

How come you came to be in Mull?

Bert: Because there was a farm to let. I was working on a farm called Barguilean, in Glen Lonan, near Taynuilt. I'd always wanted a farm, so we applied for the particulars. I came over to Mull and had a look, and made an offer of rent, but didn't get the place. However, the first choice tenant backed out so we ended up in Mull.

The delivery was in May 1972. It was a cold, miserable day and there was snow round in Glen MacQuarrie when we were there valuing the ewes at the old fank. Neil Jackson, the auctioneer from Oban did the valuation. I think that must have been around the 25th of the month.

It rained continuously at least until the week after the Highland Show. My thought was "What the Hell have we done?!", however, the weather cleared up into a pretty good summer.

When we first arrived, that was me Chris and Helen, who was one at the time, we stayed in the farmhouse, then when the Estate renovated the house we had to move to the schoolhouse. We were there for a winter, then we moved back to a very small caravan at the farm until the house was finished.

Chris: Actually, we moved in before it was finished - we were living in the kitchen, we had a mattress which we propped up against the wall during the day. The passage from the kitchen to the rest of the house was full of rubble!

Bert: The late Jessie Cameron, a daughter of the previous tenant, stayed on at the farm and was of a great help to us in the first couple of years. She stayed in a caravan in the garden. Jessie would babysit for us any time we wanted to go out, and there was only one excuse that Helen would accept for us not being there: we were away calving a cow. Eventually, Jessie moved to Killiechronan.

Chris: I took over the Post Office when we arrived, which had been run by Jessie's sister Rosemary.

Bert: Johnny Simpson was the postie at the time and Angus John was the mail contractor.

Bert: After Jessie went to Killiechronan, for a couple of years I gathered and handled the sheep on my own. At that time there were about 450 ewes. Chris helped me with the handlings.

Chris: But I didn't go gathering!

Bert: About that time, Hugh MacPhail took over as manager in Ulva and we started neighbouring. Also about that time Jimmy MacLachlan retired and moved to Salen. He'd been the shepherd at Kilbrennan for many years. He came here and helped practically every day. He came down with the mail carrier and stayed for a few hours before either going back with Angus John or sometimes he would be here the full day, clipping, or at hay, and myself or Chris would take him home. Angus John also helped at hay and the clippings.

Chris: He was very keen on keeping the garden here. He grew tomatoes in old cars! He was like a grandfather to the children.

Bert: There were about 14 cows initially. I brought them from the mainland with me. Doug Thompson shifted them with his lorry. They were just wee hill cows of various breeds and various crosses. There was an exceptionally quiet old cow called Granny Cow that Helen used to get a hurrell on. The first year we were here we got a loan of a big Lincoln Red bull from either Willie Ensay's father or De Gaul.

Chris: On occasions, the Killiechronan bull would venture this distance and we would take advantage of his visit!

Bert: When we were neighbouring with Ulva, that also took in Gometra because Hugh MacPhail did the stock work for Gometra too. At that time in Ulva, there was Johnny Cattnach, Archie Livingstone, Walter Nicholson (Rosemary's husband), the ferryman - a boy called Burgess - and a gardener, Lachie Beag. In Gometra there was the Durie family, the Howards, and Jane-Anne MacFarlane. Gometra was just an ideal wee place with some very good fields, some heathery bits and not a lot of bracken. It had a much drier climate than ours, and good sheep and cattle and some Shetland ponies. The cattle were cross Shorthorns.

Hugh had a helluva good dog at that time. I can't remember his name. He would go out above the sheep and flank all the way from one end of the gather to the other.

The fank in Gometra was all right. It was quite a good hard standing. It was quite old-fashioned, the fank, but it did the job. It was a stone fank and a bit of a shed and the dipper was in the shed if I remember right. You got very well fed at the Duries'.

We went down the road to Gometra in an old Landrover. The road wasn't too bad then. Still most of the brae faces had tar on them. Hugh and Johnny, Archie, and if there was a student there (sometimes they had two students in the summer)...they would give the road a bit of maintenance.

At speaning we would walk the lambs up from Gometra. It was quite a big job. Someone would clear the road ahead. The cast ewes and lambs were all sold together so the cast ewes helped steady the lambs up. It took a while. There was always a problem at the pier on Ulva because there was no real penning arrangement. You were trying to hold them with dogs. You would try to get as many as possible onto the boat and bring them over to this side where there was pens behind the garage. Initially, it was an old ship's lifeboat, and then they got the old Ballachulish Ferry, which was ideal but it didn't last long. Something went wrong with it and eventually it broke its moorings and ran aground on Oskamull just below Don's house. After that, they borrowed the wee landing craft from Inch Kenneth sometimes.

Eventually, Hugh MacPhail got his own farm at Glenforsa and Iain Munro got a partnership tenancy on Ulva. Gometra was sold to a deer farmer and the stock was taken off it. The deer farm was a failure. Some of the deer swam across to the mainland. Some of them went to Ulva - there was a fence put up to stop them going onto Ulva, but within a few weeks they'd worn a track round the strainer at the edge of the cliff. They must've been hanging on by their toenails.

Chris: There were also Angora goats on the island at that time.

