

CROFTING IN THE KYLE OF SUTHERLAND



CROFTING AREA OF AIRDENS LOOKING SOUTH TO BONAR.

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THE CROFTING LANDSCAPE

This isn't a natural landscape, it has been moulded by the inhabitants for centuries. And it is crofting that has been the driving force for the last century or so.

The spread of small units across the hill in Strathcarron, Linside, Migdale and elsewhere, each doing their own thing, gives the variety of scenery. Each croft is a house and family so we have the population to keep the schools and the shops open and provide a workforce for hotels and the post. And they generate economic activity by employing fencers, shearers, vets. Without people living and working in an area, you have a museum not a community.

So you have the scenery enhanced, the people retained but you also have good quality food produced in an environmentally friendly and sustainable manner. Most croft land isn't fit for arable crops so we produce store cattle and sheep which are grass fed, low input and leave a light footprint on the land. Again tourists like to see the animals in the fields kept in a natural setting. It is self evident that we need food so let's do it in a way that is good for the environment, keeping woodland and retaining peatland with its carbon locked away.

So crofting isn't dead in the 21st Century – it has a big role to play in the future of the Kyle of Sutherland – but there are plenty of challenges facing agriculture in particular and the wider more remote areas in general.

SOME HISTORY OF CROFTING IN THE KYLE

Consider now the history of how the crofters (our forebears) fought for their heritage - not always successfully but always with spirit. We are the heirs and the beneficiaries of that activism.

Following the collapse of the clan system after Culloden the chiefs turned from being the father of their clan into landlords and looked to introduce sheep farming to boost their income at the expense of their tenants' livelihood. The tenants fought back. Instigated by the inhabitants of Strathrusdale just across the border in Ross-shire, some 200 men of this area meet at Brae in Strathoykel in 1792 , gathered up all the 10,000 sheep in the Kyle and drove them on foot over the Struie where they were met by the Ross-shire men. The combined flocks were then driven south and they got as far as Boath before they were stopped by the military called out by the panicking landlords. The attempt to clear Sutherland and Easter Ross of the "big sheep" failed but you have to be impressed by the organisation and determination.

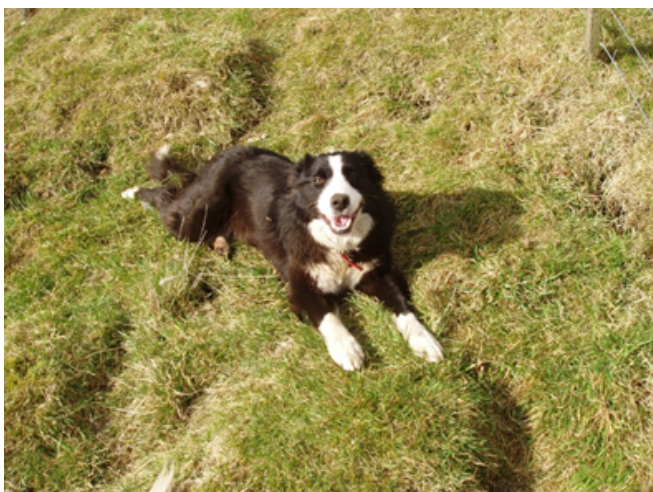
The outcome of the failure was the Highland Clearances and the best known and documented local stories concern Croick and Glencalvie in 1845. If you haven't visited the church and seen the inscriptions on the glass - do so and be moved. Some crofters left willingly for a better life, some were forced out unwillingly from the land their ancestors had farmed for generations.



Following the Napier Commission report and the Crofters Act of 1886 crofters got their security of tenure at a fair rent but the struggles weren't over. In 1893, the crofters of Airdens went on a rent strike. The Sheriff's Officer was hounded out every time he appeared even when accompanied by police officers. A look out was posted to give the alarm whereupon all the inhabitants turned out. According to the contemporary report in the Ross-Shire Journal "on more than one occasion his speed was accelerated by the application behind of a sturdy boot". The reporters weren't impressed with their reception – "the women came rushing on cursing swearing and blaspheming like a pack of demonics". Their cursing included the line "go home you Bonar Tories" to some sightseers from the village. This isn't ancient history, Ken McKinnon of Airdens and Bonar who died recently knew one of the ringleaders who was imprisoned for his part in the battle. But the battle for fair rents was won.

