Enforced abandonment of crofting stock-keeping

Highlands and Islands crofting stock-holders have been compelled by the European Commission and the Scottish Government into a state of enforced abandonment.

Strong words, granted, but look at the evidence.

Over the years we have been subjected to continual erosion of our entitlements and funding. Margaret Thatcher’s rebate was supposed to put in place UK-specific environmental schemes. Most of that money went for other purposes so the 29% left with the EU was never drawn back, leaving Britain net losers to other states, with Scotland at the very bottom of the heap of 15 nations.

EU schemes such as the Agricultural Development Programme, Environmentally Sensitive Areas, the Rural Stewardship Scheme and now the Rural Priority Scheme within the Scotland Rural Development Programme (SRDP) have steadily become less accessible to those in the Highlands and Islands.

As the Hill Livestock Compensatory Allowance became the Less Favoured Area Support Scheme (LFASS) pressure came from big business to make it a production subsidy, not a scheme for the truly less favoured areas. The Scottish Government accepted these conditions, despite knowing that crofters in the periphery would be poorly served, putting forward a scheme to Europe that was well outwith the spirit of the regulation. In fact the Scottish use of LFASS has been widely criticised in Europe, even by the EU auditors.

The Scottish Government decided to withdraw payments to holdings under three

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The SCF legal helpline

The Scottish Crofting Federation is very happy to announce that it can now provide a legal helpline for its members, in partnership with well-known crofting law firm Inkers Solicitors.

Members of SCF will be able to phone one Highland number to be put through to a lawyer with crofting expertise. The initial advice will be free (for around 15 minutes, which can usually solve many problems) and if the SCF member wishes to engage Inkers to undertake legal work on his or her behalf a 10% discount on the fees chargeable will be available.

Think about it. Not only does this mean that many legal queries can be answered for free, and that big savings can be gained on more protracted issues, but this is with a leading crofting law team with outlets in Glasgow, Inverness, Wick and soon in Portree. And all through one number – 01599 230 300.

Through this partnership, the service and savings can only be available to paid-up SCF members. If you are unsure of your membership status and think you may need to take advantage of this facility, please check with HQ.
message from the chair...

"If crofting has a future, it will be secured, and can only be secured, by crofters themselves – crofters prepared to get together in sufficient numbers to make their collective voice heard in the places where it matters." (Jim Hunter)

major changes have been taking place during the past year since I took over as chair of the SCF Board. These changes are of great interest to all those who believe in crofting. At the same time, I am pleased that we have been able to strengthen the board by appointing new members, all knowledgeable people and each active on SCF’s behalf, in an area of their own interest.

Patrick, our chief executive, and the staff at HQ have been busy helping to set up meetings and we have tried to respond to all requests to attend and speak at local SCF events. We know there is a desire to learn more about the recent changes, not least because everyone with a croft is affected.

When crofting was created in its statutory form in 1886, many landlords complained that it interfered with their right to control those who occupied crofts.

Crofting legislation is devised by a distant parliament as being for the public good. It protected the residents of remote lands from the actions of others, who generally were looking out for themselves.

Great changes have taken place in rural and agricultural matters. But the framework of crofting, as a model of maintaining a population in rural areas by making the land available to them, has remained the last of time. That is the case put by the SCF with some success. The Scottish Government has committed itself to ensuring that crofting will continue well into the future.

Whilst investing in that framework, by continuing to provide the Scottish Land Court, the new Crofting Commission and now the Crofting Register, crofters were looking out for themselves. Those who are to occupy crofts must accept the legal duty of residing on or passing their crofts and a legal duty of care for their land.

These reforms, however unpopular they may be in some quarters, have reinforced crofting law as being for the public good by sustaining resident crofters who are looking after their lands and dismissing the claims of others, who generally are looking out for themselves.

The Crofting Register is now in place. All crofting lands are now to be mapped. Crofters can vote on amendments to the new CAP, and we have tried to respond to all requests to attend and speak at local SCF events. We know there is a desire to learn more about the recent changes, not least because everyone with a croft is affected.

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LFA support more vital than ever?

A recent NFUS press release was headed LFA Support: More Vital Than Ever. The statement is true in itself, but let’s look at this a bit more closely.

The way the Less Favoured Area Support Scheme (LFASS) has been used in Scotland has been canny to say the least. Most of Scotland is designated as LFA in the European context. According to the European Commission: In areas designated as less-favoured, agricultural production or activity is more difficult because of natural handicaps, eg difficult climatic conditions, steep slopes in mountainous areas, or low soil productivity in other less-favoured areas. Due to the handicap to farming there is a significant risk of agricultural land abandonment and thus a possibility of loss of biodiversity, desertification, forest fires and the loss of highly valuable rural landscape. You get the picture. So it would make sense to any right-minded person that the greater the handicap the more compensation there should be. Not so in Scotland.

The payments are worked out through a complicated series of mathematical trickeries. Through a bizarre inversion of the formula that should ensure more support goes to LESS favoured areas, the highest payment per hectare are awarded to the farms on better land in the LFA. To be clear, if you are a producer in the LFA – most of Scotland – the higher the quality of your land the higher the payment you get from LFASS, yes, strange but true. This was criticised by bodies such as the Royal Society of Edinburgh and the Committee on Enquiry on Crofting, not to mention the European Commission auditors. So the Scottish Government made some changes. The most notable change for 2010 was the increase in payment rates to farmers and crofters in areas classified as fragile or very fragile – areas concentrated in the north and west of the country. However, a year later they quietly informed us that the European Commission had approved scheme changes which would apply from 2011. These included increased payment rates in the standard areas – ie the better land in the south and east. So let’s look again at what NFUS says: “With the potential for great upheaval under the CAP’s Pillar 1, which will provide direct payments via a new area-based formula, the role of LFASS will grow in importance.”

