

Aiteann Croft: Planning Design Statement

Croft history

Aiteann Croft was originally part of a much larger croft, Moor of Clunes (C3994), which was subdivided into four smaller crofts in 2019. It is located at the southern end of the original croft and is the largest of the new crofts, covering an area of 16.89 hectares (approximately 42 acres) and supports a diverse range of natural habitats. It is our understanding that the croft hasn't been worked for at least a decade or more. Though some temporary grazing has taken place, it has sadly become derelict. All stock fencing and gates require replacing, and there is no remaining infrastructure. However, there is evidence that Aiteann was well-looked after and productive in the past – [historical OS maps](#) show buildings, a track, and two 'wells'. Although Aiteann does not have an existing building on it, historical maps show a structure similar to those marked on surrounding crofts (Appendices 1-3). There are ruined remains of stone walls and outbuildings (Appendix 4), and several well-constructed drainage channels which could be restored.

In terms of the broader settlement pattern, the croft is located in a traditional crofting area. A number of crofts run along the valley between Caiplich and Knockbain. Most of these crofts are located along Easter Street, running downhill towards the Moniack Burn. Two of the four new crofts created by splitting Upper Moor of Clunes had existing buildings on them and have recently gained planning permission.

We see our tenancy of Aiteann Croft and the purchase of the adjacent arable field, along with the rental of a further adjacent field for grazing purposes, as an exciting opportunity to restore formerly derelict croft land and bring it back into a productive state through sensitive management and diversification. This is a long-term plan for us, and we hope that Aiteann remains in our family for many generations to come.

The future Aiteann Croft

As a family, we are committed to restoring the croft to a state where it is both as productive and biodiverse as possible. By living on the croft and working it in a sustainable way, we believe we can make a valuable contribution to the local environment, community and economy. The tenancy of Aiteann is a legacy for our children, who hope to develop their own businesses and take over the running of the croft in future. Starting from a derelict state, it will take money, time and hard work to build the croft to its full potential but we feel this is achievable, and well worth doing.

The future Aiteann Croft will be run on the principal of regenerative agriculture with agroforestry, silviculture and permaculture practices employed to enable livestock and nature to thrive. It will be a mixed holding producing meat, dairy, eggs, fruit, vegetables, honey, preserves, and herbs. Among the many benefits of regenerative crofting are increased animal health and welfare; habitat regeneration and creation; increased carbon capture; production of high quality, organic, local and sustainable food products; fewer food miles, and reduced carbon emissions.

The supporting Operational Needs Assessment covers the conventional agricultural aspects of our crofting plans. As noted in the report, the regenerative approach is more time-consuming as it includes intensive practices such as rotational mob grazing, and pesticide-free horticulture. Further activities essential to our overall croft management, but not able to be included as part of the annual labour requirement for agriculture in the SRUC farming handbook, will include beekeeping (for honey and pollination), agroforestry, and wildlife habitat management and creation. Additional diversification will be built into the croft's enterprises as it becomes more productive, including forestry products, arts and crafts materials, small-scale educational activities, volunteering

opportunities, and potentially a small, very low-key 'quiet' glamping site. We intend to tread lightly by using renewable energy and closed-loop/zero waste systems wherever possible.

Surrounding environment

Conservation will be an integral part of our regenerative crofting approach. Aiteann Croft borders the Moniack Burn, which is an SSSI due to its abundance of mosses and lichens and native forest. The croft itself supports great biodiversity within a wide variety of habitats. We've seen barn owl, merlin, red kite, bats, hare, fox, red squirrel, and also noticed badger prints on several occasions. Large areas of Aiteann are shown on the Scottish Forestry Map Viewer as a Native Woodland Habitat Network and Highland Native Woodland Target Area. Our intention is to enhance and expand the existing native woodland by planting native broadleaf and conifer species. We also intend to plant shelter hedges and introduce beneficial trees and shrubs in other areas to facilitate agroforestry. We will carefully manage the grassland to ensure it remains species-diverse, and restore peat bog areas to be retained as nature reserves.

