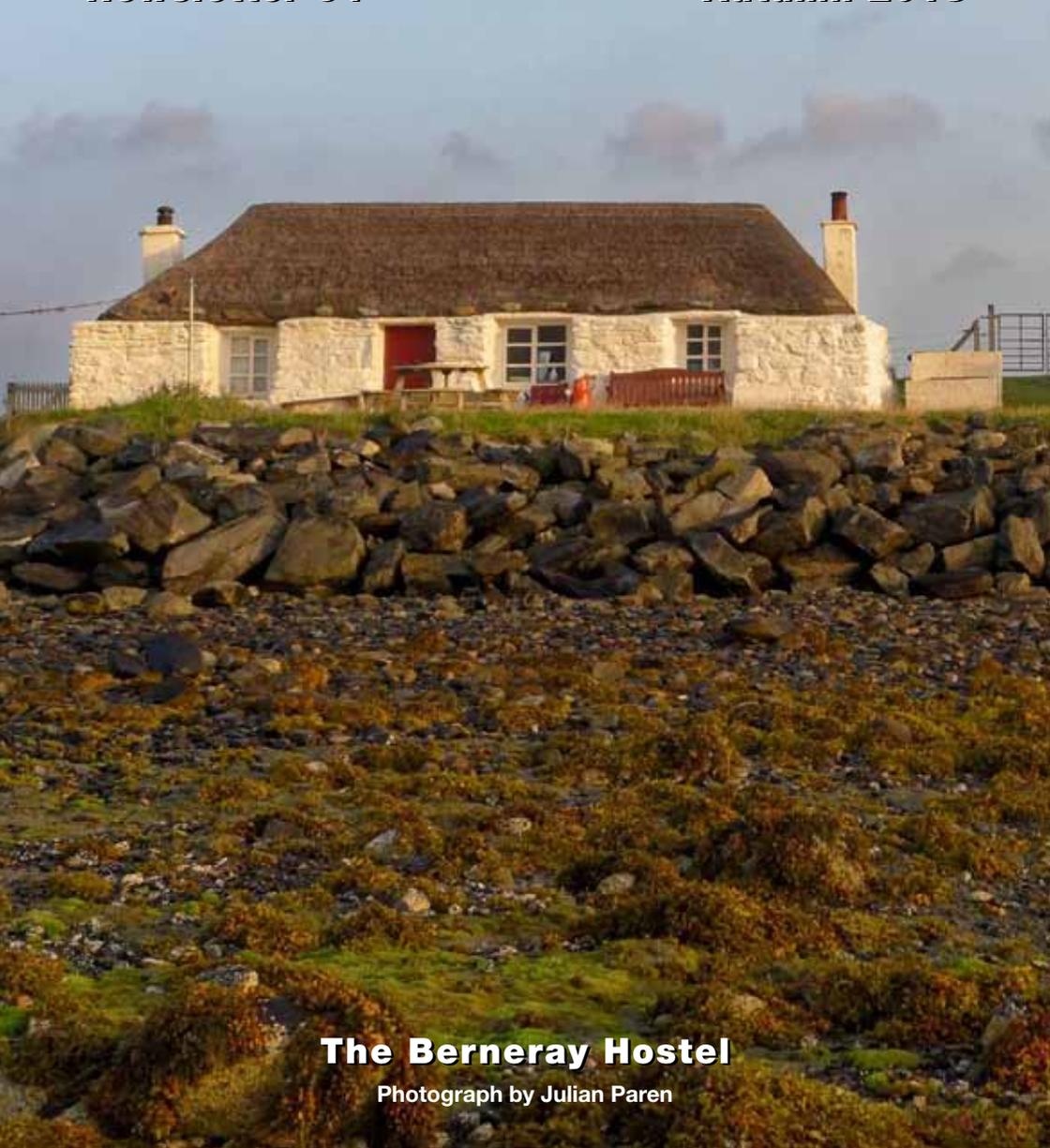
Hebridean Hostellers

Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust

www.gatliff.org.uk

Newsletter 64

Autumn 2018



The Berneray Hostel

Photograph by Julian Paren

From the Chairman

Peter Clarke, Chairman, writes: ‘Stay a while at the hostels. The islands in July and August were serene. Pleasant weather, some rain, but not the blistering heat of the South. I spent some time at Rhenigidale during this phase and did some gardening with Chloe and Hersila from London. Gardening amidst the gaunt beauty of Harris was blissful.

