

UK agriculture: the bill, the theft and the future



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WESTMINSTER recently released an agriculture bill, setting out UK secretary of state for agriculture Michael Gove's intentions for agriculture for England and Wales.

Scotland's cabinet secretary for rural economy, Fergus Ewing,

responded angrily, particularly at the prospect of certain aspects of agriculture in the bill being claimed to be reserved, having been devolved to the Scottish government since 1999. The indignation expressed by Mr Ewing is justifiable, and should be supported by us all. However, the power-grab is a different battle

to fight and must not be confused with the overall direction of the agriculture bill.

The relevance of the bill to Scotland's crofters and the Highlands and Islands is yet to be seen, though one would assume that as the UK government will be setting out an agriculture framework

for UK, there will be some leakage of Mr Gove's quite radical ideas into the Scottish system. However, it is the Scottish government and parliament that should ultimately decide on the shape and details of the new rural and agricultural

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Cross Party Group on Crofting discusses crofting support

AT THE September meeting of the Cross-Party Group on Crofting (CPGoC) in Inverness, consultant Gwyn Jones presented the findings of his study and report *Support for Crofting*, prepared for the Crofting Commission.

This impartial and well-presented research clearly shows that existing support mechanisms do not work as well as they could for crofting. The research examines what works and what does not, and goes on to make recommendations on how support can be improved. This is very timely, with the interim phase to agricultural and rural development support being explored in

the Scottish government consultation *Stability and Simplicity*, and with ongoing discussions being held on what the Scottish rural support system will look like post-Brexit.

We are very pleased that the Crofting Commission has taken the initiative to have this research carried out under its remit to promote the interests of crofting and to keep under review matters relating to crofting – and they selected a very experienced and applied consultant to do the job. It demonstrates a proactive commission

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Message from the chair...

Russell Smith



THE SERVICES SCF carries out for its members are discussed in an article on page 23, and our survey shows members see lobbying as the top essential service.

As one example of this, I attended a session of the Scottish Affairs Committee at Westminster to give evidence on the agriculture bill currently before the UK parliament. This centres around seemingly arcane arguments concerning whether the UK secretary of state has powers over Scottish agriculture – whether he is required to get the consent of the devolved administrations or whether he is merely required to consult them.

For once, the representatives of Scottish agriculture – ourselves, NFUS, RSPB and the agricultural champions – were in agreement.

Scottish policy must be made in Scotland. There are existing differences in the way CAP is applied between England and Scotland. For example we have LFASS and the ewe hogg scheme and they don't; and there must be scope for such divergence to continue after Brexit so that extensive grazings systems in the Highlands and Islands can be supported.

But we do need the Scottish government to publish the results of the *Simplicity and Stability* consultation and start serious discussions on what a post-Brexit agricultural policy will look like. There is a lot to be debated.

And of course we had cabinet secretary Fergus Ewing at our gathering in Rothes with a chance for ordinary crofters to quiz him on the issues that matter to them. Also coming up, Patrick is going to

a meeting with the secretary of state for Scotland, David Mundell; and we have a regular contingent of MSPs at the Cross Party Group on Crofting for which SCF provides the secretariat. So we are treating the political representation part of our remit seriously. And it does make a difference.

But what really struck me about the visit to Westminster was how remote London is – it took me over six hours to get there by car, plane, tram and train. Later in the week I went to Achiltibuie for an access to crofting course and it took less than a quarter of the time by car. It was literally and figuratively a breath of fresh air. It makes you appreciate the benefits of living in a crofting area – clean air, open space, neighbours who you know and can talk to – and we shouldn't take these things for granted. We do have plenty of challenges, but there are compensations.

The crofting course was, as always, a pleasure to attend. As with the entrants at the Spirit of Crofting awards, there is so much enthusiasm and new ideas that you can't help but come away encouraged for the future.

I hope you filled in our survey on your views of the future of agriculture. This again is designed to give us ammunition to argue for a good deal for support payments for crofters and hill farmers. The CAP reforms of the early 2000s led to a lot of sheep and cattle being taken off the hills and we don't want that to happen again. Data on the mood of crofters will help the Scottish government to design a system that works for us. Thank you to those who did reply.

The survey was done through an on-line system which is quick, easy to use and cheap to run and, if it works, we would like to do more from time to time on questions of immediate importance. So if you want your voice to be heard, please make sure that HQ has an email address for you and then you will get the notifications.

Crofting law reform

AS YOU MAY recall, crofting legislation reform is being taken forward in two phases.

SCF supports the two-phase approach as it seems the most pragmatic way to get the more urgent amendments, which will make a real difference to crofters, into a bill that can pass through the Scottish parliament in this session.

Identification of these phase 1 issues, and how to deal with them, is already well underway by stakeholders – including representative organisations, lawyers, specialists, agencies and Scottish government officials. You will be glad to know that there are crofters involved.

Issues currently being looked at include:

- **deemed crofts** – a term that brings confusion to crofters, regulators and lawyers alike;
- **notification of first registration of croft** – which is costly for

crofters and duplicates the Crofting Commission's notification of those with an interest;

- **requirement for annual notices** – the amount of data generated overloads the Crofting Commission;
- **grazings committee duty to report** – many feel that it is not an appropriate matter for a grazings committee to have to report on shareholders;
- **joint tenancies** – it is proposed that, if necessary, legislation will be amended to allow croft tenancies in more than one name to bring crofting into line with other sectors.

A stakeholder group is meeting to look at more complex issues, which will take more time to formulate and gain consensus for. It has started with looking at legal issues concerning common grazings. The work for the second phase will be in parallel with phase one, but the legislation would need to go through parliament in the next session.



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support system for Scotland.

We, of course, hope to see some of the ideas in the UK bill borne out in Scottish policy, with the continuation of crofting support and an equitable system that supports ecologically-sound production and compensates for natural constraints. We want to see a more focussed results-based use of public money, replacing the current income support that, as Mr Gove put it, "gives the most from the public purse to those who have the most private wealth", a situation that clearly has to end. No surprise that the farmers' unions are irate to see Mr Gove's proposal to end the indefensible distribution of public money that their wealthier members have long enjoyed.

An important issue that is not covered in the bill is the convergence uplift, in effect a refund from the EU to UK due its overall low level of CAP payments. Scottish government and stakeholders have long argued that the refund, worth some £190 million, should come to Scotland in its entirety as it is our low payments that bring the UK average down low enough to justify the refund. The UK government stance has been that the refund gets divided up amongst the UK nations, with Scotland getting £30 million. Apart from the money itself, this sets precedence for the future relationship of Scottish government and UK government over agricultural support. In an announcement this week launching a comprehensive review of agriculture, UK government said that the convergence issue will not be revisited.

As an aside, were Scotland to get the whole refund, one could speculate that there could be sectors of producers in Scotland who could argue that it is their low payments that bring Scotland's average below the threshold, so it is they who should receive the uplift.

A plus for Scotland is that Mr Gove confirmed in the review launch announcement that future support payments will not depend on the Barnett formula – a population-based calculation. This is important, as Scotland gets 16% of farm payments but with only 8% of the population, though we manage huge tracts of land.

Instead, the review will consider each country's individual circumstances, including environmental, economic and socio-economic factors, as well as farm numbers and farm sizes. It is not clear yet what that will mean for Scotland or the crofting counties. The agriculture review will last three to six months, so keep an eye on the agriculture press.



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Cross Party Group on Crofting discusses crofting support

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that is willing to be more than just a regulator. We welcome this development of the government agency for crofting.

The Crofting Commission employed Gwyn Jones, a director of the European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism and the author of several studies relating to crofting, common grazings and UK and Irish support and development mechanisms, to carry out this research. His remit was to examine the extent to which the support payments currently available to crofters are sufficient to achieve the Scottish government's objectives for crofting and the sustainability of the crofting system; and to identify alternative support systems that might achieve these objectives to a greater extent in future.

The report demonstrates what we have said for a long time, that adding crofting to a support mechanism designed for farming doesn't work well. Crofts are different and have unique challenges, as well as offering exceptional public goods. Mr Jones favours adapting the support system to work better for crofting, rather than developing a croft-only scheme. We can go with that, the objective being to deliver croft-friendly outcomes.

The report recommends support specifically catering for small-scale, less-intensive crofts and crofting common grazings. It recommends the design of schemes that encourage small steps of improvement, activity on an appropriate scale, accessible training, a scheme to encourage the passing on of crofts to new entrants and adapting capital grant schemes such as CAGS to include woodland crofts. Gwyn also recommends

the redesign of support to constrained areas (LFASS/ANC) so that it does actually favour the constrained areas, something the SCF has advocated for many years.

The report contains a wealth of information and a range of recommendations which SCF will be promoting. This is going to be seen as a benchmark piece of work and we would recommend everyone who has an interest in crofting to read it and use it to lobby the Scottish government. It is the government's stated objective to have crofts occupied and cultivated, so they need to back this up with appropriate support.

SCF has organised the Cross-Party Group on Crofting in the Scottish parliament for nigh on 20 years and is secretary to the group. It is a very powerful forum for informing MSPs of crofting issues and garnering their support for pressing the government to act.

The CPGoC meets regularly, usually in Edinburgh, and is co-convened by Rhoda Grant MSP, Tavish Scott MSP and Alasdair Allan MSP. It is always very well-attended with over 30 representatives of organisations and individuals regularly present. The last two meetings have been held in Inverness in order to give crofters a better chance of attending. The intention is to hold more future meetings out of Edinburgh. These will be publicised through social media. If you wish to attend please let SCF HQ know.

Standing items on the agenda are crofting legislation reform; crofting administration; crofting development; and crofting support. We usually have a specific theme and invite a guest speaker to present this.

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Crofting Commission and Highlands and Islands Enterprise

Bill Barron, commission CEO, explores the mutual aims of the two organisations.

WHAT IS THE aim of the Crofting Commission?

That was the initial question posed to us when commissioners Rod Mackenzie, David Campbell, Malcolm Mathieson and I attended the Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) board meeting in October to discuss how the two organisations will work together.

HIE chair Lorne Crerar had told us that HIE's aim could be set out very succinctly: to see more people living, working, studying and investing in the Highlands and Islands. There followed a very thoughtful debate about the multifaceted aims of the Crofting Commission.

We are the regulator of crofting, but also charged with promoting it and with sustaining the system for future generations. Moreover, in seeking the success of crofters and crofting, should our prime focus be on economic success, social factors, the environment, population, agriculture, land use, culture, or community? We could say all of the above, of course, but perhaps the time will come when the debate about crofting may require some prioritisation between them.

However, what emerged strongly was that, although they are not identical, there is a fundamental synergy between the aims and perspectives of HIE and the



Minister for crofting Fergus Ewing, Carroll Buxton, director of regional development at HIE and Rod MacKenzie, convener of the Crofting Commission

Commission. The two organisations share a common geography; both are concerned to see businesses in the Highlands and Islands thrive; both have a strong emphasis on community; and both have a sharp focus on the need to prevent depopulation and bring new talent into the area. Both recognise the huge contribution that the crofting system has made in the past, shaping what the Highlands and

Islands are today, and its perhaps unique ability to root people and families to a geographical area and a living cultural tradition.

