

Inside this issue

- Crofters Commission Officials Visit North Assynt (p2)
- Possibilities for Creation of New Crofts in North Assynt (p2)
- New Deer Larder Up and Running at Last (p2)
- New ACT Office/ Information Centre Receives "Amber" Light for SRDP Funding Support (p3)
- SRDP—No-one Ever Said it Was Easy....(p3)
- New Director Elected for Culkein Drumbeg (p3/4)
- Bluetongue—Vaccination Requirement for Sheep and Cattle as Scotland Becomes Protection Zone (p4)
- Notice Board, Meeting Dates, Contact Details (p3/4)

Shucksmith Report—Crofting Inquiry

There has been a great deal of local and national press coverage on the Shucksmith report, which was released in May of this year—both negative and positive.

The Scottish Government made its formal response at the start of October. It has not accepted every single one of the recommendations, but has welcomed the vision for crofting set out in the Report. The next step will be for the Government to bring forward a draft bill for consultation following further debate on the report and its response.

The following letter was sent from the Trust to Mike Russell MSP at the end of July: -

Committee of Inquiry on Crofting – Final Report

Further to an emergency meeting of the Board of Directors held on Monday 28th July, we are writing to express our serious concerns on the findings of the Shucksmith Report. There has been insufficient time to date to formulate specific alternatives, but there are a number of issues which we feel would be detrimental to the wellbeing of crofters and crofting, in particular the following recommendations:

- *That all croft houses should be tied to residency through a real burden, which would be deemed to be included in the conveyancing when next assigned or purchased.*

The Board feels that this proposal effectively discriminates against crofters. As well as reducing the value of their homes, it would be extremely difficult for crofters to borrow against the security of their homes – their main asset – which could in turn prevent croft improvement/development.

- *The dissolution of the Crofters Commission, to be replaced by a federation of Local Crofting Boards.*

The Board has considerable unease over this proposal and considers that such a policy would inevitably lead to conflict in crofting communities. As stated in its submission to the Inquiry (a reiteration of the submission to the Environment and Rural Development Committee of The Scottish Parliament in respect of the Scottish Crofting Reform Bill in May 2006) the Board asserts that what is required is more effective regulation within the framework currently at the

disposal of the Crofters Commission.

- *The replacement of township grazings committees with "Crofting Township Development Committees".*

The Board is uneasy about the proposal, which would give non-shareholders a major say in matters relating to township common grazings.

We note that the North West, a major crofting region, was bypassed in the Committee's series of Open Meetings held last summer and in February of this year, the only Sutherland meeting having been held in Lairg.

We would like to emphasise that there are less contentious proposals within the report which the Board views positively, such as the section on Land and Environment Issues.

Finally, the Board is keen to underline the fact that the key ingredient to the survival of our crofting communities and our unique culture is retention of our young people.

*Yours sincerely,
For and on behalf of the Board of Directors of Assynt Crofters' Trust Ltd.*

Stoer School Trip to Edinburgh

On 3 September 2008, twelve P5-7 pupils, 2 staff members and the local Ranger went on a school trip to Edinburgh. The plan was to leave very early and travel by car then train from Inverness arriving in Edinburgh at lunch-time.

There was a slight delay because of a cow on the railway line near Perth! This meant the trip to Dynamic Earth was shortened. However we quickly marched there from the train station with our luggage. Dynamic Earth subsidised our travel to and from Edinburgh. We loved the vibrating volcanic platform there. Leaving the building for the top of the

Royal Mile to visit Camera Obscura we all got soaked!

We stayed in the SYHA down Leith Walk which was the most expensive part of the trip! The next day we went to the Scottish Parliament which was



P7: Euan, Michael & Alexander;
P6: William, Eilidh, Rory, Maria, Andrew, John
A: P5: Robyn, John B, John E

arranged by Jamie Stone. After he met us and showed us round, we went into the debating chamber and had to be very quiet- we were briefly caught on the TV cameras! We thought the building was very modern and unusual.

The 1st Minister was not there but we saw many other important people!!

We had a picnic lunch in Princes Street Gardens then went shopping. Everyone loved the Disney shop best!

