



Gartcharron: making amends

A new endeavour attempts to combine the ecological and social responsibilities of land stewardship, as Arthur Hobhouse explains.

I have been on a learning journey after inheriting land. Firstly about my family's involvement in imperialism and colonisation, then the history of land injustice in Scotland and finally about the ecological systems that were failing on much of the land. Also, by using plant medicine I have opened my eyes to the need for change, both in the wider world and within myself, particularly with my attitude to privilege and control.

I have been inspired to learn that there are people seeking and practicing reparatory justice, taking land and decision making back into community hands, building sustainable, affordable social housing with generous land holdings, restoring temperate rainforests, letting nature lead through rewilding and intertwining this with productive regenerative farming. I hope that I can follow in their footsteps.

The land

In 2024, I inherited and moved to Gartcharron, a 130-hectare hill farm

Looking north up Loch Craignish, two potential croft sites on in-bye fields in background and Eilean Dubh to the right. Photo: Arthur Hobhouse.

with two small islands near the village of Ardfern. The farm had formed part of the 1,500-acre Craignish Estate on the Craignish peninsula in Mid-Argyll, which was bought by my maternal grandfather, William Younger, in 1953 and is still owned by my mother. The land hosts a mix of habitats with ancient woodland, wetlands, upland hill land, improved pasture and a stretch of shoreline. Seawilding, the ocean restoration charity, has its native oyster nurseries nestled in the shoulders of one island, Eilean Dubh, and one of their sea grass meadow restoration areas sits on the west coast of the other, Eilean Buidhe.

Whilst there are fragments of what could be described as temperate rainforest (many of the oaks have rich bryophyte populations) and some natural tree regeneration elsewhere of alder, birch, rowan, hawthorn and willow, there is still a lack of trees. Much of the pasture has a narrow range of species and is given over to rushes and bracken. My grandfather also planted about 100 acres of Sitka spruce on the Estate which my mother later felled and replanted with native broadleaf species. The residual Sitka seeds have spread along with *Rhododendron ponticum*, which is rapidly

taking over sections of the farm as well as much of the western coast.

Our grazier's family has farmed the south end of the peninsula for four generations. Together we are exploring a regenerative system of management with the aim of maintaining and supporting a healthy herd of native breed cattle, 'rewilding' on the margins of the productive land, with seasonal long grassland cores and permanent corridors (including woodland) running through it.

Colonisation and me

Both sides of my family significantly participated in the exploitation and disempowerment of people, nearby and across the world. On my maternal side, my fourth-great-uncle, Arthur Balfour (1848–1930), wrote the Balfour Declaration which paved the way for the occupation of Palestine. My grandfather four times removed, Robert Lytton (1831–1891), was Viceroy of India during the Great Famine, and James Balfour (1775–1845), another grandfather four times removed, made a fortune supplying food and drink for the British Navy in India. A large portion of the Balfour

wealth was made by building and running coal mines in Fife.

On my father's side, my great-uncle James Chichester-Clark (1923–2002) was Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, where in the 17th century our family had been posted as overseers of Anglo-Irish rule, some of whom also owned large plantations in the Caribbean. My seventh-great-uncle, Isaac Hobhouse (1685–1763), trafficked over 19,000 African people to the Caribbean and United States in the middle of the 18th century as part of the Atlantic slave trade. The money I have recently inherited was from the sale of the family Estate in Somerset which was purchased in 1747 with the proceeds.

I am now working with reparations activists to help me take steps towards reparations for Isaac's human trafficking crimes from which my family benefitted. The Hobhouses rose from labourers to minor gentry in one generation and held that ill-gotten privilege for nearly 300 years. As part of the reparatory justice work, we are exploring ways in which wealth that I inherited can be returned to descendants of those who were enslaved.

Land justice

Craignish Estate was bought by my family with wealth made in brewing McEwan's lager, among other brands, and unlike many other Estates there is nothing to tie it directly to colonisation or the Highland Clearances. However, census data shows over one thousand people lived in Craignish in 1754 falling to around two hundred in 1939. There is evidence of this depopulation with abandoned small holdings, run rigs and lazy beds scattered the length of the peninsula.



The plan is to steward one third of Gartcharron into tree cover. I would like to focus planting

Gartcharron Farm house and buildings and Eilean Buidhe. Photo: Gordon Gray Stephens.

