

Social Crofting CASE STUDIES



Case Study 3 - Elchies, Simply Speyside

Author: Dr David Heaney, Rossal Research & Consultancy

This case study is a goat farm, which has been running 12 years, starting with sheep, and now with 9 years breeding meat goats. The family have a crofting background stretching for many, many years however worked away in careers elsewhere, and then returned, setting up in Speyside rather than the original west coast. The return to farming was a lifestyle choice to some extent, **“small farms do not make money rearing sheep”**, so speciality hogget, mutton and goat were chosen as high value products. They had to look abroad for the depth of knowledge needed to rear meat goats – for example goats are inquisitive and their curiosity can cause stress on long journeys so extra care needs to be taken in travelling to the abattoir to prevent meat tainting, and then if carcasses are cooled too quickly, due to the low fat content (1%) cold shortening can occur giving tough meat.

The decision to target the high-quality end of the market had to be matched by a quality product. Goat meat is a healthy, protein rich food, low in cholesterol and high in nutrients. The 2019 Great Taste awards had over 12000 entries, and Elchies achieved the only three-star rating for meat producers in Scotland: one of the judges said, **“you can tell this animal has been loved”**. This is something that has been forgotten in modern food production.

In the early days they held an open day for local farmers to meet the animals and understand how goat rearing compared to more conventional livestock. This was well attended, and the business-model was eye-opening for some.

The relatively small start enabled traditional farming /crofting values to be integral. The farm has built a customer base who look for provenance over traceability. Although traceability is a necessary and important process, customers want to know what the farm is like, what are their values, and methods. People want to understand the meat they are buying.

Currently, one third of their market is retail from farm direct to customer, one third wholesale to restaurants, and one third shipped out to online customers. The farm shop was set up in a refurbished portacabin with no counter no budget. The farm has had no subsidy support, there is no grant aid, - as a principle every pound of cost has to be met with more than a pound of revenue – simply they want the business to be viable.

They have amusingly noted that customers divide along the Spey Valley. To the east it is harder to sell goat and sheep products – it is cattle country. However, looking west, through perhaps greater familiarity with sheep, market days such as the Highland Food festival are often very successful.

Having opened up the farm to the public, they run a local producers market selling veg, pork, beef, honey, cheese, all local produce from other farmers, for two hours once a month and that makes it focussed and busy. Also, the farm subscribes to a zero food miles ethos – for example running a pop-up restaurant with ingredients all pretty well from within walking distance.

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“One of the most difficult things to do is to get local community to buy local food”

In fact, the farm was set up with a set of holistic principles:

- Zero waste. This is not only sustainable, it makes money. It is a benefit on many levels. Skins, horns, fleece, yarn are all sold – these products are expensive but exclusive, some people will pay for that.
- Friends not customers -so they come back. We welcome customers on the farm so they come back
- Total care – when the animal is alive it is cherished – **“we don’t play a numbers game – if one animal needs the vet, we call them - that add costs to the product but the meat is better – evidence comes from customers”**

There was an early realisation that they were not an industrialised food production site, so it was possible to open the doors. Communication was there from the start to persuade people that the meat was good. One day the local choir made a visit and they saw the farm experience was rewarding for the visitor. The following year this evolved into an open day with a petting pen. The social media posts went viral receiving over 15000 likes, and the outcome was over £2500 raised for charity and a lot of new customers – **“and we thought this is the way to show people our product and the door is open”**.

Next someone said it would be great if we could bring some schoolkids here. That evolved into the following activities:

- The farm visits local schools.
- Schools visit the farm, including structured learning experiences running from six weeks up to single terms. For this they had to design various learning experiences. For example:
 - A 6-week course for schools for challenging pupils. Converting the farm experience into mathematics biology, history. How do you calculate how much to feed the kid? More important is ‘how do you interact with this animal?’
 - Work experience for schoolkids for whom school might be a challenging experience but want to learn the occupation. They are contributing to the working on the farm.
 - Kidding Around Open day an Leaf Open Farm Sunday bringing up to 1600 visitors twice a year
 - Visiting tourists – for example knitting tours from USA who are passionate to buy large amounts of local yarns and fibre product from our animals
 - Volunteers who work on the farm

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“It’s a memorable experience. Put someone, anyone, with a baby kid or lamb on their lap and they will be enthralled – it triggers the imagination, something in the mind at another level, it does something to you”

The farm does not charge for any of these services - they are all free, but they get good PR and build relationships with a growing body of customers – and as a result sell more meat. It’s a deliberate decision to provide access to the business. Children and adults alike get interested and want to visit the farm.

There are also disabled adults and autistic groups who visit – interacting with animals has known positive impacts and the goats seem to have a calming influence.

None of this is formalised – there are no service level agreements. One barrier has been that some teachers have a fear of stepping outside rigid structures until they have seen the health and safety. These questions have led to systematic protocols which have been created by Elchies to provide a safe and enjoyable experience. There are areas taped off, signs up to wash hands and other obvious indicators of this. Underpinning the experiences are the learning outcomes which are tailored to individuals and groups.

“Classifying can take you down the wrong route. you have to be reactive to the needs of the individual”

The fifteen-year olds who come are taught physical skills and they contribute to the farm by doing these on their two-hour visit. It’s not a lecture, it’s doing the work. There has to be a balance to gain and maintain interest and keep it alive for example there is a 19-year-old who still works on the farm at the weekends. Some of course, don’t come back. This is an outlet for kids who may not be able to achieve in the academic environment but thrive in the different environment we provide. The effort is in the preparation. The farm has been diligent, and has adopted a mindset of what do, need to do.

“The education that’s being done here, it’s not a by-product it’s an essential part of what we do, it’s in the mix. It might be us giving something back to society, but nine times out of ten, it leads to someone telling someone else about the farm and, ultimately we get a sale and even a long-term customer”

The farm has also run goat-keeping courses with the Scottish Crofting Federation, and they have been oversubscribed each time with people coming from right across Scotland. Other crofts, smallholdings have taken up goats, which develops the sector in Scotland.

They also have volunteers who come regularly and enjoy the chance for physical activity in the countryside, and they contribute to the farm, doing things in a collective way. There is wellbeing in learning and fixing a fence. It’s a help, and it’s a different conversation. A big bowl of soup at lunch and it’s a great social experience.

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“it’s been a journey, what crofting teaches you is how to be resilient and entrepreneurial with a whole bunch of skillsets, you had to be clever to survive”

This enterprise has circumnavigated the barriers to introducing innovative local social aspects on their farm tailored to, and tied to, their core business and holistic values.

Case study 3

Successful and innovative small holding

Crofting and business background: traditional values

Community is placed at the heart of everything

Carefully planned business model

Lots of volunteer, educational, fun activities

Social aspect does not contribute directly to farm income

Community facing activity adds to sales in local markets

Find out more about Elchies, Simply Speyside [here](#)