

North-East revisited after several decades

Received an email from a former pupil of Peterhead Academy, 54 years on since I left that austere educational establishment, but one which provided a solid platform to help launch my media career.

“We’re having a reunion and we’ve found you at last,” it declared.

I admit to having had reservations. A total of 54 years is a long time and I doubted if I could remember even a handful. However, I accepted and I’m glad we – my wife came too – made the trip to the North East of Scotland.

Four hours from Scotland’s Capital, up the M90 to Perth and then the A90 before joining the new Aberdeen by-pass just north of Stonehaven. What a boon that is as the slip out is at Balmedie, near Donald Trump’s golf course.

We drove into Peterhead. Nothing much has changed. The prison is still on the cliff overlooking the harbour, but this former home to some of the toughest in Scotland is now a museum, and the harbour has been extensively developed.

The red granite houses have, however, not changed, aged yes, and we turned into the spacious Palace Hotel car park, situated in the middle of the town. When I was at school, not yesterday I hasten to add, this was the home of Saturday night dances, and they could get rowdy. The hotel, which has been

modernised, was comfortable and the staff helpful.

Peterhead, oh dear, it was a Saturday afternoon and it was deserted. Depressing. Very few people about on the streets. Sad really from what I remember, however, the sun, which blazed through the blue sky, lifted spirits and there was no wind. Shorts and T-shirt in Peterhead, something to note in your diary as the town is the most easterly point in Scotland.

We ventured towards the harbour looking for a café. We found one, The Dolphin, next to the Lifeboat station, which has been serving quality fish and chips for over 30 years, using, unsurprisingly, locally landed fish. Yes, there are staples like burgers, chicken, macaroni and other pies and baked potatoes plus soups. I asked what the soup de jour was and the reply: "Mince and tatties soup."

Well, I had to give it a try and it was great. Hats off to Pauline who made it, wee bits of beef and packed with vegetables.

On we travelled past the busy, but deserted, fish market, where fish landings topped £200m for the first time in 2017 and, according to the Port Authority, have remained high since. The modern facility can handle up to 10,000 boxes a day and we strolled on, passing the dry dock and on towards the tiny harbour at Buchanhaven, the fishing cottages clinging to the foreshore and nestling among the red granite council houses.

Peterhead beach, at the mouth of the Ugie River, is a gem. Anywhere else and it would be crammed by deckchairs in mid-summer. Here the only wood is driftwood from the sea and the only thing to have changed was the configuration of the sand dunes, worn away by the sea and the relentless windy blasts from the North Sea.

We arrived back at the hotel to be greeted in the foyer by a collection of blue balloons, strange to those not from the

North East. Peterhead is nicknamed the Blue Toon because of the blue clothes and stockings traditionally worn by the town's fishermen.

These ladies, false eyelashes to the fore, were there, not in blue clothes or stockings, but their multi-coloured finery for an evening out. We understood they were the wives of players in a local football team, and they were having a good time. Another cocktail please, waiter.

The dinner was a success, after my embarrassment at not recognising a large percentage of my former classmates, despite travelling to Peterhead's twin town, Alesund in Norway, with the school choir. The food excellent, despite this being a busy night for the hotel.

Breakfast was typical Scottish. I had smoked fish – we are in a major fishing port, after all – with poached egg, before heading off into the fog. Yes, a total change in the weather, and driving was difficult heading north towards Banff along the coast.

Pennan, famous for its red telephone box in the film Local Hero, was our next stop, a tiny village which has become a tourist hot spot. It was shrouded in mist when we turned down the narrow road and down the cliff into the village which hugs the cliffs. Watch the bend to the right behind the hotel, it is blind. Thankfully, nothing.

The village there was nobody about, only tourists venture out in poor weather, apart from a lady with a wet suit going for a dip. Convenience note, the public toilets are in the village hall.