As the rural housing crisis deepens, driven by second home ownership hiking prices in picturesque villages like ours, I feel it is important to establish three crofts on the farm for full-time residents. One of these would be a woodland croft, taking stewardship of the rainforest fragment. I am interested in using the Glengarry model which removes the assignation rights which had previously let many crofts become second homes and holiday lets. Once crofts have been established, I would like to offer this land to the community to own and control if they would like to. This would be the first step in offering a transfer of the whole land holding into community ownership.

Whilst Scotland has one of the worst rates of private land ownership in the world (with 433 people owning some 50 per cent), it is also leading the world in community ownership with 240,000 hectares (around three per cent) now owned by community groups. I would like to be part of this revolution envisioning a future where, as the Land Worker's Alliance ask, "all land is held in common and working for nature and communities, not lairds and corporations".

Rainforest restoration

The Woodland Trust and Native Woods Co-op have been working together for four years to create the Restoring Craignish Rainforest Habitat Project, which is focused on reducing deer numbers and removing non-native invasive species. This involves at least ten landowners, of whom I am one, and over 2,500 hectares of land on our peninsula. Craignish is now one of 11 Alliance for Scotland's Rainforest focus projects and one of nine Priority Landscape Scale Areas in the Scottish Government's strategic approach to restoring and expanding Scotland's rainforest.

efforts on areas of bracken particularly where at least one other woodland indicative species is present, such as bluebell or primrose. To advance these efforts, I recently received funding from SCOTLAND: The Big Picture and Rewilding Britain for survey work (which finished in August 2025). As part of the funding, Native Woods Co-op is working with The Scottish Association of Marine Science's Robotics Academy, who have been recording Seawilding's impact on the seabed, to conduct drone surveys which might over time help us describe sea-to-land ecosystem recovery.

Conservation grazing

Between ice ages, our natural landscape has likely hosted a large-scale herbivore presence for millions of years. These would have included wild ponies, wild cattle, red deer, elk and boar as 'ecosystem engineers'. Predators such as wolves and lynx would have kept their numbers in check and influenced their movements. Together, they would have broken ground and vegetation, spread seed via their fur and excrement which, along with their carcasses, would have fed the complex food webs above and below the soil. On a landscape scale, the predators and herbivores would have shaped and maintained woodland, grassland, wetland and river courses. Thanks to human activity, most of these animals no longer survive in Scotland and it is important to find substitutes to sustain the ecosystems that relied on them.

Intense deer and sheep herbivory has contributed to Scotland being in the bottom 25 per cent of countries ranked for biodiversity intactness, and having the one of the lowest woodland coverage rankings in Europe. Sheep are a non-native species that evolved in a Mesopotamian ecology. Along with deer, they are selective grazers that seek out tasty individual plants which, over time, contributes to a pre-dominance of the few grass species that can survive heavy grazing. These are tough and quick to regenerate but have low nutrient levels, in themselves supporting fewer species. In contrast, cattle, which have a longer lineage than sheep in this climate through their ancient wild proxies, aurochs, are less-selective grazers, co-evolving with our flora and as such leave a more diverse mix with greater nutritional value.



In April 2025, our grazier removed sheep from the hill for the first time in 40 years, and in July GPS shock collars were fitted to the hill cattle. We will initially use these collars to build heat maps of how the cows graze which will then inform a rotational grazing strategy, using virtual fenced paddocks, in an attempt to mimic the wild cattle's migration patterns. In this natural system, the grassland is left to recover, ideally for months, which further improves species diversity with more flowers which also means more pollinators. By introducing resting

Soon to be collared cattle on Gartcharron hill in 2024. Photo: Arthur Hobhouse.

periods the aim is, over time, to develop rich enough forage to support a herd on a fully grass-fed system.

Following in the footsteps my grandfather Paul Hobhouse who was, and my uncle David who is, a sheep and cattle farmer on nearby Colonsay I am keen to support the grazier in his transition to regenerative practice here on Gartcharron. I am doing a Pasture for Life training course to develop my skills in raising cattle for market. This accreditation body seeks to promote 100 per cent pasture-fed farming, taking us away from problems associated with imported feed, such as deforestation for soy production.

Although the farmer uses domestic winter feed sources, we are still keen to explore profitable ways of reducing our reliance on medication and feed (potentially still full of preservatives, and pesticide and herbicide residue). For example, a new holistic grazing system with extended rest periods might break parasite life cycles and allow us to stop using dewormers which can harm invertebrate populations in the soil. Over time, I hope to be able to encourage a full transition to organic and would seek accreditation from the Soil Association, co-founded by my third-great-aunt, Eve Balfour.

