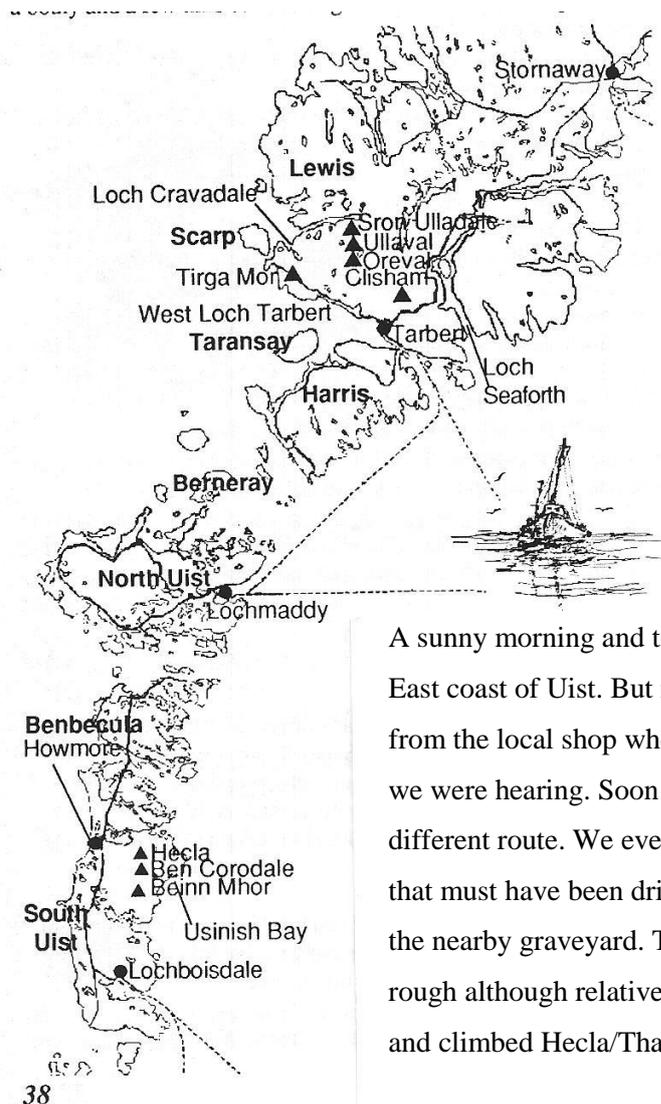


A Week in May (Frazer Hamilton, PHC Journal 1993)

Robert, Stephen, Billy and I, for the past few years have had a weeks backpacking in sunny and midge free May. This year we had our sights set on Uist and Harris. An opportunity to explore a new bit of Scotland and an excuse to add to our collection of maps. Some camping, a bothy and a few hills culminating with Clisham was the plan.

We left on a Friday on the 8:00am bus from Buchanan Street station, had a fish supper for lunch in Oban and at 3:pm sailed for Lochboisdale in South Uist. The weather was perfect and the sail up the sound of Mull, past Ardnamurchan Point, the isles of Rum, Eigg, Muck and Canna was magnificent. No sea-sickness! Was the sea calm, or could it be that the pills I sell for a living actually work? Five hours later we were on a somewhat dilapidated bus belonging to Hebridean Coaches heading for the Gatliff hostel at Howmore. It was a slow journey. Twelve people in twelve seats, with twelve large rucksacks. Stephen said the driver never got out of third gear. I was greatly impressed with the bus fascia, a mess of wires with the few remaining controls labelled with white paint.



Howmore is a picturesque, whitewashed, thatched building with two small rooms and a porch containing a sink and toilet. It only has eight beds, so we camped outside on the Machair and let the students, who had been with us on the bus, sleep in the hostel. They were heading for Berneray to plant marram grass, possibly to protect the royal potatoes. (*Planted by Prince Charles. Ed.*)

A sunny morning and today we were heading for Usinis bothy on the East coast of Uist. But not before we loaded up with a few luxuries from the local shop where we made the mistake of mentioning where we were heading. Soon half a dozen people were all suggesting a different route. We even heard about the dead shepherd and ghosts that must have been drifting through our tents during the night from the nearby graveyard. There was no path to follow and the going was rough although relatively dry. After some 7km we dumped our sacks and climbed Hecla/Thacla (606m). The views were spectacular.

We were surrounded by the sea. To the south was Barra, to the east the Cuillins of Rum and Skye, north we looked over the strange loch covered landscape of Uist and Benbecula toward the hills of Harris. Forty miles out into the Atlantic we could clearly see the stacks of St Kilda.

This bothy is nicely situated, overlooking Usinis Bay but inside it was a mess; dirty cooker, dirty pots, mounds of dry dusty bracken and all this mess dimly illuminated by one small window. Enough to make you weep at the end of a long hot day. In true M.B.A. tradition we cleaned it up, lit the fire with the bracken, stayed for two nights and were sorry to leave. At least there was no shortage of food as Stephen discovered two full boxes of army rations. Two empty boxes when we left.

