

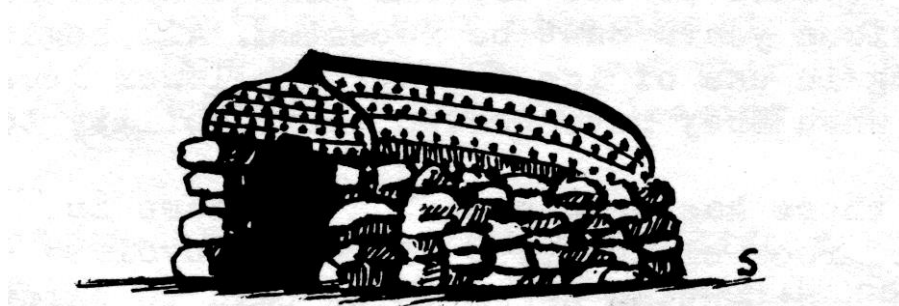
Bothying Abroad

I have written in the past that bothying is a peculiarly British practice. I had cause recently to look back through my collection of MBA newsletters, and the articles over the years about bothy style accommodation in foreign hills clearly says that bothying is not a particularly British practice, it is only the use of the word bothy for such accommodation that is peculiarly British. And even then, bothy is a word of Scottish origin, which has come into more widespread use in Britain since WWII. What does seem to be peculiarly British is the existence and successful running of a national organisation to maintain the type of property we know as a bothy. And long may the MBA continue to be successful and well respected.

[It is appropriate to note at this point that 'at home' the MBA maintains probably about half the total number of properties usable as bothies in Britain. Of the rest, perhaps two thirds are maintained by the owning Estate, with acceptance of use by the hillwalking and climbing community varying from strongly encouraged to reluctant acceptance, and one third are maintained by individuals, organisations and charities. And then there are an unidentified number of buildings whose use suits the 'any port in a storm' category but in which most folk wouldn't plan to spend a night i.e. they do not receive any maintenance and their state indicates that they haven't done for many years.]

But overseas..... Well it is nearly 40 years ago now that I sheltered from a passing rain storm in a hut in Corsica's mountains, and that together with two walking trips with Dick Phillip's Icelandic Walking Tours gives the sum total of my bothying abroad experience. What follows is therefore a summation (most certainly incomplete) of what has been contributed on the bothying abroad theme to MBA Journals over the years.

The availability of *bothies* in remote parts of Scotland, Wales and England is due to rural history and social factors recorded elsewhere on the MBA web-site. Across the water in Ireland, different events occurred, different influences prevailed. Although the island has some beautiful and wild areas, it has not been left with the legacy of remote, unoccupied cottages. Wilderness camping is broadly the requirement. There is a small amount of accommodation available, frequently described as bothy-style accommodation, a few of these are open bothies as we in Britain know the concept but most are more akin to the camping barn we also know in the Britain. But £5 – £10 a night is still bargain basement stuff. They are all provided and maintained on an organisation-by-organisation basis. An early MBA Journal contained a drawing of one Irish bothy – nothing more than an upturned boat forming the roof to a stone wall structure! An Oige, the Youth Hostelling Organisation of Eire does



'The Boat Bothy', Eire (from an early MBA Journal)

operate far more simple hostels than do the SYHA and YHA (E&W). Northern Ireland has little wilderness country, but there is a limited amount of bothy style accommodation available in less accessible areas.

Across the water the other way, i.e. in mainland Europe, it is probably accurate to say that availability of 'bothies' is greater, the lower the living standards and state of economic development of the country. The more wealthy countries - Germany, France, Spain - have very few bothies, but a lot of fully maintained climbing huts available on a commercial basis. But those countries that have more recently joined the European Union, or are independent of both the EU and Russia are believed to have bothy style accommodation available, but the willingness of the owner to allow

casual use varies from country to country, from region to region. As far as I know, none of these countries has an MBA style national organisation ensuring the availability of these 'bothies'. Inevitably unless personal experience is recorded (these days usually on the Internet – blogs and forums), local knowledge is the only knowledge.

The availability of mountain bothy style accommodation in such countries is illustrated by a letter from Katja Bizjac in the MBA's June 1997 Newsletter, comparing the experience of his visit to our Kielder Forest bothies, and his experience of bothies in his native Slovenia. Slovenian bothies, Katja says, are of far more recent construction, often being log cabins and occasionally pre-fabricated in aluminium, and generally only to be found in areas as remote as our most remote bothies. Katja remarks on the high standard of cleanliness and lack of vandalism in Slovenia's bothies.

Peter King, currently our Area Organiser for Southern Scotland, is a fan of Poland, perhaps the most prosperous of the previous communist countries. On his trips out there, Peter has discovered three types of simple accommodation in Poland's wild areas: wardened hostels of the standard of the YHA/SYHA's rural hostels in the 1980s, but most with kitchen selling meals until 10pm; club huts and bothy type cottages which are wardened in the summer months; and very basic, drafty, leaky shelters marked on maps as *tourist shelters*, dotted about without any consistency, the most basic of them providing no more warmth and protection than a bus-shelter – but we have a few of those in the UK, usually providing some form of shelter on or near our high summits.