Could this be interpreted as ‘This going’s getting tough with direct payments – they are going to redistribute it – so the LFASS milk cow is going to be even more important for the better off in the standard areas’?

And “The current LFASS has been a real success”. Well yes, to the better-off farmers who really, one could argue, don’t need public support anyway, or at least should get proportionally less from a scheme that is designed to help less-favoured producers.

The next phase of the SRDP aims to do away with LFASS to replace it with Areas of Natural Constraint (ANC). The fundamental principle cited in the stakeholder working-group looking at this support mechanism was that greater support should go to those with greater constraints. That sounds like the end of the scam when ANC comes in.

It is little wonder then that NFUS is lobbying hard to delay that day and the phrase ‘the current LFASS scheme must roll over in its current form until farms have adjusted to the area-payment system’ takes on more meaning.

Crofting and the SRDP

During last year the SCF presented a paper to the Cross-Party Group on Crofting (CPGoC) on the theme of crofting and the SRDP. As the ensuing discussion blossomed it became apparent that the subject would benefit from a working-group looking further into this important topic. Subsequently this was formed, charged with producing relevant information on the issues for crofting in the context of the Scotland Rural Development Programme (SRDP) and to present recommendations for a future SRDP (2014-20) to the CPGoC to present to the Scottish Government.

Meeting with government officials has been arranged to follow up on this. The report highlights the lack of uptake of SRDP measures by crofters and small-holders and contains a wealth of analytical data as background. It is recommended that a new SRDP should have: 1) an enhanced Crofting Counties Agricultural Grant Scheme and 2) a Programme for Crofting and Small Units. Thanks to all who participated in the working-group and especially to Susan for the time she put into the preparation of the report. The report can be found on the SCF website www.crofting.org.
Scottish Crofting Federation calls on land reform gurus to support creation of new crofts

N THE SCF response to the Land Reform Review Group call for evidence, we reiterated our petition to the Scottish Government to create 10,000 new crofts by 2020 and asked the group to support this. We have pressed the Scottish Government to set out the policies that will be put in place to facilitate rapid extension of the crofting system. This is based on a fundamental belief, not only within SCF, that in the Scottish context crofting is the model best placed to deliver the emerging policy goals for agriculture and rural development. Review of land reform in Scotland should reflect these policy goals and so we asked the group to support our request.

The Land Reform Review Group, chaired by Dr Alison Elliot with support from vice-chairs Dr Sarah Skenerratt and Professor James Hunter, has been appointed by Scottish Ministers to identify how land reform will, amongst other things, enable more people in rural and urban Scotland to have a stake in the ownership, governance, management and use of land, which will lead to a greater diversity of land ownership, and ownership types, in Scotland.

We want to see more people on the land; more families benefiting from a stake in Scotland and being able to take care of their own part of it. The current financial climate creates an opportunity like never before for public bodies to create new crofts for the many people who aspire to live and work in rural Scotland and we must seize this opportunity.

The vast majority of these crofts will provide a new, cost-effective means of caring for large areas of public land, but we see no reason why the private sector cannot play its part in realising this vision too, and the Scottish Government should consider land reform legislation to help enable this.

Pairc Trust saga enters its 10th year

IT IS NOW approaching a decade since the community of Pairc in Lewis first stated its interest in purchasing the local estate.

Other communities have since been successful and are reapin the rewards of community ownership, but the Pairc community’s clear wishes continue to be denied.

For the past several years, the Pairc Trust has been pursuing a twin-pronged approach – having no option but to use the byzantine procedures of Part 3 of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003; but retaining a strong preference to purchase the estate on an amicable basis from the current owner, Mr Barry Lomas of Leamington Spa.

Following extensive consultation and consideration, the Scottish Government approved the Pairc Trust’s applications under Part 3 in March 2011 – the first time this has ever happened – but due to the landlord’s appeal the case has had to be referred to the courts. The first part of his appeal – relating to claimed contravention of European human rights legislation – was heard in the Court of Session in July 2012 and the judgement issued in December 2012 comprehensively dismissed the landlord’s appeal.

At the time of writing it appears that the landlord has decided not to appeal against this judgement. But the other elements of his original appeal – relating to the particular circumstances of the Pairc Trust ballot and applications – still have to be heard in the Stornoway Sheriff Court at a date yet to be fixed.

Meanwhile, the Pairc Trust has been talking to the landlord over the last several months about the basis of a possible amicable transfer. But no breakthrough has yet been achieved. Only if it is possible to reach an agreement on reasonable terms which can be recommended to the community will an amicable transfer be achieved.

Having some so far, the Pairc Trust is not going to give up the struggle easily. We remain determined that one day – whether under Part 3 or through an amicable transfer – the estate will join the ranks of other community-owned estates.
**Successful woodland crofts knowledge-share programme**

The programme of woodland crofts knowledge-share events announced in the September issue of *The Crofter* was completed as planned before Christmas – but such was their success, a further event has already been confirmed in Lochcarron, in March.

Over 60 people attended the three events held in successive months in Tighnabruaich, Gairloch and Dornoch. Each was hosted by a different partner in the Woodland Crofts Partnership working with a local group, with the theme of each event reflecting both the hosts and local priorities.

The KIlfinnan Community Forest Company together with the Community Woodlands Association (CWS) started the ball rolling on a crisp October day in Argyll. As well as basic information and guidance on woodland crofts being provided (common to all three events), Ian Hopburn from MUI outlined how the community there had become the first in the country to create new community-owned woodland crofts.

Following this, David Blair from Tighnabruaich itself offered his own experiences over more than 15 years of living and working in a woodland locally. A site visit was made in the afternoon to the community forest, to view the inspirational progress to date and hear the community’s own plans for woodland crofts.

