

Letter from Scotland



Paisley's pattern
for the future

What is culture worth ? Quite a lot, it seems. Everywhere which wants to be anywhere wants to be the UK's next City of Culture. Even towns like Paisley which is not a city at all. But the point is that "culture" – meaning, the arts, learning, sport, leisure, fine buildings – can lift a town out of the doldrums and create jobs, wealth, healthy growth and general excitement.

Here in my town (actually a city) Edinburgh we know all about culture. Our festivals alone are worth £300m a year and create 6,000 jobs. The UK's current city of culture, Hull, is reckoned to be £60m better off immediately and has new investment promised of £1bn. When Glasgow won the title of European city of culture in 1990, it led to the virtual re-birth of the place as a vibrant centre of the arts and "cool" living.

Paisley will learn at the beginning of December whether its bid to be the UK city of culture in 2021 has been successful. If it wins, it will be the first Scottish city/town to take the title. It's up against Coventry, Stoke, Sunderland and Swansea. The Heritage Lottery has promised an immediate £3m towards the project and economists have worked out that the full effect of a win could amount to £172m to the local economy and 4,700 jobs.

Paisley stands a good chance of winning. It's got a 12th century abbey, a weaving heritage that stretches back to the industrial revolution, a fine Victorian town hall and famous grammar school. But it also has a recent history of decline – the end of the textile and heavy engineering industries. The

closure of the Linwood car plant left 5,000 people without a job. The Ferguslee Park housing estate is the most deprived area in Scotland.

The bid is intended to reverse all that. The local council has announced plans for £100m of refurbishments to buildings. Arts groups, especially choirs, have been putting on performances to bolster the bid. Local hero, singer/song-writer Paolo Nutini has begun a series of workshops for music students and is to sponsor a masters course in the local university's music school. Paisley's football team, St Mirren, has even renamed its stadium "The Paisley 2021".

But even if Paisley doesn't win, the bid will have been worthwhile. The City of Dundee lost out to Hull last time round but its efforts to pull itself up by the bootstraps has resulted in the current resurgence of the city as a star in computing and bio-science. It's redevelopment of the waterfront has been spectacular, with the new and astonishing museum of design taking shape.



Pushing the boat out. Dundee's V&A museum of design

Dundee is even launching a bid to be European city of culture in 2023 – though Brexit may scupper that ship before it even leaves harbour.

Of course, right now we have a city of culture in the shape of Fort William where this year's Gaelic MOD is coming to an end. By all accounts it's been a toe-tapping success, with a record 3,600 participants...singers, dancers, pipers, and poets.

The one thing we can appreciate about our culture – whatever form it takes – is that it takes our minds off our every-day problems. Like that Atlantic storm, Ophelia, which blew in from Ireland on Monday and disrupted flights and ferry

services. Of like the continuing troubles in the health service, with waiting time targets missed again and shortages of staff in care homes.

Unemployment also went up to 4.1 per cent. Real earnings have fallen again, by 0.3 per cent. And the switch-over to the new welfare payment system, Universal Credit, has been plagued with problems and delays. But the UK government is carrying on anyway, despite a vote at both Holyrood and Westminster calling for a pause in the roll-out.

But there was good news at last from the North Sea. The world's first floating wind farm has begun producing electricity. Five huge turbines, anchored to the seabed 15 miles off Peterhead, can power up to 20,000 homes.

The project has been led by the Norwegian state-owned company Hywind but there has been considerable Scottish involvement. The first minister Nicola Sturgeon flew over the wind farm on Wednesday and declared it would establish Scotland's international reputation as a leader in renewable energy technology. Let's hope she's right and we can add "inventive engineering" to our list of cultural achievements by the year 2021.

And towards the end of the week, the Scottish government announced another item to that cultural list...it's to back a move in parliament to ban the smacking of children. Apparently, Britain is one of the few countries in Europe to allow parents to administer "reasonable chastisement" to their children. If the law is approved – and it looks certain it will be very soon – Scotland will become the first part of the UK to ban smacking.

Welcome to our non-violent future...maybe.