

Letter from Scotland

The humble town of Falkirk is celebrating the 10th anniversary of the famous Kelpies. These creatures from Celtic mythology are rising from its industrial past to take it to a new future as a commuter town, service centre and tourist attraction. The Falkirk Wheel, linking the old canals, gives a similar signal from the other side of the district.

Since the Kelpies emerged on the landscape, over 800,000 people a year have come to visit them. The local council has worked out that those visitors have spent £137 million each year, boosting the economy in the town and its surrounds. The 30 metre high structures are set in a new parkland where the Forth-Clyde canal joins the Firth of Forth. The sculptor, Andy Scott from Glasgow, was inspired by the canal horses and pit ponies of industrial times and linked them to the mythical horse maidens who haunted the rivers and lochs of ancient Scotland...and maybe still do.



Rising from the past. The “Kelpies” at Falkirk.

Until the Kelpies and the Wheel were built, Falkirk was a forgotten town, lying in the rust belt of Central Scotland between the oil refineries of Grangemouth and Stirling Castle. Yet it was once the beating heart of the country, the home of the Industrial Revolution, its Carron Iron Works making everything from cannons, to pillar boxes and ovens. Now the only large manufacturing business is the bus maker Alexander Dennis, employing just 800 people. By far the largest employers are the health board and the district council.

But post-industrial Falkirk has not lost population, it remains at around 32,000, in fact it’s increasing slightly, proving that you don’t have to make things to prosper. And we found out this week that the same is true for Scotland as a whole. The latest population figures, from the 2022 census, put the number at 5.43m, the highest it’s ever been. But the growth, at 2.7 per cent since 2011, is less than in England and Wales (6 per cent) and the figure would have decreased by

48,800 if it had not been for immigration.

We are also an aging population. The number of people over 65 has risen by 22 per cent over the last decade and now stands at over one million, compared to the 832,000 children under the age of 15. How are we to pay for the care all these old people will need?



PHOTO – Chris Watt Photography

Here is another issue where we have been given a decade's warning and still we have done almost nothing about. Like climate change. How many more climate marches, like the one due to take place in Edinburgh on Saturday will there have to be before governments, businesses and we the people cut our carbon emissions?

Scotland is about to embark on two interesting social experiments. The first involves cutting high peak-time fares on our [newly nationalised ScotRail trains](#). It's for a six month trial, starting on 2 October, to see if more people can be persuaded to leave their cars at home and take the train.

The second is to open “safe consumption rooms” for drug addicts. It’s hoped to persuade them to take their drugs in a clean, organised manner, with experts on hand to help addicts control their habit and find a route out of it. The idea has been the subject of a raging debate between those who think it is condoning illegal drug taking and those who say something drastic needs to be done to reduce Scotland’s shocking rate of drug deaths, a 100 every month, the worse rate in Europe.

It’s only been made possible by a tweak in the law in Scotland, despite the power over drugs policy being reserved to Westminster. The subtle change came this week when the chief law officer in Scotland, the Lord Advocate Dorothy Bain, declared it would not be in the public interest to prosecute anyone using a safe consumption room. Everyone acknowledges the rooms are not the complete solution to drug addiction but at least something new is being tried.

The happiest story of the week concerns Yampil the Bear. The large Asiatic black bear is to be given a new home at the Five Sisters Zoo in West Lothian after he was rescued from the war zone in Ukraine. He was found starving and close to death in a zoo which had been destroyed in the fighting and where most of the other animals were killed. He’s currently recuperating at a wildlife sanctuary in Belgium but will soon be arriving in Scotland to spend the rest of his life as our latest refugee.

And the saddest story of the week concerns a game of football. Scotland lost to England at Hampden 3-1. It was supposed to be a “friendly” match to mark the 150th anniversary of the oldest international football fixture in the world. It wasn’t so much the score that saddened me – it’s widely agreed England played better on the night – but the booing by the crowd of the English national anthem. We may not like England hijacking the UK national anthem, God Save the King, but we need to rise, like the Falkirk Kelpies, from our sulky and mythical past.