We would like to thank the Assynt Crofters Trust, Assynt Community Council, Geo Park, Dynamic Earth, Jamie Stone and all others who gave donations to the school and made this trip possible.

Euan, Michael, Alexander (P7)

VIP Visit from the Crofters Commission

Crofters Commission officials Drew Ratter (Convenor), Keith Aitchison (Area Manager) and Isobel MacPhail (Area Commissioner—and ACT Director) met with ACT Chairman Allan MacRae, Vice Chairman Donnie Macleod, Crofting Administrator Kirsty MacLeod and Secretary Ian Colston at the Trust's office in Stoer on the afternoon of 29th October.

The meeting, timed to co-incide with a visit to neighbouring estate owners Assynt Foundation, provided an opportunity to discuss various issues of concern, including the Shucksmith report, the new Scottish Rural Development Programme, the increase in administrative burden for the Trust following the changes in legislation which came in earlier this year, and agricultural concerns such as the cessation of the bull hire scheme, the lack of an abattoir on the west coast, and new blue tongue

vaccination requirements. Some of these issues are covered elsewhere in this newsletter.

Creation of New Crofts?

As many will be aware, the new legislation which came into force in January allows for the creation of new crofts. With 99.99% of North Assynt Estate under crofting tenure, this might seem not to be a course of action open to the Trust.

During the meeting with the Commission officials, various options for the possible creation of new crofts on the estate were discussed.

A tenant can apply for an apportionment of part of his/her grazings share, then divide the apportionment from the croft and assign it to a third party, creating a new croft. There are two such applications underway.

A tenant can also apply for an apportionment and then apply to the Commission to create a new croft or crofts which would then be re-let.

A tenant can apply to divide his/her croft, if it is of sufficient

size for this to be viable, then assign one part to a third party. Finally, the landowner can apply to create new crofts for re-let by re-instating old crofts which have been absorbed into common grazings (with supporting evidence) or indeed on any common grazings land. Issues to be considered include access, service connections and planning issues in respect of a croft house. Obviously this course of action would only be followed with the full support of the township grazings shareholders. If grazings shares were to be attached to increase viability of a new croft, shares would not necessarily have to be reduced across the board, since non-active and/or absentee tenants might be willing to give up part of their share, but even without this the impact would be minimal.

Only the latter option is one that the Trust as landowner can follow, the previous options being open only to individual croft and/or grazings tenants.

The Trust would be happy to assist with any such applications by individual tenants. Township grazings committees would also be offered assistance should they wish to look into this further.

As we all know, croft tenancies very rarely come up for re-let, making it extremely difficult for local young people to get a croft, and this could help towards meeting demand.

The Trust may also consider changing its policy of preferring grazings shares to remain attached to crofts in the event of resale of owner/occupied crofts. The Commission is reportedly adjusting its policy, with retention of young people taking priority over shares remaining with crofts.

If any tenant or grazings committee wishes to discuss options in more detail, please contact Mrs Kirsty MacLeod, Crofting Administrator, or a member of the Trust's Executive Committee. Contact details can be found on p4.

Sport & Game

2008/09 Stalking Season

The commercial deer stalking season is well underway, with 22 stags taken by paying guests, and three parties for hind stalking in November and December. Hind stalking has been deliberately undersold due to the uncertain impact of the activities of neighbouring estates.

A letter was sent to all grazings clerks advising booking dates prior to the start of the season.

Deer Larder

The new deer larder with separate chill and preparation areas was formally opened on 1st September, just in time for the first paying guest. Venison prices are showing a marked improvement on last year, although a shortage in the market may partly account for this.

The total cost of the Sport & Game Development Plan, including the new larder, service connections, equipment and the three new boats for loch fishing, came to a total of £50,647. CASE and Leader+ grants of £23,619 resulted in a net cost to ACT of £27,028. There was further support in the form of a grant of £1,500 from Highland

Council, £1,000 from the Crofters Commission's development budget towards co-ordination costs (£2,000), and £5,850 from the Crofting Communities Development Scheme (a joint application with Stoer Grazings).

