

Letter from Scotland

The country is in festival mood. Not just because we think we can see the end of the Covid pandemic but it's holiday time. There's football and tennis to watch on the television and the sun has been shining. And, glory be, the Edinburgh festivals – International, Fringe, Film and Book – are all due to go ahead in August.

Not quite as normal, of course, but at least they are happening, and some of it will be in person, unlike last year. This week, tickets went on sale for around a hundred Fringe Shows in venues ranging from the beach at Silverknowes and the racecourse at Musselburgh to the gardens in George Square.

In the official International Festival, classical concerts will be staged under canvas in school and university quads. Overall, the festivals will be a third of the size of what we are used to and there won't be anything like the usual half million visitors.



Edinburgh Festivals: fewer frolics but the shows go on. Jenna Reid – Fiddle, Su-a Lee – Cello. Photo by John Preece

The Lockdown has shown us how important the arts are to our way of life and to our economy. The “arts, entertainment and recreation” sector employs 78,000 people, more than the financial services sector or agriculture and fishing. The government, indeed all of us, should do more to encourage arts and sports. They, like education and health, have no limits to production and do not put an undue burden on the earth’s resources. They are the jobs of the future.

As to the pandemic itself, we’ve been watching with some alarm as the number of Covid-19 cases rises to over 4,000 a day. There are various explanations. One is that we are testing more people. Another is that the economy is being allowed to re-open. Another is that the test and trace system is struggling to keep up. Still another is that young men are ignoring the rules during the European football matches and the virus is spreading among them in stadiums, “fan zones” pubs and private homes. Nearly two thousand cases were found among people who had been at football events in the last week.

But at her Covid-19 briefing on Tuesday, Nicola Sturgeon told us not to panic. She remains committed to 19 July for most of Scotland to come down to Level 0 rules and 9 August for all legal restrictions to be lifted.

She told us the link between the number of cases and the number of people ending up in hospital is being broken by the vaccination programme. There are around 270 people in hospital with Covid. There were 17 deaths in the week to 30 June, which brought the overall total to 10,168.

Covid deaths have added considerably to our population decline. A National Records Office report out this week showed there were just over 64,000 deaths in Scotland in 2020, the highest “excess deaths” figure since 1940. Meanwhile, there were only 46,800 births, the lowest number since records began in 1855.

One man who wants to re-populate at least the Highlands is Jeremy Leggett, a former director of Greenpeace and solar energy magnate. He's bought the 800-acre Beldorney Estate near Huntly where he wants to create green jobs in alternative energy and build affordable eco-homes. He's already started a similar project at Bunloit near Drumnadrochit.

And there was more good news for the climate on Wednesday when the bus company Stagecoach announced it's planning a totally zero-emissions bus fleet by 2035. The company, headquartered in Perth, has had a difficult Covid year, profits fell from £90m to £17m, but it's hoping that business will pick up this year, with more people travelling for leisure here at home.

The Queen has been in Scotland this week, valiantly carrying on with her duties, despite the pandemic. On a visit to the Edinburgh Climate Change Institute she said "we will have to change the way we do things." To set an example, she arrived in a hybrid vehicle.

Among her other engagements were a trip to Stirling to open a new military museum at Stirling Castle, a tour of the AG Barr factory in Cumbernauld to taste Scotland's "other national drink" Irn-Bru, and a visit to a community garden in Glasgow where she remarked on the fine quality of the strawberries.

I wonder if she has been watching the tennis at Wimbledon and the ups and downs of Andy Murray. And, for sure, she'll be watching England in the football finals, while observing all the Covid rules, of course.



Palace of Holyrood. Photo: Martin P. McAdam
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