



# A new life

BY STEVE WERBLOW

## LIFE-CHANGING ACCIDENT LAUNCHES SCOTLAND FARM.

Kelly Bray heard her heartbeat slowing down. She realized she could no longer hear herself breathing. The thudding slowed. Then it stopped. She felt like she was floating, like she was dreaming. She drifted away from her busy London life, away from the deadlines she'd faced as a surveyor on huge building projects, away from her army reserve unit and her grueling marathon workouts and the rat race.

Two minutes later—two full minutes—she heard her husband Paul yell, “Don’t you leave me!” as he stumbled and dropped her lifeless body on the couch. The impact dislodged the embolism in her lung and she floated back to life.

When she woke, she saw life with a new clarity.

“I told Paul and all my friends, ‘I’m moving to Scotland. I’m going to be a farmer,’” Bray says.

Kelly and Paul had discussed retiring to Scotland in a few decades, when Kelly was ready to put down her surveying instruments and Paul was done with his career lighting massive concerts and sporting events at London’s Wembley Arena. But during a snowy, muddy obstacle course race, Kelly suffered an ankle break so severe that doctors had to reattach her right foot. As she recovered from the surgery, a blood clot lodged in one of her lungs and stopped her heart. It also changed her retirement plans.

“I knew I was meant to be up here,” she says from her home in Scotland. “I knew I was not meant to be carrying on with that life I was leading. It wasn’t a bad life, don’t get me wrong. It’s a lot of people’s dreams to be a chartered surveyor and nine years of degrees and working your way up and all that, money and lifestyle, holidays and materialistic stuff. But as soon as I had my accident, there was this realization that this wasn’t what life is meant to be about, really. Not for me, at least.

“Life’s too short,” Kelly adds. “So I wrote a business plan whilst I was recovering in hospital after the pulmonary embolism, about a farm in Scotland.”

The Brays scoured real estate listings for small Scottish farms, and Kelly fell in love with the ultimate fixer-upper: a crumbling British Army garrison with plenty of history and little else left standing.

**Construction delays.** Following a series of wars with Scottish clans, British Army engineers identified a pass above the village of Inversnaid that would allow them to control traffic along key paths connecting Loch Lomond and the Highlands.

The fort experienced construction delays in 1718 when angry Highlanders kidnapped the army’s stone masons, but the garrison was completed the next year. It served as a base to harass legendary cattle rustler Rob Roy and subdue Highland raiders until it was destroyed in another rebellion in 1745.

A pair of women moved into the surviving buildings to run what Kelly discreetly calls “a kind of a hotel” until 1823. After that, sheep roamed the property and the buildings lived on as barns, storehouses, and slowly mouldering piles of stone and moss.

By the time the Brays bought the buildings and the remaining five acres in 2014, the property had been updated with electricity, then neglected for 45 years.

“Yeah, it wasn’t habitable, but we habitated it,” Kelly laughs. “We kind of had an etched-out bit we could get into, and we lived in part of the house while we worked on the other parts. There was an awful lot of clearance for the first year and a half.

“We had a lot of microwave food then,” she adds with a chuckle. “In Paul’s eyes, we’d gone from five-star living to minus-one-star living.”

There were still ties to their old lives—they still had to work. Paul took lighting jobs around Scotland on projects like the Commonwealth Games and the production of the *Outlander* TV series. Kelly worked from home. But camping out on a remote Scottish hilltop in a community of three neighbors was a far cry from the London bustle the Brays had left behind.

“Yeah, it was exciting, but at the same time it was terrifying,” Kelly says. “We had no internet, no phone lines for six months when we first moved in.



**Clockwise from top-left.** The Garrison of Inversnaid greets hikers on the West Highland Way (pictured on previous page) and offers longer stays for adventurers. The Brays dug out the house and converted the old barn to guest rooms. Lettuce sprouts in the greenhouse, nestled in the ruins of the 18th-century barracks. The Brays’ Gloucestershire Old Spot boar awaits a sow to breed, an event that occurs every two years. Kelly and Paul Bray dug out the old garrison and created a new life.



We went from 3G to zero. So I was on my own with no phone signal, no internet, and no landline. That was a wee bit scary, but it was exciting at the same time.

“I had to go to the local village, which is 16 miles away, to use the internet in the local pub to be able to work,” she notes. “The reason I moved here was to get away from the fast-paced life. That’s exactly what I did, so I was pretty happy with the decision that I’d made, albeit it was a bit scary.”

**Building a farm.** Isolated days at the garrison gave Kelly time to dream up plans for the farm.

“Things would just come to me, just pop into my head,” she says. “‘You want to be a farmer, chickens are a place to start.’ Then I’d clear an area within the ruins to put chickens in. And then it was like, ‘OK, do you want to grow some food now? What are you going to be doing with this area?’

“So these little thoughts would pop into my head and I’d talk to Paul and see if they were feasible and could be done quickly enough for me,” Kelly says. “And it would sort of evolve of its own accord.”

Early on, Kelly was weeding a patch of garden when a squawking little ball of feathers caught her attention. When she went over to look at it, the hatchling ran over to her feet and looked up at her.

“It must have imprinted there and then,” Kelly says. “Then it followed me into the house and I was like, ‘OK, this is where my farm begins.’”

What Kelly and Paul thought was a little duckling turned out to be a Canada goose that grew to the size of a small dog. Tiny is a member of the family now, and the Brays bought an Embden goose to keep him company and teach him how to swim and...well, how to be a goose and not a feathered human.

Tiny was soon joined by a couple of shaggy Highland calves and a few Suffolk-Blackface cross sheep from a retired farmer down the road.

“She thought it was such a great thing that I was doing here that she gave me some sheep, which was awesome, and that’s how the farm began,” Kelly says.