Deer Management

The Trust is currently in discussions with the Deer Commission for Scotland regarding a "Memorandum of Understanding". This follows an "unfavourable" status assessment of the Ardvar and Loch a'Mhullinn SAC (Special Area of Conservation) by SNH. Most of the SAC is within Ardvar estate, but part of it also falls within the eastern end of Nedd common grazings. Ardvar has entered into a Voluntary Section 7 Agreement with DCS, together with the John Muir Trust, owners of Quinag estate. ACT declined to sign up to this, although it will continue to be involved in future meetings..

As part of the Section 7 Agreement, DCS carried out a helicopter count of deer on Ardvar, Quinag, North Assynt, Little Assynt, Loch Assynt Lodge, Middle Inver and

Brackloch, which are considered to have a shared population. A copy of the DCS count report is available on request.

This Memorandum of Understanding is to be agreed between ACT and DCS only. At present the board feels that the document puts too much emphasis on deer management (i.e. reduction) rather than other ways of protecting the woodland, such as fencing and moorland management to draw deer away from the protected areas. Further discussions with DCS will take place.

Meantime, Nedd Grazings will be eligible to apply for SRDP funding for woodland management, including re-planting and 100% of capital costs in respect of fencing etc. The next stage will be a meeting on the ground between all the parties concerned, to discuss the way forward.

Rough Shooting

During the last two winters, rough shooting trials have been carried out on the estate, in the form of a single two or three day shoot. This has

provided additional income for the Trust, and was reported to be much enjoyed by the guests.

At the Board Meeting of Monday 22nd September, a note was circulated for discussion, including a report on numbers shot and seen, proposing a maximum of three 3-day shoots over the coming winter bringing in up to £1,800 for the Trust.

It was agreed to continue on a trial basis only, with a single three-day shoot, scheduled to take place in December.

Fishing

There has been a further increase in permit sales in 2008, which is encouraging given the economic climate and this summer's good weather (poor for fishing!).

The Visitor Centre in Lochinver sold 25% more than last year. New permit outlets Drumbeg Stores and the Drumbeg Hotel have undoubtedly helped to boost sales, although long-standing vendor Non Macleod remains a vital link in Drumbeg. Some reports are still to come in, but the running total is already equal to the overall total in 2007.

CROFT RENT

Rent letters went out in October. In a change from recent years, all tenants were sent a request including those who pay by Standing Order. There are still a number rents outstanding for 2007, with reminders out this month. Please contact Kirsty or Joanne if you have any queries.

TOWNSHIP DIRECTORS - ELECTIONS

2008 results:

Culkein Drumbeg—Marion Macleod elected (Janice Macleod stood down)

Culkein Stoer—John Morrison re-elected

Clashnessie—Roddie Kerr re-elected

Clashmore and Raffin—Issie MacPhail was re-elected

Torbreck—Allan MacRae

Future Elections:

2009: Achmelvich, Drumbeg and Nedd

2010: Achnacarnin, Balchladich, Clachtoll and Stoer

Any queries relating to township elections should be addressed to the Secretary or Administrative Assistant (contact details on page 4).

NEW OFFICE/INFORMATION CENTRE

Planning has been approved for a new office/information facility for the Trust, adjacent to Stoer Hall, with an extension to the existing car park to benefit both buildings. The possibility of some sort of

small scale renewable energy system is being investigated. A Statement of Intent for SRDP funding was submitted under "Rural Priorities" and has achieved "amber" status, inviting a full application.

The estimated budget for the project is around £100,000, including ground works, service connections etc. The building design is simple but functional, timber clad with a natural slate roof.

The centre will be used as the main base for the Trust, making the organisation more accessible both to its members and the public. The part-time Administrator, the Secretary to the Board and the Crofting Administrator will be based in the building.

As well as face to face access to ACT, local businesses and individuals will have access to information on crofting, grants and so on, as well as access to facilities such as colour printer, photocopier, fax and PCs with internet access (e.g. for on-line filing of agricultural returns, research and SDRP applications).

