

Letter from Scotland



On Wednesday I found myself curiously drawn to an obscure railway halt on the outskirts of Edinburgh to witness two historic events – the re-opening of the Borders rail line and the Queen’s “Victoria Day,” the day she overtook Queen Victoria as Britain’s longest reigning monarch. A small crowd had gathered at Newcraighall to watch proceedings but, because of confusion over the timing, most of us were away having coffee when the Queen’s steam train went puffing by. We’d missed our moment in history. But in our virtual age, when so little is “live”, we were able to catch up on events later on television.

The day left many of us reflecting on how things change. The Queen herself noted how many milestones she’d passed in her 63 years on the throne. She herself has changed from being an institution to being a celebrity. We celebrate her personal qualities rather than her office, personal qualities of loyalty, commitment to duty, her steady and sympathetic eye on all that is happening. And we, (some of us at least), take with a happy shrug of the shoulders the fact that the institution of monarchy is a contradiction of our modern belief in democracy.

As in Victoria’s time, much has happened in Elizabeth’s reign but it would be fascinating to see how it is all summed up in, say, a hundred years’ time. Will “Elizabethan” be as pejorative a word as “Victorian” is to us today?

Take the railways as an example. First we axed them, now we are re-opening them. Then we nationalised them, then we de-nationalised them, and now we’ve half nationalised them again. But however it’s come back to life, the new Waverley line from Edinburgh to Tweedbank is a great thing. It will open up the

Borders and ease the housing pressure on Edinburgh. The 30 miles of track have cost £294m and taken three years to build.

Of course, with our usual short-termism, the line is only single-track, is not electrified and leaves you in the middle of nowhere, a twenty minute walk from Melrose. But it's a start and, if other rail re-openings are anything to go by, it will soon be carrying far more than its target of 650,000 passengers a year.



I wonder how many bicycles it will take ? Not that the hundred or so participants in the Tour of Britain were interested in the train on Wednesday. I watched them speed past me near Arthur's Seat as they set out on the fourth stage of the race, from Edinburgh to Blyth in Northumberland, a mere 136 miles away. The lycra stars were hunched over their handlebars – Sir Bradley Wiggins, Mark Cavendish, Dylan van Baarle and Colombian Fernando Gaviria who eventually won that day's stage. I didn't expect such an entourage – police outriders, race officials, media cameras, team cars with spare bikes on the roof-racks, and, ominously, an ambulance. It was quite a cavalcade.

As I write, we are expecting the result of another race, the UK Labour leadership. If as expected, Jeremy Corbyn, crosses the line first, either hands in the air or hunched over his handlebars, Labour in Scotland will have a little adjusting to do.

Already, the new leader here Kezia Dugale has had to row back from her view that a Corbyn victory would lead to Labour carping from the sidelines of British politics. And this morning I heard Labour's only MP in Scotland, Ian Murray, hint that he would, after all, join Corbyn's front bench team if asked. The problem for Labour in Scotland is that many of its Corbynesque members have already deserted the party for

the SNP.

One Labour man we will have to watch out for in future is Frank McAveety. He's just been re-elected leader of the city council in Glasgow. This cheerful bouncing ball is back after a spell as leader in the 1990s and then a period as a Minister in the Labour-led Scottish governments of the early 2000s. All that seems such a long time ago, another example of Elizabethan times a-changing.

Times are changing too down at St Abbs. I've spent many a pleasant afternoon walking round this old fishing village on the Berwickshire coast, watching the sea birds wheeling round the cliffs, the creel fishermen offshore and the diving boats going to and fro. The village has been in the news this week because it's losing its 104-year-old lifeboat station.

The RNLI say the St Abbs lifeboat has only been launched an average of nine times a year in recent decades and even then, it's worked in conjunction with the Eyemouth lifeboat which is only a few miles away. But the folk in St Abbs are not going down without a fight, there's a campaign under way to start a private lifeboat station, which they say will be worth it even if it only saves one life. That's easy to say, harder to do. I'm afraid they are swimming against the tide of time.

But time itself will tell.