It is ironic that the best loved images of crofting nowadays are the Border collie and the Cheviot sheep – both introduced by the shepherds from the south who our ancestors from 1792 were up in arms against.

If you want to know more, look at "The Kyle of Sutherland - a brief history" produced by the Kyle of Sutherland Heritage Society, "A Further Peek into the Past" by Sarah Horne and "Last of the Free" by James Hunter.



CROFTING LAW

The old joke is that a croft is a small piece of land completely surrounded by legislation and there are certainly some complications about crofting law. Crofting is unique to Scotland so we can't look elsewhere for enlightenment. Basically, crofting was set up by the Napier Commission and the Crofters Holdings (Scotland) Act of 1886 to give crofters security from eviction by landlords after they (the crofters) had worked to improve their plot of land.

The Act set up both rights and responsibilities. The crofter had to pay their rent, live on or near the croft, and work the land. In return, they had a fair rent, security of tenure, the right to pass on the croft and the right to be compensated for the improvements that they had made.

These rights and responsibilities have been added to and amended by subsequent acts of parliament but the basics remain the same. Fulfil your responsibilities and you earn the rights that go with it.

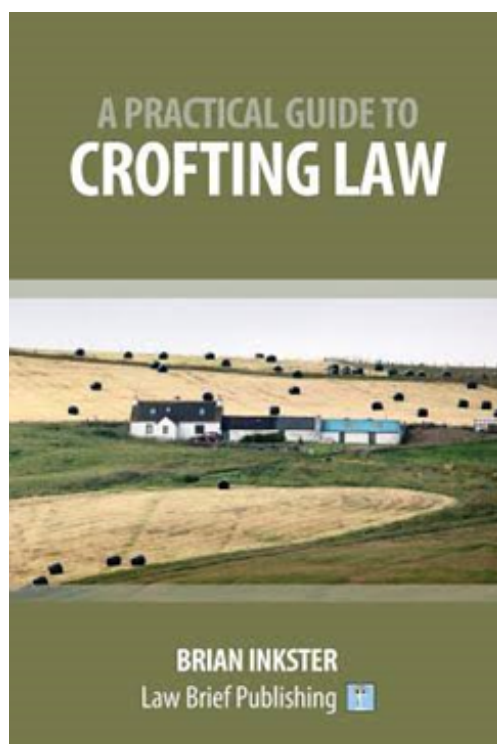
There have been a succession of acts over the past 130 years and a major change was the 1976 Crofting Reform (Scotland) Act which gave crofters the absolute right to buy their house and garden site and the conditional right to buy the whole croft from the landlord for a price of 15 times a fair rent (but you have to pay the landlord's solicitor's fees). The croft once bought is still subject to crofting law so the crofter still has to work the land and live on or near the croft. This is a point often lost on people coming from outwith the Crofting Counties (and their solicitors): you still have to follow the rules even if you are not a tenant. The ability to buy and sell on the open market has put a price on crofts and has led to many going purely as house sites rather than as agricultural units which happen to have a house on them. This can put crofts out of the price range of young people who want to work them.

The Crofting Commission in Inverness is the arm of the Scottish Government who oversee the regulations and make sure that crofters are fulfilling their responsibilities: if they aren't then the Commission have powers to enforce the legislation. If a crofter is not making purposeful use of the croft or if they don't live close by, then the Commission could remove the tenancy or, if the croft has been bought, force the owner to put in a tenant. The Commission's stated aim is to regulate and promote "the interests of crofting in Scotland to secure the future of crofting". However, they only have the resources to pursue a small number of cases where the rules are being flouted.

It is possible to take land out of crofting tenure by decrofting it and this is often done for house sites in order to get a mortgage. There have been cases of whole crofts being decrofted but the Commission should refuse most of these cases as the loss of any croft land can affect the viability of the local crofting community.

Grazing Committees are also unique to crofting and are reckoned to be the smallest democratic unit in the country. They are made up of the crofters themselves and exist to regulate and maintain the grazings - every croft is assigned a number of animals (the souming) that they are allowed to graze on the hill.

"A Practical Guide to Crofting Law" by Brian Inkster is a readable introduction to some of the intricacies and the Commission website crofting.scotland.gov.uk can also help. The Scottish Crofting Federation runs a free legal helpline for members. Good luck!



