

Letter from Scotland

This week I had my home fitted with two smoke alarms and a heat alarm, all interlinked. I was only just in time to comply with a new law in Scotland requiring all homes to be fitted with such devices by 1 February. The legislation was passed by The Scottish Parliament in the aftermath of the Grenfell tower-block fire in London in 2017 in which 72 people died.

The law has not been introduced in England and its implementation was delayed in Scotland during the Covid lockdowns. Indeed it was largely forgotten until the last few weeks and there has now been a panic to have them fitted. The shops have sold out of alarms, electricians are over-run with orders and everyone is checking their house insurance to see if they are still covered.



James Braidwood (1800-1861) the world's first city fire chief. The opposition parties reckon there are 500,000 homes still without linked fire alarms (rented buildings have had to have them under existing regulations) and they are not cheap. It cost me £170 to have the three battery-powered alarms fitted. But the fear of fire is a deep-seated human emotion and I'm glad I've had them installed.

Here in Edinburgh, we are proud to be the first city in the world to establish a public fire rescue service. Up till then rudimental fire engines were operated by private insurance companies. The year was 1824. James Braidwood, a local surveyor, was appointed fire-chief. He'd only been office for two months when the Great Fire of Edinburgh broke out. It began at 10pm on 15th November in an engraving workshop just off the Royal Mile. It raged for five days, killing 13 people and destroying 400 homes.

Braidwood learnt many lessons in those five days. You need a water source, you need masons, plumbers, slaters, experts who understand buildings and a proper scientific approach to bring a major fire under control. By 1833, the City of London wanted his expertise and he was appointed the first director of the London Fire Brigade. There he fought many a fire until, in 1861, he was killed by a falling wall in a fire in Tooley Street. We finally got round to erecting a statue to him in 2008 and there he stands, just beside the Royal Mile where he had his own baptism of fire.

This week, we have come through the fire of Covid relatively unscathed. The dreaded numbers are unchanged on last week: around 8,000 cases a day, 1,300 in hospital with Covid (60 per cent because of Covid), 20 deaths a day. But this has allowed the government to moderate the work-from-home rule and, at least, hint at dropping the requirement for senior school pupils to wear masks.

Instead, the focus has changed to the damage Covid has inflicted on poorer households and on social care. We had reports this week of more people defaulting on their mortgage payments, more using food banks, more children living in poverty and a third of households struggling to pay their energy bills. The crisis in the care sector was highlighted by the Auditor General who said care staff are under-valued, under-pressure and under-funded.



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All of which is a world away from the goings-on at Westminster
and the obsession in the press with the fate of Boris Johnson.

The SNP and the Scottish Conservatives have renewed their calls for him to resign. But Kate Forbes, the finance secretary, found herself welcoming a little further help from the UK Government in her budget statement on Thursday. She's been able to find a further £120 million for our 32 local councils which, she told parliament, would make it unnecessary for them to raise council tax at a time of local elections. It's typical of both governments, of course, that it is just a token figure. The councils have already said they need £1 billion just to keep current services going.

Curiously, £120 million is also the figure the UK government intends to spend on its latest "cheer up Britain" campaign. The "Unboxed" programme, announced this week, begins at Paisley Abbey at the end of February with a light show projected onto its ancient walls, followed by a series of concerts, poetry readings and animations charting the history of the universe from 11 billion years ago to the present day.

But Glasgow has already started its star-studded shows in the form of "Celtic Connections" the folk music festival which enters its second week.

And getting back to the issue of fire, the official report into the catastrophic fire at Charles Rennie Mackintosh's Glasgow School of Art has failed to establish the cause, despite three years of investigation. It's the second fire at the iconic building and it's prompted a debate over whether it can, or should, be rebuilt. I'm not myself a fan of Mackintosh's work – I find it a dark and cold pastiche of a medieval castle and a Victorian workhouse. And anyone who has been round the School of Art could have seen it was a fire hazard, with heating ducts running up and down the building and wood panelling everywhere. James Braidwood would have condemned it, or at least, insisted on installing interconnect fire alarms.