

Letter from Scotland

No community should be without its Gala Day. It's a chance to feel "on holiday", to enjoy the parades, the dancing, the bizarre ceremonies, and to mark the passing of the years.

Last weekend I went to the Gala Day in Cockenzie and Port Seton, two old fishing villages on the Firth of Forth, now combined into one, with a harbour at either end.

Until a few years ago, the children would board fishing boats and parade in a flotilla from Cockenzie to Port Seton. These days, they travel on "floats," three St Ayles skiffs pulled by cars and a large open-decked lorry. They are accompanied by a brass band and two pipe bands. Outside the Thorntree Inn on the main street, the "fish-wives" give a dancing display, accompanied by one of the pipers.



The Gala Season begins. Port Seton, East Lothian.



Port Seton Gala Day

Such Gala Days are the culmination of a week-long diary of local events, sports days, flower shows, exhibitions, dinners and balls and lots of bunting. Next week it will be Tranent's turn, up the road, then the following week Prestonpans. Over on the other side of Edinburgh, East Lothian boasts of 26 local Gala Days across the summer. In the Borders they have their "Common Ridings" in the weekends of June, beginning with Hawick, followed by Selkirk and Peebles and Melrose. In Eyemouth they have their "Herring Queen" day at the end of July.

North of the Forth, Anstruther has a Harbour Festival at the beginning of June. Ellon in Aberdeenshire has its Gala is on 4 June, the Ness Gala on the Isle of Lewis is on 24 June and the "John o' Groat Journal" is already publishing pictures of the Gala Queen and her handmaidens for the Wick Gala at the end of July.

But the biggest Gala of them all is in the ancient town Lanark. They've been holding the Lanimer Week since 1140. They will be staging what the organisers say will be one of the largest Gala parades in Britain on 8 June. It's the highpoint of a whole week of festivities, from "the kirking" to horse ride-outs, the Lanimer Ball and a "perambulation", a three mile walk around the village boundaries or "lines" (hence the term Lanimer) usually attended by over 2,000 people.



Village galas are the smiling face of the community we like to think we are – friendly, inclusive, at ease with ourselves. It was therefore a shock to hear our Chief Constable announce at the regular Police Authority meeting on Thursday that "Police Scotland is racist and discriminatory." Sir Iain Livingstone is the first Chief Constable in Britain to admit to institutional racialism and misogyny and it comes after a review which found instances of racism and a "boys club" culture in Scotland's national police force.

He said measures had already been put in place to tackle discrimination, including a stronger recruitment and vetting system and a training programme being rolled out to the force's 5,000 officers. Nevertheless, it surprises me that such special measures are needed, since I've always found police officers to be exemplary in their care for individuals as well ensuring good public order.

It was another shock to the system to learn this week that the backlog in dealing with serious court cases means some are

taking three years to come to court. In January this year, there were 600 cases pending at the High Court and 2,500 in the Sheriff Courts. In an aphorism that goes back to the Magna Carta, or even the Book of Exodus, "justice delayed is justice denied."

One shocking case that did get to court this week was of a man who attacked a woman in Aberdeen as she was walking home one night in September last year. He raped and then burnt her to death in what the judge called "an act of medieval barbarity". He was jailed for 24 years.

It's been the week of the Church of Scotland's annual general assembly and there's been many a moral and material issue debated. The immediate issue for the Kirk is its falling membership (270,000, down 10,000 on the year before), and the pain of closing or amalgamating churches. But it has also spent time discussing the crisis in social care and it has agreed to review the Kirk's traditional opposition to assisted dying.

Finally, we learnt this week that the football legend Graeme Souness, now aged 70, is in training to swim the English Channel, on our around 18 June. He is taking part in a fundraiser for the fight against EB, the condition known as "butterfly-fly skin." He's a friend of the Grist family from the Black Isle whose daughter Isla suffers from the condition.

We are back in the world of Gala Scotland, where communities and people care for each other and there is hope and happiness.