Gairloch in November provided a complete contrast, not least weather-wise, to Tighnabruaich. Janet Miles from the GAILE centre was keynote speaker on the theme of sustaining communities, with joint host SCF represented by Patrick Krause and Duncan McCowan from Applecross and Alexander Jappy from Brora. Duncan and Alexander’s experience as amongst the 61 new tenants to have taken up a croft in the previous few months as a result of the work of the commission to focus on retaining population and Islands Enterprise (HIE) and Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS).

Other elements include a website at www. woodlandcrofts.org – in development, but hopefully live by the time you read this – a Twitter feed @woodlandcrofts, media work and importantly, a register of interest for woodland crofts, already providing very interesting and useful information about prospective woodland crofters.

Until the new website brings it all together in one place, further information on these measures including the register of interest, as well as wider information on woodland crofts, can be found on the websites of the individual members of the Woodland Crofts Partnership as well as those of HIE and FCS.

**New tenants**

One of the key aims of the Crofting Commission is to use the effective regulation of crofting to help create stronger, more sustainable communities – including those in some of the most remote parts of rural Scotland.

Commissioners are delighted to see those very regulations making it possible for young people to create and build new lives into crofts throughout the crofting counties. Under the former system, decision making was largely left to target crofts where the tenants had been absent for 10 years or more.

The aim was therefore to move many long-standing situations and release crofts to new tenants together with the Community Woodland Crofting Act 2007, such as Duncan McCowan from Applecross and Alexander Jappy from Brora. Duncan and Alexander’s experience as amongst the 61 new tenants to have taken up a croft in the previous few months as a result of the work of the commission to focus on retaining population and Islands Enterprise (HIE) and Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS).

For Duncan, becoming a new tenant of a croft in Applecross feels pretty natural, having been involved in the work on his mother’s croft since he was a child. As well as rearing sheep, this has also allowed Duncan to gain experience with poultry, pigs and vegetable production. But his aim is to invest in his own croft and start with a small flock of sheep and build up from there.

Alexander, still in his twenties, is keen to take part in livestock gathering and, like Duncan, has reared on a croft, maintaining and repairing fences, digging drains and working on hands-on with animals. It is the latter element that partly drew him to take on a croft. My intention is to work on the croft with a young family of my own, Alexander thinks it is good to children to understand where our food comes from – and that it doesn’t begin life neatly packaged on a supermarket shelf.

The 2010 Crofting Reform Act gave extensive powers to the new Crofting Commission, to ensure crofts are occupied and worked or put to good use and to prevent the land from being kept as such. The act also increased the need for the commission to report on retaining population in crofting communities.

For Crofting Commission convener Susan Walker, the priorities are clear. “When we take a decision or develop policy, we must keep in mind the importance of the local crofting community at the forefront of our minds. We have to consider the impact our decision will have on the sustainability of that community.”

A number of examples show exactly that. Duncan and Alexander have become crofters, with plans to bring their crofts back into productive use. Not only that, with Duncan’s main business as a builder and Alexander working as a qualified mechanic, they retain vital skills which are threatened in remote parts of rural Scotland. We want to see more young people entering crofting and will increase that when decisions by the commission are beginning to free up more crofts for those who wish to live and work in crofting communities.”

**Duty to report**

One of the recent changes in crofting requires granting committees to report to the commission breaches of duties of residence on, and care of, crofts, and sets out a process for doing so. Many crofters expressed concern and reluctance at what they see as an obligation to spy on their neighbours. By way of response, the commission has been at pains to reassure that the duty to report can be used positively to develop crofting and improve the health of crofting communities. Rather than a threat, the reports could be used to create new beneficial opportunities.

The draft form of report has been discussed by assessors and their input has been incorporated into further revisions which are now out for consultation with key stakeholders. Already some inactive crofters have assigned their crofts to new tenants who are enthusiastic about revitalising the land and becoming involved in township activities.

Commission convener Susan Walker commented: “We believe that through this consultation process we can devise a form which everyone will feel comfortable with but which will also allow crofting communities to report problems to us where they choose to do so. This will encourage greater crofting communities and individuals to move towards greater self- regulation, by allowing them to decide how they manage their croft and the way they choose to live on it.”

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At recent meetings SCF meetings on Skye, Susan Walker and colleague I.G MacDonald outlined the commission’s intentions to use the regulations and the reports as a positive development tool. No-one would be forced to submit information that they were not comfortable with and the opportunity for townspeople to self assess was an important way to strengthen communities for the future well-being of crofting.

Crofters at the meetings, held at Kyleakin and Portree, also had an opportunity to ask questions about the new mapping requirements as part of the process of entering crofts onto the crofting register.

SCF chair Derek Flynn commented that this was a learning opportunity for all concerned – crofters, the commission and Register of Scotland. Help and advice was available and SCF members were encouraged to contact SCF HQ if they need any clarification. Mapping and the new register is also discussed elsewhere in this issue of *The Crofter*.

Derek continued: “The recent reforms to crofting are intended to bring about major changes of great interest to all those who believe in crofting. As a model of maintaining a population in rural areas, crofting has stood the test of time by making the land available to ordinary people. That is the case put by the SCF with some force. The Scottish Government has committed itself to ensuring that crofting will continue well into the future. These reforms, however unpopular they may be in some quarters, have reinforced crofting as viable and sustainable, perhaps even more so, by sustaining resident crofters who are looking after their land and dismissing the idea of manager, who generally are looking out for themselves.”
Promoting your tourism businesses

Tourism businesses can be an important part of crofting.