The 2017 Crofters’ Newsletter included a piece written by **Ros Evans** and **Pat Jacobs** of Edinburgh about flora in the grounds of Rhenigidale hostel, which is fortunate enough to be on a good sized plot. Ros and Pat found reeds (Phragmites) and sedges (Duncas), a young willow tree, fuchsia, contoneaster and elderflower.

There were also many attractive machair and the common flowering plants including tormentil, bog asphodel, self-heal, sorrel, silver leaf, knapweed, plantains, orchid and buttercup. Among the many tasks they suggested were cutting back the nettles and montbrecia with its short flowering season and **invasive tendencies.**

Staying at the hostel for a few days brought an **unexpected bounty.** I saw the comings and goings. Here was the village as it is; with the postman making his calls; the motorists who brought their cars down to the end of the road just for the drive; the delivery vans which turned for the next box to be ticked on their island routes.

I also met the thrush which had built a nest in the fuchsia (covered in lovely red and purple flowers at the time); the robin ever-present to pick out grubs from the newly-worked soil; and the jenny wren which interrupted its darting about to **observe proceedings.**

After a day in the open, especially with rain showers, the snug warmth of the hostel enveloped me with its warm stove, hot showers and well-equipped kitchen. Seven of us **shared** one night and eight the next, but on the first night there was only one other hosteller. The shared slow-cooked vegetable stew was delicious.’



Chloe takes a break on the Rhenigale Hostel Steps by Peter Clarke

‘Living the Dream’

The Summer of '18 provided perfect conditions for staying in the Gatliff hostels. The weather was balmy and breezy, which was perfect for humans and repellent for midges. The footfall of visitors was steady, but not incessant. People came and went. One seasoned hosteller referred to the experience as ‘Living the dream’ and his words kept being repeated.

What they emphasised was how significant human attributes - being convivial, informed and resourceful - were in evidence and how the structure of the hostels lend themselves to people being able to share effectively and mix comfortably. These conditions are to be cherished, held in esteem and experienced as though in a dream fulfilled.

It is little wonder that individuals over past decades have journeyed to the Outer Hebrides to enjoy Christmas and the New Year in the hostels. The words ‘balmy and breezy’ are likely to apply only to the festive atmosphere within the buildings, although even the exterior conditions can be ‘bracing and beneficial’. Consider the advantages of feeling at home when away plus the sensation of ‘living the dream’.



Loch Roag, the first major loch on the Howmore river system, South Uist.

Geograph image by Robert Fleetingly.

Responding and, Perhaps, Rethatching?

The art of volunteering is a fine one - for it shows that commitment to giving as well as sharing and it involves making a judgement about one’s own work/life balance. The main aspects are that the tasks involved should bring certain personal pleasures in themselves. The GHHT offers many people the chance to show, or even learn, the skills required.

The items that are most pressing concern the maintenance and refurbishment of the buildings that receive the brunt of visitor-use and elemental-forces. The former tends to occur in the summer months; the latter with winter weather. However, a new initiative has a particular allure - a proposed collaborative project with Historic Environment Scotland to re-thatch Berneray hostel.

John Joyce, our Project Manager, has been responsible for remarkable work in transforming Howmore, refurbishing Berneray and creating extra facilities at Rhenigidale. He needs help and will happily advise about the April 2019 work-party. Go to the back page for his details; plan ahead; picture yourself on the Hebridean shores, assisting in various ways to strengthen the hostels and their appeal.

Hooked on the Hebrides - Three

Julian Paren, former GHHT Secretary, writes: ‘On the Spring Solstice in 1964, I was watching the sun set due west while perched on the summit of Ruinsival on the Isle of Rhum. The sun set red and spectacular behind a very jagged horizon - the higher peaks of the southern part of the Outer Hebrides. This was my first sighting of the Outer Isles - and they fascinated me.

Spurred by this, in Easter 1965 I was able to ‘borrow’ a remote building at Kinlochresort at the head of Loch Resort on the west coast of Harris/Lewis. There is no road, and a postie walked over the moor three days a week with provisions and, sometimes, mail. This untamed no-mans-land appealed to me. Somehow Herbert Gatliff learned of my visit and I was invited to London to brief him on this destination for the adventurous.

