Comunn Eachdraidh Bheàrnaraigh **Berneray Historical Society**

Newsletter - December 2025

Cottage Season

The 2025 summer season at the Cottage was good, with 460 adult visitors. We opened at Easter and again from late May to late August.

However we were short of volunteers and we would welcome more. Our normal pattern is to be open for four hours each weekday with one volunteer covering 11am to 1pm and another covering 1pm to 3pm.

At its simplest being a volunteer involves being in the Cottage to give a friendly welcome to visitors.

From the entries in our Visitors Book, we can tell where about half our visitors come from. In 2025, 31% were from Scotland, 44% from England and Wales. There were visitors from eight European countries as well as from Australia, Canada and the USA.

The comments were, as always, a pleasure to read. Incidentally three comments were in Gaelic; one from a German visitor, one from a Swiss visitor and one from a child from Edinburgh.

Donations

Visitors donated a total of £431 in the Cottage during the 2025 season. In addition we received three larger donations amounting to £350.

Among the events we arranged this year there were three talks: George Geddes spoke about Pabbay and its links to Berneray and St. Kilda, Liam Crouse about the history of lobster fishing and Susanne Barding used lots of photos when recalling her visits to Berneray in the 1970s. Donations at these talks amounted to £373.

We are very grateful for all donations.

Website

Our website is
www.bernerayhistorical.com

You can find previous newsletters going back to 2018 on our website.

Dates for your diary:Seachdain na Gàidhlig

Berneray Historical Society is once again taking part in Seachdain na Gàidhlig, from **23 February to 1 March.** Look out for more information in the New Year about events taking place in Berneray.

Roderick MacKillop's recollections of Oidhche Challainn

With New Year fast approaching it's interesting to look at some recently published research which reminds us how the Berneray celebration of Oidhche Challainn (New Year's Eve) has changed over the years and what has remained the same. Prior to 1752 New Year's Day was celebrated in Britain on what is now 12 January but that changed with the adoption of the Gregorian Calendar, in use today. However, a few places, including Berneray, continue to celebrate the Old New Year's Eve on 11 January.

In recent times island boys and girls have visited houses in Berneray wearing disguises, chanting verses and being rewarded with sweets, other treats or money. The disguises have been a source of merriment and it has been an evening of fun for the children, enjoyed by the adults too.

However, celebrating Oidhche Challainn in Berneray was quite different in the early part of the twentieth century at least, as revealed in research recently published by Dr Emily Lyle* of the School of Scottish Studies at Edinburgh University. In 1977 Dr Lyle recorded the memories of Roderick MacKillop (1916-1999) of 11 Borve, a seaman who emigrated to Australia in 1947. His reminiscences show the significant changes between the Oidhche Challainn of his childhood in Berneray and the present day tradition.

Roddy, who was at Berneray School between 1922 and 1930, recalled that Oidhche Challainn was a major event in island life, looked forward to all year. School finished at 4pm and the island boys then met up in Borve or Ruisgarry and went round the houses in the dark, wearing their ordinary school clothes, carrying a pillowslip but not disguised in any way or wearing masks. According to Roddy, that came after his time. Only boys were involved in the house-visiting gangs. The boys shouted out their rhyme as they stood outside the houses and "You could hear it halfway round the island." The chant started like this:

Sinn a-nochd a' dol a Challainn	*Tonight we are going out for Hogmanay*
Dh'innse do mhnathan a' bhaile	*To tell the women of the village*
Gur e màireach Latha Nollaig	*That tomorrow is Christmas Day*

Some people invited the boys into their house, with home baking and tea provided; others just handed out something at the door. When the boys received something they chanted in Gaelic:

Guma fada beò sibh is ceò às ur taigh	*Long may you live and have smoke from your house*
'S nuair thig sinn an rathad	*And when we come this way*
Tadhailidh sinn a-staigh	*We will call in*

Comhairle Grant

The Historical Society receives an annual grant of £350 from the Comhairle nan Eilean Siar. We are most appreciative of this support.