They give an opportunity to maximise the revenue from one of the remotestness of a croft, provide a valuable income stream from crofters and the workforce fits in well with traditional crofting. SCF will be looking to strengthen and expand our work in this area to a wider audience on behalf of our members. Here tourism businesses could include B&Bs, self catering, caravan sites or actively ventures such as quad bike safaris, guided walks, fishing trips or rare breeds farms. And by banding together we can provide a top quality website at lower cost to members. Early bookings are down in some areas so we need to make use of all avenues for generating business. We are currently revamping the website to showcase these businesses and will be launching the new site shortly. Eventually we will also promote Scottish Crofting Produce market. This involves giving them an outlet for their produce in a low-cost and collaborative way.

To qualify, tourism businesses will need to be based on a working croft and be run by an SCF member. The business will need to be committed to quality and customer care and the owner must be on hand to explain and promote crofting to visitors.

This proposal will consist of three photos, 100 words of text and email and web links plus a location map. Prospective customers will be directed to the owner so that you retain control of your own bookings. Eventually we may incorporate a calendar for each property. There will be a set-up fee of £40 per business. In addition, SCF will provide promotion material for use by members, explaining crofting and the benefits it brings, which we can turn encouragement to visit a genuine working croft. We will also promote croft holidays at the shows we attend, as happened at the Royal Highland Show in 2012. Later, we might do some joint marketing if that is what people want, which would give smaller operators access to (for example) newspaper advertising that would otherwise be out of reach for an individual business.

We will also establish an informal network where new operators can talk to experienced people about how to go about establishing and running a business.

If you are interested, get in touch with HO or phone Russell Smith on 01863 786144.

Unusual discovery in a fleece

While teaching sheep husbandry to adult students at her local education college, Pauline Palmoarn – our crofting connection in central Sweden – made a discovery. The sheep (owned by someone else) had not been shorn for a few years and needed some assistance to lamb. The photo shows the mummified body of a mouse, which Pauline found buried deep in the fleece.

Help for your business venture

Business Gateway helps new and existing businesses to grow and prosper through a combination of online and local support, local workshops, training, impartial advice and specialist advisory services.

Most services are free and all are available throughout the Highlands and Islands. The assistance we can give to crofters is probably most relevant in terms of office or diversification initiatives where support may be required to investigate possible new enterprises, sources of market information or business models. For example we can supply information on market trends in specific sectors such as tourism or food and drink. We have access to individuals with comprehensive knowledge on IT and social media that is relevant for the growth and development of every form of business. We can access mentors for those working in the creative industries from musicians to jewelers and posties to photographers.

For young people there is additional support through the Princes Scottish Youth Business Trust, where in addition to start-up training and support there is access to small grants, soft loans and an extensive aftercare network.

Examples of diversification businesses that Business Gateway (BG) has been involved in are many and varied, including the development of self-catering holidays in redundant old buildings; the provision of “glamping” facilities on croft land; food processing; smokehouses and outdoor activities. Crofts provide the basis for a comprehensive range of economic development activities, in many cases run in conjunction with other livelihoods – part time employment, seasonal work etc. We understand the need for flexibility and the fact that livelihoods in remote marginal areas are often complex and far removed from nine to five working.

Accessing finance is crucial. We can help provide information in a manner that is clear and comprehensible to banks, grant-awarding bodies and other potential financiers. One of the biggest problems for banks making lending decisions to small businesses is the quality of the information that they receive on which to base their decision. We cannot guarantee that we can help every applicant, but we will ensure that the information you provide is clear, concise, relevant and robust.

BS offers a face-to-face to service to any business in any sector, on any matter. A builder, for example, might have problems pricing and tendering for work. Our advisers can talk you through simple processes for estimates. An outdoor activity provider may be struggling with service charges and competition. BS can help with market advice and comparable business prices. A game larder may wish to seek market advice against competitors with new packaging and processing techniques. BS can help with these specialist issues.

Scottish Crofting Enterprise Ltd

Scottish Crofting Enterprise Ltd (SCE Ltd) is its trading arm. This is a route that many charities have gone down as a route to offer a non-profit and are therefore limited by charities law on diversification initiatives where support may be required to investigate possible new enterprises, sources of market information or business models. For example we can supply information on market trends in specific sectors such as tourism or food and drink. We have access to individuals with comprehensive knowledge on IT and social media that is relevant for the growth and development of every form of business. We can access mentors for those working in the creative industries from musicians to jewelers and posties to photographers.

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Major sheep event at Dingwall

NSA HIGHLANDSHEEP takes place at Dingwall mart on May 30th. SCF will have a stand and we will be pleased to see you there for a chat.

NSA Scotland chairman Jimmy Sinclair commented: “The national sheep flock has been declining, particularly in the Highlands and Islands, and we hope this event will help reverse this decline by bringing the latest genetic, husbandry, technical and marketing information to the area and highlighting the marketing opportunities which exist for Scottish lamb both at home and abroad.

“The Highlands and Islands is an important area for the production of store lambs for the whole Scottish sheep industry and it is vital that this key reservoir of quality lambs is nurtured and expanded to enable the meat industry to maintain critical mass.”

Scanning can help save costs and reduce lamb losses

Following one of the wettest years on record, when many ewes are approaching spring lambing in poor condition, experts from Scotland’s Rural University College (SRUC) warn that scanning is more important than ever.

Sheep that are too fat may have been taken indoors off wet pastures. To avoid lambing problems John Vipond believes they should lose weight. Give them only the amount of silage they can clear up in a few hours, or replace silage with straw at weekends.

During the last six weeks of pregnancy around 75% of lamb birth weight is deposited. The demand for nutrients, production of colostrum and the growth of the lamb’s birth coat puts a great strain on ewes’ protein reserves. Supplementary protein is important for all ewes but especially thin ones. It must be digestible, undegradable protein (DPD) to be effective. John suggests feeding an extra 100g of soya bean meal per lamb carried per day for the last three weeks of pregnancy. It also provides energy, so concentrate levels can be reduced accordingly.