So began my connection with the Gatliff Hostels. The decisive year was when I took my wife-to-be on our first holiday together, and we spent three weeks in the Hebrides, effortlessly moving from Gatliff Hostel to campsite to three-star hotels as the weather and spirit moved us. We extended our holiday to get a perfect day in a Barra fishing boat and rounded Barra Head and alarmingly penetrated the passageways behind Mingulay. We were hooked.



Machair by Julian Paren

Not that the Hebrides alone have satisfied the needs of a growing family. Colonsay in Argyll is the ultimate holiday destination for children of school age and we have visited possibly ten times. But for both a harsher and more demanding environment, as well as a laissez-faire idling-existence, the Hebrides with its fabulous sand, machair flowers and Atlantic rollers, together with untracked mountains, provide a combination that makes me happy whenever I hear mention of these isles.

Added joys are fish and chips on the CalMac ferries, the exciting zigzags of the Sound of Harris ferry, the sustainability and earthy colouring of Harris Tweed woven in garden sheds, the hidden anchorages away from the road network, stunning skies, the Gatliff hostels and so much else.’

To be Relished and Savoured

When Herbert Gatliff established or inspired his hostels in the Outer Hebrides, he saw them as ways of accessing places that, in his view, offered much to those with enquiring minds, spirited personalities and tendencies to venture. Thousands have participated in explorations, both physical and mental, which are readily available at the Gatliff hostels of destination.

However, before anyone embarks on a voyage of discovery, an introduction or recommendation provides assurance. A modern and discreet way of assessing prospective personal interest in a place is to bring up a presentation on-screen. This is possible within seconds by entering the words 'gatliff hostel videos' into a search-engine.



The Sound of Harris from the north shore of Berneray by Julian Paren

One unifying factor of the hostels is the sea. At Rhenigidale, kayaks could well be used to carry hostellers who like that form of transport. Howmore has the expanse of the Atlantic to be viewed within yards. A visitor to Berneray recalled that in the early 1980s the then passenger-only ferry, the *Endeavour of Berneray*, would make unscheduled stops at the hostel on its way through the Sound of Harris.

Involvement in various activities is appealing. One of them is walking - for though the hostels are all close to metalled roads, access to them has been comparatively recent. Rhenigidale has its own booklet on routes and ways to be enjoyed on foot. Berneray is situated on the rim of an island that can be strolled around or wandered across. Howmore is right on the Hebridean Way.

Observations of natural- and social-life are almost unavoidable. Birds, perhaps even an eagle, may be seen; machair is a shoreline feature; ecclesiastical buildings are there to be explored; blackhouses remain in existence; some settlements from the 19th Century are now in ruins; houses with technological and eco-friendly aspects have been introduced since the turn of the Millennium.

Convivial company and innovative catering make any hostel stay all the more stimulating. The range of personalities, the breadth of interests and the threads of information brought out in conversation are the essence of a stay. They mean that while activities in the vicinity are there to be relished, just 'hanging out' is a pastime to be savoured.

The fulfilment of the quest for the distinct, elusive and satisfying is always an achievement, particularly as 'travel' has become something of a retail commodity. How Herbert Gatliff would have rejoiced were he to have known 121 years after his birth, and 41 years after his death, that his contributions to social activities and human pleasures would be both continuing and much appreciated.

Grid Discovery

Humans love going places and, wherever possible, taking short cuts. In the late 19th Century, when universal literacy and the mass production of books became established features of British life, the phrase ‘armchair traveller’ could be applied. A hundred years later, the general availability of computers and new technologies provided new dynamics for getting around.

Soon after the start of this century, in March 2005, a charity was registered and people’s interests were aroused. Here was Geograph Britain and Ireland, a web-based project that displays freely-accessible, archive photographs of significant or typical vistas from each of the one kilometre square grids of the Ordnance Survey or Irish National Grid reference systems.

It sounds easy, but there are 331,957 such grids and it has taken some 13 years to file over five million photographs by 12,900 contributors who have covered over 97% of Great Britain and 40% of Ireland. That’s about 20 images per grid. This is certainly sufficient to encourage us to log in to www.geograph.org.uk and begin what could become a time-consuming interest.

