

Summer expeditions to the Hebrides proved a treasured and life-changing experience

# From gentle Kent to the wilds of the isles



Enjoying the open space of the beach at Udal

For 27 years the Schools Hebridean Society ran expeditions for pupils. These trips were, for most, an unforgettable experience, building character and forging friendships. Here, NICK SMITH recalls his first adventure.

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**E**arly in 1972 I went to an illustrated talk by an older pupil at my school in Canterbury, Kent.

The talk was about an expedition to the Isle of Lewis with an organisation called the Schools Hebridean Society that he had been on the previous year.

Within a few minutes I was hooked, it looked amazing and I wanted to visit the Hebrides.

I was 13 years old and eligible to join one of the expeditions during the summer holidays, so I made sure I got hold of an application form that had been put out on the table. The Schools Hebridean Society (SHS) usually ran five expeditions a year, one for each of the different age groups, taking applicants from all over the country. The youngest group, 12-14 year olds, would be going on an 18-day trip to North Uist.

I wasted no time in persuading my parents I wanted to go and their exchange of letters with the designated leader reassured them I would be well looked after.

It was very exciting; I'd never holidayed without my parents and, in fact, had hardly ever left Kent so this was a real adventure and, although I wasn't leaving the UK, I was amazed to find it was about as far to North



Members of the 1972 Expedition to North Uist. The author, Nick Smith, is pictured in the front row, second from the end on the right, in orange top and light trousers.

Uist from my home as it was to Milan in northern Italy!

The southern contingent travelled by overnight train from London to Glasgow, picking up other members en-route, and then we continued on to Mallaig, where for me the real adventure began.

I'd never been on a ship before so the ferry trip was something I was really looking forward to. As an enthusiastic but not very knowledgeable bird watcher I spent my time on deck watching birds I'd only ever seen in books or on TV: razorbills and guillemots, shearwaters and gannets.

I was so enthralled I didn't realise just how rough the sea was, until darkness fell and I ventured into the hot, smoky interior of the saloon; I only lasted a few minutes before feeling decidedly sea-sick. I

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didn't have to suffer for long as we were soon approaching Lochboisdale. An overnight stay in the schoolhouse enabled everyone to recover before an early morning departure to the camp site at Eaval croft.

We had no concept of what to expect but to quote the leader of the expedition Roger Weatherly, in his trip report: "The site, at the foot of Ben Eaval, was the one

the Society used in 1970. It is very remote from roads and settlements – by far the most isolated ever used for a Junior expedition."

We soon found out how isolated; it was a hard slog across two or three miles of soggy peat bog from the end of the road to the croft.

Everyone carried their own backpacks but the bulk of the equipment had been ferried round by boat from

Baymore by Ewan Nicholson and his friends, who got a special mention in the leader's report.

When we arrived at the croft one of the first priorities was setting up the tents and marquees. I think it would be fair to say at this point many of us were wondering why we'd been so foolish to think visiting the Hebrides had been such a good idea.

It was of course the weariness of three days travelling and the trudge across the moors that had sapped our spirits; the following morning, exploring our new surroundings quickly washed away our reservations.

Thirty boys and nine adult supervisors – (known as 'officers' for want of a suitable label, but apart from their role in taking responsibility for the safe and smooth

running of the venture, no military overtones existed) – made up the expedition.

There was no set agenda, apart from a rota on a tent by tent basis to carry out the domestic duties – cooking, washing up, water collection etc, and with six boys to a tent, and one officer allocated to each, this was every five days, leaving the rest of the time to follow your own interests.

The range of activities available was varied, with appropriate equipment and, where necessary, training provided.

These included rock-climbing, canoeing, sailing, fishing, bird watching and, of course, hiking, in fact the latter was usually a requirement for some of the former!

There was encouragement to carry out some sort of project work which added





Rock climbing on Eaval.

interest and also provided good material for the annual report.

