

Car crash, missing leader, climbing accident, road charting... the SHS visits Harris

# Joining the daily life of the locals

In his second feature on his expeditions with the Schools Hebridean Society, NICK SMITH recounts his stay in the small hamlet of Reinigeadal on Harris, where the young visitors outnumbered the locals nearly three to one. Once again, it was to prove a memorable trip and one that would eventually make a lasting impression on the small community... by providing its first road.

In my first article of this series I wrote about my experience of visiting North Uist with the Schools' Hebridean Society (SHS) in 1972.

This was my first ever trip to the Outer Hebrides, or indeed Scotland. From my home in Kent, it was a long way away. A very memorable and exciting visit; it had given me an appetite for more such adventures.

The following year the expedition for my age group was to the island of Jura but as that doesn't fall within the remit of this journal I won't describe it here other than to say that it was just as exciting as my first trip and consequently I was equally keen to join the expedition to Harris in 1974.

With two previous trips under my belt I had a better idea of what to expect from the expedition, but it was difficult to get a real idea of the area where we would be camping.

We take it for granted now to simply type a destination into a search engine and bring up photos and information about it. That wasn't possible then, so armed only with the description below, sent out in a circular before departure I'd tried to imagine what it was going to be like.

*"The area of the site is typical of Harris scenery; very barren but beautiful. The rock is generally Archean Gneiss, a granular, grey rock with lines of granite and other intrusions and is overlain with peat of varying depth. The overall land picture is dry, contrasting with the bogs and innumerable lochs of Lewis and North Uist. Because of this, it will be relatively easy to get around, the only restriction on our movements being that we*

*must keep to the East of Tarbert - Stornoway road, except to climb Clisham."*

Our campsite was to be at the township of Reinigeadal (or Rhenigidale as it was written then). At the time it was a community of 12 people and was for a long time considered to be the most isolated community in the UK. There was no road leading to it, only a path that connected it to the Tarbert - Kyles Scalpay road; I will talk again of this path later.

As I described previously, each expedition was made up of approximately 30 boys and a number of 'officers' who had a range of skills, interests and hobbies including someone with some medical knowledge to act as expedition doctor.

Travelling from all parts of the country we converged on Inverness and then took the train to Kyle of Lochalsh where we crossed by ferry to Skye - there was no bridge then - and spent the night in Portree.

It was during the bus journey across Skye to Uig that Alan, the young medical student who was the expedition 'doctor', may have started to consider why he'd volunteered for this post. A bus in front of ours was involved in an accident with a car towing a caravan. The car overturned and skidded on its roof into a ditch. Everyone looked to Alan who quickly took control of the situation and after some time helped free and treat the three passengers trapped in the car; mercifully they were not seriously injured.

It would prove to be quite an eventful trip, especially for Alan!

When we arrived at Reinigeadal it was indeed



The campsite at Reinigidale, with Todun (528 m) in background.

Picture: Lawrence Hall

**'We will appreciate the remoteness even more as the various problems of living in such a location will be readily apparent. What is important is that we are venturing into the township and must be as unobtrusive as possible'**

both barren and beautiful as described in the circular. Several of us had travelled with all the tents and equipment in a fishing boat from Tarbert while others walked to the campsite. There was a lot of paraphernalia and supplies to unload and transport the few hundred yards to where we would be erecting the tents and marquee.

It surprises me now to think that it all got done so smoothly, with 30 adolescents involved (we were now in the 15 to 16 years age band) there was potential for it to all go horribly wrong.

This expedition was unusual for the SHS as explained by our leader, John Hutchison in his circular: - *"The fundamental difference between this and the other sites which we have used is that we will actually be living in the community, although one should not imagine that this will make the site seem any less isolated. We will appreciate the remoteness even*

*more as the various problems of living in such a location will be readily apparent. What is important is that we are venturing into the township and must be as unobtrusive as possible"*.

This turned out to be very prophetic as I will explain later.

One of the projects that John had planned was to try to survey a possible route for a Land Rover track to the township in as much detail as possible in the time available.

John was by profession a civil engineer and, at the time of the expedition, working on Skye. This project was high on his list of priorities because some sort of vehicular access had been sought by the township for about 40 years and this could give them a valuable start. Also it would give something back to the community who had been so welcoming to the SHS.

A route was successfully mapped and a report sent to the Highlands and Islands Development Board. In 1985 when funding became available with a grant from the European Union, a proper road was finally started using the route mapped out by John and the boys of the SHS.

The expedition to Reinigeadal had more than its fair share of setbacks.

The deputy leader, Duncan, failed to show up, which was both surprising and completely out of character, he being a seasoned SHS officer. Communications with the outside world were not easy but John managed to make a telephone call to Duncan's mother, who was equally surprised. As far as she knew Duncan was travelling to Harris after he had visited the remote island of Mingulay.