CCAGS changes

Potential applicants should note that important changes to the Crofting Counties Agricultural Grants Scheme (CCAGS), which include new guidance on the application of scheme penalties, the number of competitive quotations needed and invoice requirements, came into force on 01 February 2013. In brief, these changes mean that:

- You cannot claim for more grant aid than you received approval for.
- You must provide a minimum of two competitive quotations with your application, regardless of the costs involved.
- Completion certificates are required in all claims for agricultural buildings.

These changes are in addition to the amendment to the scheme on 1 April 2011, outlined below.

In brief, those changes meant that:

- Eligible applicants under 40 years of age qualify for a higher rate of grant.
- CCAGS provision is extended to the entire HEI area.
- The new category of short-lease tenants of an owner-occupied croft, as introduced by the Crofting Reform (Scotland) Act 2010, are eligible for assistance.
- CCAGS is no longer means tested.
- Owners of holdings other than crofts are no longer eligible to apply for CCAGS.

If you have any questions about these changes in the meantime, please contact your local SGROD office.
An update on OPA

THE SNARES (Identification Numbers and Tags) (Scotland) Order 2012 came into force on 22nd November 2012. This order makes significant changes to snaring legislation in Scotland. Snaring is commonly used as a means of control for some predator and pest species and must be carried out in accordance with the requirements set out in section 11 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

As of 22nd November 2012, a snaring operator who has successfully completed a snaring training course can apply to his local police station for a unique identification number which must be attached to all snares set from 1st April 2013. Successful completion of the snaring training course will provide an indication that the applicant has sufficient knowledge and experience to use snares responsibly and within the legislative requirements.

The identification numbers and tags will make snaring operators more accountable for their actions as the identification number and tag will help identify the individual snaring operator.

Further information about the training courses and the use of identification numbers and tags can be found at www.legislation.gov.uk/sis/2012/161/contents at www.moredun.org.uk

ON THE CROFT

New rules for snaring

THE CROFTER, MARCH 2013

We have previously discussed in The Crofter how crofting is an example of High Nature Value (HNV) farming. A HNV low output system that provides many benefits for wildlife. However, it established in spring 2009 between crofters, the Scottish Agricultural College, the RSIPB and the SCSF has shown many benefits for crofters and wildlife.

The primary aim of the Scottish Crofting and Conservation Partnership (SCCP) is to provide support for Skey’s high-nature-value crofting, with a particular focus on crookmark habitats. This species is found in only few parts of the UK, with the strongest populations occurring on the Hebrides. Skeye still supports a small but significant population, but is under threat.

The correlation between the occurrence of breeding crookmark and land managed under crofting is extremely strong. In part that is because we have to ensure the Uists have sufficient crookmark habitat to avoid the potential extinction of the species.

The partnership is now expanding its aims to include projects aimed at improving grassland quality that are not dependent on agri-environment funds.

The partnership has supported the submission of over 50 Rural Priorities proposals, which will provide more than £1 of support to habitat management on crofts in Skeye over the life of the SRDP plus the on-going support for Uist and North Uist.

ON THE CROFT

Active crofting’s wildlife and financial dividend

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The introduction of mandatory BVD testing for submission to the land reform review group, had information on SRDP deadlines, our monthly newsletters to all those who we of questions about the overall SCF structure. Structure review reminder fi ndings later this year. We also have a Facebook page which can be used for keeping up to date with meetings and press-releases. You can also join in with discussions on our activities. Along the last edition of The Crofter you received a page where we posed a number of questions about the overall SCF structure. Thanks to all those who have taken the time to respond so far. We will be reporting the findings later this year. As a reminder, the questions we posed were: • Is it time to move away from the current two-tier system? • Do we need to redefine areas and branches by postcode rather than parishes? • Do you have any other comments about the two-tier system? If you would like more information about these questions or have any comments please get in touch with the HQ team.

GIFT AID DECLARATION

The government operates a scheme called Gift Aid which allows charities to claim the basic rate tax on every pound donated to a registered charity we are able to claim Gift Aid on your membership subscription. This means for an individual membership, we can claim an additional £1.75 from HMRC on your subscription at no extra cost to you.

Am I eligible to sign up for Gift Aid?

If you are a UK tax payer, yes. Even if you are not employed, you are still eligible if you are paying tax on any of the following: personal or occupational pension; stocks and shares; bank and building society savings accounts; rent; some overseas and UK investment dividends. If you are a UK tax payer, yes. Even if you are not employed, you are still eligible if you are paying tax on any of the following: personal or occupational pension; stocks and shares; bank and building society savings accounts; rent; some overseas and UK investment dividends. I’m a member of the SCF. Can I still use Gift Aid?

Will it affect my current tax liability?

If you pay tax on a pension plan or savings account or pay capital gains tax if you sell property or shares, you are still eligible for Gift Aid. Will I have to fill in a Gift Aid declaration again? No you won’t. This single Gift Aid declaration will cover any donation you have made to the SCF in the past four years and all donations you make in the future.

I’ve completed a declaration for another charity. Do I need to complete another one for the SCF?

Yes. You have to complete a separate form for each charity you want to benefit from Gift Aid. Will it affect my current tax liability?

We will make the claim to HMRC on the tax you have already paid on your donations. This will not affect the tax you pay in any way.

Will I have to complete more forms?

No. If you have completed the Gift Aid declaration there are no more forms for the SCF to complete. Is it really that easy? What’s the catch?

We have had unprecedented turnouts for SCF local meetings which have been taking place over the winter months in many diverse locations. We have had speakers on crofting law, the crofting register, community mapping, CAP reform and Crofting Commission activities, amongst other topics of concern, in response to requests from our members. Evenings have also been full of the usual good crofting craic. We also invite non-members to attend as we like to thank you for helping us safeguard the crofting community. We are extremely grateful to him for his generous gesture.

THE CROFTER, MARCH 2013

Have you read about gift aid on p16?