The croft is currently derelict with no stock-proof fencing remaining. The eastern side of bordering the Moniack Gorge is completely unfenced leaving the croft exposed to over-browsing by the local feral goat population that lives there (confirmed as a non-native invasive pest by NatureScot in recent correspondence). In addition to the goats, both roe and red deer frequent the croft. If our crofting enterprises are to be viable, suitable deer/goat-proof fencing must be erected at the earliest opportunity. This will lead to the regeneration of ancient native Scots Pine forest (some of the last remaining in Scotland) and allow for a natural underbrush layer to re-establish. The resulting restoration/rewilding of the area will contribute significantly to the green network as a valuable natural habitat for wildlife. A more detailed explanation of our plans for habitat management and creation, including agroforestry, can be found in the accompanying business plan.

Local housing context

Opportunities for development / housing within the community

Locally, suitable family housing becomes available only rarely (in our experience - we have been searching in this area for well over a decade). Disappointingly, when it has, it has never been within our budget. An additional, more personal factor for us is the desire to live a simpler life with minimal environmental impact. Countryside homes in the area tend to be larger, older and more conventional in design so are not so suited to our sustainable ethos.

Considering the current context, the pandemic (which began just after we offered for the tenancy of Aiteann) has seen demand for rural Highland properties rise significantly over a very short period of time. This has led to the subsequent inflation of house prices. If any suitable property in the area did come on to the market at present, we are unlikely to be able to compete. In addition, there appear to be virtually no rental properties available at this time. A further concern for us is that rental prices for family homes, when available, now far exceed our monthly mortgage payments so renting would not be a viable financial option for us.

We purchased the land adjacent to Aiteann with the intention of extending the opportunities for diversification in order to build a viable croft business for ourselves, and our children ongoing. This has been a long-held dream and we have the very best of intentions for working the land and integrating with the local community. We are comfortable with the house being tied to the croft land via a Section 75 agreement if necessary as we intend to live there for the foreseeable future and generations beyond.

Planning proposal

Note: All of the development outlined is to be sited on the field that we own which is adjacent to Aiteann Croft. Please see attached location plan for details.

Croft house - functional need

A family home will be integral to the running of the croft's enterprises. We expect to be almost constantly working on some aspect of the croft or related businesses; be it maintenance, tending to livestock and plants, making and packing produce, working on promotion or dealing with customers face-to-face. It is essential that we are on site to ensure that livestock health and well-being can be monitored throughout the day, year-round, particularly as the location is rural, and in an area where severe weather can hit quickly. Being on site and available to deal with emergent situations, animal welfare - particularly during birthing season, in the swarming season for honey bees, or in the event of predator or dog attack - is vital to the safe running of the croft and its associated businesses. Emergency action such as dealing with stock fence break-out, preventing storm damage or dealing promptly with livestock injury could be required at any time. It is also necessary to be on site in order to carry out essential duties such as the daily milking of goats and dairy cattle, charcoal burning, smoking of meat products, controlling the temperature of polytunnels and assessing the watering needs of the crops both under cover and in the gardens. Water conservation is an important environmental consideration related to the horticultural side of the business. Plants are best watered in the very early morning or late evening to reduce evaporation rates and ensure that they are not put under stress as temperatures build during the day. Stress weakens plants making them susceptible to pest attack and disease as well as reducing yield. Most vegetable and fruit varieties have the best flavour if they are picked in the early afternoon once water intake from overnight and early-morning watering has been absorbed. Fruit and veg which is picked shortly after watering can have a diluted flavour due to higher water retention. For this reason, being on site to water efficiently, and harvest accordingly, at optimum times of the day is essential to ensure good taste and quality.

We currently live and work from home (permanently, not just as a result of the pandemic) on the south side of Inverness approximately 13 miles from South Clunes. Not being able to live on the croft would necessitate a daily 26-mile round, 60–80-minute commute in order to work it. This would have negative implications in terms of carbon emissions, fuel and vehicle maintenance costs, and time management. As we discovered this harsh winter, the rural roads leading to the croft can quickly become impassable due to drifting snow. Livestock well-being is a significant responsibility in winter. We would need to be available to ensure a constant supply of fresh drinking water is available to livestock at all times. In winter, this could mean having to go out and break ice or transport water around the croft several times a day in freezing temperatures. In addition, heavy snow and blizzard conditions can hit as late as April, often coinciding with livestock birthing time. This is a serious concern as it would ultimately prevent us from being able to keep the livestock essential to building our croft business enterprises.