Members of the HIE board were particularly interested in the commission's ability to help create opportunities for new entrants by using our enforcement powers over residency and land use.

This meeting at board level was the start of a new and closer

relationship; and it now falls to officials of the two organisations to identify specific mutual initiatives that can be undertaken together.

This may include:

- work on future policy, to engage with the Scottish government in the phase 2 consideration of the future of crofting law or about the future of crofting support post-Brexit; or with the Scottish Land Commission about how crofting can make a positive contribution to the land reform agenda.
- place-based working, where the two organisations could focus jointly on particular locations to promote community growth, population growth, affordable housing developments, and perhaps new crofts.
- providing opportunities for crofters to take part in HIE-led economic development initiatives around, for example, the food and drink sector and tourism industry.
- exploring opportunities to drive economic, social and environmental value through strengthening relations between crofting communities and community landowners.

The specifics are yet to be worked out, but the cordial and positive discussion at board level gives a clear sense of mutual aims and a drive to make a positive difference together.

Why nine months is so important in croft registrations

AN APPLICATION to modify an entry in the Crofting Register can only be made after the end of the nine-month challenge period "on cause shown".

A couple of cases decided by the Scottish Land Court have highlighted the importance of the nine-month challenge period, following registration of a croft in the crofting register.

In one case, where the boundaries of a croft had been wrongly registered to include part of a neighbouring croft, and the neighbouring crofter had simply been too busy with other things to deal with a challenge timeously, the land court, in refusing the challenge made, observed: "In our opinion cause shown requires something which justifies, or at least excuses, the failure to make the application timeously. Illness and consequent inability to deal with the matter would be an example. If merely being too busy with other things was to be an adequate reason, the time

limit would be rendered nugatory. It also has to be noted in the present context that a time period of nine months for bringing a challenge is a very long one; far longer than most statutorily-prescribed time limits for bringing appeals."

However, in another case where the challenge was brought seven months after the expiry of the nine-month period, the court took the view that the specific circumstances involved were sufficient cause shown. In that particular case an initial inspection of the croft registration had appeared to suggest that all was well. It was only later, when plans were being drawn up for a house extension, that it was discovered that part of a decrofted house site had been mistakenly included in the neighbouring croft registration.

The land court observed that had they rejected the application then, unless the crofter who originally applied to register the croft agreed to apply for rectification: "the only remedy for

someone in the applicant's position would be to apply to resume the area owned by him that was erroneously included in the croft registration, but that would not, of course, solve any associated consequential problem of an area erroneously excluded therefrom. The introduction of the register was supposed to make life easier for crofters (and for that matter their neighbours) by establishing definitively the location of croft boundaries; we do not think that we would be doing the crofting community any favours were we to do so."

So whilst the land court may decide that cause has been shown, there can be no guarantee of that and you will always be better placed not having to argue it. Therefore, if you have concerns over how a neighbouring croft boundary has been registered do ensure you lodge your challenge before that nine month period expires.

Brian Inkster, Inksters Solicitors

SPIRIT OF CROFTING

Celebrating the spirit of crofting

SCF TOOK ITS gathering to Moray for the first time in October – a county which was added to the crofting world in 2010.

The Spirit of Crofting event celebrated the best in both crofting traditions and innovation in rearing, growing and marketing the highest quality local produce. Crofters and associated food producers gathered in the attractive Lossie-side village of Rothes, surrounded by some of the best whisky distilleries, to showcase how the crofting culture's emphasis on natural, non-intensive farming methods can result in some of the best and healthiest food to be found anywhere in the world.

Russell Smith, SCF's chair, welcomed attendees to the event, reviewing the current lay-of-the-land for crofting.

He started by saying that he wouldn't dwell on



Russell Smith, SCF chair, welcomes everyone



Brexit, as to do so would be too depressing, but observed that the whole issue brought home to us how diversification had to be key to the future of crofting – especially in these uncertain times. This will be the only way to keep people living and working in remote areas, producing high-quality food which must be seen as the primary purpose of the crofting system.

He expressed his pride at being able to introduce our new crofting awards for young crofters and crofting newcomers. The energy



and degree of innovation shown by the nominees and winners testifying eloquently to the fact that, despite what its detractors maintain, crofting is very far from dead. Many of the crofting businesses showcased and highlighted at the event demonstrated the importance of building local supply chains for the sustainability of crofting communities.

Russell hoped that after being infected with the spirit of all these newcomers, quality producers and trailblazers, attendees would go home with the determination to make ideas happen.

The keynote speaker on the first day of the Spirit of Crofting event was cabinet secretary for the rural economy, Fergus Ewing, who gave an upbeat speech – despite the looming *bùrach*,



Keynote speaker Fergus Ewing



Patrick Krause and Maria Scholten

as he called it, of Brexit – about the immediate outlook for crofting.

He reminded us at the outset about the extent to which crofters' rights had to be fought for, touching on the Battle of the Braes on Skye and the memorial to the fight for land for returning servicemen in Upper Coll, Lewis, which he had recently visited. The Clearances are still fresh in the minds of many in the crofting counties, but he was here, as he said, to celebrate that indomitable

crofting spirit.

Mr Ewing expressed his delight that the Spirit of Crofting event was providing a showcase for young crofters and new entrants to the crofting scene; and rightly highlighting some of the great business ideas that some of this new blood was bringing to both crofting and the Highlands and Islands. He emphasised that even though the SRDP scheme for new entrants had recently been closed, his team was working hard on a new and improved new entrant scheme for crofting, which would be a key element of the national development plan for crofting – assuring the audience that this would be introduced in the life of this current parliament. The crofting stakeholders' group, in which the SCF is one of the most active participants, is working hard to finalise proposals which will form part of the plan, before the final version is produced by the Scottish government.

Attention was drawn during his speech to the extent to which the food and drink industry is a major Scottish success story, of which crofting and the Highlands and Islands are crucial parts, as many of the producers highlighted by the Spirit

"... diversification ... will be the only way to keep people living and working in remote areas, producing high-quality food which must be seen as the primary purpose of the crofting system."



of Crofting event show so eloquently.

Mr Ewing reiterated that he and the rest of the Scottish Government were continuing intensive talks with their Westminster counterparts to get the best deal possible for Scottish agriculture. He stressed that one of the highest priority areas was safeguarding the vital less favoured area support scheme payments. He noted former deputy prime minister Damian Green's overheard private remark that "Scots were determined to go to war over hill farm payments" and observed

SPRIT OF CROFTING

that although he found Michael Gove was always extremely courteous in all his dealings, for now he would give Mr Gove "very high marks for courtesy, but very low marks for delivery."

Later, the cabinet secretary talked about the work the government is doing on a new planning bill, decrying the fact that in parts of the crofting counties whose tourist industries are booming, such as Oban, Skye, Lochalsh, it is almost impossible to get permission to build new houses.

In the question and answer session after his talk, Mr Ewing made it clear that he was very aware of the already-apparent problems with the escalating price of winter fodder, exacerbated by the disappearance of substantial volumes of distillery draff and pot-ale, diverted to green energy markets. Because of this very issue he had made loan payments for basic payment claimants, including the vast majority of crofters,

available on the earliest possible date legally – starting on the very day he was speaking.

He was also asked what the prospects for safeguarding the vital continental European outlets for Scottish sheep were and assured the audience that the Scottish government was doing everything it could to fight for uninterrupted access to the European single market. Much of the discussions in the media had revolved around scenarios to avoid the imposition of tariffs; but non-tariff barriers, eg those associated with single market regulations, could be even more critical in deciding whether these free flows of trade could continue on the other side of Brexit.

Questions were also asked about what could be done to both safeguard existing abattoirs, with threats or closures of facilities on Orkney and Lewis recently in the news, and increase and expand the availability of these to areas such as the vast majority of the western and northern Highlands, which are remote from the likes of Dingwall. Mr Ewing said he was very aware of the problems and his department was looking at ways of ameliorating the situation.

Tanja Lister from the multi-award-winning Kylesku Hotel in northwest Sutherland, which she runs with her partner Sonia Virechauveix, spoke about the way they have built up their business on the basis of an emphasis on the very best of local food. They have established a trusted network of suppliers, mostly from the local area,

featuring several local crofters from Assynt and Scourie, who supply top-quality pork, lamb, beef and vegetables. The meat they serve is full of the flavours of the natural vegetation from the crofts and hills of Sutherland.

Tanja spoke about how important it was to work closely and consistently with suppliers, making sure everybody knew what each others' requirements were and establishing mutual trust. The end result was that the hotel could effectively tell a story about all the key ingredients – a story that fitted with their mission to serve the very best food possible to their guests.

The event was blessed with glorious sunshine, with the birchwoods nearby glowing in the late autumn light as attendees went on field visits to Elchies British Boer Goat farm and Auld Mill Alpacas nearby.



Tanja Lister from Kylesku Hotel



Auld Mill Alpacas visit



Who are you?



Talks about goat husbandry on Elchies goat farm visit



Elchies British Boer goat farm

Hot topics!

ON THE afternoon of the first day, we had a very lively and engaged question-and-answer session in the town hall in Rothes, with Crofting Commission chief executive Bill Barron, crofting commissioner Mairi Mackenzie (West Sutherland, Wester Ross, Skye and Lochalsh), Russell Smith, Patrick Krause and SCF director Brendan O'Hanrahan

taking the questions, suggesting topical issues and trying to answer some of the questions thrown at them.

Among the many topics raised was what can be done to tackle croft neglect, including whether residency requirements should be tightened up – though the general consensus was that this was probably best left as it was for now. We agreed that the commission should regard those who indicated that they weren't using their crofts in crofting census returns as being a priority. The commission should

engage with them and try and find ways in which they could be persuaded to make the transition towards eventually handing over their crofts, with sublets being preferred as way of beginning that transition process.

It was commented on, in the context of doing more to encourage new entrants into crofting, that LANTRA, the Scottish land-based training organisation, was looking into possibly extending its efforts in the area of enabling new

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Questions from the floor



SPIRIT OF CROFTING

Hot topics!

...Continued from page 7

entrants into farming to crofting areas. Some scepticism was expressed as to whether they had the background and knowledge of crofting to be effective with such an initiative.

Russell Smith emphasised the need to give reassurance to older crofters when tackling this issue, that they have the security to keep their croft house, even if they sublet. Again, it was commented that some older crofters sitting on multiple crofts could perhaps be approached and persuaded to start at least subletting one or two of those crofts.

Bill Barron said with the price of crofts having risen to such high levels in some areas – particularly where a booming tourist industry had led to greater pressure on land, including for house sites – it had become practically impossible for many younger folk outwith crofting families, and even many within, to contemplate being in a position to get a croft. Subletting was again mentioned as one kind of halfway-house solution, though clearly insufficient in the long run for those who wanted to be able, for example, to build a new croft house.