A community vegetable farm here in Craignish would help with local food resilience. There are some sites that might work on Gartcharron but market gardens are currently hard to make profitable. A Community Supported Agriculture model is viable if there are enough members prepared to do the work involved.

Education

After gaining a BSc in Sociology at the University of Bristol, I put on art exhibitions, became a gardener and worked in tree surgery. I eventually got a job as a teaching assistant in a primary school in London before

Bwiti initiation ceremony

Gabon is a country that sits on the equator and is home to some of the most pristine tropical rainforest in the world. In June 2025, I visited with a group to take part in a Bwiti initiation ceremony. There are 300 temples practicing these ancient rituals in Gabon, and many others across Cameroon and Congo. The practices, which were suppressed during French colonial rule and the subsequent introduction of Catholicism, are re-emerging and Westerners are beginning to be welcomed to take part, to facilitate their healing. At the centre of the tradition is the consumption of bark from the iboga tree's root. Across five days of rituals, I was painted and led chanting through the rainforest, cleansed in the river there, ate the wood, danced, sang, and was eventually encouraged to stare at myself for several hours in a mirror

shaking rattles before vomiting and lying down to dream.

Following an encounter between the Fang Ombwiri and Missoko Bwete Ngonde Dipuma traditions, a circle of twenty Bwiti practitioners, overseen by a Nima (wood giver), sang and danced around us for seven hours, accompanied by harp, Mugongo and drum players. The intelligence and visions that I received led me back to hurtful childhood experiences, the pain from some of which I was able to release through shedding tears and crying out.

I will be financially supporting the creation of a new temple outside of Libreville called Ghé-ndöti-ndöti—The Dream—being established by young men and women with Bwiti lineage, helping to protect this wise and

healing plant medicine and the sacred rituals that have developed around its consumption. I have taken iboga seven times now in nine years and the experiences have helped steer me away from avoidance and addiction towards stability and wholeness. Among the visions, I have been called to become a primary school teacher, to stop using drugs to escape discomfort and to compassionately explore, express and release some of the emotional wounds that still sometimes shape my thoughts and behaviours. Also guided by my iboga experiences, I have begun giving one third of my inherited wealth away in reparations for crimes that my ancestors committed—crimes that enriched my family whilst inflicting suffering on generations of people descended from those enslaved. This is not charity but an act seeking justice, in a world still marked by those wounds.

training, through Teach First, as a primary school teacher in West Ipswich, teaching Year 4 for two years. I established a Forest School and organic vegetable beds there which, in the end, I found the most rewarding part of the teaching experience.

I then spent two years learning regenerative vegetable growing on a community farm in Suffolk following organic principles (when I got interested in soil microbiology). During this time, I taught teenagers from a Montessori school how to grow, and worked on a commercial 'no-dig' market garden before setting up my own micro vegetable farm where kids came once a week to learn, and in a Rudolf Steiner informed Forest School in nearby woodland.

Montessori education adopts a "help you to do it yourself" approach with practical life skill development, mixed age groups and self-directed learning. Steiner education, in contrast, fosters the creative, spiritual and emotional development of the child using music,

movement, drama and art. Both philosophies insist on natural materials, emphasising a connection to learning and exploring outside and encourage rhythm tied to seasonal changes.

Weaving some of these ideas together, and also drawing on wisdom from indigenous communities, including our own Celtic traditions, the plan is to create a summer camp here on Gartcharron for children from inner cities who have less access to nature. The modern system needs counterbalancing and we hope to provide an opportunity to do this, focusing on re-establishing children's relationship with the land and working together to grow food, learn land-based skills, develop resilience and be expressive and creative.

In spring 2026, I will be working with Seawilding's community youth group, Seawildlings, Native Woods Co-op and The Woodland Trust to plant some broadleaves on Eilean Dubh using cactus guards to protect them from deer browsing. We will also be inviting Craignish Primary

School children to visit Gartcharron this winter to spend a day tree-planting on the hill, exploring different methods such as seed islands and nurse planting. The plan is to return to the sites each year to clear bracken so the children can learn that young trees need aftercare.

As we begin to implement regular deer culling, non-native species removal, large-scale tree planting, e-fence systems, build croft houses and perhaps one day return land to common ownership we can develop lessons on rainforest restoration, regenerative farming practice and land justice. I am hoping that following this path will continue to make me, the land, its ecology, as well as the local community happier and that this might radiate out to other land stewards, encouraging them to adopt similar practices.

Arthur Hobhouse is 39 and owner of Gartcharron Farm, which is part of the SCOTLAND: The Big Picture's Northwoods Rewilding Network.



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