

# New farming venture for young family on the remote Isle of Coll



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## Case Study

### Tom and Heather Davis

Toraston Farm, Isle of Coll



Isle of Coll - A tough place to farm, but there are worse office views!

***"We knew starting a viable business on a remote island was going to be tough, but we were determined to make it work and had great connections and family already on the island"***

## A Working Holiday on the Hebridean Island of Coll Turns into Permanent Commitment for one Young New Zealander

Tom Davis visited the Isle of Coll in 2001 with the intention of shearing sheep and returning home to New Zealand. However things didn't go according to plan and he ended up meeting islander now wife Heather Davis. Tom continued to work on the island as a self-employed farm worker, builder and fencer, while Heather found part time work on both the island and on the mainland.

In 2015, Tom and Heather heard about a farm going onto the market. After some debate the couple decided that with hard work and perseverance the farm would eventually provide them with a viable farming business and income whilst providing a great life for their young family. "We knew starting a viable business on a remote island was going to be tough, but we had great connections and family already on the island" said Tom "so we talked about it and then went for it."

The added bonus for the couple was the chance to inject new life into the remote and declining Isle

of Coll community that Heather called home.

Purchasing a farm is a pipe dream for most new entrants. Those who manage to secure a bank loan are hit with large capital and interest payments, which can often make the proposed farming operations unviable.

However, things fell into place, when Tom and Heather were approached by another couple on the island who were also keen to invest in a smaller percentage of the farm and the decision was made to form a partnership.

Forming a partnership is a potential gateway into farming for new entrants, who have limited capital available for investment. There are many things to consider, however the basic principle is that a partnership agreement is drawn up by a solicitor, with the profits, losses and liabilities divided among the partners. With the majority partners responsible for making the main business decisions.

More information on business structures and joint ventures is available at <https://www.fas.scot/business-skills/>

Toraston Farm, consisting of 490 hectares (1,210 acres) (396 ha (978.5 acres) of which are categorised as region 2 and 3 rough grazing) was finally purchased in December 2015. The farm had not been worked for many years and there were no fences or farm buildings. The couple knew that starting a business was going to be a lot of work but were determined to make it work!

## Farming on Isle of Coll

Tom and Heather purchased the original flock of 500 Blackface ewes from the outgoing occupier and are now farming approximately:

- 450 Blackface ewes
- 230 Mule ewes
- 130 ewe lambs (for replacements)

The aim is to breed a hardy ewe, suitable for Coll conditions, with good maternal characteristics producing a store lamb, with a desirable carcass conformation. Toraston have been experimenting with Texel, Scottish Blackface and Blueface Leicester tups and although the current numbers aren't significantly higher than original flock numbers, the genetics of the flock have vastly improved, with older unproductive ewes replaced with new breeding stock.

When they purchased the farm, the fencing was in a state of disrepair. Since then the couple have completed more than 10 km of fencing and have already commenced work on a new multi-purpose lambing shed, which will be used for lambing Mules. A sheep handling facility has also been built for drenching and shearing.

## Knowing Your Market

### Marketing Strategy

During August, the heaviest lambs are sold as stores at either Oban or Dalmally, while lighter lambs are sent off the island and put to grass on the mainland. These lambs are then sold in Stirling at the end November into December.

This strategy works well, as there is a limited area of grass on Coll available for growing lambs, while ewes are dried off early and are given the



Shearing some of the ewes at Toraston

opportunity to achieve target condition for tugging in November. Lambs perform well at grass and are sold at a heavier weight than if sold as stores in August.

"There are extra costs associated with grazing away, so it is important to run the numbers and work out if the final margin is worth the extra work" said Tom.

### Locally produced Isle of Coll lamb

Heather also takes charge in supplying the Isle of Coll hotel and local shop with Toraston lamb. This is a part of the business, which she is hoping to develop further.

"Lambs go for slaughter in November, so there is normally a good supply in time for Christmas" said Heather. "Anyone can get in touch, if they are interested in purchasing some Isle of Coll lamb."

The couple deliver to a few customers near Glasgow, but the majority of lambs are used to supply the local hotel and shop who will sell to locals and tourists alike. 25 lambs are normally butchered annually.



All hands on deck at Toraston Farm!





The environmentally important species rich grassland on Coll

## Working with Nature

### Farming with Nature

The Isle of Coll has a hugely diverse ecosystem and like other Hebridean islands provides a last outpost for many species. The Corncrake, Great yellow bumble bee and short necked oil beetle are amongst the vulnerable species which are present on the island and require a carefully managed grazing regime in order to provide suitable nesting and feeding sites.

The farm has recently applied to manage approximately 52 ha as species rich grassland, for the benefit of the oil beetle and Great yellow bumblebee, while another 5 ha have been proposed for corncrake management. Many species depend on this type of farming for their survival. The appropriate stocking density ensures the grass sward is longest in the summer and shortest in the winter, thus providing suitable nesting and feeding sites for the breeding birds and insects. Dung from grazing animals also helps to maintain soil fertility.

