

Letter from Scotland

In this second Covid summer, Scots have been rediscovering their own country. Holidaying at home for just a few days at a time has become the normal thing to do, just as we all did back in the 1950s. An old friend remembers family holidays going “doon the watter” to Rothesay on the Isle of Bute and we revisited those days on a trip there last week.

The days were hot, dry and sunny, just as they were in the 50s, before the climate-changed down-pours of this week which have brought flash floods to several unfortunate parts of Scotland, mainly in the north-east. In Rothesay, we were lucky enough to see the icon of those old Clydeside days, the paddle steamer Waverley.



Doon the watter. PS Waverley backing out of Rothesay harbour. It's a remarkable ship, the last sea-going paddle steamer in the world. Built on the Clyde in 1946, she replaced a similar vessel which was sunk by a torpedo during the evacuation of Dunkirk in 1940. It's a gleaming 73 metres long, with a capacity for 900 passengers, and has been lovingly restored with the aid of a Heritage Lottery grant. Just to hear its ship's-horn and see those great paddles churning takes you

back to a grander age, the age which was able to build a thing so beautiful as Wemyss Bay railway station, another staging post on the pilgrimage doon the watter.



Wemyss Bay station

Holiday excursions to the water have not been all good news. Last weekend was the worst for drowning accidents for many years, with six people dying in four separate incidents. A woman and her young son and a family friend died while swimming in Loch Lomond at Pulpit Rock. The day before, a 16 year old boy drowned further down the loch at Balloch. In Lanarkshire, an 11 year old boy drowned in the River Avon. And a few hours later the body of a 13 year old boy was pulled from the River Clyde at Hazelbank. Since then the police and rescue services have been warning that loch and river waters are colder than we think, even on a hot day.

In a further tragedy, Scotland lost one of its most experienced mountaineers. Rick Allen (68) from Aberdeen was swept away in an avalanche on K2 in the Himalayas. His two climbing companions were rescued. They were attempting a new route on the south-east face and were raising money for Partners Relief UK, a charity for children caught up in the refugee crisis in Myanmar.

On Wednesday, the Scottish government joined with the UK government in loosening the Covid quarantine rules for people flying in from the USA and the EU (except France). Provided they have been double vaccinated and have tested negative for Covid-19, they will no longer have to undergo 10 days of quarantine. It's an attempt to rescue the British tourism industry but I wonder if we're just repeating the mistake of last summer by importing new waves of the virus.

Scotland has now climbed down from being the worst country in Europe for new Covid cases at the beginning of this month with over 4,000 cases a day. We're now down to around a thousand

cases a day, though there are still over 400 people in hospital and an average of 8 deaths a day. (The total last Sunday stood at 10,324). The challenge now is to persuade young people to turn up at the vaccination centres. But Nicola Sturgeon, in her latest First Minister's briefing, said she still hoped to be able to go ahead with further relaxation of restrictions on 9 August.

My own freedom day was in July 1973 when I escaped from Aberdeen University with a second class degree. I felt triumphant. But we didn't get the star treatment the graduates of Napier University got this week. Their names were plastered all over Edinburgh in a series of 18 large red billboards. The university said it wanted to show just how proud it was of its students' achievements, despite the difficulties of the last two years.



And while we're talking about achievements, what about our athletes at the Olympic Games in Tokyo? There are 50 Scots in the GB team. Just to mention a few, there are the swimmers Duncan Scott and Kathleen Dawson, the rower Polly Swan, the runners Jemma Reekie and Laura Muir and the Marathon man Callum Hawkins. Andy Murray unfortunately had to pull out of the singles tennis and was knocked out of the doubles. Which all goes to show we should not be measuring our success by the medals we win but simply by the participation in such a challenging event in such a challenging year.