The farm and pasture covers the Brays’ five acres as well as 15 rented acres. In front of the house, vegetable plots yield potatoes and cabbage, all sorts of beans, beets, tomatoes, peppers, and an array of fruits ranging from currants and apples to native rowan berries and blaeberrries. Nestled in the ruins of the old barracks, a greenhouse shelters herbs, greens, and flowers. All the produce ends up in Kelly and Paul’s larder and on the plates of guests who rent the two rooms in the old byre, or barn.

In fact, everything on guests’ plates was reared, grown, or hunted on the farm. In addition to salads and vegetables, there’s pork from the Gloucestershire Old Spot boar and the Tamworth sow he



breeds every other year, beef from Highland steers, lamb from the ewes, and pheasant and red deer that the Brays hunt (or “stalk,” as the Scots say) on their property and the adjoining nature preserve. They catch salmon in the Callander river and brown trout in Loch Lomond. It’s all a reflection of their commitment to self-sufficiency, and, at the same time, a testament to the power of good neighbor relations.

“We learned all of this stuff when we moved here—we had no previous experience of it whatsoever,” Kelly says. “Whilst we were military reservists, we learned outdoor skills, survival skills and the rest of it, and how to work hard, but we never learned how to work with livestock. The Royal Society for the Preservation of Birds taught us how to deer stalk and how to butcher it. And Andre and Lynn, who are retired farmers, taught us how to work with cows and sheep, and Hillary Barker, the lady that I’d bought the Highland cows from and who gave me the sheep, she’s been a great help as well.

“And when we bred our first pigs, it was the butcher in Aberfoyle, at the delicatessen, who taught me how to butcher a pig,” she notes.

The sharing goes both ways. Kelly and Paul are particularly eager to help their retired neighbors Andre and Lynn.

“They’re retired farmers and they’ve given us loads of help with the animals,” Kelly explains. “Because we’re younger, we can help them out with a lot of stuff as well. That’s kind of how it goes here. I guess it’s the same in Alaska or Canada, where there’s sparser people—you’re there when you’re needed and other than that, you kind of live your own way.”

**New faces.** To generate a little cash while they were digging out the old garrison, the Brays rented a pair of rooms in the old barn to guests. That venture turned into a bed and breakfast business they dubbed The Garrison of Inversnaid. They couldn’t

have picked a better spot to lure guests. The West Highland Way, a 96-mile trail that extends from the suburbs of Glasgow to the coastal Highland town of Fort William, runs along the shore of Loch Lomond just a mile from the garrison. About 30,000 hikers walk the entire trail each year, and 85,000 walk at least part of it. And though it’s just an hour by car to Glasgow, Scotland’s biggest city, the garrison sits in the heart of the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park, surrounded by rugged beauty on all sides.

Kelly says the success she and Paul have had with their bed and breakfast has inspired a couple of neighbors to go into the business, too. That’s allowing the Brays to start exploring other directions for their hospitality venture, which they are tipping toward longer stays and the more physical, outdoor recreation Kelly especially loves.

**Adventure travel.** “There are going to be other alternatives locally for the people who just want to get their head down and carry on with their hike, but I’m hoping our clientele will evolve to be the people that want to stay a few nights and experience the local area and not just pass through it,” she says. “I’m hoping it will be people that want the whole experience and want to be taken out on our boat on Loch Lomond, they’ll want to do some fishing, they’ll want to do some trail runs or hikes, see how

we grow stuff, come and pet the animals.”

Especially motivated guests can sign on for the Garrison Boot Camp and Loch Lomond Adventure Retreat. Kelly is developing those programs around the swimming, mountain biking, and running regimen she used to fight her way from the emergency room to the head of the pack in cross triathlon racing in just two years. It’s another aspect of living in the mountains that Kelly can share with guests.

“When I moved here to Scotland, being surrounded with mountains, trails, and lochs, I felt I wanted

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**Opposite.** Built on a hill in 1718 and 1719 to control a key route to the Highlands, most of the British Army garrison above Inversnaid has been in ruins since a 1745 rebellion. The Brays spent two years digging out key buildings before opening their property to guests as a bed-and-breakfast serving fresh, organic food from their gardens and pastures.



to make use of it and be amongst it, so I thought cross triathlon would be perfect,” she says.

**‘Head of the pack.** To build her coaching skills and credentials, Kelly is completing certifications in personal training and nutrition. Meanwhile, she is also challenging herself to win a spot representing Great Britain on the cross triathlon circuit.

Kelly Bray’s success as a triathlete may have surprised her doctors—who told her after rebuilding her ankle that she might never even walk normally again, let alone run—but comes as little surprise to the people who know her drive and focus. It’s the drive that led her to place in the top 10 finishers in her first year racing cross triathlon; swim, run, and bike her way into the top five in her second year of

competition; and team up with Paul to literally and metaphorically dig a new life from the ruins.

The Brays have found their place on the isolated hilltop above tiny Inversnaid, with Kelly elbow-deep in the soil and Paul balancing lighting gigs around Scotland with his work on the farm. It’s as if they’d floated away from the London hustle and bustle they had enjoyed before Kelly’s accident and embolism.

Kelly says the friends and family she left back in England have been very supportive of her new life.

“My family were really proud of me to be chasing my dream,” she says. “Friends, the majority of them, were the same: they thought it was great that I was chasing my dreams and all the rest of it because so many people don’t do that in their lives. Then it becomes a too-late opportunity to do it.” ❁

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**Above.** A coop nestled in the ruins of an old barracks wall marks the first step the Brays took to get into farming—taking on chickens. The roof protects the birds from the area’s raptors, including golden eagles and red kites.