The site can be looked at with or without registering and, probably, many first-timers will see how their home grid square is depicted. Then it’s time to venture further afield, perhaps explore more remote settlements with finger-tip control. Where better to go than the areas immediately around Rhenigidale, Berneray and Howmore? Sites and sights, previously unknown personally, will spring onto your screen.

The Rhenigidale hostel appears twice and there is a 26-year gap between the two images, with the 1986 shot by Julian Paren, whose work is frequently featured on the system. Skip along the coast to Molinginish and see the almost aerial view of the houses, pictured here, by another prolific contributor, Alan Reid. Drag the map to note the state of Kenny Mackay’s rusting tractor, now possibly decomposed, at Nostar.

Getting around Berneray is comparatively easy on foot, but this device enables you to pick and choose before setting off. The beach panoramas impress and the Chairstones inform about Viking folklore. With its many ecclesiastical and historical sites, Howmore has attracted photographers. Reaching out to Lochsklpport and Ushinish shows the less-travelled, but nearby, ways. All in all, becoming acquainted with Geograph leads to an extravaganza of locations.



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

'**Howmore's sense of community** may have suffered a recent blow with the closure of its petrol station and shop. Residents no longer walk along the roads to buy groceries and, consequently, a social hub has been lost.' (Editor: John Humphries) [*Long traditions continue, however*]

and of Ten Years Ago ...

'Catherine MacSween (1910 - 2008)

Howmore's first warden ... When she was born in Howmore, the second oldest of ten children, there was no metalled road through the village and the sight of only an occasional visitor.' (Editor: John Humphries) [*One lifetime; many changes*]

Fifteen ...

'Henke Munneke, from Western Isles Enterprise, has visited **Rhenigidale** to make a feasibility study into the possible use of renewable energy. Solar panels, a windmill and a water turbine were considered. It was felt that solar panels would be the least intrusive to the environment, but costing would be a key issue.' (Editor: John Humphries) [*Good to learn of a prospective supply of sunshine*]



Catherine MacSween by Helle Wiese of Ammersbeck, Germany

Twenty ...

'The **causeway to Berneray** has been completed - if this is good or bad for the island only time will tell. Tony Blair officially opened the new bridge in Scalpay. [He] has pledged to consider the possibility of a causeway to the island of Eriskay.' (Editor: Jim McFarlane) [*It was all happening towards the end of that decade*]

Twenty-five ...

'The closure of **Claddach Baleshare** leaves a gap in the hostel chain and we regret its passing, but Berneray and Garenin continue to weave their magic, reporting increased bednights.' (Editor: Richard Genner) [*Happy memories are aroused of this truly simple hostel and the good times it provided*]

... and Thirty

'During 1987 the **SYHA** offered our hostels 'adopted' status and inclusion in their 1988 Handbook. This offer was accepted as it will be a great aid to publicising the hostels.' (Editor: Peter Clarke) [*The publicity continues and is certainly of benefit*]

Rhenigidale – North Harris

Berneray – North Uist

Howmore – South Uist



Glasgow as the Pivot?

There's nothing like planning ahead for holidays to be both pleasurable and purposeful. So, why not consider having a Gatliff-style break in the Outer Hebrides during the high-summer of 2019 and using the date of the Gatliff AGM at the baronial-style Glasgow SYHA hostel on the edge of Kelvingrove Park as a pivot? Saturday 6 July (with accommodation booked for the night before) could be at the start or finish of your odyssey to the islands and our hostels.

Forward Planning for the Free-Spirited

There have been recent changes to the operating services of CalMac that could impact on the 2019 Spring and Summer sailings. It's worth checking and, perhaps, booking well ahead. However, as we are well aware, the booking of beds at the Gatliff hostels is not possible. So be prepared, if possible, to reach your destination a little earlier in the day than is customary at ordinary destinations. Securing a place at the extraordinary incurs a slightly different approach.

Seasonal Sentiments

It would be good to see the membership of the GHHT settle at well above the 300 mark. Why not consider giving a family-member or friend the gift of a year's subscription to the organisation? For £10 or more you would assist their belonging, possibly encourage them to take-a-break in the Outer Hebrides and relax, perhaps on the Berneray bench photographed here by Peter Clarke. Do tell him of your gifting intentions - for it will bring cheer as well as funds.