Membership

Membership Numbers
Membership of Berneray Historical Society has grown steadily over the last few years and anyone interested in the history and life of Berneray is most welcome to join.

Subscriptions
Membership subscriptions are an important part of our income. Annual membership, open to over 16s, is £10 (£5 for additional adults at the same address).
Most members now pay their subscription by standing order.

Gift Aid

If you pay income tax, then completing a Gift Aid form is an extra benefit to the Society at no extra cost to you.
Payment can be by cash, cheque or standing order made out to Comunn Eachdraidh Bheàrnaraigh
sort code 80-05-60
account. 00108189

Membership, Standing Order and Gift Aid forms can be printed from our website.

Berneray Historical Society

Nurse's Cottage
Backhill
Berneray
Isle of North Uist
HS6 5BD

email info@bernerayhistorical.com

www.bernerayhistorical.com
SC047024

The whole chant was six verses long and Roddy's account of it was confirmed by Mary MacAskill (1920-2019) who was four years younger than Roddy and remembered the same six verses. Being a girl, she did not go round the houses but had learned the chant from "hearing it every year".

What the boys got varied, depending on how much a household had to spare. Money was most welcome, to spend later on lollies or sweets, but they also got butter and cakes. One woman gave them a cake box which turned out to be empty. Very annoying! The territories were sharply defined and only a few places, the manse and the Post Office, were visited by boys from both Borve and Ruisgarry. The minister was generous but the first group to get to the manse usually did best with more to put in the pillowcases. Visiting these houses turned into a keenly fought race between the lads from Borve and Ruisgarry reflecting the rivalry, even conflict, that existed between Borve and Ruisgarry at that time.

Roddy recalled that if you got nothing at a house, you didn't graciously accept your bad luck but you took your revenge with a curse including singing some very rude lines, even to the minister's wife:

"*An fheadhainn nach toir dhuinn a' Challainn*	*Those who won't give us the Hogmanay*
Sgriobadh an fheannag an tòn"	*May the crow scratch their backside.*

At this time, not all the island boys took part in the Oidhche Challainn house-visiting. Some people thought of it as begging rather than a custom that belonged to the community as a whole and so they would not let their sons take part. This too, marks a difference with the present day when Oidhche Challainn is enjoyed as an island celebration providing fun for children along with keeping alive remembrance of a time long ago before the Gregorian calendar changed the dates of the celebration of New Year.

Today, as the children are going in at the door they chant:

Tha sinne an nochd a' dol air Challainn,	*Tonight we are going on the Callainn*
Dh'innse do mhnathan a' bhaile,..... ..	*To tell the women of the village*
Gur e maireach latha Nollaig,	*That tomorrow is Christmas day.*
Daoine bochd a' dol a' dholaidh,	*The poor people are having a bad time.*
Freasdal silean beag bhuntàta,	*Little seed potatoes*
Is duilleag chàil air a dhroch phronnadh,	*Mashed with cabbage leaves.*
Gabhaidh sinn an t-aran gun an t-ìm,	*We will take bread without butter*
Gabhaidh sinn an t-ìm gun an t-aran,	*We will take butter without bread*
Gabhaidh sinn an càis leis fhein,	*We will take cheese by itself*
'S carson a reisd a bhiodh sinn falamh?	*Why then would we be hungry*

On leaving, the children chant:

Gu math fada beò sibh,	*We wish you a long life*
Is ceò as ur taigh,	*And smoke from your house*
Nuair a thig sinn an rathad,	*When we come along the road*
Taladh sinn a-staigh,	*We will visit*
Pàilteas bidhe is pàilteas aodaich,	*Plenty of food and plenty of clothes*
Is slàinte dhaoine gun robh agaibh.	*We wish you and yours good health*

There will be other, different recollections, and spellings, of Oidhche Challainn but Roddy's memories as recorded in 1977 provide interesting contrasts and similarities with the tradition today.

*With thanks to Dr Lyle for kindly giving permission to use her research "Boys' Chants at Oidhche Challainn on Berneray in the Outer Hebrides" published in Old Norse Studies Vol. 1 Folklore (Trivent Publishing 2025).