

Letter from Scotland



Spring – better late than never

Suddenly we are a different country. Winter has gone and a glorious spring has arrived. We are basking in sunshine. The beastly wind from the East has given way to mild westerlies. The temperature here in Edinburgh is 18 degrees Celsius and a searing 21 degrees in Aberdeenshire.

The daffodils have thrown caution to the west wind and opened their yellow faces to the sun. Pink blossom has appeared on the cheery trees. Light green leaves are unfolding on the sycamores, the beeches, the ash and the birch. And today, for the first time this year, I could smell the grass and hedges beginning another growing season. They say it's the warmest April day Britain has had in nearly 70 years.



Yet only a fortnight ago, I was cycling through a snow storm. Since then we have been shrouded in a cold mist with only occasional glimpses of blue sky. Gardeners are complaining that everything is a month late and now there is a rush to action.

Farmers have already suffered losses – particularly the loss of lambs and crop-planting time. The Scottish Government has had to come to their aid with a compensation scheme worth £250,000 – which doesn't seem much – and it's facing calls to suspend the "three-crop-rule" for this year. Farmers say they can't be expected to diversify when faced with such wet and cold conditions for so long a winter.

But finally tourists can enjoy Scotland without having to dress up like polar explorers. Apparently the "Outlander effect" has led to a large increase in visitor numbers at our top historical sites. Historic Environment Scotland has reported a 17 per cent increase in visitors in 2017/18, made up largely of Americans keen to see the locations used in the television series.

Edinburgh Castle remains the biggest attraction, with two million people prepared to pay up to £18.50 for admission last year. That's way over-priced for what is on offer – in my poor-man's opinion. Stirling Castle is second favourite with over half a million visitors. It's a better experience than Edinburgh but it's still steeply priced at £15 for an adult ticket. The further you get from Edinburgh the more reasonable the prices...Urquhart Castle £9, Skara Brae £7.50 and the last of the top ten, Iona Abbey, with 66,000 "pilgrims" paying also £7.50.

All this a world away for the people of Cambuslang. They've just been told their chicken processing factory is to close with the loss of 450 jobs. The owners, The Two Sisters Group, say the factory needs upgrading and is making a loss. It's to concentrate its production elsewhere in Scotland and England. Last week, the owners of Pinney's fish processing plant in Annan announced a similar closure there, with the loss of 420 jobs. What both factories have in common is that their biggest customer is M&S, and the Labour MSP James Kelly believes that large companies like M&S are driving too hard a bargain with their suppliers. I guess he's right.

There was better news this week for the 260 workers at the BiFab oil-rig and wind-farm yards in Fife and the Western Isles. The yards were in danger of closing, owing large sums of money to a sub-contractor. But the Scottish Government has rescued the company with a loan of £15m and a share-deal with a new owner, the Canadian company J V Driver. BiFab was just too important to fail since it was pioneering Scotland's grand conversion from oil and gas to off-shore wind power.

I don't want to paint too gloomy a picture of Glasgow, but yet again its violent underworld has come to the surface. A 29 year-old man was shot in the head while he was sitting in his silver BMW at traffic lights in Ruchill. He died in hospital. Police say it was a targeted attack connected with gangland feuding.

The story reads like a B-movie film script...a Glasgow street 10.30 at night, BMW chased by black Focus S-Max, they stop at traffic lights, man in balaclava gets out of black car, runs forward and shoots man in BMW, dives back into black car which is later found abandoned and burnt out, police appeal for information but none is forthcoming.

No doubt there were other crimes being committed in other parts of Scotland. But they are of a different order...a golden eagle goes missing in Perthshire, a wildlife camera is stolen from a wood in Aberdeenshire, Tesco store in Stornoway is "losing" 15 wire baskets a week and a book is returned to Shetland Library 43 years late.

Finally, the nation's heart sank when it saw Callum Hawkins from Renfrewshire collapse just a mile before the finishing line in the marathon at the Commonwealth Games in Australia. The poor chap was in front when he appeared to trip and fall. He rose again, staggering a little, and then fell heavily against the side barrier, slumping to the ground unable to move. He was taken to hospital but quickly recovered.

Doctors said it was a case of heat exhaustion. The temperature was 28 degrees Celsius, a little different from our 18 degrees of spring sunshine, but people crazy enough to run the London marathon this weekend should beware.