A further concern is related to security. From news reports in 2020, and early this year, it appears that rural crime (theft, fly-tipping, dirty camping) is on the increase in the Highlands. Sadly, dog attacks are also becoming increasingly common as more people access the countryside for leisure. It is therefore vital that there is an inhabited property on the croft security for reasons, and to allow us to be on hand to respond promptly to any emergent situations.

Proposed croft house

The croft house would have a modest footprint of approximately 140m² (with approximately 5m² of this floorspace being taken up by the spring water storage tank and filtration equipment for the private water supply). It will have three bedrooms to accommodate our family of four. It is designed to be visually unobtrusive, taking a traditional rectangular agricultural barn/longhouse form over one storey. We hope to be able to use some of the traditional stone left on the site from the now ruined croft buildings costs allowing, and will source local sustainable materials where possible.

Design for a low environmental impact

The house will be as thermally efficient as possible, and sited for maximum solar gain. Heating will be provided by a combination of ground or air source heating and wood burning stove, run on wood sourced from the croft. Electricity will be provided by 4Kw roof-mounted solar PV system arrangement, arranged in a [4 x 8] landscape orientation. This will be fitted with a battery system in order to ensure maximum use of the electricity generated, with top-up coming from the grid in less favourable conditions. As the site is south-east facing, it is ideally placed for both solar gain and solar generation. Water for the house will be provided by the natural spring nearby which has been professionally assessed and deemed sufficient for both yield and quality. Hot water will come from a combination of solar immersion and solar thermal systems. Outdoor lighting will be kept to a minimum to reduce electricity usage and maintain dark skies.

Building: We intend to employ local builders and tradespeople on the build.

Materials proposed:

- Vertical larch cladding (locally sourced)
- Corrugated steel roof
- Timber frame windows (locally sourced, Norscot or Nordan, Inverness)
- Larch decking to front
- Stone gathered from the croft's original buildings to parts of the side sections (costs allowing)

Utilities:

- Water supply from spring + sunken holding tank
- Septic tank with 60m² drainage system
- Electricity – 4 kW solar pv array with connection to grid as back-up
- Rainwater collection system (costs allowing)

Location

The proposed croft house will be situated on adjacent non-croft land therefore no inbye/apportioned croft land will be affected. The site is south-east facing and slopes gently down towards the croft. The croft house will be centrally located to allow for optimum management of the horticultural side of the business. It will be surrounded by a kitchen/edible garden based on permaculture principles which will provide the family with fresh organically grown produce. This central location will allow for the best management of the nearby polytunnel crops, orchard fruits, and the safety and well-being of our laying hens. It will also allow for close management of the grazing land and the livestock moving through our mob-grazing systems.

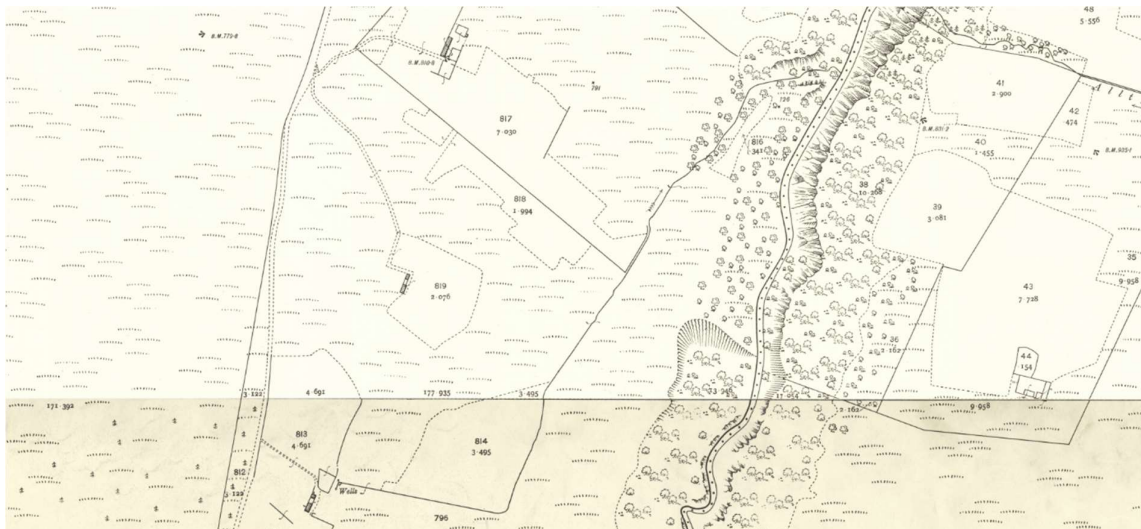
Planting plans are designed to provide shelter hedges, forage crops, and habitat for wildlife. Once established, these should make the house almost invisible from the road.

