

The National Huts

The third and final National Hut in Scotland managed for walkers and climbers is situated in stunning Glen Brittle on the Isle of Skye

Part 3 - Glen Brittle Memorial Hut

By John Foster and Ruth Payne

Photos: Bill Poole

History

Like the Alex MacIntyre Memorial Hut and Mill Cottage, GBMH is a memorial, but is unique in that it was built as a War Memorial to mountaineers who died in the Second World War.

It was clear by the late 1940s that climbers felt some form of memorial to their comrades, who had not returned to the hills, was needed, and donations from individuals and climbing clubs were collected, but without any clear idea of the type of memorial that would be appropriate. In the early 1950s a group of climbers which was considering the possibilities thought of shelters for refuge in remote mountain areas; eventually the idea of a national hut for climbers of all clubs arose, and Glenbrittle was suggested as a suitable base for activities in the Cuillin of Skye, now that more leisure and independent transport facilitated travel to the area.

In 1955 the MacLeod Estate agreed in principle to the construction of a hut, and by consent of the farmers in the Glen, the location and size of GBMH was agreed, so design could begin. Once this stage had been reached, it was clear that the original post war donations to the memorial fund would be inadequate, and more funding was needed.

The prime mover was Harry Spilsbury, who had been a Prisoner of War in the First World War, and he convened a committee in October 1952 to consider the whole question of the memorial to climbers. His own memorial in the hut specifies him as one "without whose inspired work this hut would not have been built", and he was active in its management until his death on Beinn Alligin in 1970.

A new appeal for funds was launched in early 1959, via the national press and to climbing clubs and groups; by March 1960 over £4,000 had been gathered and an architect, Mr A Medlycott (himself a climber, who gave his services without fee) was appointed.

By autumn 1962 tenders for the building were being considered; as all exceeded the funding available a further appeal was launched, and by December 1963 the fund was close to the £8,000 needed; a start to the construction was authorised in late 1964 with a proposed completion date by April 1965.

Much of the interior finishing was done by Harry Spilsbury himself, while many materials were donated by well-wishers. Volunteers also helped Harry, including a young student, Bill Poole, who wardened the hut in 1965 and still 'helps out' on the practicalities today! All was ready for a grand and official opening by Dame Flora MacLeod of MacLeod on

The tablet at the door is the dedication of the hut:
GLEN BRITTLE MEMORIAL HUT
1935-1945

This hut is built in memory of those who found strength in the hills to sustain them even unto death

Saturday 5th June 1965.

There was much debate on the charges to be made to users; finally 5/- per person, per night was agreed. The objective has remained to charge a fee which covers the running costs and allows a modest surplus to accumulate for repairs needed in the future.

Thanks to the continuation of volunteers working at the hut as wardens and



committee, a sizeable surplus did accumulate, in excess of immediate needs. On the basis of this the BMC and MCoF asked if a loan could be made to enable a hut at Onich be established. This then became the Alex MacIntyre Memorial Hut (AMMH). This was agreed in 1983, as was a further loan from the GBMH Trust to help with the necessary structural works to AMMH. Subsequently legal arrangements were made such that this £20,000 loan was repaid and then made a gift to enable AMMH to build further quality; it is good to see that our 'offspring' is flourishing!

Facilities

Since its original construction GBMH has been improved by adding double glazing, re-equipping the kitchen and improving both the insulation and fire safety of the roof and ceilings; most recently the 'midgie' has been banned from the hut by screens at bedroom, kitchen and sitting area windows, and showers have been safer and easier to use, as have the upper bunks.

The hut is located at NG412216, an ideal spot for access to the south end of the

Cuillin – on a clear day the view of the Ridge, Coire na Banachdich and Corie Lagan is superb, but there is no view in the mist!

Accommodation includes three bedrooms, each with bunk beds, although there are two single floor-based beds. Two mobile beds bring the maximum capacity to 20, this being necessary for Health and Safety, and for insurance purposes. There is an excellent drying room (very necessary on Skye) and showers and toilets for men and women. The kitchen is well-equipped and spacious, next to a large dining room and food storage space (including larder fridges); there is also a small lounge area with stove (soon to be replaced with a more efficient model) and space for changing gear in the entrance hall.

The hut is all-electric, and we have a water supply from a nearby stream, which is UV treated. 2008 has been a difficult year for the plumbing, as both severe spates and severe drought have impaired

In Memory of John Foster

Just after being involved in writing this National Hut article with Ruth Payne, sadly, John Foster passed away. Sandra Winter looks back at John's tireless volunteering work with the hut



Photo: Sandra Winter

The Glen Brittle Hut Committee, L to R: Mrs MacRae (custodian), Bill Wallace and wife, John Foster and Ruth Payne

the water supply. Both Wardens and Hut visitors have needed 'adaptability' to economise on water usage.

Being an 'old' building for mountaineers, access is not very easy for those of limited mobility, but the public areas on the ground floor need only one small step! The usual minimum age for visitors is 16 years.

The Hut has an invaluable asset in the MacRae family of Glenbrittle. For the last 50 years they have taken a kindly interest, held the keys for visitors and wardens, kept an eye, and often helped with water supply and other practical difficulties. They all deserve a public 'thank you'.

Booking the Hut

Occupancy is well over 50% from March to October, and during that period there is a resident volunteer warden; due to its remoteness winter use is limited to 10%.

Use of the hut is available to members of the BMC, MCofS

and recognised climbing clubs throughout the world; the visitors book records Lord Hunt (as BMC President and a Trustee) in 1966, as well as Alpine Clubs of other nations and individuals from as far away as New Zealand.

Bookings are accepted to a maximum of one year ahead of the visit by our Booking Secretary – details can be found on the website. If space is available and a warden is in residence, 'casuals' get a welcome too – as long as they can present an appropriate membership card.



John's funeral and cremation took place on Monday January 19th 2009 at St Helens. John had battled against kidney disease for many years, enduring dialysis and a transplant.

I first met John in the mid-seventies when I lived in The Lakes and he was a member of the Achille Ratti Climbing Club. His Catholic faith was a very important part of his life. He was Warden at Tyn Twr, their Hut in Bethesda, North Wales. He also had connections with the Glen Brittle Memorial Hut and when he became Chairman there, asked me to warden.

John was a proud and idiosyncratic Lancastrian. He was in the RAF for many years, based at RAF Valley, North Wales. He became a lecturer at a further education college and married Joyce; together they spent every available moment along with their sons, Mike and Keith, in mountain areas. For many years they camped at Glen Brittle but then purchased a croft at Sconser.

John was chairman of the Glen Brittle Memorial Hut from 1983-2005. He was also involved for many years with the MacIntyre Hut wardening annually during the month of February. He gave generously of his time and skills to all the Huts he was connected with.

Management committee meetings chaired by John could be lengthy affairs... John had strong views on certain matters and expressed them robustly and at length. He was particularly adamant about hut fees at Glen Brittle staying as low as possible. Where else in the world can you have an overnight stay in such a grand setting and for only £5 a night?

John was a good climber who loved being in the hills. His attitude was that they were to be savoured, appreciated and respected, not bagged or ticked off to achieve a record. He was of the old school; no trendy new gear. "Make do and mend" was his philosophy and many of us will remember with a smile evidence of this.

A fitting tribute to him is the fact that he is remembered by many in the mountain areas that he loved so much: North Wales, The Lakes and Skye. RIP.