

Crofting offers an opportunity for a young family



**Farm
Advisory
Service**

National Advice Hub

T: 0300 323 0161

E: advice@fas.scot

W: www.fas.scot

Case Study

Tanya Wren & Colm McNichol



A Passion for Ethical Food Production Leads this Young Couple to a Crofting Life on the Isle of Colonsay

Tanya was brought up in a small farming community near Cupar in Fife and Colm was born in London, then his parents moved to Musselburgh where he grew up.

Tanya studied herbalism at university and went on to do an MA in Environmental Education. Colm studied environmental studies with The Open University following this took up tree surgery and fencing.

After university Tanya found herself working on the Isle of Mull managing a small Mediterranean Restaurant. It was during this time that Tanya first became aware of the crofting system and it sparked her interest.

“The Mull Community Woodland Group were advertising their first lot of woodland crofts and it caught my attention” said Tanya “I didn’t feel that a woodland croft was quite right for me, but the seed had been planted and I began to think about it more and more”

A Shared Desire to Grow

When they met it was clear that Tanya and Colm shared a passion for good food production that is sustainable and kind to the environment. They packed their bags and spent the summer WWOOFING! The WWOOF Organisation gives people the opportunity to work for bed and board on organic farms at various locations across the country. Working for organic growers from Newton Stewart to Black Isle to Ardfern and on to Skye, gave them fantastic experience of production in various climatic conditions.

By now Tanya and Colm were looking for a place of their own to rent so they could start growing their own produce. They found a small piece of land on an estate in Angus which was up for rent along with a house and some outbuildings. This seemed an ideal opportunity to start up their farming career, with good land for livestock and vegetable growing along with buildings to process the vegetables for sale.

“The retired crofter we took over from has been a tremendous source of practical advice. He has encouraged us all the way”



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To further improve her business skills, Tanya joined Nourish Scotland's New Farmer programme which was a "vocational training and work placement programme for new entrants and employees wanting to develop their food growing, local marketing and small business skills".

It was on the New Farmer programme that they met Pete Ritchie, Executive Director of Nourish Scotland and co-owner of Whitmuir Organics. A placement to Whitmuir proved an inspiration to them, proving that environmentally friendly farming and good business can go hand in hand.

Looking for the Crofting Life

After three years, Tanya and Colm turned their attention to finding a croft. They had decided that they wanted to be on the west coast of Scotland so they started looking for crofting tenancies to apply for.

By this time Tanya was expecting their first child and they began to think seriously about Colonsay as a place to live and bring up children. "We came across a few options in our search and found that we were always comparing places we visited to Colonsay" said Tanya "We knew that a community croft would become available at some point in the near future so we registered an interest."

"With a baby on the way, living near to family started to make a lot of sense. We had visited Colonsay regularly so we knew a lot of people on the island" said Tanya "All of a sudden it seemed like the logical place to set up home"



Tanya and Colm are settling into their new life.



Tanya and Colm's flock on the croft

Learning the Ropes

Crofting is often described as a 'way of life' rather than a job like traditional farming. There are a complicated set of regulations governing the system. The regulations are designed to protect both the crofters and the system itself. The most important factor though, is the knowledge passed down through the generations.

Like most crofters, Tanya and Colm do not rely entirely on income from the croft. Colm helps out on the local estate where his skills in tree surgery have proven useful and he also works with another local man doing fencing jobs around the island. Tanya works in the local hotel when child care and crofting duties allow.

Tanya and Colm have found the help and support from the crofter who has sublet his croft to them be invaluable. "Peadie has been a mentor to us during our first year of crofting on Colonsay. He showed us how he does things and was always there with advice and a cup of coffee" Tanya said "He also coached us through our first year lambing his old stock of Suffolk cross and our own Hebridean sheep crossed with Texel. We encountered a range of situations during our first lambing on the croft and we feel so much more confident going into lambing next year"

Tanya and Colm started out on Colonsay with their own Hebridean sheep, chosen because of the hardiness and low intervention rates at lambing. They also bought the Suffolk crosses already on the croft and put them all to a Texel tup, which was chosen carefully to not produce too big offspring for the smaller Hebrideans to lamb. The Suffolks, being a much bigger sheep, have proven to be the more profitable enterprise.

All Tanya and Colm's lambs are sold at auction. Although it would be ideal to sell their own finished lamb locally, it is almost impossible to make this viable on an island. To finish lambs themselves would involve keeping them and feeding extra over the winter, which would mean bringing in concentrates to fatten them, this is costly enough without adding transport costs to an island location. There is an abattoir and butcher on the neighbouring island of Mull, but this would involve two ferries which all adds up to a very expensive finished product.

The croft they sub-let has 7.30 hectares of in-bye land which has, like many of the west coast islands, rich soil providing good grazing. The croft also has a 'share' in the Common Grazing. This allows Tanya and Colm to graze livestock on the hill ground that makes up the Common Grazings. These are shared pieces of land where a number of crofts will have the right to graze a specified number of stock. This can be sheep, cows or both in some cases.

Grazings are usually owned by a local estate, but crofters do have the right to buy the grazings in the same way they have to buy their crofts.

Looking to the Future

Having settled in well, Tanya and Colm have been granted the tenancy of a community croft nearby adding a further 3.80 hectares to their enterprise. Some of the land they have taken on has been neglected recently and they plan to use a neighbours pigs to clear the ground initially.

With the ground cleared they plan to introduce a reseeded rotational grazing programme with the aim of improving the pasture overall as it has become compacted and overrun with couch grass in places.

This will allow them to keep some summer grass to cut for silage to reduce the need for expensive concentrates in winter.

They hope to introduce some cattle to boost the croft income and eliminate the need to 'top' the grass. The area of rough grazing that comes with the community croft hasn't been grazed for some time and are hoping the addition of cattle will help the grass to grow again.

Tanya has a love of growing vegetables and has established a small vegetable plot on the croft.

Tanya plans to introduce a couple of poly tunnels and add to the outside beds in the future once their two year old son is a little older. She and her neighbour are hoping to gain funding to help get their enterprise off the ground and into local restaurants/hotels/B&B's as well as the local shop.

Taking advantage of another crofter's 'right' Tanya and Colm plan to build a house on part of the croft. All crofters have the right to build a house on their croft even on tenanted ground. Tanya and Colm are looking to take advantage of the Crofting Grants Scheme which they hope will allow some funding towards building their new house.

Moving to Colonsay has worked well for Tanya and Colm. They are prepared to 'muck in' and become part of the community and that community is happy to help in return.



Tips for success

1. If you are looking into renting land, make sure the agreement is right for you and your particular situation. Think about the future and where you would like to be and decide if the opportunity you have is going to help you get there or potentially hold you back.
2. Don't be afraid to ask. Advice from more experienced farmers is really useful and often freely given.
3. Don't beat yourself up if something doesn't go to plan! Mistakes are how you learn and what suits one farmer may not work for another.