Bert: Anyway, back to Laggan. Around 1978, Killiechronan was cleared of sheep. In fact, the sheep and the men were cleared off Killiechronan and Killiechronan was sold. Hoodbar had it, and it was sold after he died. The new proprietor, David Holman, sold Oskamull off and a man Alastair De Watteville bought it, intending to run boat trips to Staffa. I obtained a grazing lease from him, however the boat trips project was short-lived and Oskamull was put up for sale. With help from the Highlands and Islands Development Board and the bank, we managed to buy it. That allowed us to expand the sheep numbers and the cattle numbers. We raised a family of three on the island and it's a tremendous place to bring up children.

Chris: When did we get the milk cows?

Bert: We must have had a milk coo when we came because the Sutcliffes got milk from us and I've forgotten who else at that time. Mary-Ann would be the first milk cow - she reared a calf as well but aye gave plenty of milk. She was from England. She came up in Adie's [MacQuarie] lorry along with the furniture. One time in England she reared three calves at once. She had a braw vessel on her. She was an Aberdeen Angus cross Jersey. She was the first coo I ever owned. There was somebody giving up milking Jersey coos down near Campbeltown. Me and Jimmy MacLachlan went down to get a coo and we came back with 3 coos and a couple of heifers. We ran out of diesel in the middle of nowhere that day. We had to walk at least a couple of mile till we got enough diesel to get us down as far as Lochgilphead. We kept two of the coos and managed to sell the rest locally in Mull.

Chris: At one point we had three milk cows and milked two. By hand? Oh yes. We provided various people with milk. It all started with Mary-Ann. We obviously thought we'd expand a bit! I milked the cows by hand in the byre. It had a cobbled floor, and wooden stalls. The milk was strained through muslin and put into customers' containers, which were then put in a milk crate in the culvert under the road to keep cool in the burn. Some people collected their own but it was mainly delivered by Angus John. We stopped milking cows when the pasteurisation regulations came in. One day, one of the milk cows had wandered down the road and I went to get her back. It was a horrible morning. I got her back up to the yard and at the same time a lady from Ulva appeared to visit the Post Office. She had walked from Ulva. I was trying to hurry the cow into the byre, and I said "Get inside where it's warm, you silly old cow", and the lady said "Oh, but I'm not cold!". I had to apologise and explain I wasn't talking to her! If the cows had been up the burn at the wild garlic, there was a garlic flavour in the milk. Another time they got into a field of rape. That milk was quite bitter. We had a Morag, and a Daisy - I can't remember the others. We bought Daisy from Jenny Goodfellow. She would kick occasionally. I milked the cows in the morning. They would be put out to graze after that if the weather was reasonable. The calves went out with them and were separated at night so there'd be milk in the morning. I suppose I didn't mind milking the cows, but I wasn't sorry when we stopped.

Chris: I did bed and breakfast, in fact, I did dinner, bed and breakfast for a while. I might have had 6 or even 8 people in sometimes. Other times maybe only 2 or 3. There was plenty of passing trade at that time. Some people would come back the following year. How upmarket accommodation is now compared to how it was then! There weren't the comforts then that there are now in houses, but that was just the way it was.

Bert: When we first came, there was a butcher's van every week. There was no refrigeration and by the time he got here, sometimes the meat could be just about on the turn. Anyhow, we didn't buy much meat, we lived mainly on rabbits, venison and mutton. We grew our own tatties and neeps, and Angus grew vegetables in the garden. There were other vans: some that sold clothing - Iain Irvine was one, and there was another van that came from up North, and another from the Cabrach - and then for a while there was a wifie that came round selling fish - that was Pearl Stevenson. Her husband was a lobster fisherman and they had a caravan and stayed here at Laggan for a while.

Chris: Sometimes, if I had milk spare, I took the cream off it and made butter. I mainly got my groceries in Salen at Whyte's shop. Angus would deliver them.

Bert: There were various agricultural reps came round, from feeding firms and veterinary supply firms.

Bert: One year, in 1976, we had hay in the Camas, and it was got without a spot of rain on it.

Chris: The sun shone for 6 weeks.

Bert: It was cut with an old trailing mower, which is now in Andy MacFarlane's field at Aros Bridge. We had an old International 414 of unknown vintage. The hay was turned by hand, then rowed up with a borrowed wuffler. It might have been from Torloisk. We put it into rucks. There was Angus John, ourselves and Jim Scarlett. The rucks sat for a while, then we brought them down to the farm with an old ruck-lifter. Niellie [MacColl] came down with the Torloisk baler and we baled it in the yard.

Chris: I remember one evening, while baling, the midges attacked and the operation had to be abandoned. Everybody was black with the things.

Bert: We got a wee trailed Taarup forage harvester in the late Seventies or early Eighties. That's when we started making silage. Generally a field of grass and a field of oats, or maybe two fields of grass. Once we had a field of pure red clover, which we put into silage. The forage harvester cut it and blew it into a trailer with high sides. Then the trailer went to the pit and we couped it in and rolled it. Then when we were finished we covered it with plastic and tyres. That was for feeding the coos. We just had a silage knife to cut it into blocks, then we graiped into the transport box and took it to the cows. Winters were generally wet but not as wet as now. Most of our hard feeding and hay was bought through Ewen Stewart from Comrie, who I'd known since I was a teenager. In fact, I gave him his first load to Mull.

It was a good old tractor, the 414, then we had a 434 - very uncomplicated tractors. The old 414 ran away one morning and somersaulted down a bank. It was written off. That was one of the few mornings Helen wasn't with me when I was feeding. Normally, she would have been in the transport box.