Nick Molnar is a community land activist in Forres who's trying to see if it's possible to get access to land in the area from a local estate in order to create opportunities for land-management tenancies, maybe including crofts. He asked whether it might be possible to create croft tenancies which were time-limited. They wanted to give young households the opportunity to try farming/crofting for, say, ten years, and perhaps act as a stepping stone to a more permanent form of land tenure.

However, it was pointed out that wasn't possible under crofting law. One of the fundamental rights land rights campaigners had fought for – and been granted with the first crofting acts – was complete security of tenure and heritability rights, unconstrained by any landlord. Nonetheless, some did agree that a sort of training-wheel land tenure option might have a role in preparing people for longer-term tenancies or crofts.

We also briefly discussed the potential for engaging with Scottish Land and Estates to explore possible locations for the creation of new crofts – whether woodland or more traditional farmland models. Some large estate owners had already done this on a very small scale and there might be mileage in discussions with them in the context of land reform.

Ullapool-based David Heaney briefly described a social crofting initiative he's working on, sometimes called care farming, which SCF is also associated with. This enables people with various kinds of mental health issues, for example autism, to spend time working and living on crofts or farms. It has apparently been introduced already in Ireland and Norway, to the extent that 10% of all farms in the latter now participate in the project.

Diversification workshops

MIKE AND LUCY Goodwin, from Anam Cara croft in Rhuvolt, near Kinlochbervie, told the story of how they established their business preparing hand-cooked curries at their croft base and then delivering them up and down the west coast. They are a fascinating, if unusual, model of croft diversification. They have their own sheep and pigs, a polytunnel and use seaweed for manuring their lazy beds. The food they produce, based on their enviable on-the-ground research trips to the Indian subcontinent and Sri Lanka, always contains the most authentic spices and herbs; and you could say manages to combine the best of Highland crofting with the exoticism of Asia.

Another workshop featured the entertaining

Paul Parkyn, of Salt-Air Charcuterie, taking us through the delicious, but occasionally slightly risky, world of preparing cured hams and various kinds of salami, blood sausage etc. We learnt a huge amount about the importance and interactions of air, salt and humidity, as well as learning how to encourage the right fungi, but at the same time discourage the bad ones – a lot of very applied chemistry and biology! Paul's business is based in Lochside near Ullapool.

The charismatic Craig MacKay of the River Spey Anglers Association reminded us of a time when most crofters gleaned a large and important part of their diets from salmon, trout and seafood. They were thus dependent on and appreciative of the quality of freshwater and marine environments, for the health of these stocks.

He said there effectively used to be what you could call salmon crofters, and maybe there should be again. Craig pointed out the potential for crofters to gain both food and a living, at least partially, from these rich, if somewhat depleted, natural resources. He contrasted the healthy state of fish stocks in the past with the situation today where, he said, many salmon stocks in particular had been ruined by intensive aquaculture.

We were also entertained throughout the talk by Peter and Gordon doing a simultaneous fly-tying demonstration as we watched – truly a multimedia experience!



Mike and Lucy Goodwin from Anam Cara Croft



Sampling the curry



Paul Parkyn of Salt-Air Charcuterie



Craig MacKay, River Spey Anglers Association workshop Salmon Crofting



River Spey Anglers Association workshop fly-tying



Charcuterie

SPIRIT OF CROFTING



Award winners Sandra Baer, Lynn Cassells and Domhnall Macsween

Spirit of Crofting was also the occasion for the announcement of the winners of our inaugural Best Crofting Newcomer and Young Crofter of the Year awards, followed by presentations to the winners.

The Euan MacRae Best Crofting Newcomer award is for new entrants with a keen interest in the land who have recently made a start in crofting. The award is named after Euan MacRae of Drumbeg, Sutherland, a young and infectious enthusiastic crofter who sadly passed away in summer 2017 just before his 20th birthday.

The Young Crofter of the Year award is aimed at those aged 40 and under who have taken their first steps on the crofting ladder or have recently established themselves in crofting and are good

examples of best practice and success within their field.

SCF chief executive Patrick Krause commented: "We were very pleased to get the interest we did from our new and young crofters; it is quite daunting to stand up and be counted. The judges found it very difficult to narrow down to the short-list and almost impossible to pick the winners from the runners-up. However, the winners are outstanding crofters and very much deserve the prestige of the respective awards."

Euan's mother, Amanda MacRae, presented the award for Best Crofting Newcomer 2018 to Lynn Cassells and Sandra Baer from Lynbreck Croft in Strathspey. Lynn and Sandra arrived at Lynbreck, a 150-acre croft near Grantown-on-Spey, with a vision of farming with nature for healthy land and living. They are determined to make a living entirely from their croft and have built up a mixed sheep and cattle herd recently to go with their rare breed pigs and hens, the latter producing for their 'eggmob'. They are very keen to spread their message as far as possible, using social media and staging events on their



Euan MacRae with Dave the scone-scoffing sheep



SCF training manager Lucy Beattie and Amanda MacRae



Lucy Williams with freshly picked leaf



Domhnall Macsween on his croft in Ness, Lewis



Lynn and Sandra with their tree planting spears, ready to go to work

croft. One of the themes of the event was how some of the most successful crofting businesses today are skilled at using modern media platforms to publicise their products and businesses.

The runner-up for Best Crofting Newcomer was Lucy Williams, who with her husband Chris runs Tulloch Tea, a company pioneering the growing and selling of tea – not in the Himalayan foothills, but from their croft near Bonar Bridge in East Sutherland.

The Young Crofter 2018 award went to Domhnall Macsween from Ness, in Lewis. Domhnall is better known to many as Sweeny from Ness, the hyperactive and ebullient crofting entrepreneur from BBC Alba's *Air an Lot* programme, which features Domhnall as he goes about building and expanding his croft business – most of which is conducted in his native Gaelic. The programme has followed him as he's built new henhouses, expanded his sheep flock, getting his sheepskins tanned and started keeping Highland cattle. His business now sees him despatching meat from pigs, sheep and cattle on his croft to all corners of Britain, as well as an impressive poultry empire. Domhnall quickly showed his delight at winning the award on social media, where he has already built a sizeable following.

The award was presented by Rear Admiral Chris Hockley, chief executive of the MacRobert Trust, which sponsored the prizes.

...Continued on page 10



Patrick Krause

SPRIT OF CROFTING



Young Crofter runner-up Beth Rose in action on the croft

...Continued from page 9

Runner-up for Young Crofter went to Beth Rose of Beechwood Croft in Invernessshire. Beth and her family work their 35 acre croft, which backs onto the Monadhliath, stocking Shetland cattle, sheep, chickens, ducks and pigs.

Patrick concluded, "With these standard-bearers for young and new-coming crofters, all bursting with ideas and energy, it looks as if crofting is still in rude good health in many areas and we can dare to be more optimistic about its future."



Nearly gala dinnertime

The key focus of the event was on adding value to produce and to showcase food produced in Moray. Dede MacGillivray, a well known crofter/caterer from Croft no 8, Camuscross in Skye brought in a fantastic team of servers who helped to keep people fed. During the day sandwiches made with breads from the bakehouse at Findhorn, local cheeses and meats were served with Nairnshire carrot and ginger soup or Scotch broth. The evening meal showcased goat from

Elchies in both the Scotch broth and goat tagine main course. Many sheep producers were heard to comment on the tenderness of the goat and we were pleased to be joined at the meal by Jools and Brian of Elchies goat farm.

The after-dinner speaker was former SCF company secretary John Bannister MBE, who looked back at 20 years of SCF training.



John Bannister MBE



Lee-Ann Sutherland, JHI NEWBIE project leader

After dinner, for those still left standing a ceilidh dance was put on by the Dandy Ceilidh band. Notable dancers included Tim and Beth Rose who danced very ably with the micro crofter (due date in January) on board, as well as Alec Campbell and Helen O'Keefe from east and west Sutherland showing us all how we should be dancing.

On Saturday morning, we had the infectious Dr Lee-Ann Sutherland (a Canadian, despite her surname) from the James Hutton Institute in Aberdeen, telling us about the NEWBIE project.

This stands for New Entrant netWork: Business models for innovation, entrepreneurship and resilience in European agriculture. An EU-funded initiative, based particularly on farm incubator models which have been successful in France and Ireland, it aims to help those either seeking access to land or who have recently entered the farming sector. All of these tend to face common barriers: access to land, labour, capital, housing, markets, knowledge and the human and business networks needed to acquire these resources.

The project consortium is a mix of agricultural

advisors, agricultural educators, researchers and an NGO specialising in establishing new entrant incubators. The project runs from 2018 to 2021 and hopes to both provide support and knowledge to new entrants, as well as looking at which models are most successful for improving access to farming for new entrants and, crucially, then increasing the chances for success of those entrants once they get their foot in the door.

One of the things Lee-Ann said they were hoping to achieve was increased up-take of new entry models (eg share farming, joint ventures and farming incubators) amongst new entrants, farming advisors and policy makers right across Europe. They hoped that through the project they could find ways of involving new-entrant crofters in the NEWBIE network, as well as looking at particular issues – and solutions – which faced actual or would-be new crofters.

Rounding off the morning's presenters, Simon Erlanger talked about the importance of Harris



Simon Erlanger, CEO Harris Gin speaking on social good

Distillery and Harris Gin having a strong social commitment. Local people work for the company and are encouraged to participate in all aspects of its running, instilling a sense of ownership.

Simon finished on an inspiring note, telling the story of how Harris Gin had won a prestigious award and it was employees that went to the ceremony to collect the accolade.

This led Patrick to sum up the event's themes of enterprise, diversification and particularly people. He thanked the funders and all who had made the event a success, both organisers and participants.

Celebrating the Spirit of Crofting was funded by Moray LEADER, National Lottery Awards for All, Princes Countryside Fund, NEWBIE and the MacRobert Trust. The MacRobert Trust sponsored the awards and donated prize money to the winning nominees.

The event was organised by SCF's training team. Our thanks to Lucy, Tina and Ailsa for all their hard work, and to Brendan O'Hanrahan for reporting on the event.



This project is being part-financed by the Scottish Government and the European Community Moray LEADER 2014-2020 Programme



ON THE CROFT

A tale of two abattoirs

Mull and Skye; two inner Hebridean islands with, you might think, many similarities, writes SCF's Donald Murdie.

WE RECENTLY visited Mull for the first time and were immediately struck by the familiarity of the land forms, including waterfalls on the basalt cliffs being blown upwards by a severe gale!

Both islands result from volcanic activity and are formed, predominantly, of relatively young lava rocks. There are important differences though, resulting from recent history. Skye has a stable and growing resident population of around ten thousand. Mull's permanent population, in a land area a bit smaller than Skye, is under three thousand, over a third of which are in the town of Tobermory.