Perimeter and access:

- Access road – new safe access from the croft onto minor rural road to be created
- Deer fencing at a height of 1.8m to perimeter bordering the road
- Shelter hedge along the perimeter fence (native and wildlife friendly species such as rowan, hazel, damson, wild rose, and hawthorn)
- Refuse and recycling bin store (2 x 240L) at site entrance
- All garden and organic food waste will be composted on site

No trees will be felled due to this application, and many more will be planted.

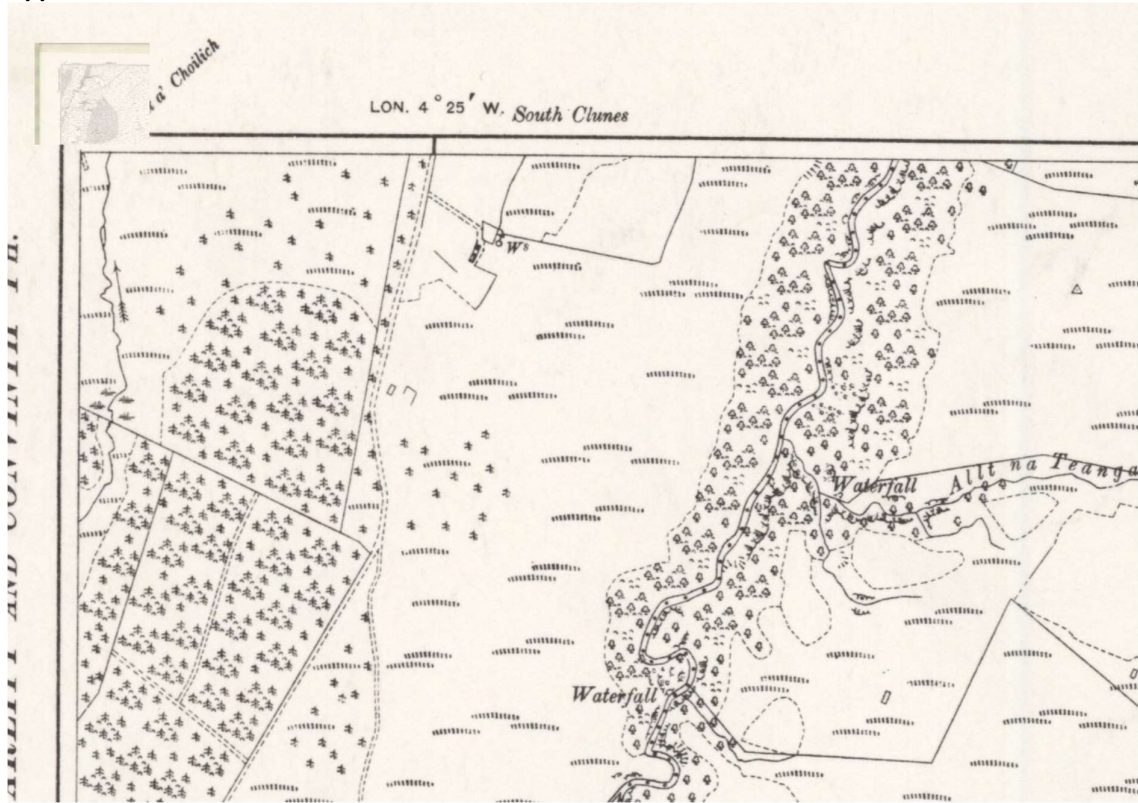
Appendix 1



Appendix 2



Appendix 3



Appendix 4

