



Crofting areas make rich habitats for wildlife, such as this corn bunting

# All about crofts

Helen Babbs finds out about these uniquely Scottish smallholdings

When the Covid lockdown struck in March 2020, Andrea Herrmann and her two young children were living in Fort William, while her husband Gareth was away on a short business trip to Thailand. “He got home six months later,” says Andrea. “We said: ‘never again.’” Like many other families, they decided the time had come to realise their dream of living in the country, at a slower and more local pace of life. But rather than just buying a house with large garden, Andrea and Gareth opted for a part of Scottish rural heritage, and bought a croft outside Strontian, in western Argyll.

## WHAT'S A CROFT?

Crofts developed in the second half of the 19th century, after thousands of small subsistence-scale farms across the northern and western regions of Scotland were amalgamated into large and much more profitable sheep-farming estates. These “Highland Clearances” saw the previous tenant farmers simply turned out homeless, and the rural communities decimated. By

the 1880s, the plight of these ex-farmers finally gained attention, and the 1886 Crofting Act was passed to provide land and homes for the remaining rural population. A system of legally protected smallholdings,

called crofts, was established, overseen by a Crofting Commission to ensure fair rents and general “fair play”.

Over 130 years on, the crofting system is still going strong, with a few



Each croft has an area of “in bye” land around the croft house

modernisations such as the right for crofters to buy their land, not only rent it. “There’s a very long history to crofting,” Andrea observes. “Out and about, you can see the little old croft houses right across the landscape.” Many crofts are passed down within families. “We bought ours from an old lady who had lived on it for years. It had been in her husband’s family for generations, which is why she wanted it to go to a family who would love the land as much as she did.”

## HOUSE AND LAND

An individual croft consists of 3-5 acres of land, called the “in-bye”, around a croft house and outbuildings. “We have four acres of in-bye land,” Andrea describes, “which includes our house and vegetable garden, and a big metal barn. The previous owner kept cows there, and we have our pigs in it now.” Unlike other smallholdings, crofters have a legal duty to live on, or within 20 miles, of their crofts, and keep the land in cultivation. This is most commonly as long-term grazing pasture, but can also be arable crops, vegetable and fruit growing or even some forestry. “We have two Kune-kune pigs at present,” says Andrea, “which we got as piglets and are hoping to breed from next year. We also have French geese, and Isa Brown chickens.”

Crofts are arranged in groups, called townships, and each group has shared access to an area of upland common grazing. “Our common grazing is about ten minutes walk away,” says Andrea. The croft owners and tenants come together annually to elect a Grazing Committee, which manages the common land and allocates the number of livestock each croft may graze on it – called the sounding – and any communal work on the land, such as a rota for checking on the sheep during lambing time.

“We haven’t used the common land much yet,” says Andrea, “but we probably will once we get our flock of Soay sheep later this winter. We’re just in the process of applying for grants towards new fencing and field shelters, although it is quite a lot of paperwork.” While most English smallholdings are too small to qualify for government grants, the Scottish Rural Payments system has a specific category for crofts, aimed to help make improvements to the croft and sustain croft-based rural businesses.

## PAPERWORK AND PODS

Having a croft also entails quite a lot of compulsory paperwork from the Crofting Commission. Forms must be submitted when the ownership or tenancy of the croft is transferred, with the new crofters detailing who will be living on the croft, what they plan to do with it, etc. “We then have to fill out a yearly census, describing what we are doing,” Andrea explains.



Crofts are grouped into small communities, called “townships”



Crofters have a duty to live on their land all year round



Croft land must be cultivated, which includes vegetable growing in Andrea’s “Eden garden”





The geese and hens, with the glamping pod in the background



The Kune-kune pigs

Although the aim of the crofting system is to ensure the land remains occupied and farmed, most crofts are not large enough to provide the sole income for a family. With typical smallholder's resourcefulness, most crofters have an extra on-croft business, work off-site, or both. "We have an Air BnB glamping pod," Andrea describes, "which is very nice, as people love to come and see our animals. Our croft has a much older, derelict croft house on it too, that we are hoping to restore and let as well." Andrea also runs a child-minding business, with plenty of space for the children to get involved with outdoor activities, while husband Gareth has a job at the local ferry.

### CROFTING COMMUNITY

This local nature of life is another distinct feature of crofts: being grouped together, there tends to be a strong community focus. "We have four or five crofters close by us, and the village is 20 minutes walk away,"

says Andrea. "It's been very good settling in, everyone has been friendly. Our first livestock actually came from one of our neighbours, who gave my son a rooster, and a hen to keep it company! There's a village show, and a Christmas market, and also an online Facebook group where people will list things like 'horse-manure for free'."

Crofting is also beneficial for wildlife, as the traditional small-scale cropping and low-intensity grazing creates a rich mosaic of varied habitats for many species, especially bumblebees and birds. For example, the corncrake and corn bunting are two species noted to be more prevalent in crofting areas.

### GETTING DOWN TO WORK

All this may make crofting sound idyllic, but like any smallholding, it's still very hard work at times. "Our croft was quite overgrown, as the previous lady hadn't been able to manage very well for a while,"

Andrea recalls. "We had to 'start in the corner' and try not to get overwhelmed. Fortunately, as a former engineer, Gareth is quite good with tools for making repairs and putting up chicken runs!"

If a croft is not kept in cultivation, or misused, the Crofting Commission can be asked to investigate. The Commission does have the legal authority to reassign a tenancy, or require a privately owned croft to be let. "That would only be in an extreme case," says Andrea, "although if you did not use the croft for a year, they might ask if there is an issue with illness or such."

### SO YOU WANT A CROFT?

In total, there are over 20,000 crofts in Scotland, but only 400-500 change hands each year, mainly passed between generations within crofting families. Crofts to let or for sale are advertised in the local area newspapers. The Scottish Crofting Federation, a national-scale organisation which represents and promotes crofting, maintains a list of available crofts which SCF members can access. It can also be worth contacting local solicitors firms, who may know of any upcoming crofts for sale, or writing to large estates to enquire for any vacant tenancies. Prices vary depending on the location, level of demand, and state of upkeep, but can be cheaper than a similar non-croft property.

"We were very lucky to find this one, at just the right time," Andrea observes. "But I would encourage anyone who is thinking of crofting to go ahead and give it a try. There have been a lot of challenges, but we absolutely love it."

For further information about crofting, visit:  
 The Scottish Crofting Federation: [www.crofting.org](http://www.crofting.org)  
 The Crofting Commission: [www.crofting.scotland.gov.uk](http://www.crofting.scotland.gov.uk)



The big barn forms the hub of the croft