The Clearances reduced Mull's people from ten thousand to a level similar to today's, but it has recovered from an even lower level. This is partly a reflection of Mull's low number of crofts, around 120, as against two thousand in Skye. The Mull crofts are very much on the poorer land. No surprise there of course. You are immediately struck by the vast and empty tracts of hill and glen, and the huge distances on often-tortuous roads between the scattered settlements, as nearly all of the island consists of large estates and hill farms.

Like Skye, Mull is experiencing a boom in tourism. Argyll and Bute Council has responded

by an almost total resurfacing of the island's roads, in complete contrast to the Highland Council's reaction in Skye.

Another striking difference is Mull's apparently thriving local food economy. There are regular producers' markets throughout the island, plus a network of farm and croft shops; and local produce is available in village shops in the likes of Bunessan and Fionnphort.

*The abattoir is so busy
that it has been fully
booked from mid-summer
until January*

Why is this? Mull and Iona have had an abattoir, for over twenty years, run co-operatively for the benefit of crofters and farmers. This means that beef, lamb and pork, reared on the islands, is readily available for local consumers and visitors. In turn this has stimulated the market for other island produce such as the famous Isle of Mull cheese, bakery goods and vegetables.

Currently, the abattoir is so busy that it has been fully booked from mid-summer until January. Coming from Skye, we looked on this with

envy and took the opportunity to eat as much as we could in a week of the very fine produce available. Locally in northwest Skye we have the very successful Glendale Highland Market, which includes beef and chicken from the excellent Skye free-range croft enterprise in Vatten. They, and Orbst Farm, also supply local restaurants. This could be multiplied many times if we had our own abattoir for Skye and Lochalsh.

So where are we now on the long, hard road towards that goal? We have a fully-designed and costed project; a site identified with planning permission; a registered community benefit company; and a highly professional working group including an architect, a quantity surveyor, a management accountant, a business development adviser and a Michelin-starred chef, as well as other crofters and a farmer.

The major obstacle to progress is a state-aids ruling limiting public sector funding to forty percent. However, this is currently being challenged at the highest level with the active help of our local members of parliament at Holyrood and Westminster.

At the time of writing we have been awarded a major grant contribution from the Prince's Countryside Trust, which is a huge endorsement of the potential of the project. We will get there.

We hope to write more on the Mull and Iona Abattoir in the next issue.



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ON THE CROFT

Donald's hortiblog

AT THE END of my last column, I wished for "a good drop of rain... as long as it stops".

We got it, and it didn't! Out in the west, we've hardly had a dry day since the second week of July.

That said, most crops have revelled in the early heat, followed by the plentiful water supply. In the polytunnels we had the biggest-ever crops of aubergines, cucumbers, peppers and chillies. With aubergines it is important not to let them be shaded at any stage. Otherwise they do well in the same conditions as tomatoes.

This year we grew onions from seed rather than sets and this proved a huge success. From seeds sown in February, the onions were planted in a well-manured bed in a tunnel in April and lifted in July, having ripened well in the June heat. The early summer conditions were also ideal for the overwintered garlic crop. Tomatoes also did well, except that the exceptional heat of the early season caused the first flower trusses to abort.

A couple of dry days in mid-October allowed us to lift the potatoes. Normally we like to get them up a few weeks earlier to



Early crop of Red Duke of York in polytunnel, Lewis

reduce slug damage, but the crop was excellent. Despite the wet weather, we were free of blight.

Discussion of potatoes amongst crofters can be a bit of a minefield, but here we go.

Traditionally, highland and island folk demand a dry potato, hence the great popularity of Kerr's Pink. We used to grow them on our heavy, peaty soil in Lewis, as well as Edzell Blue, another dry one. For a very early polytunnel crop we grew Red Duke of York.

On our mineral soil in Skye, after various trials, we have settled on

King Edward and the fairly new variety Isle of Jura. This has good flavour, high resistance to disease and produces a good yield, but it might not be dry enough for some tastes. This year we added the well-known Rooster, which is quite dry, and it has been very successful. It's a matter of choosing a variety for the soil and weather conditions. For example, the alkaline soil of the machair will cause scab on many potato varieties, but Record does very well, as does Sharpe's Express as an early, provided it is lifted before the blight season.

Several traditional Shetland potato varieties, not just the popular Shetland Black, have been kept going by dedicated crofters such as Mary and Tommy Isbister of Burland, Trondra. It would be good to know of other local varieties that are still grown, such as the Lewis Black, or *buntata dubh*.

Whatever you grow, the taste and cooking quality of the potato will vary according to the soil, which is true of all crops. Our King Edward might be different from yours. The French have a word for it – *terroir*.



The Isbisters' selection of native Shetland potato varieties

Cheviot orphan rules the roost

This orphan Cheviot ewe lamb, writes SCF vice-chair Yvonne White, though shunned by the other Cheviots, was accepted by the thuggish gang of North Ronaldsays on her croft in Kingsburgh on Skye.

THE CHEVIOT orphan and the cross-North Ronaldsay lamb in the picture became friends, being of similar age.

The Cheviot lamb is totally integrated with the North Ronaldsays, to the point that she eats seaweed; and though now fully grown she is still

with them. Indeed, she is their leader, but I suspect that is only on sufferance as the North Ronaldsays can outrun the Cheviots and are much smarter and adept at getting as much food as possible.

She can be seen leading the marauding gang of North Ronaldsays.



North Ronaldsay ewe and cross lamb – if we get no joy here with extra food, we may as well go eat seaweed!



Hello, where is my elevenses?

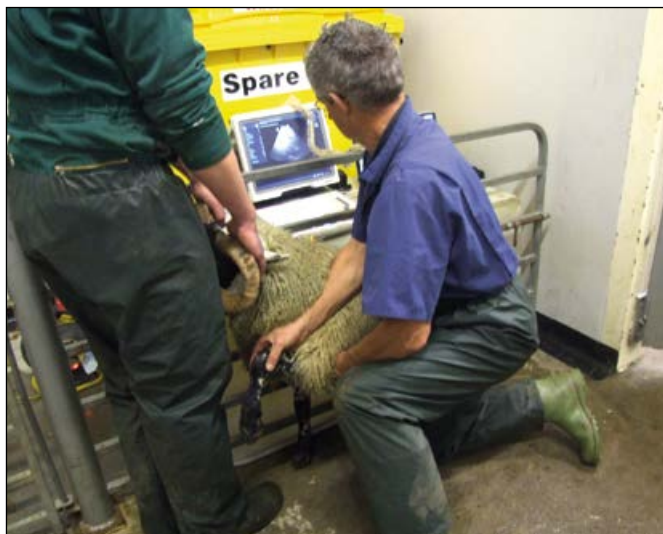
ON THE CROFT

Where are we with OPA control?

OVINE **PULMONARY** adenocarcinoma (OPA) is an infectious lung cancer specific to sheep, caused by a virus known as jaagsiekte sheep retrovirus.

Typical signs in an affected animal are difficulty in breathing, often with marked loss in weight, although clinical signs may not show for several years. OPA is commonly introduced to flocks through the purchase of apparently healthy animals carrying the virus, which can spread to other animals within the flock. Major routes of infection are by inhalation of infectious virus or by direct contact with infected respiratory secretions. All breeds of sheep can be affected and currently there is no evidence to suggest that any specific breed is more or less susceptible than others.

There is no reliable test for detection of individual infected animals prior to the growth of OPA tumours. Recently Moredun has been investigating the application of transthoracic ultrasound scanning for the detection of OPA. This technique is able to identify tumours of greater than 1-2 cm in size. Importantly, this is before clinical signs of OPA become apparent and



OPA scanning

so provides a means for detecting the disease much earlier than previous methods.

The advantages of screening whole flocks using transthoracic ultrasound scanning to identify sheep with pre-clinical OPA include removal of these animals from flocks with immediate economic and welfare benefits, as the sheep may be sold for slaughter whilst still in good condition. Removing OPA-

affected sheep as soon as possible should reduce the risk of the virus spreading in the flock.

The results to date on scanning whole flocks and culling sheep with identifiable tumours indicate a year-on-year reduction in the number of OPA-positive sheep found at each scanning, but it is too early to say if it will be possible to eventually eradicate OPA from a flock using this test-and-cull regime.

Other management tools for controlling OPA include good biosecurity.

- Remove and cull affected animals and their lambs as soon as clinical signs are suspected.
- Minimise bringing sheep into close contact on affected farms, such as indoor housing, trough and ring feeding and transporting.
- Closed flocks should be maintained, with replacements only sourced from flocks free of OPA, or trusted sources.
- New stock should ideally be quarantined for several months and monitored for signs of respiratory disease before mixing with existing stock. Movement of sheep, including rams, between farms should also be minimised.
- Contaminated areas and equipment where infected sheep have been held should be disinfected or, if this is not possible, left without sheep for at least two months.

For further information visit the Moredun website: www.moredun.org or contact Dr Chris Cousins, Moredun Research Institute – Chris.Cousins@moredun.ac.uk.

Crofting and the Farm Advisory Service

Are you looking for crofting advice?

THE FARM Advisory Service (FAS) has been in operation for a couple of years, with over 2000 crofters taking advantage of its free or subsidised advice. The FAS also provides events in the crofting counties and a range of articles, videos and publications intended to help crofting businesses.

Some aspects of the service are free whilst more tailored advice is provided at a discount, through the SAC subscription.

Free advice line

The free advice line operates Monday to Friday, between 9am and 5pm. Advice from a local advisor is available on a variety of topics such as sheep tagging rules, grants, subsidies, feeding stock, lime and fertiliser and many other technical issues. The number is 0300 323 0161.

Croft and small farm subscription

Another feature of the FAS is the Croft and Small Farm Advisory Service. The croft and small farm

subscription follows on from the popular SAC crofters' subscription and provides two hours of advice from SAC advisers.

Events and discussion groups

On-farm meetings are great ways to see what others are doing, catch up and learn new information and techniques. Many events are coming up over winter, along with evening meetings to keep crofters up-to-date with schemes and technical info. Check the calendar on www.fas.scot

Videos and podcasts

The FAS website has a dedicated crofting and common grazing section with info and short videos, eg on croft succession; and podcasts which are great ways to catch up when in the car.

The website also has application forms for Integrated Land Management Plans (ILMP); specialist advice; mentoring for new entrants; and carbon audits.

Siobhan Macdonald, SAC Consulting, Portree



Gavin explaining drainage issues at first test hole

ON THE CROFT

Uist croft and nature notes

from Rebecca Cotton



Seaweed harvesting

SUMMER HAS swished through to winter like a theatrical curtain, surprising us all. It's the season of sand and rain exfoliation, burnishing clean everything in its pathway.

The season of gales and geese sweeps over Uist. Barnacles are coming in for winter and the greylags are in perpetual motion, moved on and off grazing and fleeing the gun.

I search for more familiar autumn

comforts, substituting fallen leaves, ripe plum and apple windfalls for golden wrack, rusty gateways and crimson wax caps: jelly fungi to me. The huge ginger hairy fox moth caterpillars lie in ambush on the moors.

The first dead seal pups wash up on the beaches, casualties from the Monarch Isles' huge grey seal clan.

