

Letter from Scotland



Welcome to the fun and games

Sport and the arts don't often mix but this month Scotland is hosting the European Championships and the Edinburgh International Festival. Both are now big business and I like to argue they are the "industries" of the future.

Spending on sport is estimated to be around £2.5bn a year and already it employs 3 per cent of the workforce – more than agriculture and fishing. The Edinburgh festivals are worth £250m to the Edinburgh economy alone, creating over 5,500 jobs.

Following on from the Commonwealth Games in 2014, Glasgow now co-hosts with Berlin a new fixture on the sporting calendar, the [European Championships](#). Gymnastics, swimming, diving at

the Royal Commonwealth Pool here in the capital, rowing, cycling, dance, triathlon and golf are being held in Scotland, while Berlin is hosting the athletics. Over 4,500 athletes from 52 nations are taking part.

Meanwhile, in Edinburgh the 71st Arts Festival and the Fringe are getting under way with over 3,500 shows in 300 different venues. The population of the city famously doubles during the month of the festival. A footfall count in Princes Street last year recorded 45,000 people using the pavement every day. There are serious fears that the city is becoming over-crowded and it's not being helped by the annoying habit of builders and gas and water companies deciding that Festival time is the best opportunity to dig up the roads.

As ever, the biggest actor is the weather. So far, the heat wave has lasted two months – indeed there are concerns over water shortages in the North East. But the weather in Scotland is an unreliable companion. Last weekend's Mela Festival in Aberdeen had to be cancelled because of rain and high winds. Ideally, we need the sport and arts events to be spared and the rest of the country to be deluged.

But whatever happens, Glasgow is ready for the rain. A new giant sewer come into operation this week. It's a three-mile long tunnel cut under the south side of the city to prevent flooding and improve what they are discreetly calling "environmental conditions". It cost £100m and has taken 100 workers two years to build. But when the rains come, it will be worth it.

Glasgow has been in the news for a less wholesome reason this week. The firm providing housing for some 5,000 asylum seekers in the city, Serco, issued eviction notices to 300 people and announced it will be changing the locks on their doors in the next few weeks. The company says it can no longer afford to provide free accommodation after the Home Office in London stopped paying rent for people whose

application for asylum has been turned down.

It's led to a chorus of protest from MPs and church leaders who say it will lead to a "humanitarian crisis". But no one is courageous enough to say what should happen to failed asylum seekers. Meanwhile, two Afghan men have been staging a hunger strike outside the Home Office building in Glasgow. One of them has been in Scotland for the last 12 years. Clearly there is something wrong with the system.

There's more worrying news from the High Street. Aulds the family bakery which has been supplying pies and pasties to the West of Scotland for the past 118 years has announced it's to close 26 of its shops – though its two factories will continue supplying other outlets. And Jenners, the oldest department store in Scotland (founded in 1838) and pride of Princes Street in Edinburgh, is in danger of closing. It was taken over by House of Fraser in 2005 which in turn was taken over by Hamleys, which in its turn is now desperately seeking a new investor or it is feared all its stores will close.

We said a sad farewell this week to one of the true gentlemen of Scottish politics, Sir Alex Fergusson, one of the few Conservatives who genuinely believed in the devolved Scottish Parliament. In fact he was its Presiding Officer from 2007 to 2011. He was a farmer in Galloway and never lost his footing in the community he came from. Politicians on all sides have been praising his dedication and integrity. His death was an occasion to remember that politics is a noble profession followed, generally, by people who want to make the world a better place.



Flags on top of Camera Obscura

Finally, Scotland has acquired its first official vexillologist, which I have now learnt is a term invented in the 1950s from the Latin word for flag. Philip Tibbetts has been appointed to the honorary post by the Lord Lyon, the man in charge of heraldry in Scotland.

Mr Tibbetts' job will be to help communities design an appropriate local flag. He's already succeeded in having two flags officially recognised by the Lord Lyon, those for Caithness and Kirkcudbright. His advice is "keep it simple".

I think Edinburgh's flag should be just plain white as we surrender to the hordes of Festival goers.