

Newsletter - May 2021

Nurse's Cottage

We hope to open the Nurse's Cottage to visitors on June 7th when Scotland is expected to move to Level 1.

Committee

Donald MacLean - Chair
Peigi MacKillop - Vice-Chair
Iris Steedman - Secretary
Donald McDiarmid - Treasurer
Mary McCormick - Minutes Secretary
Andrew Ross
Stuart McIntyre

Membership

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).

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. Please post to the Secretary, address overleaf, or hand in to Berneray Post Office on a Tuesday or Thursday during opening hours.

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.

We can claim £2.50 from HM Revenue and Customs making your membership worth £12.50. If enough people complete a Gift Aid form then the Society can claim 25% of the small donations made by visitors to the Cottage.

Do you know what this "spear" was for?

The Berneray Doctor – An Enigma

At the end of the 19th century medical provision in the Hebrides was very limited. One doctor covered all of North Uist and its islands, and this before the telephone and motor car. Doctors relied on payments by patients and most people were very poor so many doctors could not afford to take a holiday or even save for retirement. Nonetheless, from about 1890 to 1919 Berneray had a resident doctor, Dr Hotham George Christian.

Dr Hotham George Christian's early life

Hotham was born in 1856 in India where his father was an army officer. The Indian Mutiny broke out in 1857 and at one point his mother had to flee on foot with her baby and a house servant. The extreme violence of the mutiny and of the British reprisals may have led to the family's return home for by 1861 they were living in England.

At Edinburgh University Hotham qualified as a surgeon and in 1880 he joined the Royal Army Medical Corps. In the 1881 census he was on the troop ship Serapis travelling to India. However, aged 32, Hotham resigned his commission in 1888.



Serapis

Captain Archibald Paterson

Meanwhile on Berneray, Captain Archibald Paterson had come to live at 8 Ruisgarry, the croft at Baile which includes the Gunnery and the present day Gatliff Trust hostel. In the 1870s he demolished the historic old house of the MacLeods of Berneray and built a new house. Probably in the late 1880s, Captain Paterson and his wife Jessie were travelling when she became ill. She was successfully treated by Dr Christian, and Captain Paterson suggested that Hotham should come to work on Berneray. Without an Army career, was Hotham glad to take up this offer?

Why Berneray?

Berneray was far from an obvious choice for him. Of the 500 people on the island in 1891, Hotham was the only person without any Gaelic. At this time, the Highlands and Islands were not attractive places for a doctor to work. Some doctors chose to work in the Highlands out of idealism but many were "the rough of the medical profession" unable to find a better post. Was Hotham one of those?

Hotham came from a distinguished, no doubt wealthy, family. His grandfather was selected from Eton by the future King William IV, and sent to India where he rose to become a director of the East India Company and an advisor to the King. Hotham's father became Provost of Portobello, a JP and vice-chair of the local the Conservative Association.

Hotham was treated differently from his siblings in his father's will. Hotham's father died in 1914, and his estate was shared equally among his five children. Four received their share immediately but the trustees were directed to invest Hotham's share and pay as an 'elementary provision' the



It is locally made with a five and a half feet long wooden handle and a sharp iron blade.

Find out when the Cottage reopens.

Words from The Place Names of Berneray



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SC047024

annual interest to him 'at such times as they think proper'. Why was this?

Dr Christian on Berneray

By 1891, Dr Hotham George Christian was lodging at 8 Ruisgarry. Most people on Berneray had had no proper medical care before Hotham's arrival. Death certificates had been introduced in 1855 but in all the years before Hotham's arrival only three deaths were certified by a doctor.

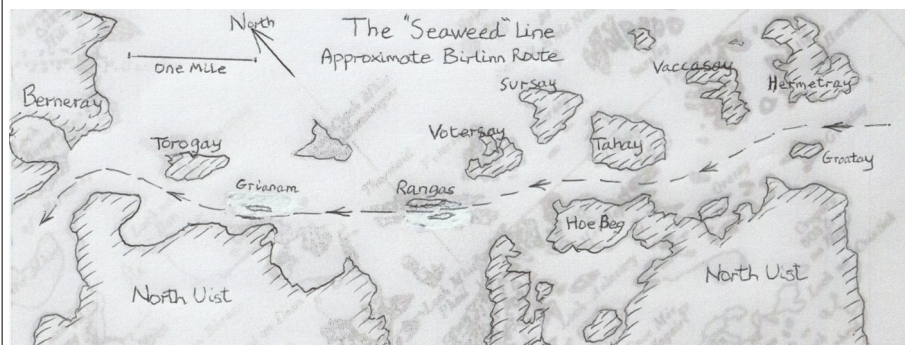
It's hard to tell at this distance if Hotham was a good, well-liked doctor. The picture seems mixed. In 1893, a child, George Christian Macleod, was named after him. Although it seems he was sober when seeing patients, Hotham certainly was, or became, a heavy drinker. He purchased whisky in Lochmaddy which may account for this reference: "Dr Christian is like a saint since long but he is away south today. But perhaps he'll go no further than Lochmaddy." In the 1911 census, he claims to speak Gaelic and English but a later comment says that he had "the unenviable distinction of being twenty years resident in the island of Berneray and not learning one word of Gaelic".

We are unlikely ever to know the full story of why Hotham chose to come to Berneray and remain here. We do know that he was the doctor on Berneray for nearly thirty years but being a doctor carried risks and Dr Hotham George Christian succumbed to tuberculosis in Berneray in 1919. He was buried in the Old Cemetery at Sandhill.



An Inconclusive Voyage

In 1736 a birlinn sailed from Skye to the Sound of Harris. On board were the chief of the MacLeods of Dunvegan and the chief of the MacDonalds of Sleat. Also on board was Donald MacLeod of Berneray, the Old Trojan. Their aim was to settle, once and for all, the boundary between the MacLeod lands of Harris and the MacDonald lands of Uist



While earlier disputes had concerned grazing rights, arguments now were about the seaweed that could be gathered on the shores of islands in the Sound of Harris. Disputes focused on the island of Grianam. If it could be reached on foot from North Uist it would belong to the MacDonalds.

The chiefs, used to a comfortable life in Edinburgh and London, informally agreed that it belonged to Harris but could scarcely believe how small the island was and joked of deciding the matter by mortal combat.

In fact the matter was far from settled.

More on this another time.