Sprout the dog and I set off for the shore with an old carrot sack to continue our daily collection of mainly fishing and farming plastic waste. It's a small gesture and there are treasures to be had.

There's another deadly form of pollution out there in the vast Atlantic. Twenty-two beaked whales washed up dead on North and South Uist not long ago. Is it due to military sonar activity, which can give whales the bends? There is to be an investigation.

The time for washing fleeces is over and I am harvesting thoughts and ideas to make new work. My St Kilda Challenge vessel made from the resident rare Soay sheep fleece will hardly sail home. In September, Uist Wool hosted the eighth North Atlantic Native Sheep and Wool Conference. Fascinating stories of entrepreneurship and conservation

were shared by woolly-loving delegates in lochar Hall.

Huge piles of kelp and ruddy pink dulse are building up along the west coast and some crofters are beginning to haul it in, valuable fertilizer for machair corn and potatoes. I have also become a collector of seaweed and sheep dung, albeit on a far less grand scale. With the addition of machair sand, this concoction was known locally as flagais, the perfect compost for garden veg, according to Charlie, my go-to-crofter for traditional knowledge.

I heed his advice, and with the small amount of winter brainpower I have left, devote it to a biodynamic agriculture course on-line. Weirdly and rather wonderfully it ties everything together and I feel lighter.

Rebecca Cotton was part of the team who ran the Machair LIFE + Project on Uist, from 2010-2014. She stayed on and now works as a landscape architect and maker of felt.

For more information about her ocean plastic collection campaign please see #rubbishdogdays.

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**Keeping wonderful Kerry cows**

Sally Ann Jackson from the Black Isle praises a thrifty traditional breed.

It was my mother's idea. Born and bred in Eire, she knew the Kerry cows well.

She said they would suit the LFASS fields of the smallholdings my sons have on the Black Isle. And they do! They are ideal for the Highlands and Islands – farms, crofts and smallholdings. They are thrifty, good natured, hardy, healthy and light-footed.

They live out all year, come rain, wind or snow. They do like trees or gorse or a lean-to shed for shelter when rain and wind combine, otherwise they ignore the weather.

They calf easily to a Kerry or other small native bull. Mature cows (for third calf onwards) can go to a larger bull. Mine have gone to an Aberdeen Angus bull this year which gives the Aberdeen Angus premium for selling the bullocks.

They follow a bucket. Kerrys are greedy so are tameable with food. They have character and individuality and they reward your patience and working with them with their cooperation.



Dolce, my favourite, with horns – most are now dehorned

I love this breed because they are docile and don't scare me. And they are pretty.

They are not large cows. They are of dairy build, putting their food stores into milk so they are very good for milking or as a suckler cow. The bullocks, though maturing slowly, are stockier and heavier. The beef is amazing!

I run day courses for one to four people who would like to keep cattle for the first time. They cover everything you might need to know from registering for a holding and herd number to showing, transporting and selling. Accommodation is in a log cabin on the smallholding with panoramic views.

Phone me, Sally Ann, on 07876717073 for further information about Kerrys (I have some to sell) or the day course.

ON THE CROFT

Green energy... at what cost?



© Martin Benson

THERE WOULD be few who would argue against the need to explore all options for a greener, more energy-efficient society.

However, as one SCF member found out last month, pot-ale syrup – used as an essential ingredient in his winter calf feeding programme – is no longer available. The explanation given by the feed supplier was that they had been unable to source any. The alternative being offered was four times more expensive.

Alarmed at the loss of this vital element of his winter feed programme, combined with the rising cost of feed and haulage, the member felt that it was becoming increasingly difficult to keep livestock. There is a growing concern that crofters are getting rid of their stock entirely.

Where has the pot-ale syrup and draff gone?

As recently as January this year, the *Farmers Guardian* was reporting on “significant quantities of draff and pot-ale syrup to be available to Scottish livestock farmers, following a review of Diageo’s distilling operations” (*Farmers Guardian*; A. Robinson; 6 Dec 2017). Yet our member was advised by his feed supplier that they could no longer supply pot-ale syrup (a distillery by-product). The product was being diverted from animal feed to the more lucrative renewable energy sector, in particular biomass burners and anaerobic digesters (ADs).

SCF contacted the trading office of a national feed supplier in the hope of shedding some light on the pot-ale situation. We were informed that the syrup and draff is sold in a silent, online auction.

Typically, although the sale is anonymous, feed suppliers are generally aware of the successful bidder... but not on this occasion. An unknown buyer bought the lot.

There is increasing worry that distillery by-products suitable for the agri sector are being diverted to the green energy sector, notably biomass and ADs, arising from government incentives to meet greening targets.

The demand for feed is not constant throughout the year. Therefore it should be feasible for a quota system to be put in place. Crofters are clearly at a disadvantage when up against industry and large commercial farms that are being encouraged with incentives. There is some irony in that one of the key selling points of ADs was that they could convert agricultural waste into sustainable green energy, when in fact they are now buying up essential elements of crofters’ feed and bedding supplies as feedstock for these renewables.

The issue was put to crofting minister Fergus Ewing on behalf of members during his address at the Spirit of Crofting event in Rothes in September. While acknowledging that he was very aware of the difficulties this was causing small producers, he noted that it was the UK government that set the rules for ADs. However he added that he would be bringing this up in a meeting scheduled for 29th November with the major distillers.

If you have experienced similar problems, we would like to hear about it. Please get in touch with Sandra in HQ, 01599 5300005; email hq@crofting.org.

Self-build loan fund

THE SCOTTISH government announced a new Scotland-wide self-build loan fund in September, with the Highlands Small Communities Housing Trust appointed as agent, administering the fund on the Scottish government’s behalf.

It is recognised that within the crofting counties self-build can be the only way a crofter or family members can secure accommodation near or on the croft. Whilst the fund is not specifically

targeted at crofters, it can provide a useful backstop when they have exhausted all other avenues to finance their homes.

The self-build loan fund can also be used alongside a croft house grant. However, both schemes have different terms and conditions attached to them. The self-build loan fund can lend up to a maximum of £175,000, which is secured against the house plot. Because of this the house plot requires to be de-crofted.

The loan covers the period of the build and is repaid upon completion, with the borrower obtaining a standard mortgage over the new home to repay the loan. The self-build loan fund is targeted toward people who do not presently own a home, but who have the ability to build.

The full criteria attached to the self-build loan fund can be found on the Highlands Small Communities Housing Trust website www.hscht.co.uk/scotland-self-build-loan-fund.html.



© HSCHT

Self Build Loan Fund

Have you been unable to obtain self build finance?

Then the new Scotland wide Self Build Loan Fund may be able to help.

Loans up to £175,000 are available, subject to meeting the criteria.

Full details are available at:

www.hscht.co.uk/scotland-self-build-loan-fund

e-mail: selfbuild@hscht.co.uk | tel: 01463 572 030



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ON THE CROFT

Small croft campsites

SCF member Tom Stephens explores the possibilities.

I'VE OFTEN wondered why there are not more small-scale campsites around.

With the Camping and Caravanning Club exempted scheme, if you limit yourself to five touring caravans or motorhomes and ten tents, as long as everyone is a member of the club, you do not need planning permission. All you need is the agreement of your neighbours and a safe access.

You have to provide a cold water tap and a tank to empty chemical toilets, which can then be pumped out by Scottish Water. Waste cannot go into a septic tank, as it will stop the bacterial activity. You do not have to provide electricity, as most motorhomes are self-sufficient.

This means very little investment is needed, and your new business can be run on the minimum scale of just taking on one motorhome, or a few tents. The publicity and listing is all undertaken by the club, and I don't think it costs anything to

get set up through them. You don't need to be able to use, or even own, a computer. You can take all your bookings by post or telephone.

So you can start up for next to nothing, but if it doesn't suit, get out without loss. If it does suit, you can re-invest the earnings to expand a little, with the benefit of learning as you go along, and finding out from customers what the priority should be for improvements.

Quite a few club members specifically want very small, simple rural sites. They also like something different, so however quirky your site may be, there are always people who will be delighted with it. It can soon be hassle-free, with customers returning year after year. You can make any rules you want, to suit your way of life. If you want to have spells with no tourists, just don't take any bookings for those times.

This gives crofters without much time or money the opportunity to benefit from tourism. Visitors get a chance to interact with a local person, learn a little about the area and see it from a different



© Martin Benson - Tree

perspective. The majority travel from one big site to another, visiting four or five must-see attractions and leave none the wiser.

More grass-roots involvement in and benefit from tourism could slowly transform the way it develops. I have deliberately not referred to the tourist industry, as this approach is almost the antithesis of industry. It should definitely not be looked at in the same vein as mass marketing.

It will take many different shapes, according to owners' personalities. They can enjoy setting

up something which appeals to them, rather than what they think a campsite should be. Then the work feels more like a natural extension of their life.

If this type of provision grows, it could benefit local producers and local guided walks. I see a lot of tourists who are desperate to experience something genuine and local, and to feel that for however short a time, they have tapped into a mutually beneficial system that exploits nobody.

www.ashaig-campsite-skye.co.uk

Women in agriculture, women in crofting

YOU WILL remember that we reported on a fascinating piece of research that was carried out on behalf of the Scottish government on Women in Farming and the Agriculture Sector.

The report can be found on-line or provided in hard copy. Numerous cases were exposed of gender inequity in the family, on the holding, in the mart, in organisations, in training; in fact in every aspect of the agricultural sector. Crofting, on the whole, seems to be a lot better than other parts of agriculture, perhaps due to women often taking sole care of crofts when their menfolk were working away, or maybe there is a tradition of more women-led crofts, or crofters are more gender balanced; who knows? But we cannot be complacent – we all know that there are still gender inequalities and bigoted behaviour in the crofting world too.

Following on from the research, the first minister of Scotland, Rt Hon Nicola Sturgeon MSP, launched a Women in Agriculture taskforce, chaired by cabinet secretary for rural economy Fergus Ewing and Sutherland hill farmer Joyce Campbell. SCF has a place on the taskforce. We have reported on the work of the taskforce in other issues of *The Crofter*.

Causing some confusion, there is another, older, group called Women

In Agriculture. It is well respected and its events well-attended, but it seems from the membership list that this group consists mainly of industry representatives and agri-businesses.

By popular demand, SCF has run some women-only crofting skills courses. These have been very well-attended and the feedback very positive. Participants have said that not only do they feel more comfortable in a women-only environment, especially for the more traditionally thought of as male skills, but that they also have really valued meeting other women crofters, sharing stories and feeling solidarity. Many participants stay in touch with each other after courses.

This has made us think. Would a Women in Crofting group be appropriate? Is it something women crofters would want? It could be an opportunity to meet other women crofters and to share ideas, experience and skills. It could provide a context for training or events. It could provide a collective voice. Possibilities abound.

A bit of asking around has made us think it is wanted and could be helpful. However, it really needs to be shown that there will be enough interest to start down the road to making it happen. Therefore, if YOU want it, please let Sandra at HQ know.



