



CROFTING

17 - HISTORY - HISTORY

Crofting as we know it today began at the end of the 19th century, following on from the Napier Commission report. This helped crofters to obtain security of tenure, fixed rents, the right to compensation for improvements, and the right to inherit or assign crofts in the Crofters Act of 1886.

Traditionally, land in the Gàidhealtachd (Gaelic speaking) areas of Scotland had been held in common by 'clans', led by a clan chief. 'Clan' comes from the Gaelic word 'clann', which means 'children', and originally most of the inhabitants of the clan territory would have been related. In exchange for holding land, the people would fight for the chief if necessary. **This all changed after the battle of Culloden in 1745, when the old Gaelic clan systems were done away with and the modern era of land holding began.**

Clan chiefs became landlords, who had no need for fighting men, but needed instead to make a profit from 'their' land. They quickly saw that large sheep farms would be more profitable than large numbers of tenants, leading to the Highland Clearances. This saw the native people being displaced from huge swathes of land in the highlands to make way for sheep. These displaced people were often relocated to coastal areas where landlords provided them with small plots of, often unproductive, land which they could farm in return for an annual rent. These plots were called crofts. They were usually too small to make a living from them, meaning that the new tenants, the crofters, had to undertake other work to find money with which to pay the rent.

In addition to this hardship, the crofters could be evicted at any time at the whim of the landlord as he or she owned the ground in law. They had no security of tenure. They also had no control over rents, which the landlord could increase at any time.

A combination of circumstances in the 19th century – such as the decline of the kelp industry which employed many crofters, and the potato famine – led to huge numbers being evicted and having to emigrate overseas, many to North America.

Similar problems affected small tenant farmers in Ireland, also under British rule at the time. There, the Irish National Land League was set up in 1879 to press for reform of the landlord system. This was closely

followed in Scotland by the Highland Land League, also known as the Crofters Party, fighting for the same aims in the 1880s. They organised rent strikes and land raids, and their slogan was ‘Is treasa tuath na tighearna’. This means ‘the people are stronger than the landlord’. The Crofters Party managed to elect Members of Parliament in the 1885 election, and to pass the Crofters Act the following year. **This Act greatly improved the lot of the crofters and led to further Crofting Acts which govern crofting to this day.**

The Crofting Acts led to the setting up of the Crofters Commission (now known as the Crofting Commission) to regulate crofting and **ensure that crofters fulfil their legislative duties.**

There are almost 20,000 crofts in northern Scotland, with over 15,000 individual crofters. When their families are taken in, this means that around 33,000 people are involved in crofting today. An average croft has about five hectares of land, and also a share in a township’s common grazings land. The produce of the croft is usually lamb or beef. Most crofters are tenants, but they can assign their tenancy to someone else using a process regulated by the Crofting Commission.

The Scottish Crofters Federation is a membership organisation which exists to safeguard and promote the rights, livelihoods and culture of crofters and their communities.

TIMELINE



GAMES

Play the ‘Bliadhna a’ Chroiteir’ (the Year of the Crofter) game on e-stòras and keep your croft going for a year.

ACTIVITIES

1. Make an information leaflet describing what a croft is.
2. Make a display showing crofting in your local area.



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