CROFTING AGRICULTURE

The key points to remember are that when the crofting system was laid out in the 19th century crofts were made deliberately too small to support a family so that the crofter would have to go and work at fishing or on the landlord's farm. Generally, croft land is poor quality with a harsh cool and wet climate so raising sheep and cattle is the primary activity. Most crofts have a small area of in-bye land which can be cropped due to the hard graft put in by our forebears putting lime and seaweed on the fields to improve the fertility. They would have removed cartloads of stones, built walls and dug field drains by hand. Crofters would also have a share in hill grazing which is unimproved, rough grass and heather but could support livestock over the summer months whilst hay or oats or potatoes were grown on the in-bye. These common grazings would be run by all the crofters in the township working together and with the numbers of stock (the souming) for each croft being tightly controlled and policed.

Many of these features have survived to the present day.

Cropping is much less common than it used to be and the main output are store lambs and cattle that are bred here but then shipped south to be fattened ready for market. There isn't the forage on the hills to bring young animals on over the winter without buying lots of expensive feed so they are sold in the autumn. The Lairg sale earlier this month saw over 14,000 lambs sold, most from Sutherland, many from crofters. Older cast ewes also go south where they can produce lambs for another couple of years on easier ground and better grass. And ewe lambs from the Highlands are prized for their hardiness and good mothering.

Common grazings are less used than they used to be and this has led to a decrease in communal working in some areas. Sheep stock clubs still thrive though and whole townships with dogs and quads can get together to gather sheep off huge areas of hill ground - a "wildlife" spectacle to rival anything the African savannah can offer!

CROFTING AGRICULTURE

Some crofts will specialise in forestry or horticulture and crofts have kept hens from time immemorial. Holiday cottages and glamping pods are the latest “crop” for enterprising crofters. Crofters will still have jobs off the croft as a main or alternative source of income but crofting isn't hobby farming: it is a commercial enterprise just on a small scale. And crofters are skilled and knowledgeable stock keepers.

The result of all this is good quality livestock which is grass fed, naturally reared, disease free and is a vital part of the UK livestock system. The Covid-19 pandemic has put the focus on locally produced food and short supply chains so maybe crofting's future is bright.



CROFTINGTHE FUTURE

Over the last few articles we have looked at various aspects of crofting. Here we consider the future and the threats and opportunities that exist. Will crofting survive?

Food – there is a trend for locally produced, high quality food of known provenance and high welfare standards but the counter trend is away from red meat which is the main croft product. We would argue that when it comes to meat, consumers should be eating less but eating better. Maybe there is an opportunity for a resurgence of locally grown vegetables.

Environment – crofting epitomises high nature value farming which is producing good quality food whilst respecting and treading lightly on the environment. Re-wilding is the latest buzz word but the land needs to be managed to produce food and to keep population. Native trees can be integrated into crofting and still allow grazing for animals. Introducing predators is problematic: sea eagles on the west coast have affected the viability of some of the hill flocks that communities there depend on. Extensive grazing on hills is good for carbon retention on peatlands, rough grazing and permanent grass – all important carbon sinks.

Community – the population of crofters is getting older and it can be difficult for young people to get a foothold. There is a critical mass below which those who are left can't go on – for example there are common grazings which have been abandoned because there are not enough people to gather. Depopulation is still a Highland problem away from Inverness and its environs. Crofting is internationally recognised as being good at retaining population in remote areas because of historic family links to the land. Without young people having a home and a base, we lose the schools, shops, post office and other services.

Lifestyle – decent broadband can allow crofters to work from home and build a business. We have a high amenity life with space, fresh air, access to the outdoors and nature – great for children to grow up in; great for our mental and physical health. But this draws in people from outside who can outbid young locals who want to work crofts. Can we develop house sites that don't use up good agricultural land?

Jobs - crofting has only ever been a part time activity so there needs to be other employment opportunities to keep school leavers here? Tourism has boomed this year when people can't get abroad: is this a route for sustainability for at least some of the year?

Regulation – the law needs to be made simpler and more appropriate but it does provide protection for tenants and, maybe more importantly now, for the land.

Croft income – the Common Agriculture Policy has protected support payments to crofters but will this continue post Brexit? We need a system which recognises the benefits of what is often referred to as “public goods” (preserving landscape, carbon retention, air quality, flood prevention etc). Will 2020's better lamb prices continue if there are tariffs on exports to the EU possibly coupled with cheap imports to lower welfare standards?

Time will tell. But challenges are there to be overcome and crofters and crofting are resilient. The Kyle would be the poorer if crofting were to fade away.