Eleanor Arthur, a former SCF chair, on her croft in Shetland



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ON THE CROFT

Derelict to productive croft

It can be easy to see all that is wrong with a croft that has not been used for decades, writes SAC Portree's Ross MacKenzie.

BUT IT IS seeing through the overgrowth to the potential that can be the challenge. Through the Farm Advisory Service (FAS), three meetings were set up under the heading *Derelict to Productive*, to help those making decisions and moving forward with their crofts.

The first meeting involved an indoor and outdoor session, with the host croft courtesy of one of the attendees who is now in the position to start working her croft. We were delighted to be joined by Gillian McKnight, a SAC conservation and biodiversity specialist; Donnie Chisholm, a woodland expert with the Woodlands Trust Scotland; and Shelagh Parlange of RSPB, who works tirelessly on improving environments for a large range of birds on Skye.

With an excellent turn-out of attendees who were mainly new to crofting, we considered where to start and how to make those first steps. It takes time to get to know your croft, and setting out a

plan for the future is the best start you can make. We had fun with the crofting version of Blind Date, titled Croft Date, a fun game where a problem was solved by three contestants' answers. The theme continued with the emphasis on how you learn about your land over time and how you can make improvements.

Gillian gave an overview of the importance of conservation and biodiversity to crofting land and spoke of the agri-environmental climate scheme, and how you can apply. Donnie gave a good insight on croft woodland and especially shelter-belts. With a strong wind blowing outside, notes were duly taken. Shelagh's great knowledge of the Waternish area was well received, especially the work she does for the corncrake.

Session two saw the group brave the wind and rain as they went out to inspect the croft, to put some ideas together. Walking the land, they stopped off at four work-stations to get further advice on croft woodland and shelter belts; conservation and biodiversity; corncrake habitat and wader birds; soil management and eligible grant aid.

Once back to the hall and warmed with a cup



Main group walking down to croft

of tea, the groups gave feedback on ideas and future plans. These were well thought out and showed a good understanding of agricultural enterprises. The meeting closed with positivity in the hall, as people left to plan their crofts' futures.

The final Derelict to Productive meeting includes a farm visit and is on 2nd February 2019. Check the Farm Advisory Service website for this meeting and similar events in your area. www.fas.scot

Crofters' seeds and local varieties

Project officer Maria Scholten gives an update.

THE ARTICLES in the previous edition of *The Crofter* about two new seed projects – UK and Ireland Seed Sovereignty Programme and the H2020-funded Farmer's Pride project – resonated with readers in a profound way.

Two crofters from Lochaber contacted me, one about her Sutherland kale and a wish to see more seed-saving. The second crofter "just wanted to reach out again as a young crofter deeply interested in local seed and local food production. In particular reintroducing grain down here in Lochaber, where traditional corn crops have been lost, and doing some more heritage vegetables."

A third reader had just returned from Shetland with Shetland kale seeds for planting out on the mainland and offered me kale seed.

The story about Sutherland kale is interesting. Seed sourced near Ullapool around 2003 went to the Real Seed Company in south west Wales, who are successfully selling it. From Wales seed went to Lochaber, where it is productively seed-saved by the crofter, with 98% germination rate.

Shetland kale is now also grown for seed sales in Wales. And of course, kale is commercially grown near Inverness.

Given the interest in crofters' kale, the future of these kales may not be as bleak as first thought. And perhaps crofters should start selling the seeds so that reproduction occurs in the Highlands, the original home of the kale, where it has adapted to Highland conditions.

A practical next step to foster the interest in traditional crofters' varieties will be an informal technical visit to Uist – to bring interested young crofters from Lochaber in contact with corn-growing crofters on Uist, to learn about Uist corn-growing practices and look at machinery and seed – provided the Uist crofters can spare some after a very difficult seed-harvesting season this



Neil MacPherson from Lionacleit with his Uist barley

year. This visit will be supported through the UK and Ireland Seed Sovereignty Programme (www.seedsovereignty.info). The beautiful photograph on this page is taken by Sophie Gerrard for the *We Feed The World* photography initiative. It pays homage to small-scale food producers on six continents, and their importance – from climate change to local food, fertile soils and public goods such as preservation of local varieties like Uist barley. The exhibition in London mid-October

attracted over 7000 viewers and the *Sunday Telegraph* featured the story of the photographs taken on Uist.

Please contact me if you want to obtain some Highland-grown Sutherland or Shetland kale seeds; or to have a chat about seeds and local varieties; or would like to show the photographs of *We Feed The World* in your community.

maria@gaianet.org or phone 07388086438

Tilleadh a' mhadaidh-allaidh

BHA MI a' leughadh an t-seachdain seo gun do chaill aon fheurach-coitcheann ann an Nirribhidh 450 caora a-mach as 1300 a chuir iad a-mach gu am monadh aca aig toiseach an t-samhraidh agus an dùil gur e madaidhean-allaidh bu chuireach.

Nis chaidh am madadh-allaidh mu dheireadh ann an Alba a mharbhadh le Camshron Loch lall ann an Siorrachd Pheàirt ann an 1680. Air neo chaidh a mharbhadh le fear MacCuitheinn ann an Siorrachd Narann ann an 1743. Co-dhiù cha robh madadh-allaidh ri fhaicinn air monaidhean na h-Alba fad dà cheud bliadhna. Ach sna beagan bhliadhnaichean mu dheireadh thàinig moladh am bàrr bho chuid a dhaoine gum biodh e na bhuannachd don Gàidhealtachd madaidhean-allaidh a thoirt air ais. Gum biodh madaidhean-allaidh a' cumail àireamhan fèidh fo smachd agus gan cumail a' gluasad, gus am biodh cothrom fàis aig craobhan òga a bhios an-dràsta gan ithe. Mar a bhiodh dùil cha robh duine sam bith aig a bheil caoraich a' cur fàilte air a' phlan seo nuair a nochd e. A dh'aindeoin sin tha sinn a' cluinntinn barrachd mu dhèidhinn a leithid agus air a' bheachd "rewilding" o chionn goirid.

Ach mar a tha an naidheachd bho thaobh thall a' Chuain a Tuath ag innse, ann an Nirribhidh tha tuathanaich chaorach a' fulang bho àrdachadh àireamhan nam madaidhean-allaidh, gun ghuth air na mathain, lincs, iolairan no an neas mhòr. Chaidh lagh tron Phàrlamaid ann an 2011 a' toirt àite san dùthaich airson an dà chuid beathaichean-



creachaidh agus beathaichean-ionaltraidh. Tha, mar sin, beathaichean-creachaidh gan dìon agus airgead-diolaidd ga phàigheadh a-mach do thuathanaich a tha a' call stoc. Tha Riaghaltas Nirribhidh a' pàigheadh a-mach 150M Crùn (£13.8M) ann an airgead-diolaidd gach bliadhna. Ach a bheil na tuathanaich sàsaichte le sin? Gu dearbh chan eil.

Tha madaidhean-allaidh a' sìor thighinn a-nall bhon t-Suain agus bha an àireamh ann an Nirribhidh suas ri 60-80 an uiridh. Lean am meudachadh seo gu gairm airson an àireamh sin a lughdachadh agus le aonta bhon riaghaltas

gu oidhirp gus 42 dhiubh a mharbhadh an gearmradh seo chaidh. Cha deachaidh sin air adhart as aonais connspaid ge-tà. Bha fianais ga thogail ann an sràidean Oslo agus seasamh gach taobh ga dhaingneachadh. Tha e dol na chomh-strì eadar am baile mòr agus na sgìrean dùthchail, luchd na h-àrainneachd an aghaidh nan tuathanach, suidheachadh nach eil idir fallainn. Bhiodh e math nam b' urrainn dhuinn spàirn mar seo a sheachnadh ann an Alba.

le Gabhan Mac a' Phearsain

Going forward, holding back



Ian Sherry has a small farm in the Mourne, at Rostrevor, Co Down. Here he reminisces on traditional farming practices.

IM ALWAYS bemused when the binder is highlighted as a vintage agricultural machine.

To me it's a fairly new device. This is because I have tied corn after the scythe and gathered a field of potatoes dug with a spade. My Uncle Pat mowed steep fields, banks with crags and spinks and round the edges of perfectly flat fields – to 'open them out.' He opened them out to such an extent that it would have been simply a waste of time to harness the horses and put them in the

reaper; so he went on to mow the rest. He must have loved to mow, to tow three 'lifters' after him on upland harvest days.

For a couple of years before I graduated to lift and tie behind him I 'held the rod'. This skill is known in the wider reaches of Mourne as 'holding back'. Long before health and safety became common, I would hold a six-foot sally rod against the stalks of corn (we always referred to oats as corn) leaning them back to facilitate each swipe of the scythe. The mower crouched and moving forward, the boy facing him crouched and holding the rod, inclining the corn, moving back.

Then after a few years of holding back and gathering heads, I went on to lift corn; to tie sheaves after the scythe. The lifter follows the mower, collecting the cut stalks until he has enough for a small armful to be placed over the knee and tied with a band pulled from the top, not too tightly and closer to the grain than the butt. A good scouldin' would befall the careless fellow caught bundling his sheaves too big and tied too tight.

Then there was stookin'. Principally in the heel of the evening, every four sheaves were stood up pyramid style. Imperative to have the knots on the inside of the construction – they would hold the rain if facing out. In time these stooks would be built into a larger pyramid, a shig, a more permanent structure normally safe from the elements, until traced into the haggard for thrashing or to be stored in a stack.

I pitched to the man building the stack. I picked

the driest sheaves for the heart and placed the rest of them right to hand (butts out) as on his knees he went around the outside, row after row until he turned the ring, and circle by circle worked the stack into a not-too-sharp point. A structure thatched and roped.

Then in the late 50s my Uncle Pat bought a T20 tractor, and for fear that wasn't enough my Uncle Peter bought a record player and 78s of Elvis and Tommy Steele. On top of all that I bought a Little Richard record. That, and John Fagan's thrasher and baler, is why I never got to build a stack.

But I did get to write a verse.

I'm going forward holding back, in farming's ancient almanac.

Uncle Pat he's mowing corn. We haven't changed since cuneiform.

The scythe has just replaced the hook. And we still work in sheaf and stook.

Uncle Pat he loves to mow. Stoic as Geronimo. His principles are set in stone, that we should work with muscle, sinew, bone.

He senses it's decreed by God, it falls to me to hold the rod.

That's why I'm going forward, holding back. I take the strain, I lose the slack.

Going forward, holding back.

Along the river, north of The Wee Holms, on a spink above Puldavy, Uncle Pat, he's mowin'. Johnnie Green and Red Paddy, they're liftin'. And that's where I am. Going forward. Holding back.

TRAINING

Bitesize training feedback

YEAR THREE of the Skills Boost Project began with a range of one-day bitesize skills courses – sheepdogs, fencing, shearing and our first blade-shearing course.

Bitesize feedback

Sheepdog and handler training

Dunbeath – tutor Jasmine Grant

"I learned that my dog needs better discipline so that I can control her better when I take her to the sheep."

