

Newsletter - November 2023

Cottage Season

There was a good summer season at the Cottage in 2023 with 511 visitors. This was well below the record 891 of 2018, but visitor numbers throughout the Uists seem to have been lower this year, perhaps because of the ferry problems or because people went abroad post-Covid

Despite fewer visitors in 2023, it's good to record that income from sales, £372, was similar to earlier years, apart from 2022 when Fading Footprints greatly increased our sales figures. Equally, income from visitor donations - £417 - was also maintained despite the lower visitor numbers.

Copies of Fading Footprints are still available and Murdo Turner's generosity in supplying them to us at no cost has benefited BHS by over £1000 so far.

Comhairle Grant

The Historical Society receives an annual grant of £350 from the Comhairle nan Eilean Siar. This makes a big difference and we are most appreciative.

Our visitors

About half of our visitors sign the Visitors Book and this season 44% came from England, 36% from Scotland and about 10% each from other English speaking countries and from the Continent. As usual it was very pleasing to read their positive comments about their visit.

A First

In recent years more and more children have been given island names such as Lewis, Iona, Skye and Harris. This year we welcomed a Cottage visitor, a young lady, whose first name was Berneray. Some research showed that she is the only person called Berneray born in Scotland in the last fifty years. She had no family connection to the island so why this choice of name? The very pleasing reason is that her parents met here!

Berneray's History and Heritage

Beàrnaraigh na Hearadh: 'Tis Fifty Years Since: A Study of Life in a Hebridean Island Community

Friday 29th September saw the launch of Susanne Barding's monumental book about Berneray in the 1970s with a very well attended ceilidh in Berneray Community Hall. Susanne herself was present, all the way from her home in the Faroe Islands. Published by The Islands Book Trust her book is an amazing work, sure to be of great interest to anyone with connections to Berneray and a remarkable bargain at £20 for 600 pages. Susanne's book is available at the Coral Box in Berneray.

More about Berneray from the 1921 Census

Occupations

There were 447 people in Berneray on 19th June 1921 but other Berneray people would have been working off island, perhaps at sea, in domestic work or in seasonal farm work. With two exceptions, everyone except pre-school children had an occupation listed.

There were 106 children described as scholars. There were 64 men involved in crofting, described as a farmer, crofter, farm worker, farm labourer, farm servant, agricultural labourer or herd. 11 were described as labourer or general labourer. 24 men were fishermen although five were retired and two were out of work. 121 women had home duties. 26, almost all women, were earning by working as wool spinners or hand loom weavers; one was described as a weaveress, one was a sock knitter and for two, the occupation was Harris Tweed Industries.

A range of other occupations was also represented. There were three teachers and a school cleaner, two ministers and a missionary, a District Nurse (employed by Berneray Nursing Association), a tailor and two dressmakers, a joiner and a stone mason, a groom, a sub postmistress and two letter carriers, two ferrymen, seven domestic servants, a housemaid, a civil servant, a junior student, four grocers or general merchants and eight seamen. The eight seamen were all unemployed. In Berneray there was a total of sixteen unemployed, all men. There was high unemployment in Britain in 1921 and widespread strikes caused the census to be postponed from April to June.

Interesting entries in the census

Neil Turner of "Fading Footprints" is in the 1921 census. He was a civil servant, staying with his uncle and aunt, Allan and Kate Effie MacLeod.

Mary Ann MacLeod, age 23, staying with her father Donald MacLeod and his wife Christina, has occupation "telephone operator, employer General Post Office". Berneray first had a telephone in 1947 so presumably Mary Ann was visiting her parents at the time of the census.

Membership

Membership Numbers

Membership of Berneray Historical Society has grown steadily over the last few years and continues to grow.

2017-18	34
2018-19	43
2019-20	49
2020-21	57
2021-22	61
2022-23	62

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).

Forty 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.

Please post completed forms to the Secretary, or hand in to Berneray Post Office during opening hours.

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It might seem surprising that two men named on the Berneray War Memorial appear in the 1921 census.

One, John MacMillan, aged 23, was staying with his widower father, sister, two brothers and an orphaned cousin. The outline of their house is on the east side of Loch Borge. The other is Donald MacLeod, aged 24, son of Donald and Kate MacLeod of Quay. However, both men were listed as "ex-soldier, pensioner" and presumably their deaths were in some way caused by their war service.

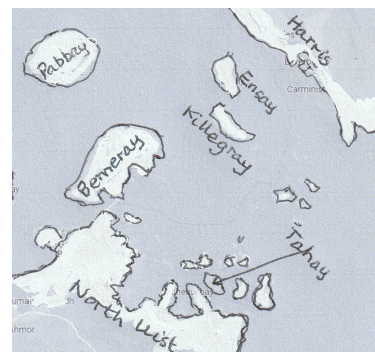
Cleared – and cleared again

The Berneray Historical Society archive contains much interesting material about the history of our island. A few years ago Pamela Chismon of South Australia sent us information about her Berneray ancestors. Her account, edited below, opens yet another window on the harsh reality of island life in the mid nineteenth century when potato crops failed, rents were higher than people could pay and landlords valued income from sheep above the welfare of tenants.

Donald MacLeod, born about 1803, was the eldest of the four sons of Norman and Anne MacLeod of Berneray. In the 1841 census, Donald, his wife Annie and their three sons Murdo, John and Malcolm were living in Pabbay. However from 1845 Pabbay was cleared for sheep. Donald, Annie and the family, now five children, moved to the uninhabited island of Tahay in the Sound of Harris. Tahay became home to about 36 people.

Pabbay had been fertile but Tahay was described as having "*no soil, only deep moss ill adapted for raising crops*". The challenges are not hard to imagine.

Tahay had one advantage. Its waters had "*great bodies of fish and caught in great numbers by the inhabitants*" so Donald and the others living on Tahay could make a living of sorts. However, only a few years later Tahay was also cleared.



Donald, Annie and son Murdo emigrated to Australia in 1855 on the Royal Albert and their other sons also went to Australia. Of Donald's three brothers, two also emigrated to Australia and the third is thought to have gone to Canada.

Life was not easy in Australia either. Pamela Chismon quotes another descendant, Roderick MacLeod:
"Today it is impossible to believe how primitive their lives were. There are not too many of us who would live in tents, in the walls of creeks, painstakingly constructing "homes" of stone and pug with no floors other than hard polished earth and cow-dung and without the most basic domestic facilities we take for granted. They did and in the main were happy. Even though little sign of their passing can be seen today, they made an enormous contribution to the early history of their portion of South Australia."

In the 1700s and early 1800s, before Donald MacLeod and his family lived on Tahay, the islands in the Sound of Harris were a valuable source of seaweed which was burned and the ash sold.

In more recent times Borge crofters used to take sheep to Tahay for the summer but no longer, and Tahay is now totally deserted.