Next day we climbed Ben Corodale (527m) and Beinn Mhor (620m), the highest hills in South Uist, in a very tough 11km round. Lots of sunshine, a snow-shower, three eagles and a visit to the Prince's cave saw us back at the bothy about 7.00pm.

Our plan for the following day, Monday, was a complicated mixture of busses, a boat and a taxi, which we hoped would find us camped, that evening, opposite the island of Scarp on the west coast of North Harris. The first problem, the bus stop was 12km away across a trackless wilderness, and we had to be there by 10.00am. So it was up at 4.00am and away by 5.00am walking north up the coast into the sunrise. (*I've heard of the simmer dim but this is ridiculous. Ed*) As we climbed up to our first bealach the lads ahead were silhouetted against the morning sky. It was beautiful. Three hours later we had reached a side road when along came a fisherman, with a nice lorry, who was nice enough to give us a lift to the main road. Robert in the comfy seat beside the driver, Stephen and I bouncing in the back with several boxes of lobsters. Where was Billy? He had left the bothy about 7.00pm the previous night to camp out near the road. I don't think he fancied the early rise. Pity about the torrential rain shortly after he left the bothy. We met Billy on the bus.

"Where are you making for?" said the driver.

"We are making for Lochmaddy to catch the 2.00pm boat." Said we.

"Oh, but to be sure, on Mondays, it sails at 11.50am." Said the driver.

So it was out of the bus and into a taxi. We made the boat quite comfortably with about one minute to spare. About half an hour later, as we ate a gargantuan meal in the ship's restaurant, we noticed that the boat seemed to be going in the wrong direction. I leaned over to a man sitting behind me. "Excuse me. Do you mind if I ask you a silly question? Where is this boat headed for?"

"Uig on Skye." Was the reply, but the day was saved when we discovered that after Uig the boat went back across the Minch to Tarbert in Harris. Thank God it was calm.

Tarbert: provisions for five days from the shops and a taxi arranged for us by the lady in the Tourist Office. The taxi was a clapped out something-or-other driven by an oil-covered mechanic. "I don't usually take four people and four rucksacks." He said, "But I will give it a try." After grinding along for about half a mile he stopped. The back suspension was obviously knackered. "If one of you would get out of the back seat

and sit on the knee of the gentleman in front, I'm sure we will make it." He said. So that was how I had Robert bouncing up and down on my knee for ten miles along one of Scotland's rougher roads. After a while I didn't feel a thing, my leg had gone numb. How was it for Robert? He never said. I retired early to my tent. It had been a hard day. Billy left us and went off on his own.

It Rained all day Tuesday. We stayed in our tents and enjoyed the rest.

Wednesday morning and the sun had returned, it would stay with us for the rest of our trip. We had been camping for the past two nights amongst some old lazy-beds beside the beach at Loch Cravadale. A beautiful spot which faces north toward the Uig hills on the west coast of Lewis. The plan for the remainder of our holiday was to walk west toward Loch Seaforth and eventually come out onto the Tarbert-Stornaway road. *En route*, we would climb most of the principal hills of North Harris. Three hours after packing up the tents we were dozing in the sun on the top of Tirga Mor (679m) and, as usual, the views were very fine. Away on the horizon to the north-west lay the Flannan Islands, a short distance to the south were the huge beaches on the west coast of South Harris at Luskentyre and the island of Taransay where there is an M.B.A. bothy. A few miles and we were camped at the foot of Sron Ulladale, which is described in the SMC District Guide as one of the most awe-inspiring rock towers in the whole of the British Isles. An abandoned rope was hanging high up on the overhanging face.

After dinner Robert assembled his poacher's rod, tied on his fly and went fishing while Stephen and I lay in the sun fantasising about trout for breakfast. Alas our dreams never became reality. The burn was either too deep, shallow, fast, slow, hot or cold. What ever the excuse was, he only managed to land one, which divided into three, would have given each of us about half an inch of fish. We threw it back.

Most of the ridges in North Harris run north to south and on Thursday we walked along one of them bagging Ullaval (659m) and Oreval (662m). Five more miles to the east, by a well-maintained stalkers path, we found a perfect campsite beside the Langdale River. There were stonechats a few yards away on some bushes and above us reared Friday's challenge, the north ridge of the Clisham Horseshoe.

We climbed about 1000m over three tops before reaching Clisham (779m). The route was a nice mixture of grass and rock with several stretches of narrow ridge. The weather was very hot which resulted in a great deal of dozing in the sun. Our views, as ever, were magnificent. There were fishing boats in West Loch Tarbert and to the northeast we could see Stornaway. Back at the tents we all relaxed, Stephen had a swim, Robert went fishing and I did nothing.

Our last day, Saturday, started at 6.15am. We had about three miles to walk and a bus to catch. When the Tarbert bus arrived, 10 minutes early, we were in a river at the side of the road washing off the sweat. Its driver was the first person we had seen since Monday evening. Soon we were on the boat to Uig where we met the bus to Glasgow. We ate for most of the journey.