



Sharing their story: All work and no play left  
Lynn and Sandra rethinking their crofting life

Living well in order to be able to farm and croft well is one of the key Farmstrong Scotland messages. We meet the crofters who are reaping the benefits of finding some time for themselves...

It took start-up crofters Lynn Cassells and Sandra Baer six hard years before they realised the hours they were working were unsustainable.

Many will remember the pair from their appearance on the BBC programme This Farming Life in 2019, following their new life trying to make a living from the land at Lynbreck Croft near Tomintoul in the Highlands of Scotland.

"We arrived as green as the grass," recalls Lynn. "Because we came to the croft with no farming background we had no idea of how hard - both physically and mentally - this way of life is."

The pair were six years into the eight they have been on the 150-acre croft when they realised they needed to rethink their work-life balance.

"The wellbeing messages of Farmstrong have really struck a chord with us," explains Lynn.

"Not only did we have to learn how to look after the livestock, but we realised there is so much

else to keep on top of such as general paperwork, accounting and marketing. Farming today isn't simply looking after the land and animals - which is hard enough - there are so many other stresses that we were completely unprepared for.

"As soon as we started admitting to ourselves that the reality was sometimes hard - not the roses-around-the-door image given by seemingly perfect Instagram pictures - we felt like a weight had been lifted off our shoulders."

Just the other day, Lynn reveals, her and Sandra sat down with a diary and worked out some dates to take time away from the croft and have family visit.

"It's such a simple thing, but sitting down with the diary and getting a few things written down in there to allow for a break felt so good," says Lynn. "Obviously, there are times of year on any farm or croft - such as calving, lambing or harvest - when it is impossible to get away. But what we have realised is to help get you through those busy seasonal times, it's so important to have time to step back and catch your breath.

"Getting some dates written down in the diary for family to come over, or to visit them, feels so good. It is not an easy thing to do, especially

if you need to arrange help to look after the animals, but we have learnt over the last couple of years that we must not wait until we are utterly exhausted before we think of ourselves. There is no shame in taking a holiday."

Lynn describes the first six years on the croft as "running on adrenaline" and completely understands the feelings of guilt that the farming and crofting communities often feel for taking time out for themselves.

"To always be working can become a bit of a pattern that is hard to break," says Lynn. "We now realise that we were not doing ourselves, or the croft, any good by being so exhausted. To be able to cope with the challenges life throws at us we need to look after ourselves. We have also found it very true that you can get too close to your problems. That even a simple day out always brings us back to the land with new ideas and remembering what it is we love about the croft. We have a new understanding for the old saying about being no use to either man nor beast. It is so important to look after yourself, not just the animals."

Sandra grew up in Switzerland, having annual holidays in Scotland visiting family, while Lynn's childhood was spent in Northern Ireland.



They met in 2012, while both working in the South East of England for the National Trust as apprentice rangers and shared a dream to one day buy a "bit of land", spending the next few years working and saving tirelessly to be able to turn their dream into a reality.

"We never thought we'd end up with 150 acres," explains Lynn, who says it's interesting to reflect that it probably took them six years after taking over the reins at the croft in 2016 to admit how exhausted their new life was making them because they knew they were, to the outside world, so lucky to have been able to take on the croft in the Cairngorms.

"Sandra and I are a couple and, in common with so many other farming and crofting couples, we were spending all our time either working together or talking about work," says Lynn.

"We don't get the balance right all the time, but we now have some boundaries to separate work and life. My telephone is switched off from 5pm and we make a point of sitting at the table to eat dinner together. These are just a few tiny things that have made such a difference to us. It is strange really, because taking time away from our crofting duties has probably made us even more passionate about it. It really has re-energised us.

"Sandra loves learning about traditional skills and is a wonderful carpenter and this is how she spends some of our new-found time away from work. She is also a keen gardener and can often be found in the polytunnel growing our

vegetables. We are really passionate about eating good quality food to keep our minds and bodies healthy from the best soils and are now self-sufficient in year-round vegetables, meat and eggs, and we're not far off with fruit!

"I factor in going for a run while I am out delivering the eggs - we have a subscription club that involves a weekly delivery - and make time now for reading, writing a few lines in my journal and just carving out times of stillness which I enjoy.

"I suppose we have been re-defining what is truly important to us. Of course, the monetary side of the croft is a factor. We have to pay our bills and feed the animals but wealth for us now is more about physical and mental wellbeing. There is no point having a million pounds in the bank if you are waking up feeling exhausted."

Once a week, Lynn and Sandra venture into town to take part in a weekly exercise class at their local leisure centre and go wild swimming as often as they can.

"Even if we've had a tiring day on the croft we now realise getting out and socialising with other people is so important," says Lynn, who is so pleased they made a conscious decision from the start not to mail out their produce.

"We deliver locally and anybody who lives further afield must come and collect, giving us that direct interaction with our customers. We encourage those far away to find producers in their area who

are doing something similar to us and support them, empowering them to create their own foodscapes where people can really connect with their food and where it comes from.

"As part of our income diversification, we also run courses in the summer, sharing with others our ethos and what we have learned. We want to enable more people to find their way into farming and crofting that is good for their minds and bodies, for the land and for their community."

To conclude, Lynn and Sandra say they have been bowled over by the parallels between regenerative farming and looking after their own wellbeing.

"The key tool in our toolbox as land stewards is providing the land with rest," says Lynn. "Just as the land needs to rejuvenate - and can't be worked tirelessly without a break - those of us who work in farming and crofting need to give their own physical and mental health some recovery time.

"I hadn't heard of the Farmstrong programme until recently, but I wish it had been around when we first came to the croft. We absolutely love our lives here and are so happy we made the move.

"Having more rest and recovery time has helped our lives and our business become even more resilient. By doing less and taking more time out, we have never achieved so much or been so productive. It's a core life lesson that we're keen to keep sharing."



**Trio & Tested: Three simple steps that helped Lynn Cassells and Sandra Baer on the path to better wellbeing.**

- TAKE NOTICE** Take time to sit down and put some dates in a diary to take time away from the farm or croft. "We love what we do and where we live and look forward to every day here but it's important to take a break" says Lynn
- KEEP LEARNING** Work out boundaries to separate work and life. Simple things like Lynn switching her mobile on to airplane mode at 5pm and making time to eat dinner together have helped to re-energise the couple
- BE ACTIVE** Even if you are tired, make time to socialise with others. Lynn and Sandra find joining a weekly exercise class in the local town's activity centre serves three purposes, a) getting them off the croft b) helping keep them fit c) widening their group of friends

Farmstrong Scotland Supporters

ROYAL HIGHLAND & AGRICULTURAL SOCIETY OF SCOTLAND

NFU Mutual Charitable Trust

MOVEMBER

**FARM STRONG** Scotland

[www.farmstrongscotland.org.uk](http://www.farmstrongscotland.org.uk)