Dear editor

Thank you very much for The Crofter number 95 which we read with great interest. We were very pleased to know there is an active scene in Scotland for the preservation of rare breeds and varieties.

In our project, Feral Populations in Europe, we discovered several feral populations in Scotland; not only the Lowland sheep, but also the seemingly very robust cattle on Swona which have existed there entirely free since the 1700s. If you have information about these or other feral populations in Scotland we would be very grateful if you could enter these into our database which can be viewed at www.agrobiodiversity.net/regional/index.html. Topic Networks Feral Populations Waltraud Kugler Project director SAVIE Foundation
Trials and tribulations of building a house on a croft

Often SCF HQ receives phone calls from members asking about how to go about building a house on their crofts. Even I usually answer, as she is going through the process herself. Here’s her story so far.

WORKING WITH THE SCF over the last few years, I have gained a good understanding of the trials and tribulations of building a house on croft land – or at least trying to. All this knowledge is proving very useful, as my husband and I are now fortunate enough to be in a position to be able to build our own house on the croft.

We started back in 2011 when our local planning and design agent advised us to prepare a pre-planning application advice, a free (for now) service provided by The Highland Council. We knew that in the 2007 local housing plan our croft had been zoned for future housing, despite the fact that the grazings committee objected to this in the initial consultation. This apparently both helped and hindered our application.

As we feared, the response three months after a site visit advised that they could not support our proposal as it did not comply with the objective of the local plan. Adding: “It is important to note that land for multi-house developments is extremely scarce.” I found it difficult to understand how a croft could have been zoned for housing in the first place and how it was possible that there was advantage given to a large-scale development over the wishes of the registered crofter? Having discussed this response until we were red in the face we decided to take our application to the next stage regardless.

Getting plans drawn up was one of the fun bits which I looked forward to for a very long time. We were finally ready to apply for planning in principal, or outline planning, in May last year. We took on board some of what was said in the initial advice, for example changing the access a little so it didn’t have a negative impact on any development of our croft, in case this was to occur in the future. It still raises my blood pressure thinking about it.

Six months later after a lot of correspondence between – and help from – the new planning officer and a letter from the local housing association stating that they did not wish to acquire the croft for future development, we were finally granted outline planning permission. Two weeks later we sent in our full planning application and are now waiting with fingers and toes crossed.

In the meantime we have been looking at the various other things still to be done – the building warrant, water and electricity connection forms, costs and so on. We’ve also got the form for the Croft House Grant Scheme, all 20 pages of it, which has to include a five-year business plan.

I guess the silver lining in all these time-consuming applications is that we are managing to save more money to go towards securing a mortgage – and don’t even get me started on those!

Alistair Campbell CROFTING LOST ANOTHER stalwart in February with the death of Alistair Campbell from Elboit in Skye. Alistair was involved in the setting up of the Scottish Crofters Union Dunvegan branch and was Skye and Lochalsh area president for a number of years, contributing his experience of union work with BT and thorough knowledge of Cheviot sheep.

Alistair was born at Elboit West in 1931 on the family croft, and, on leaving school at 17, followed in his father’s footsteps and went to sea, joining the Royal Navy in which he served during the Korean war. In 1956 he joined the merchant navy, spending the following 10 years sailing to all parts of the globe, a part of his life that he thoroughly enjoyed. Whenever possible he signed off in the springtime to be home to help with croft work at the busiest times. Always interested in anything to do with sheep, Alistair spent many years as secretary of the Dunvegan sheepdog society as an active committee member, eventually becoming president of the Dunvegan show committee.

He joined the local auxiliary coastguard and had many adventures on training exercises with them. As a result it was nothing for him to abseil down the cliffs at the back of Tarner Island to rescue a sheep that had eaten her way down narrow paths and couldn’t climb out again.

Following his retirement from crofting he maintained his interest by keeping a critical eye on his nephews and helping out at fanks. Only last year he was gathering sheep ... no longer on foot, but both he and Nan, his dog riding on the quad bike. If health over the last few years was a cause of great frustration to him.

Alistair’s former colleagues at SCF send their love and the family sincere condolences.
A nostalgic day at Daviot

STUBBLE FIELD on Daviot was the perfect venue. Although Kenny Munro’s baler was powered by his modern, high powered tractor, Watson Munro’s 1957 International B250 stood by, ready for action if required. Work continued without falter until the last shad was threshed. The old machinery, like the millmen, had worked faultlessly.

Everyone agreed how successful and nostalgic the day had been and, although the demonstration was principally intended as a practical one, an element of social history was also evident. Another opportunity to see a similar demonstration will be available at this year’s working vintage rally and display. Plans are already in place for this event to be held at Daviot Estate.

Apart from the threshing, many other vintage farming methods will be featured, along with heritage and craft stands, working craftspeople and static tractors and much, much more, evoking hum from the drum and clatter of the horses and the tractor also suitably fuelled up. Soon the distinctive hum from the drum and clatter of the stack remained available and in good condition despite the wet weather.

Work began after the traditional dram was poured and the tractor also suitably fuelled up. Soon the distinctive hum from the drum and clatter of the stack remained available and in good condition despite the wet weather.

The two oat stacks containing around five hundred and fifty sheaves had been built in readiness for a feature to be staged during last year’s working vintage rally and display. Bad weather caused cancellation of the event, but display. Bad weather caused cancellation of the event, but display. Bad weather caused cancellation of the event, but display. Bad weather caused cancellation of the event, but display.

I am always happy to hear from you. No matter how small the problem is, I always do my very best to help. I hold regular surgeries.

I hold regular surgeries.

The mill, a pre-war machine set, whilst always providing educational for the younger generation, being informative and entertaining, was a great day out, amidst fine scenery for everyone.

You don’t have to own a tractor to be there!!