On we went. Banff was also mist-bound. We did not stop. Cullen, where the Viaduct dominates, was damp with drizzle. The impressive viaduct used to carry the railway until it was decommissioned in the late 1960's but has been preserved and is part of the walking trails around the town which also

boasts a beautiful, soft sand, beach and golf.

We drove on towards Lossiemouth, originally the port for Elgin, but now labelled 'the jewel of the Moray Firth', for its two sandy beaches and dunes. RAF Lossiemouth nearby is a front-line operational base.

The fog had cleared slightly to be replaced by drizzle. It was dreich so we headed to the recommended Harbour Lights Café at the harbour. It was rammed but we got a table and loved the coffee and home-baked German biscuit. La crème de la crunch.

A short drive along the coast sits Findhorn, a world-renowned destination for mindfulness and a centre for ecological and sustainable living. It is home to around 900 and is a popular place for sailors, other water sport enthusiasts and nature lovers. It is easy to see why, and we could see by this time as the mist had, thankfully, lifted and the drizzle abated.

On to Nairn, a busy seaside resort on the Moray Firth, with three superb beaches and two championship golf courses. We walked along the shore and into the town. Not busy, Sunday near tea-time, and we were peckish.

Close to the station we fell upon The Classroom Bistro, described as a chic and popular restaurant serving quality ingredients, sourced locally, and "served with a smile". Ours was, even though the waitress was rushed off her feet, and the fish and chips and lamb steak were top drawer.

No problem walking back to the refurbished, with a Scottish twist, West End Hotel, situated in a leafy neighbourhood. Quiet yes, warm, yes, but homely, no. Needs some TLC, in our opinion. The breakfast room was soleless.

On to Aviemore. A bustling place, packed with tourists as it is billed as an "all round destination" for winter sports, 30km of ski runs, walking, climbing, biking and fishing plus other leisure pursuits.

Competition for trade is fierce, particularly among the mountain and walking clothing sector, and the shops windows were covered by sale, 50% off and other visual attractors. We walked on by.

Our designation was the Cairngorm Chairlift car park, a pleasant drive through forest and past Loch Morlich, home to many water sports. We reached road end and there is a charge for the car park, but many park a tad down the hill, on the verge.

You know you are near the summit of Cairn Gorm, 4,081 feet about sea level, when you step out of your car, even in late September. An icy blast and the woman in the shop warned: "Snow on Thursday." She was right.

A short time later we were back on the road towards the Highland Folk Museum at Newtonmore (open 10.30 to 4pm). Don't miss this, especially if you are a fan of the historical drama series, Outlander. There are over 35 buildings onsite where you learn about how people in the Highlands lived, worked on and off the farm, went to school and did their shopping. This closes on October 31 for the winter and re-opens in April 2025. There is no charge but they welcome donations. Be generous as this is a fine facility.

We enjoyed our jaunt apart from the mist, fog and drizzle, and A9 was not too busy on our route back to Scotland's Capital.

MAIN PICTURE: Pennan, of Local Hero fame. Pity about the mist but the famous telephone box is in shot. **Picture Nigel Duncan**



PETERHEAD HARBOUR: One of the busiest fishing ports in the UK.
Picture *Nigel Duncan*



QUIET: Saturday afternoon in Peterhead's shopping centre.
Picture *Nigel Duncan*



PETERHEAD BEACH: wonderful sand but deserted apart for gulls.
Picture *Nigel Duncan*



HARBOUR LIGHTS, LOSSIEMOUTH: A sanctuary away from the drizzle
with great home-baking. Picture *Nigel Duncan*



GREAT FOOD: The Classroom, next to the school, quality food in chic surroundings. Picture *Nigel Duncan*



WEST END HOTEL: Great location but disappointing. Picture *Nigel Duncan*



FLASHBACK: Life in the Highlands in years gone and lovingly restored in the Folk Museum in Newtonmore. Picture ***Nigel Duncan***



ALL OUR YESTERDAYS: The Palace Hotel, Peterhead. Picture ***Nigel Duncan***