Visitors to the area will be able to find out more about the Trust's history, and about the estate itself. Information will also be available on angling, stalking, and other outdoor activities, as well as crofting, local history, local wildlife and community activities. It is hoped that the centre will be staffed full-time in the peak summer visitor months, perhaps with a student placement.

Scottish Rural Development Programme (SRDP)

An evening meeting was held on 6th November with Simon Allison from the Crofters Commission making a presentation on the new SRDP, including examples of township and individual crofter projects, followed by a question and answer session. This followed a similar format to recent events in Scourie and Lairg. There was also an informal workshop in the afternoon, where there was an opportunity to discuss specific proposals. Copies of the presentation and details about the programme are available on request for those who missed it.

It is generally accepted that it is going to be more and more difficult for individual crofters to access SRDP, with the added difficulties of having to finance any purchases before claiming grants awarded and the inevitable delay in payments of these grants.

It should be noted that CCAGS (Crofting Counties Agricultural Grant Scheme) is still available as a source of funding support (grants based on actual costs, 50% for individuals, 60% for townships), along with Rural Development Contracts, Forestry Commission Challenge Funds, LFASS and other schemes. Although these are part of SRDP, they are run as stand-alone schemes and do not require on-line application.

As regards the competitive aspects of SRDP, under the heading of "Rural Development Contracts—Rural Priorities", the Trust will be looking at projects which could be carried out on a whole estate basis, to benefit all crofters, such as a Bracken Management Programme for habitat enhancement, Muirburn and Heather swiping, Access Management and Management of Moorland Grazing plans. These provide per hectare rates which could provide income to cover 100% of costs.

Discussions with Grazings Committees will take place over the coming months to see how this could be taken forward. For land management, it is the land occupier who applies, not the land owner, but if the Trust is able to act as co-ordinator, with applications referring to "collaborative management", applications are more likely to be successful.

The application process is certainly complicated, but this is what we are faced with and hopefully crofters in North Assynt can access some of the £1.6bn that is available to develop rural Scotland between now and 2013.

Welfare of Animals During Transport

Anyone involved in the transportation of livestock in connection with an economic activity may need to have a Certificate of Competence, or face a fine and/or custodial sentence. Short Journeys (a journey over 40 miles and under 8 hours in duration) will apply in many cases, such as a trip to Dingwall.

Some Assynt crofters qualified during recent assessments in Ullapool and Lairg, with others signed up and awaiting details of further assessments to be held in the area.

If anyone thinks they require the certification and have not yet signed up please contact Kirsty for details of how to register.

Reach 80% of households in North Assynt - and further afield - through the ACT Newsletter Notice Board

Please contact the Secretary or Administrator if you have any comments on the Newsletter or if there is anything in particular you would like to be included in the next issue.

ACT Meetings 2008/2009

Board Meetings 2009

Monday 5th January
Monday 23rd March
Monday 18th May
Monday 13th July
Monday 28th September
Monday 16th November
[Executive Committee meetings are held in the intervening months]

General Meeting 2008

Wed 17th December

Annual General Meeting

Monday 29th June 2009

General Meeting 2009

Monday 14th December

ALL WELCOME



Assynt Crofters' Trust

North Assynt Estate

Stoer

Sutherland

IV27 4JE

Tel./fax 01571 855298

E-mail: secretary@assyntcrofters.co.uk

www.assyntcrofters.co.uk

ACT Mission Statement:

“To manage the Estate in such a way as to conserve and advance the social and economic livelihood of the communities, and to foster, preserve and improve the natural environment”.

ANIMAL MATTERS : BLUETONGUE VACCINATIONS

Yet another burden has been placed on crofts with the new requirement to vaccinate sheep and cattle against bluetongue. On 3rd November, Scotland became a restricted zone and a protection zone and subject to the provisions relating to such zones. It is the responsibility of the keepers of sheep and cattle to ensure that the animals are vaccinated against BTv8.

Livestock keepers should all have received a letter and leaflet entitled “Scottish Bluetongue Vaccination Campaign Leaflet - Information for Keepers”, including details of how and when to administer the vaccine, which must be ordered through a vet. Doses are 1ml for sheep and two of 1ml for cattle, four weeks apart. The cost could be up to 98p per 1ml dose, including VAT, depending on the vaccine and quantity purchased.