Some ideas had been devised and proposed by the officers and others by the boys if some aspect of the trip inspired them. Typical projects would be based on things like archaeological, geological or hydrographical surveys, ornithological recording, taking meteorological or tidal measurements etc.

As I write the list I am looking through some of those annual reports and realise the range of project choices is too long to list here.

The previous paragraph sets out the scope of the trips but what is harder to put into words is the profound influence these expeditions had on many of us.

The wild and wide open spaces, self-reliance and camaraderie soon forged these groups of largely disparate strangers into a community where we looked out for each other and long-term friendships developed.

A good number of us went on to further expeditions over the following years and many became officers in their own right.

I still have many fond memories of the SHS and that first expedition...-

My first trip up Eaval,

**‘Three of us in canoes followed the coast out towards the tiny island of Floaigh Beag. The feeling of freedom was incredible! There was no other person or boat anywhere to be seen and we had a large loch to explore – fantastic.**

at 347 metres, was the highest I'd ever been; there's nothing that can claim to be a mountain in Kent. Looking out over a landscape of lochs and lochans and watching a column of rain moved slowly towards us. We waited until it was close before putting on our cagoules, hunkered down during the downpour then removed them a few minutes later when the rain had passed.

The vast empty beaches along the west coast, the fine white sand and egg-like quartz pebbles found on the shore (I have no idea where I discovered it, but if you grind two quartz pebbles together they emit light, a process I later found out was called triboluminescence). I took some pebbles home with me and still have them to this day, 45 years later!

It was on this beach we spotted a washed-up canoe in the distance. When we reached it, we found the paddles and life vests neatly stowed inside and a trail of footprints leading away; it hadn't been washed up but simply left safe above the receding tide. A little disappointed we'd not obtained an addition to the SHS fleet, we left it alone and continued our walk with a much greater appreciation of the trustfulness of this island community. The owners reappeared a bit later to continue their journey, blissfully unaware their canoe had nearly been carried off!

A final memory for this article at least – three of us in canoes (one of these being an officer I might add) followed the coast out towards the

tiny island of Floaigh Beag. The feeling of freedom was incredible!

There was no other person or boat anywhere to be seen and we had a large loch to explore – fantastic. Then the mixture of terror and excitement I'd felt when I had been told that someone on a previous expedition had seen a whale shark below them in the water.

I got many things out of this expedition, I'd never canoed, rock-climbed or even slept under canvas before; I certainly returned home fitter, and more confident in myself. I'd made new friends and learned a great deal about a world far beyond my previous horizons.

One overriding thing I was sure of though; I wanted to return to the Hebrides.

I did in fact return.

I went on four more expeditions with the SHS, two of which were to the Outer Isles, and as a young adult revisited them with a friend in his camper van. Almost 30 years after my first trip, I took my wife and children to Islay and Jura in the Inner Hebrides for their very first experience of Scottish island life.

And I will return again one day soon I hope.

Beach at Udal. Photo:- Mark Rayne



The SHS expedition tents at Eaval cottage.



a Fishing trip on Loch Obisary using the Estate's boat.



Waiting for supplies at Eaval.

## Safety first but nurturing the spirit of adventure...

The SHS ran its first expedition in 1962 and by my calculations went on to run another 123 expeditions until it finally closed in 1989.

About half of the residual funds were gifted to the Gatliff Trust, an organisation which had made a donation to help the SHS in its early years.

The causes of its demise were many-fold, with falling membership and difficulty in finding people prepared to run such ventures, it was unsustainable.

The lure of cheaper holidays to warmer climes, and the increased concern for the safety and well-

being of the participants contributed, I'm sure.

Safety had been taken very seriously; you were not allowed to leave camp without filing a route plan, list of participants and estimated time of return. You had to take a first-aid kit and emergency rations, an OS map and compass.

Appropriate safety equipment had to be used for the higher risk pursuits like canoeing, sailing rock-climbing etc. But after all of that, the great attraction was the isolation, ruggedness and spirit of adventure; these do not sit comfortably with today's understandable aversion to risk-taking.