There are exceptions to the above 'scale of wealth' guideline. Corsica in the early seventies had many huts, or *bergeries* as locally known, built by locals to help their mountain farming, none that I saw were even of MBA maintained bothy standard. It's a twelve year old comment now, but a conversation I had with the only guy I've met who has been walking in Corsica's mountains since then, suggests that these *bergeries* have deteriorated further as the mountain farming practices decline as they become uneconomic. In the mid 1970's, Alistair Dickson, then like me a recent graduate and future MBA General Secretary, roamed across the Spanish Pyrenees and wrote of the open huts (*refugios*) there, unpredictable in their location and state, but generally to be preferred to being out in the open, or in a tent in the heavy summer rains of the Pyrenean range, provided, that is, you don't mind earth floors, and 'a certain rustic charm'! Across the border, Alistair had gleaned (or maybe witnessed in what would then have been illicit cross border escapades), that France's Pyrenean *Refuges gardés* were maintained but locked.

Two years ago, MBA member Tom Lawson contributed an article to our quarterly newsletter, contrasting the 'bivaccos' of the Italian Dolomite Mountains with our bothies. Tom notes that these bivaccos are invariably poorly maintained and mostly less well equipped and hospitable than 'our' bothies, and he also comments that they are more remote and very definitely the poor relation compared with the 'refugios' (mountain hotels) of the region.

In northern Europe, in 1969, John Muston, MBA Chairman 1971 - 1973, wrote of Norway's remote mountain accommodation, of a modern log cabin type of construction with seemingly little difference between those cabins left open by the owner and those kept locked. John is unsure whether this is just a question of trust from the owners, or a more formal difference in status. Clearly over 40 years later, this is of little help to those planning to go 'bothying' in Norway. Writing 13 years after John Muston, Donald Rich, a former MBA Northern England Area Organiser tells, in the December 1982 Journal of 'fell cabins' in Finnish Lapland, commenting on the existence of smaller fell cabins on an open bothy basis and larger fell cabins, which usually have one room left open whilst the main accommodation is securely locked other than for pre-booked group usage. Both John and Donald comment on the high standard of usage and maintenance of this Scandinavian accommodation.

Across the water again, north west from Britain, Iceland has a semi-formal open hut network. On my first visit to Iceland in 1978 in one of Iceland's central glacial regions, Dick Phillips, another former MBA Area Organiser for Northern England, co-operated with local farmers to maintain these huts,

the latter using the huts once or twice a year during sheep-shearing and sheep gathering. On my second trip 28 years later, these huts had been taken over by a national expedition walking organisation, and considerably upgraded and modernised. The one hut that Dick Phillips had built in the late 60s, Strutslaug, no longer existed in 2006 due to a landslide and local parish refusal for a rebuild. Heading west, another MBA Journal article in the mid-70s by John Muston told of open huts around the periphery of Greenland, provided and maintained by locals to provide emergency accommodation for shipping and coastal travellers who find themselves in dire trouble in Greenland's hostile weather. The current status of these huts is not known.

Heading south, and just beyond the borders of Europe is Morocco with both type accommodation known as *Azibs*. About these, in 1997 Hamish Brown wrote "Depending on the season and weather [in the Atlas Mountains], we camp, bivouac under the stars or use *Azibs* (goat shelters) and Berber homes. *Azibs* may look like primitive bothies but are carpeted with generations of dry droppings and while itching for shelter sometimes, one is soon scratching to get out."



Alftvaten Shelter, Iceland 1978

Going west, to the Americas, as far as is known, wilderness accommodation is only available on a commercial basis. My belief, accurate or not, is that, somehow, in the USA wilderness walking is considerably more regulated than here in the UK, and both the provision of bothy style accommodation and wilderness walking is discouraged in many American states. Of Canada, Mexico and so on, I have no information.



Dick Phillip's Strutslaug Hut 1978, now demolished

Of Russia, China, Asia as a whole, the Middle East, Africa and South America, nothing is known. The Lonely Planet Guides and The Rough Guide to *Country* series of books, and the internet are likely sources of information about simple accommodation, but in many of these countries, the £5 - £10 figure referenced in the fourth paragraph is sufficient for a night in a hotel or hostel.

Which leaves Australasia. Very recently, MBA Chairman, John Arnott, wrote his piece for the MBA Journal

from a Walker's Hut in the Waipoua forest north of Auckland, New Zealand. John comments that the hut is not far from the road, has electricity, and costs \$20NZ, around £10, a good investment for a night away from the tent! This, as far as I know, is just one of many such huts provided on a commercial basis by government sponsored conservation organisations in New Zealand. As in Eire, the rural and social development of agriculture in New Zealand's remote areas has not left the country with a legacy of open bothies. Australia does have bothies – or at least open hill walking accommodation but not country-wide. Obviously much of inland Australia is the Outback, still home to the Aborigine, not really hill-walking, or expedition walking country. But Liz Bibby, a long-time

MBA member with probably a near 'full-house' of visits to MBA maintained bothies, reported on the bothy status in those parts of Australia amenable to hill walking activities in a Dec 2001 MBA Journal article. Most Aussie mountain areas akin to European mountainous areas are largely 'bothy-less' – wilderness camping being necessary and widely practised. However in South Australia, Liz and her friend used bothy-style open accommodation in the Snowy Mountains, which Liz described as an area well served by bothies, maintained on a similar basis to MBA bothies. Liz sampled two - the Valentine Hut, basic but equipped with a well-appreciated wood -burning stove, given that sub-zero temperatures were experienced at altitude during the Australian winter of 2001, and the Schlink Hilton, dubbed a 'Hilton' as this hut was spacious, and provided with mattresses and a toilet.

Well that's it, around the world in 3½ pages! A little while ago, I stumbled on a Web-site featuring wilderness walking huts around the world, I presume readers are capable of using the internet to supplement and update anything written here. Any information that you have, or acquire, will be welcome to update this article, and in the first instance, should be forwarded to the MBA Newsletter Editor.

Richard Genner, June 2015 (Version 2).