PEOPLE & PLACES

Drumbeg Village Hall – Extension & Renovation Project

Further fundraising events have been held over the summer, including the popular Drumbeg “Crofts” Dog Show, Ceilidhs in the hall and quiz nights in Drumbeg Hotel. A Statement of Intent is about to be submitted to the SRDP for funding support for the project.

New Director Elected

Following Janice Macleod’s retirement from the Board, Marion Macleod, Polchapple, was elected as the township director for Culkein Drumbeg. Marion’s late father, Adam (“Addy”) Macleod, was a founder member of the Trust and latterly a co-opted Director. Marion’s mother Kina sadly passed away last winter, and Marion took over the family croft having run Polchapple Garden Nursery for the last few years.

Snack Van at Stoerhead Lighthouse

Becky Garvey’s catering trailer at the lighthouse car park this summer popular with both visitors and locals, offering a selection of hot and cold food and drinks, including burgers, chips, baked potatoes, filled rolls and tasty home baking. Twice weekly evening visits to Clachtoll Beach Campsite added to a successful first season. Becky, who lives in Drumbeg, has previously worked locally as a Highland Council Student Ranger and as Heronry Project Officer for the RSPB. Good luck for next year!

Would your project, charity or business benefit from a mention in the Newsletter? Please let us know.

ACT Directors, Office Bearers & Grazings Clerks – contact details

Executive Committee:

Allan MacRae (Chairman)

Donnie Macleod (Vice Chairman)

Ray MacKay

Supported by:

Ian Colston (Secretary to the Board) (855345)

Joanne Murray (Administrative Assistant) (855298)

Kirsty MacLeod (Crofting Administrator) (855212)

Township Directors

Achmelvich - Ray MacKay, Redbraes, Achmelvich (844337)

Achnacarnin - Iain C MacKenzie, The Gate (855241)

Balchladich - Ian A MacKenzie, Bordan, Balchladich (855315)

Clachtoll - Bob Cook, 132 Clachtoll (855301)

Clashmore & Raffin - Issie MacPhail, 204 Clashmore (855297)

Clashnessie - Roddie Kerr, Hill Cottage, Clashnessie (855359)

Culkein Drumbeg - Marion Macleod, Polchapple (833245)

Culkein Stoer - John Morrison, Cnoc Uaine, Culkein (855331)

Drumbeg - Donnie Macleod, 340 Drumbeg (833256)

Nedd - Anne MacCrimmon, Crithinn, Drumbeg (833237)

Stoer - Durrant Macleod, Hillhead, Lochinver (844206)

Torbreck - Allan MacRae, 83 Torbreck (844335)

Co-opted Directors

John MacKenzie, 307 Culkein Drumbeg (833258)

Hugh MacRae, Braighe Raineach, Culkein Drumbeg (833212)

Township Grazings Clerks

Achmelvich - Margaret Macleod, The Shore (844393)

Achnacarnin - Iain C MacKenzie, The Gate (855241)

Balchladich - Ian A MacKenzie, Bordan, Balchladich (855315)

Clachtoll - Graham Gordon, Briar Cott., Lochinver (844607)

Clashmore & Raffin - Issie MacPhail, 204 Clashmore (855297)

Clashnessie - Kenny MacKenzie, 1 Canisp Road (844487)

Culkein Drumbeg - Mairi MacRae, Springfield (833243)

Culkein Stoer - John Morrison, Cnoc Uaine (855331)

Drumbeg - Anne MacCrimmon, Crithinn, Drumbeg (833237)

Nedd - Emily Ross, Nedd (833225)

Stoer - Ishbel Macauley, Ard na Mara, Stoer (855214)

Telephone numbers in brackets (STD code 01571)

Email contacts:

Secretary: secretary@assyntcrofters.co.uk

Administrator: admin@assyntcrofters.co.uk

Croft Admin: croftadmin@assyntcrofters.co.uk