Herein lay the answer and, after a few days absence, Duncan finally arrived. During a spell of bad weather Duncan and his girlfriend had been marooned on Mingulay. In a story that made the national newspapers, the fishing boat due to pick them up from Mingulay was unable to set out, leaving them to hone their survival skills; supplementing their diminishing food supplies with whatever they could glean from the island, (from the report of the weather conditions, I don't think getting fresh water was an issue!).

As I alluded to earlier, Alan, the expedition medic



John Hutchison, expedition leader and road planner. Picture Ted Rose

(I'm not sure how far through his medical training he was at this stage), certainly got plenty of hands on experience during the trip. He had to assist in carrying villager Angus Campbell to the boat en-route to Stornoway hospital on a wild night, when he'd sustained quite a serious neck injury.

One of the lads had suspected appendicitis and needed checking out, but the most serious and traumatic incident was when the rock climbing instructor fell during a climb and was knocked unconscious.

Under Alan's guidance they transported him to Scalpay by boat to a waiting ambulance which took him to Stornoway and then by helicopter to hospital in Glasgow. I am pleased to report that he made a full recovery but it emphasised the leader's prophecy: "We will appreci-





The 'Officers' – Lawrence, Roger, John Hutchison, Duncan, and Alan (medic).

Picture: Ted Rose



The campsite with marquee and store tent and eight Icelandics (six-person tents).

Picture: Ted Rose



The fishing boat which delivered and collected the SHS team's equipment.

Picture: John Courtman

ate the remoteness even more as the various problems of living in such a location will be readily apparent".

These events did obviously affect the morale of everyone but, if anything, it also strengthened the friendships and unity of the group; we were all in this remote place together and we had to look out for one another.

Despite these setbacks, normal expedition life went on and there are many aspects I can still recall with pleasure.

I remember using the rubber dinghy with a friend to check our improvised lobster pot in the small bay near the campsite. We never caught anything – I suspect we knew we wouldn't, but it gave us an excuse to potter around the bay and generally 'mess about in boats' – what 15 year old lad wouldn't enjoy that?

One of the villagers took a group of us out in his rowing boat helping us to fish and having someone with local knowledge improved our fishing skills considerably. He knew exactly where to try, and showed us how to jig the line up and down to attract the fish to the hooks. Looking again now at the photograph of me with my catch, something odd has happened; the fish had definitely been much bigger when I related the story to my parents and friends on my return home!

**'We held a party for the villagers which seemed to be very successful and enjoyed by our guests. It must have been quite challenging for them, being only 12 in total at the time of our visit; they had opened their community to a group of strangers'**

Other memories are our bivouac on Scalpay, and visions of a concrete boat, which with hindsight seemed highly unlikely. However, a search of the internet shows there was (and probably still is) a concrete boat, deliberately scuttled to form a sort of pier.

Also, at Scalpay harbour, my friend asking a local "Is there much fishing here?". The local was incredulous, waving his arm at the harbour – "Can you nae see the bloody fleet lad?"

A look over his shoulder revealed a harbour full of fishing boats – no longer true unfortunately.

We had some great evening ceilidhs in the marquee; there were several musicians on the trip with an assortment of tin whistles, mouth organs and

guitars so we were well catered for with evening entertainment.

On our last night we held a party for the villagers which seemed to be very successful and enjoyed by our guests. It must have been quite challenging for them, being only 12 in total at the time of our visit; they had opened their community to a group of strangers who outnumbered them three to one.

The path mentioned earlier is one aspect of the trip for which I have less fond memories.

Measuring it now on a map I make it about 3½ miles from Reinigeadal to the road and then a further 2¼ miles to Tarbert, a round trip of approximately 11½ miles. This in itself is quite a reasonable walk, especially for someone like me who was a long way



The catch after the fishing trip with the islander. From left, 'Medic Alan', author Nick Smith and John Courtman.

Picture: John Courtman

short of my peak fitness at the start of the expedition.

However, add to this the climb from near sea level to about 850 feet on a zigzag route that quite literally took your breath away and you had a path that reduced most of us to gasping, jelly-legged wrecks. By the end I'd walked the path about four times and was finding it noticeably easier each time, but I still have the greatest

respect for the postman, Duncan MacInnes, who apparently completed the round trip four times a week.

Where possible we tried to assist the community.

Most people helped in the laying of a pipeline to the hostel, digging a hole for the septic tank, demolishing an old building which was to form a new byre, and cutting and drying peat.

We couldn't have been too bad as the community welcomed back the SHS on at least two more occasions.

I have many other recollections from my time in the Hebrides, these and other historical photos can be found on the website I set up to record the history of the SHS.

Please visit <http://www.schools-hebridean-society.co.uk/>