"Coach and team very helpful and approachable, one-to-one sessions were brilliant."

Strained wire fencing

Shetland – tutor Brian Denoon

"I learned that with knowledge of the technique and correct tool I can build an effective fence. I didn't think I would be strong enough!"

"Learning how to do it right, rather than just lashing it up."

Introduction to shearing

Tain and Ullapool – tutor James Jensen

"More practical experience gained and more confident."

"This will massively speed up our sheep shearing and should make the sheep much happier."

Blade shearing for beginners, Ullapool

tutors Duncan MacColl and Duncan Cook

"I learned that this is not as difficult as I thought, plus the sheep seem to remain calmer."

"I now have confidence in getting and shearing my own flock."



Shearing, Tain



Fencing Shetland



Blade shearing, Leckmelm



Sheepdog and handler training, Braehillor, Caithness

Wood Accountancy is here to help

With changes on the horizon to how individuals and businesses interact with HMRC, and the uncertainties surrounding life after Brexit, it is more important than ever to have an accountant and professional advisor who truly understands your business.

Wood Accountancy is a new, modern, forward-thinking accountancy practice based near Dunvegan on the Isle of Skye. Specialising in assisting clients in the agriculture and rural business sector, the aim is to provide a friendly, personal and professional service to individuals and business all over Scotland.

As well as offering standard accounts, taxation, bookkeeping, VAT and payroll services, Wood Accountancy can also provide services such as creation and monitoring of budgets, preparation of management accounts and cash flow forecasts, assistance with grant applications and much more. Whatever your needs

and requirements, Wood Accountancy is here to offer guidance, support and assistance.

Following attendance at one of SCF's very useful Access to Crofting Toolkit courses, Daniel Wood met many like-minded people – from one of whom he purchased his starter flock – Daniel now has a croft and a small flock of Hebridean sheep. Within the next couple of years, the plan is to increase the breeding flock, diversify into keeping other animals and to build a small agricultural steading with a cutting room and office.

Ideally Wood Accountancy would be operating from the croft and all the animals would be born, bred, fattened and butchered on the croft, with the meat being marketed directly to consumers.

Daniel qualified as a chartered accountant in March 2016 and



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t: 07593 597738

e: daniel@woodaccountancy.co.uk

w: woodaccountancy.co.uk

is a member of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Scotland. He chose a career specialising in agriculture and rural business due to his love of the outdoors, the draw of the farming and crofting way of life and his keen interest in everything rural and agricultural. Originally

from the Cotswolds, Daniel has always been immersed in rural life.

If you would like more information on how Wood Accountancy can help you and your business, or to speak to Daniel, please feel free to contact us.

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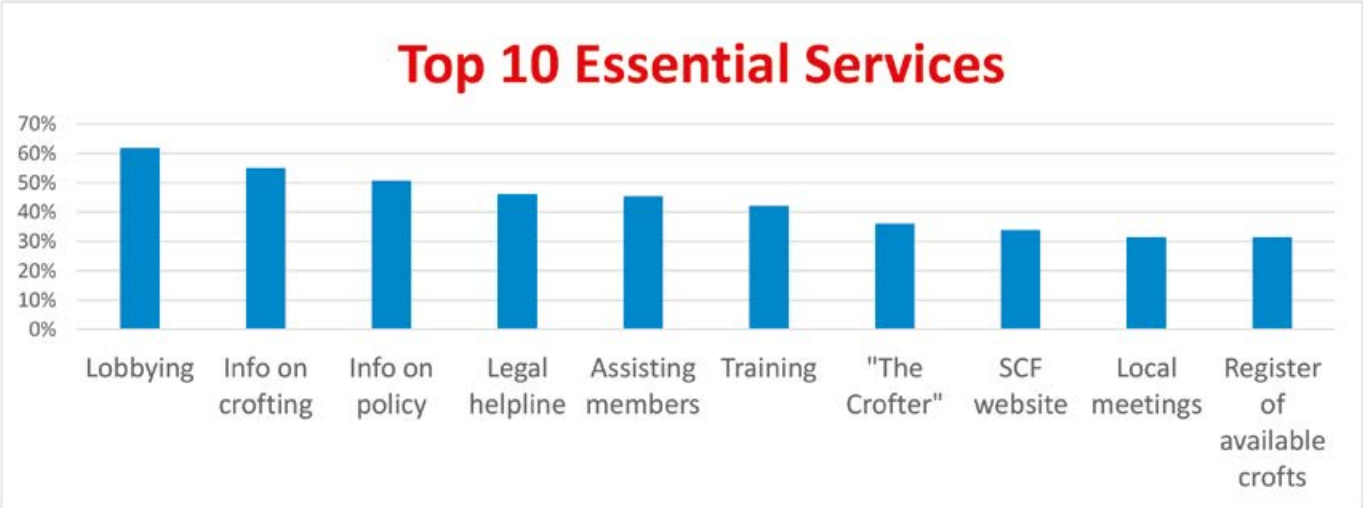
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MEMBERS PAGES

Is SCF doing the right things?



ONE OF THE reasons for carrying out the membership survey earlier this year was to check that we, your board, are doing the things that you, the members, want us to do. Your subscriptions keep SCF going so we need to check that we are devoting our resources to the issues that matter.

Out of the list of the activities that SCF undertakes, most of you thought that political representation and lobbying were essential. Providing information on crofting and policy issues were the other two services that more than half of respondents thought were indispensable.

However, if we look at the replies to "which services are useful to me" then *The Crofter* is the most used service (around ¾ of replies); then information on crofting issues and the e-newsletter and information on policy issues.

This implies that the majority of members use SCF as a way of keeping up to date on issues that affect them and value the magazine and newsletter as the ways of delivering the information. We are the organisation that finds out what is going on, summarises what you need to know and passes it on in a digestible form. The SCF website is the next most useful service – again used as a means on passing on relevant information.

Political representation is further down the list of services "useful to me" – so is seen as

really important (top of essential services) but with a less direct link to individual members.

Some of the other services are useful to those who use them but are not used by everybody – eg the legal helpline, advice and training. However, they are an important part of our offering and who knows when any of us might need advice or legal help in the future.

Local meetings and activities score well on both "useful to me" and "essential" services lists and we need to get better at this – 20 years ago local meetings were the mainstay of the SCU/SCF but have since fallen away. If you have ideas for local events, HQ can help you set them up. The annual gathering also scored well on "useful to others" ie a good thing to do though not necessarily attended by a lot of members.

Our social media offerings on Facebook and Twitter are the services categorised as not useful by more respondents than anything else; but these are alternative channels for getting the information (which members do value) out there. And it may reach members and potential members that *The Crofter* and email do not,

so are worth persevering with. Like press releases, they are ways of getting ourselves noticed and listened to, so increasing our political clout.

Product discounts and mentoring are two services that don't seem to be used or seen as important and it may be that the board will decide to discontinue them.

The Scottish Crofting Produce mark and croft holidays get a mixed response as to their usefulness. We are trying to get a project going to re-invigorate the mark and we should wait to see how that goes before making a decision.

There is lots of potential for crofters to directly market their own produce, as the Spirit of Crofting conference showed, thereby earning a premium for them and benefiting the environment. But it is not for everybody; and many of us will stick to selling our animals at Lairg or Dingwall as we have always done.

Lots of food for thought. Thank you to those who returned the survey, it is really appreciated.

Russell Smith

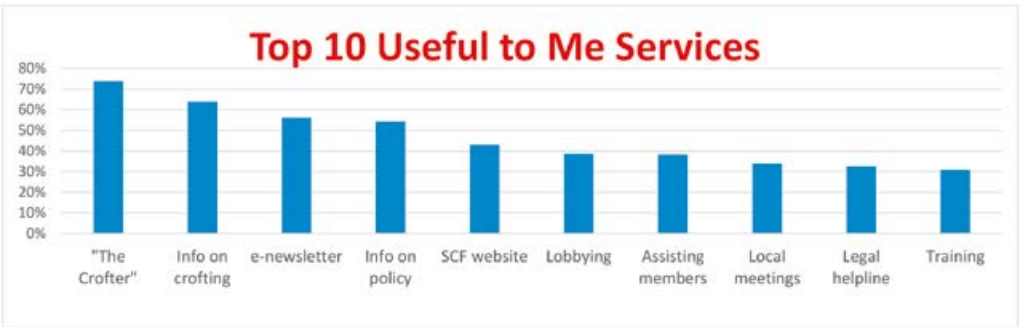
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Please visit our new easyfundraising page at <https://www.easyfundraising.org.uk/causes/scfed/> and click support us. We really would appreciate it and there is no cost involved to you.

Every time you shop, we receive a small donation. Lots of small donations add up to a big difference and could help keep subscription increases down. If you would like to know more, please call HQ on 01599 530005 or email Sandra at hq@crofting.org



MEMBERS PAGES

A problem shared is a problem that SCF may be able to help you with

AS THE OLD adage says, "A problem shared is a problem halved".

Here sharing means telling someone else your problem. The process of verbally sharing what is bothering you gives you a sense of psychological relief, and makes you feel better, making the issue seem smaller or less severe.

Despite an increasing culture of sharing personal information through social networks and online gossip, over half (57%) of the UK population bottle up their problems and worries. But with the help of SCF's casework panel, members' crofting issues can be dealt with anonymously through Sandra at HQ – 01599 530005. Sandra co-ordinates this work on behalf of the casework panel.

The panel is a ten-strong volunteer group of fellow crofters who impartially address members' many and varied problems. The information Sandra gives the panel in the first instance does not identify the member seeking help, but presents the generality of the subject in question.



© Martin Benson – TTree

Our case-workers are usually able to deal with most topics by dint of their wealth of knowledge and experience gained over many years. They know only too well how crofting, by its very nature and complexity, can bring up more than its fair share of individual problems. The cases dealt with by the panel are diverse – too many to categorise, but broadly covering the breadth of day-to-day crofting, from boundary disputes, CCAGS/CHGS grants, planning applications, crofting

regulations in general, absenteeism, assignments and sub-letting, just to mention a few.

There is no mention here of cases where a member has a questionable legal issue. The application of the law is a matter for lawyers; and our members' legal concerns can best be dealt with directly by our legal team – 01599 230300. SCF's much-valued casework service runs in tandem with its legal helpline.

Over the years, casework has remained remarkably similar year

on year. And that's why a member may turn to the panel for a friendly, understanding shoulder to lean on. A member simply has to email hq@crofting.org or telephone 01599 530005. That initial contact will set in motion a well-trying and tested process of consultation with the panel in the hope that a satisfactory answer can be arrived at.

However, we must be realistic. Because of the uniqueness of a member's problem, it may be that the panel, despite its most diligent efforts, cannot ultimately help. This is regrettable but occasionally (thankfully few), such complex cases cannot be overcome by either panel or the legal advisory team.