Ray J Smith January 2013

www.daviotvintage.co.uk

Glasshouse revival

Pete Bevington, chair of Transition Shetland, describes an innovative project in Shetland.

The first step towards reviving the huge glasshouse in Tingwall is being taken with the help of a £10,000 lottery grant. Local community action group Transition Shetland is hoping to help bring the building back to life after it has lain dormant for several years.

The group plans to appoint consultants to carry out a study into the feasibility of running the glasshouse as a community venture, making it available to individuals and groups to grow fruit, vegetables and other plants under glass.

They said the time was right to bring the glasshouse back into use with the growing interest in local food production and the popularity of polytunnels throughout the isles. The study will examine the condition of the building and gauge the level of community interest to take the project forward.

The idea was developed by Tingwall and Orkness Development Association chairman Pete Glanville, who is a member of Transition Shetland and has been closely involved in the lottery bid. “We are extremely pleased to have received this grant from the Big Lottery Fund,” he said. “It is a major contribution towards turning the Tingwall glasshouse into what it was always meant to be, a viable and vibrant centre for growing.”

Pete Bevington added: “A lot of people have been asking about this building and there is a clear desire within Shetland to see it being used productively. If we can demonstrate there is sufficient local interest to take this forward, then we believe it could become a real asset to this community – a real Garden of Eden in the north.”

Transition Shetland has been meeting for more than two years to discuss how the islands should approach a future that holds twin threats from climate change and peak oil. It holds monthly meetings, which are open to the public, at Lerwick community centre, where topics have ranged from growing food and tackling waste, to transport and energy.

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100,000 units from a wind turbine

I thought readers might be interested in my renewables journey over the last two and a half years, written Norman Leask.

S OURCING: the funding, getting all the permissions, building, the foundation and laying the cable left me in a state of anticipation. With new turbines working successfully it was very exciting to watch the erection of the turbine, with the first turning of the blades and the start of our reduction. With no local spaces or expertise, we needed to train staff. Proven machines are relatively simple, so six of us were trained by Proven. Equipment was fitted to the otherwis...
A friendly listening ear

It’s a consultant, writes Karen at RSABI’s Gatepost service.

READ ANY TEXT on improving your mental health and you’ll find advice telling you that outdoor exercise, particularly in the countryside, is a great way to boost your mood and maintain good mental health. This is true of course but, as we hear time and time again at Gatepost, the story is more complicated for those who live and work on the land. There are many positives – space, beauty, fresh air, close contact with nature and animals – and many find these indispensable parts of their way of life. But they are the blessings counted when things get tough. But things do get tough at times: rural living has never been entirely idyllic and it’s not stress-free. A bad storm or a poor lambing can swing joy into heartbreak all too easily. There’s no immunity from life’s knocks, such as bereavement, poverty, and sickness. In crofting many people will be juggling other work as well as farming. There is greater poverty in rural areas and making an income from a piece of land is probably the riskiest business venture there is, with so many variables – weather, pests and diseases, changes in regulations, and market fluctuations both local and global. Healing the profit and expenses. The price of feed is crippling many livestock holders right now. The uncertainty of not knowing whether your produce will make enough money, or whether the bills is enough to cause many a sleepless night; and if the bank is knocking on your door at the same time, the stress can become acute.

Many people working on the land spend long hours alone. In good times this can be a luxury, especially if you naturally enjoy your own company. But if you’re someone who thrives on companionship then loneliness can affect your mood and anxieties tend to seem bigger when you’re on your own. People describe worries and negative thoughts going round and round like a treadmill they can’t get off. This is where talking to someone can really help, and if you don’t have anyone near you to confide in or you’re trying to protect your loved ones from your worries, then calling a helpline like Gatepost is another option.

Long-term stress can affect your health, from your sleeping pattern to your blood pressure – and you can end up living with chronic symptoms such as nausea, headaches or low mood as if they are normal. The fact that rural folk tend to be very resilient means that people often go on coping alone for a long time before they think to ask for help. The GP is a good starting point, or you can ring Gatepost on 0300 111 4166.

Gatepost is run by RSABI and offers a friendly listening ear and sounding post at times of stress or distress. We also have a large database of sources of practical help and advice should you need support related to debt management, housing and family issues. We’re dedicated entirely to the rural based occupations in Scotland and our staff have a good understanding of the pressures involved, but you can call about anything that’s on your mind, whether it’s to do with crofting or not. Calls are confidential – you don’t even have to tell us your name if you don’t want to.

Call 0300 111 4166 Monday–Friday, 9.5. Or email gatepost@rsabi.org.uk

Rural mental health in south India

Lorna Murray spent November and December in south India, where she had the opportunity to learn about what is being done to help the rural population. In this article she offers some thoughts based on two very different experiences.

Day with a community health team

Accessing any form of health care is a major problem throughout India, except for the rich. For the majority of rural Indians, accessing care is often impossible. Living far from any bus route, how can they get there? A day away from work means no daily wage, so no meal for the family that evening.

The community health team in Vellore, Tamil Nadu, is doing what it can to help people living in villages far from the town by making visits to families identified by community leaders as in need of help. The problems involved are enormous. What to do when medicines are required: all treatment has to be paid for, but often there is no money to spare. How to offer even basic health care advice: encouraging a change of diet would be cruel to a family solely dependent on what is grown. We can do huge amounts of harm and our student comments: “That sounds just like here.”

Indeed, there are many similarities between the problems faced by rural Indians and people living in remote parts of Scotland.

What we do not have in India is having to make the choice between feeding our family or using hard-earned money to pay for health care, or many other forms of support. In India, we are privileged; but we can learn much from the resourcefulness of people who are forced to make such a choice.