Heather and Tom are committed to farming sustainably, using as few inputs as possible and making the most of natural grasslands available on Coll.

"It's a great feeling to produce food, while helping to protecting our natural environment" said Heather.



Farming, provides a great education and lifestyle for the kids.



## Looking to the Future

### Challenges faced by the business

Brexit brings uncertainty to the industry, with levels of future support payments, bringing uncertainty to remote island communities such as Coll.

"We as farmers need to do more to promote farming and shout about the great work and products that we produce!" said Tom "Consumers have never been more distant from the realities of the environment and food production! We must continue to lead the way."

### Long term plan

The couple aim to get the farm running to its full potential, improving the fertility of the grassland, while increasing the sheep numbers and introducing cattle, with the ultimate aim of running a sustainable business producing both beef and lamb for local and market consumption.

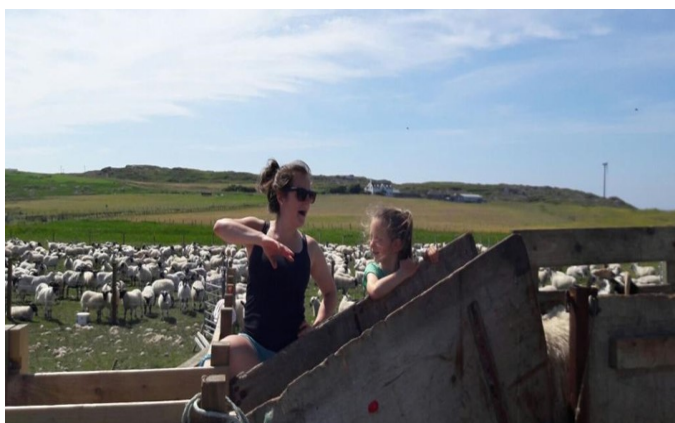
The shed should be finished soon which will be give a big improvement in handling the sheep and allow indoor lambing of the less hardy but better meat producing sheep.

They also plan to produce silage on the farm to supplement winter feeding thereby reducing feed costs incurred by having to ship in from the mainland. This will have the added benefit of reducing the carbon footprint of the business as well.

Tom and Heather are very keen to use technology to improve efficiency and are already experimenting with drones to gather the sheep. They will be keeping an eye out for any innovations that could help them improve their business.

Thinking much further into the future Tom and Heather would like to have a successful and environmentally sustainable business to pass onto their children if they choose to pursue farming as a career.

"It is important that remote and disadvantaged island communities continue to thrive and present a viable future for our young people"



Working the sheep on a sunny day—Don't be fooled! Its not always like this.

**Any tips for anyone wanting to get into farming? What have you learned from your experience? What worked and what didn't?**

"Its very difficult to get your foot into farming, but there are various different routes available. Forming a partnership worked for Toraston, but there are also other joint ventures such as contract and share farming, which are popular in New Zealand. Tendering for a farm tenancy is also an option, but is important to understand the risks and numbers involved."

"Diversification is key to success on a remote farm - don't have all your eggs in one basket! It's important to have diverse income streams so no one thing takes the load."

"Thinking outside the box is crucial and don't be afraid to explore what may seem like crazy ideas but keep the sums realistic and do your research carefully. Understand your market and focus on that."

"Surround yourself with family, friends, specialists and advice with in the industry. Many farmers live in isolation and are afraid to ask for help. Working alongside others, helps us to make decisions and keep moving forward"



**FOR MORE DETAILS SEE THE GUIDANCE NOTE:**  
<https://www.fas.scot/new-entrants/guidance-notes/>



## Toraston Farm Tips for success

- Have a vision for where you want to be in 10 years time. Think about how you are going to get there and make an action plan.
- Do your research - be realistic in your figures so you can be confident entering into a new business.
- Diversification is key but make sure you do your research! Be clear about your market and understand your customer.
- Make use of funding and take professional advice before applying for grants and schemes.

## New Entrants to Farming *"get with the" Programme*

There is a network of new entrants across the country at various stages of developing their businesses. You can join in:

- [www.facebook.com/NewEntrants](http://www.facebook.com/NewEntrants)
- [www.fas.scot/new-entrants/](https://www.fas.scot/new-entrants/)
- Regional workshops

For more info contact Kirsten Williams, Consultant, SAC Consulting, Clifton Road, Turriff, 01888 563333, [Kirsten.Williams@sac.co.uk](mailto:Kirsten.Williams@sac.co.uk)

There are useful free resources on the website too:

- Case studies—learning from the experiences of other new entrants.
- Guidance notes—benefit from advice tailored to assist new entrants to farming.
- Also see [www.gov.scot/Topics/farmingrural/Agriculture/NewEntrantsToFarming](http://www.gov.scot/Topics/farmingrural/Agriculture/NewEntrantsToFarming)