These difficulties may occasionally be exacerbated because the panel sees only one side of the issue in question and, in the panel's efforts to be fair and unbiased it might be necessary to communicate with the opposing side. In this case the panel would be taking on a more mediating role rather than a straightforward information exercise.

New case-officer for RSABI

Kerry MacLennan is the new case-officer for RSABI in the north west Highlands.

KERRY HAS a background in community care and the voluntary sector. She is currently working on the family hill farm as well as crofting. "I am delighted to join the team at RSABI," she said, "having seen the work they do supporting those in agriculture."

RSABI supports people from Scottish agriculture emotionally, practically and financially in times of need. "The breadth of the work

that we do has surprised me," Kerry commented. "Supporting working farmers and crofters as well as those who no longer work makes a case-officer job both interesting and rewarding."

RSABI has helped over 80 working crofters and farmers since April 2018 and it is expected that demand will increase. If you need support please call 0300 111 4166. The helpline is open from 7 am to 11 pm 365 days a year.

If you would like to support RSABI, call 0300111 4166 for details of our supporter scheme.



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Alasdair Allan MSP/BPA

If anybody would like to meet with Alasdair Allan, Member of the Scottish Parliament for the Western Isles, he can be contacted using the following details:

Ma tha duine sam bith ag iarraidh coinneachadh ri Alasdair Allan, Ball-Pàrlamaid na h-Alba airson nan Eilean Siar faodaidh sibh a cleachdadh na seòlaidhean a leanas:

Address/Seòladh:
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01851 700357

E-Mail/Post-Dealain:
alasdair.allan.msp@parliament.scot



www.alasdairallan.scot

Crofting forestry handbook

Bernard Planterose, author of the original Crofting Forestry Handbook, is writing a new version.

THIS VERY informative book was first written in 1993 for the Scottish Crofters Union. Much has changed and been achieved in the intervening 25 years, so the new version will be a completely fresh start.

The new *Woodlands for the Highlands and Islands Handbook* has been commissioned by the Woodland Croft Project, a partnership between Woodland Trust Scotland, the Scottish Crofting Federation, Shetland Amenity Trust, Point and Sandwick Trust, Forestry Commission Scotland and Argyll Small Woods Co-op.

Due for publication in the first half of 2019, the handbook covers the Northern and Western Isles as well as the mainland crofting counties, providing guidance on many aspects of woodland management for all land-use managers. There are sections on home-grown timber processing and construction, woodland history and ecology as well as coppicing, non-timber forest products, continuous-cover forestry and, of course, woodland crofts.

Elm in the Highlands

A NEW REPORT, written by Euan Bowditch and Elspeth Macdonald of the University of the Highlands and Islands, has identified healthy areas of elm in Skye, Raasay and locations west of Drumnadrochit. These elms have escaped the fatal Dutch elm disease, which has robbed so much of the countryside of these stately and beautiful trees.

This positive finding is, however, offset by the news that Dutch elm disease is appearing in sites beyond what was previously thought to be its geographic limit. The disease is carried by the Scolytus beetle, which can be carried long distances across country on felled timber. Warmer summers, like this year's, also favour the beetle.

The study, which was funded by Forestry Commission Scotland, proposes establishing

elm refuges in the Highlands, where active management would include targeted disease control, establishing new elm woodland and protecting natural regeneration.

Forestry Commission Scotland, Woodland Trust Scotland and the University of the Highlands and Islands are now working together to take forward a project to protect and restore elm populations in the Highlands. The first stage will be to 'ground truth' current information on elm location and disease incidence.

This is a big job, and it is hoped that volunteers across the Highlands will sign up to help via the Woodland Trust's Observatree citizen science project – a UK-wide network of over 200 trained, tree health volunteers.

For more information about the Observatree project visit www.observatree.org.uk.



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Trees for the crofting community


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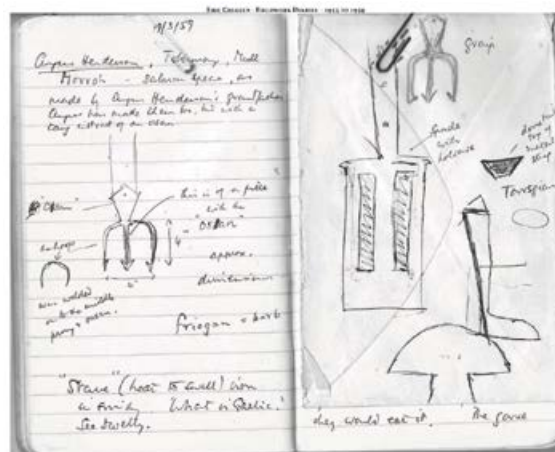
Trees provide important shelter for your livestock, crops and buildings, and a valuable source of woodfuel.

Free advice and support is available to crofters, common grazings and smallholders to help with planting and managing woodlands.

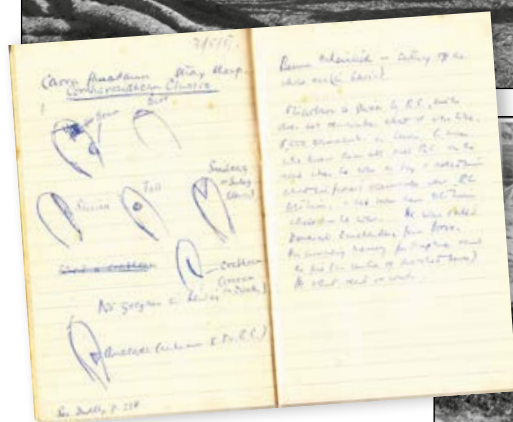
Get in touch with your local croft woodlands advisor and find out how useful trees are.

Handing on crofting traditions

Ploughing on the machair, South Uist



Eal spear



Ear marks 1957-58



Cas chrom, Grimsay



Eric Cregeen with Lachlan MacNeill, Grimsay

Margaret Bennett, folklorist, patron of Crofting Connections and good friend of SCF relays the importance of preserving knowledge for future generations.

SINCE THE Scottish government's implementation of learning for sustainability into the school curriculum, the three-letter acronym LfS has been on the lips of every teacher.

For crofting communities, sustainability was the way of life for centuries. The teaching began with daily tasks for small hands – feeding hens, calves and pet lambs, planting potatoes, thinning turnips, bringing in peats, turning hay and so on. We scarcely noticed the process of learning from our elders, as they wove in local history, sayings about the weather, anecdotes about characters, place-names, plants and wildlife, food and whatever gem of wisdom that came to mind, as well as songs and rhymes.

At the 2015 SCF gathering in Assynt, young and aspiring crofters spoke of their vision for crofting in 2020 and beyond. Sensing a skills and knowledge gap, they invited older crofters to tell how they had learned. Replies were along the lines of: "Before we started school we'd be helping in the byre, at the fank, whatever they were doing, there was always something." But, as one dismayed teenager from a crofting family told us, she had never been asked to do any of these tasks. "I would have loved that." Her interest came through a school crofting project "growing things and being out in the fresh air." Several asked where, or from whom, might they learn if there are no tradition-bearers to explain what was once common knowledge. If only someone had written all this down, then it wouldn't be lost.

The discussions reminded me of the work of a folklorist who did exactly that: Eric R Cregeen

(1921–83), whose parents were Manx. He began in his teens, with crofters and fishermen on the Isle of Man, and in 1954 moved to Argyllshire. From then until his untimely death, he worked in the Highlands and Islands, documenting lives, work and traditions of crofters, fishermen, housewives, shepherds, cattle-dealers, drovers, blacksmiths, horse-dealers, carpenters, tradespeople, weavers, craftspeople, children, healers, whisky-makers, teachers and clergy. He also kept notebooks, and while his tapes are in the School of Scottish Studies, the notebooks remained in the family home in Campbelltown.

At a meeting of Crofting Connections I was encouraged to respond to a request from Cregeen's widow, Lily, to do something with them. Heritage Lottery funded helpers to transcribe over 4,000 pages, and now 30 journals have been printed in nine volumes.

For example, "November 11, 1956: met Dougall MacDougall in Minard: a drover, born 1866; walked to Falkirk and Crieff Trysts with his uncles. Talked about stopping-places (stances), the length of journeys, some cattle shod. The markets, prices, buyers, and way of life of drovers."

"19/3/59 Angus Henderson, blacksmith, Tobermory, Mull – salmon spear... smithy-made tools – graip, spade, torr-sgian (peat spade)... gorse fed to foals. Cattle fed on seaweed... had to be cut and given to the cattle; they wouldn't graze it as the sheep would, but they would eat it."

"North Uist, April 9, 1968: We drove around the island of Grimsay – peat and rocks and sea lochs, crofts beside the water with boats and lobster creels, saw a man preparing five lazy beds for potato planting. He was Lachlan MacLeod, aged about 70. He had dug the lazy beds with a cas-chrom and was turning them with a heavy rake,

then dibbling the potato eyes in with a wooden dibbler with a footrest. The lazy-beds were about three feet wide, with furrows on each side, made very straight. The sods from one furrow were laid on the ground, which had a dressing of seaweed. Then covered with soil from the same furrow. The process was repeated, using the next furrow for making the next *feannag*. He measured the width of each *feannag* with its adjacent furrow by five lengths of his foot. After the potatoes are lifted he will sow oats then leave the ground fallow..."

"April 10, 1968: Donald Eoghain MacDonald was in the stack yard. He showed us the former Balranald house there built of thick walls (about four feet thick with lime mortar), internally about 45 feet by 15 feet, divided into unequal parts by a thick wall. The lower parts of the window survive, and a great lintel stone at the door, which he said was supposed to have been set in position by a powerful man single-handed. It had been a thatched house. Prince Charles had stayed there. Adjacent to it on the north are the servants' quarters and a thatched byre still in use... On north side are three cottages of the shepherd, cow-man and ploughman under one roof, now all in one and occupied by Donald Eoghain and family. He had been one of the crofters who had raided Balranald in 1920 – he had played the pipes on the march there (we recorded the tune he played) and had been in prison at Inverness for this... he said apples used to grow there..."

The recording is online: <http://tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/fullrecord/18165/7>.

Approximately 10 per cent of Cregeen's recordings are on-line via the School of Scottish Studies website, and in time there will be a Cregeen website. Meanwhile, the printed journals are available in relevant locations, including the SCF office.

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SCF at the Black Isle Show



SCF training manager Lucy Beattie, crofting commissioner Mairi Mackenzie and minister for children and young people Maree Todd MSP, Ullapool lasses all.



Patrick Krause



SCF council member Alex Campbell, Rogart



Lucy Beattie and a craft art session

2019 Training Dates

- **Access to Crofting Toolkit**
16/17 March
Isle of Skye
two-day course: £70
- **Practical skills**
(dates to be arranged)
These will include polytunnel growing at Turriefield in Shetland and in Assynt, plus woodland courses in Skye

Sign up for our training newsletter updates for more info.

To book and for more information, contact Ailsa: training@crofting.org



Scottish Crofting Federation

rooted in our communities

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Company Number SC 218658
Charity Number SC 031919

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Highlands and Islands Croft Origin

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