Our awareness of the difficulties faced by rural Indians can inspire us to consider innovative ways of caring for and supporting people living in isolated parts of our country. We could also use this awareness to challenge more strongly our urban-based leaders to improve access in rural areas to those services and facilities that are available in Scotland. To ensure that nobody living in our rural areas is denied the care or support they may need.

Visit to Syrian orthodox seminary

I am talking to young men training to be priests. Discussion has turned to the problem of suicide; a huge issue in rural India, with farmers particularly at risk. The students are surprised to hear that, in Scotland also, suicide in rural areas is worryingly high and ask me why. I tell them about isolation, poor public transport, the lack of locally-based resources. A student comments: “That sounds just like here.”
Decrofting and letting applications where a croft is owned by more than one person

The Crofting Commission has recently announced a policy clarification. There was uncertainty in situations where owners hold separate title to distinct parts of a croft, as to whether an application to decroft or let could be:

- made separately by an individual owner in respect of the distinct part of the croft they own, or
- if such an application has to be made by all the owners of the croft in their capacity as, collectively, the ‘landlord’ of that croft.

The Crofting Commission took the view that it was essential to have a clear policy on this issue. Therefore, in order to clarify the situation, it sought and obtained legal opinion on the practice of accepting applications submitted by only one of the croft owners where the croft is held in multiple separate ownership parcels.

The matter was discussed at the commission’s December board meeting and commissioners agreed to adopt a policy that all decrofting and letting applications in respect of crofts with multiple owners must be submitted by all the owners, in their capacity collectively as the ‘landlord’ of the croft, even in those cases where the application related to a part of the croft held in title by only one of their number.

Any application received in future from one of the owners, where a croft is held in multiple ownership, will be considered invalid and returned on the basis that the application was not submitted by the landlord of the croft.

Places of Possibility

Property, Nature and Community Land Ownership

Professor Emeritus at Carleton University, Ontario and honorary professor at the University of the Highlands and Islands, Fiona Mackenzie has carried out in-depth qualitative research on the islands of Harris.

To maximise the efficiencies of land ownership, the market-driven approach of neo-liberalism would have, it placed entirely in the hands of the private sector.

Places of Possibility reveals how community land ownership can open up the political, social, environmental and economic terrain to far more socially-just and sustainable possibilities.

Drawing on comprehensive qualitative research carried out in the Outer Hebrides, Fiona Mackenzie argues that these possibilities are created through the disruption of prevalent norms of property and nature.

The author shows how current land reforms taking place in the islands are revealed to be places of possibility where neoliberal norms of enclosure and privatisation – and of a nature separate from the social – are unceded with community land ownership. With a careful balance of original theoretical insights and intellectual rigour, Places of Possibility reveals the rich political possibilities of community land ownership and its place in the twenty-first century world.

In this splendid book Fiona Mackenzie provides an excellent analysis of the principles and practice of community land ownership, an idea which is transforming the landscape of the Scottish highlands. Drawing on extensive fieldwork in the Hebrides and a very wide range of interdisciplinary references, she adds depth and clarity to our understanding of this profound shift in Scottish society." Ewen A Cameron, University of Edinburgh.

"Because Fiona Mackenzie has spent a lot of time in the area, she has got to grips with the Highlands and Islands experience of community ownership in a way that no other academic author has done. Mackenzie has much to say that is novel, perceptive and important, while her background and experience enables her to bring a range of theoretical perspectives to bear on her subject matter." James Hunter, University of the Highlands and Islands.

To purchase the book with a 20% discount, enter promotion code VB782 at the checkout when ordering online at www.wiley.com.
The SCF gathering 2013

The theme for this year’s gathering is to be common grazings. This is a huge resource that crofters have and some good speakers and discussion could help to focus minds on how to get better support to our grazings and sow seeds of ideas on how to use grazings in traditional and in more innovative ways. There are lots of topics. For example:

- **Grazing** – support to individuals, support to collectives, (CAP, SRDP), use of stock clubs;
- **Environment** – management of grazings for carbon sequestration, increasing biodiversity, water purification;
- **Energy** – cutting peats, micro-generation schemes, wind-crofts and wind-farms, home and community schemes;
- **Homes** – housing on croft-land, affordable housing, planning;
- **Regulation** – common grazings regulations, regulated grazings, use and abuse of apportionments, deemed crofts;
- **Collaboration** – communal working, use of grazings for community benefit, common land use elsewhere.

And there will be more. Subject to funding, we intend to hold it in September and a suggested venue is Stornoway, though this is to be confirmed. We will have more detail in the next issue of The Crofter.

Honours for crofting women

The Queen’s new year’s honours list recognised the achievements of three women who will be well-known to many members.

**Agnes Leask** from Weisdale in Shetland was awarded the British Empire Medal for services to crofting in Shetland. Over the years, since the launch of the SCU in 1986, Agnes has been a stalwart SCF local branch representative and area president. Still working her croft at age 78, Agnes advocates the importance of high health status for crofters’ stock and was involved in attaining scab-free status for Shetland sheep.

All her old friends at SCF and throughout the crofting counties congratulate Agnes on this well-deserved award.

**Jessie MacNeil** from Barra is another long-standing SCF member and crofter who has been involved in the SCU and SCF since the early days. Jessie received an MBE for her services to the community. Jessie was head of Voluntary Action Barra and Vatersay and worked for Barra and Vatersay Council of Voluntary Services. In this role and as a branch official, Jessie has personally helped many members of her community, just as Agnes has done in Shetland.

**Pam Rodway** received an MBE for her services to sustainable food production and education. Pam will be known to many members for her work with the innovative and popular Crofting Connections project, which encourages and facilitates schools in teaching youngsters about crofting in a practical way. Pam’s background lies in organic farming and artisan cheese-making. As a founder board member of Slow Food UK, she helped organise the Slow Food UK Congress at Sabhal Mor Ostaig, Isle of Skye in 2005.