



They're buying pieces of paradise isle to stem population decline

By Euan Duguid

JOHN and Anna Cumming play happily in their garden on the west side of Harris.

Behind them is a breathtaking panorama of Bermuda-like white sands and the green water of the Sound of Taransay.

In this Hebridean utopia the air is pure and the land safe for children.

But apart from nine-year-old John and Anna, who's seven, children are in short supply. It's as if the Outer Hebrides have been visited by the Pied Piper.

On nearby Scalpay there are now no children under the age of seven. In the Cummings' village, Seilebost, things are similarly bleak.

Although Shelibost Primary has a roll of 12, there's only one child under five in its catchment area.

Closure

John and Anna's dad, Gordon, is manger of Borge Lodge Estate and chair of the school's parent council. He reckons the school's closure within the next five to 10 years is "very much in the pipeline".

The lack of children is just part of a wider population crash which not only endangers the school but an entire way of life.

Harris has lost around a quarter of its people over the past two decades and 35 per cent of its 2000 inhabitants — scattered across 500 square kilometres — are now past 60. Since 2001 around 300 have died and just 87 have been born.

The decline of traditional industries, like fishing and Harris tweed, is the main factor making island communities vanish.

The situation on Scalpay — linked to Harris by bridge in 1997 — recently prompted Councillor Catherine Macdonald to call for Scottish and UK government action to regenerate it and other outlying areas.

But locals on the west side of Harris are breaking away from state control to tackle the problem, in the first community buyout from the Scottish Government.

A mile across the bay from the Cummings, in Luskentyre, lives Murdo Mckay, a father of three spearheading attempts to stem depopulation.

Murdo is chair of the West

Islanders are doing it for themselves

Harris Crofting Trust, which represents the villages of Borge, Scarista, Seilebost, Horgabost and Luskentyre — whose populations total just 117.

In a postal vote in October with a 95 per cent turnout the residents voted to collectively buy out their crofting estates.

A steering group was turned into the crofting trust to begin negotiations with the landowners, the Scottish Government.

It was in the 1930s the UK government compulsorily purchased a number of estates in the Western Isles, Skye and Caithness, broke them up and resettled them as crofts as part of a post-World War 1 resettlement programme.

Now Murdo, whose children are aged 10, 12 and 14, says a deal is expected to be rubber-stamped within the next few weeks, ending nearly 80 years of government ownership.

Self-rule

With grants from various enterprise and business bodies, the trust reckons it can raise the £59,000 needed for the entire 25,000-acre estate.

Murdo, an economic development officer with Western Isles Council, which has no link with the trust, believes self-rule is the only way of reversing depopulation.

He says, "The government basically takes an estate management role. It collects the rent but doesn't take a proactive role in the community."

"It's been described by some as 'benign neglect'. We believe the more local you can have control the better."

The trust's board has members from each of the townships involved and is encouraged by events in the north of Harris, where locals succeeded in a buyout from



■ Head of the crofting trust, Murdo Mckay.

cider millionaire Jonathan Bulmer in 2003.

Murdo says, "The trust there has houses going up and that acted as a spur for more projects. They now have a wind turbine set up."

Housing will be a major concern on west Harris, too.

"A lot of the houses here are second homes for retirees," explains Murdo. "That's not especially good for a sense of community."

Nearly half are holiday homes so the first objective of the trust is to attract new blood by making affordable housing available.

The trust won't be building houses but wants to allocate land for development.

A feasibility study has been completed, looking at options for regenerating the community. As well as house building, suggestions have included a renewable energy scheme, barley production for distilleries, a restaurant and horticulture.

Murdo says, "We anticipated having 10 houses on the west side of Harris within the first five years."

"Ideally we're looking for young families, although we don't want to discriminate and appear ageist."



■ Main picture — The view looking from Luskentyre. Above — Joan and Gordon Cumming with their children.

So what sort of character do you need if you're to move to Harris and make things work?

"You have to be resourceful and be willing to turn your hand to anything," Murdo says.

He's probably better placed than most to answer that, having been born into a crofting family on Lewis in 1963.

Killed

When he was 14 his father was killed in a farming accident and the running of the croft fell largely to Murdo and his brother, with the remainder of his school years a mix of hard graft and limited academic work.

After studying on the mainland from the age of 17, Murdo returned to Harris in 1981 and spent the next 25 years in fish farming.

He took up tenancy of his croft in Luskentyre in 1988. He has a small number of Highland cattle and runs self-catering accommodation with his wife, Isobel.

Asked what drives him to lead the efforts to take Harris forward, he simply replies, "Self preservation."

Gordon Cumming, originally from Lanarkshire, is also a member of the trust and has a similar no-nonsense approach.

He settled on the island with his wife, Joan, 10 years ago and reckons island living offers opportunities for

enterprising families, with tourists flocking into the isles and broadband available.

But Gordon knows the clock is ticking and the lifeblood of Harris needs to start pumping again — and fast.

"The school roll projections make grim reading. If we do lose the school we lose another carrot to attract people here."

"It's not a disaster in terms of education as there are schools in both Tarbert and Leverburgh, both a 15-minute drive, but it would be a setback for the community. We have a lot of meetings and social gatherings there."

"We love island life. The kids are safe, the schooling fantastic and it's a very fulfilling way to live."

"But the stark reality is that the island community is at a pivotal point in its existence."

A Scottish Government spokesperson said, "The Scottish Government supports community empowerment and, once terms are agreed, we are willing to sell the crofting estates of Borge, Luskentyre and Scaristavore on West Harris to the West Harris Crofting Trust."

"Unless the trust's circumstances change we are now effectively in the end game on this issue, subject to solicitors' agreement on final terms. We await further contact from the trust's solicitors and will proceed from there."