

Letter from Scotland

It's always uplifting when a team of part-timers beat premier division professionals, except if you are an Aberdeen supporter.

In the 149 years of the Scottish Cup, there has not been an upset like it.

Darvel Football Club playing in the West of Scotland league, turned in a fine performance and a 1-0 victory against a side five leagues above them.

The 700 Aberdeen supporters who made their unfortunate journey to East Ayrshire saw their team fall apart in the first half and then fail to recover in the second. The team has not been performing well recently – nine straight losses – but when they arrived at the basic changing rooms at Recreation Park in Darvel, they expected an easy win against a team of local plumbers and school teachers. But Darvel manager, Mick Kennedy, put a sharp end to such premier complacency.



The Marvel of Darvel. Photo by Steve Doogan

The small one-street town of Darvel, population 4,000, has only popped its head out of the history books once before, since its creation in the 1750s as a lace-making town. It's the birth place of Alexander Fleming, who discovered penicillin. Though, it has produced a footballer or two, as we've seen, and it even has a second football club, Darvel Victoria, which now will be living in reflected glory. At least till 13 February when Davel face first-division side Falkirk in the last 16.



The main street, Darvel.

But football upsets have not been the only unsettling news this week. The issue of gender recognition has again boiled over into the political conversation, if that's not too polite a word for the screaming headlines. No sooner had the Scottish Parliament passed a Bill making it easier to change gender – and Westminster objected to it – but the bizarre case of transgender woman Isla Bryson came to light at the High Court in Glasgow.

She was found guilty of raping two women when she was a man, called Adam Graham. But while awaiting trial, she changed her gender and arrived at court with long blond hair and wearing a pink jacket. There then arose the issue of whether she should be held in a woman's prison or a man's prison. There was some shuffling of position on this but finally First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, told the prison service to move her into a special wing in a male prison.

As I suggested last week, Ms Sturgeon must rue the day she ever began the process of liberalising the gender laws. It's

caused her so much trouble. It reminds me of a mistake the Labour Party made at the start of devolution in 2019 of trying to ban fox-hunting. It divided town-folk from country-folk , just at a time when the new nation was supposed to be uniting to tackle big issues, like running the education and health systems and tackling poverty. And this week the Hunting with Dogs Bill had to be tweaked yet again to make it work. A farmer will now have to get a licence to flush out a fox with more than two dogs.

Meanwhile, the teachers' strikes have been continuing, targeting two council areas each week. And the education secretary Shirley-Anne Somerville has tightened the screw on the local councils, saying they can't pay teachers more by cutting their numbers, shortening the school day or increasing class sizes. The councils have already complained that their overall funding has fallen way behind inflation and now they are going to be blamed for cutting other services or putting up council tax, to pay for a settlement with the teaching unions.



Atlantic Body & Soul arriving in Antigua PHOTO ATLANTIC CAMPAIGNS/Penny Bird

Back in December, I marvelled at the audacity of five men from Portobello who set out to row across the Atlantic in the annual Talisker Challenge. Last Friday they completed the 3,000 mile crossing from La Gomera to Antigua in 36 days, 3 hours and 33 minutes. I'm marvelling even more now that I learned that they encountered 40ft waves, sharks and whales and each slept for just two hours at a time, living like galley slaves crammed into an open boat.

As we are now into Burns Supper season, it's perhaps inevitable that our national poet has been dragged into the current debate over Scotland's involvement in the slave trade. Earnest campaigners have noticed that in 1786 Burns was about to cross the Atlantic to take up a job as an overseer in a slave plantation in the Caribbean. He was only saved by friends who got together to publish the famous Kilmarnock edition of his poems. The rest is history. But that matters, because we are now debating whether Burns condoned slavery.

Of course, he didn't. See his "A Slave's Lament" – and remember his countless other poems about equality and the brotherhood of man. He was simply caught in the warp of history and in a moment of personal desperation. It reminds us that we are always being judged by our fellow men and women:

"O wad some Power to giftie gee us
To see oursels as ithers see us!
It wad fra mony a blunder free us
And foolish notion.
What airs in dress an gait wad lea'us
An' e'n devotion."