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Time to recreate Highland heyday

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IT WAS called a monstrosity, a white elephant, a hotbed of illicit sex, the biggest architectural disaster since the invention of concrete and a blot on the landscape with morals looser than a bungee-jumper's bowels. It was portrayed as tackier than a Crossroads episode and more annoying than being stuck in a lift with Paul Daniels and Debbie McGee, hard though that is to believe.

Many who lived in the area talked about it as though they were gossiping about a woman next door's new bidey-in, rumoured to have been jailed for making toad-in-the-hole with real toads and serving it up to his former wife with a garnish of grated hamster and a side salad of deadly nightshade.

Such tales were wild exaggeration, of course, but it seemed strangely cathartic to voluble opponents to look down on the newcomer as though it had arrived stuck to someone's shoe and been smeared across their precious shagpile.

It had its troubles, that's true, and there have been many times when the only solution to its problems seemed to be a squad of JCB drivers armed with dynamite. It does not deserve the over-the-top opprobrium it has endured for more than 40 years, though. It might not be ideal, but the Aviemore Centre – now styled as the Aviemore Highland Resort – has more going for it than much of Scotland's less-than-perfect tourist industry.

Time is running out, however. The resort has had more comebacks than a dinner full of radishes. Repeated blueprints for its survival seem to have been drawn up by the same people making plans for the next British Wimbledon winner. Time after time, despite a considerable racket, it all ends in tears.

When the resort's latest manifestation went into administration last week, I feared the worst. After a battle that has spanned five decades, it seemed the facility was doomed. Within hours, however, the Aviemore phoenix flapped its wings yet again as it moved into the sole ownership of Macdonald Hotels.

The company's executive chairman, Donald Macdonald, told the P&J it was time to put aside what he called the "baggage and troubles" of the past 20 years and to grasp the lifeline now being offered. He's right, but fine words now need fine deeds to back them up.

Many doubts remain. How is it that a well-established facility in a glorious setting with excellent transport links that can offer a huge range of leisure pursuits every day of the year with arguably one of the finest views in Britain over a famous river to some of the country's highest mountains find itself in financial difficulties?

It's a mystery. If you can't do it in tourism in Aviemore, it probably can't be done.

In the mid-1960s, the Aviemore Centre was a brilliant concept, clustering hotels that catered for every market sector round a set of common facilities including a swimming pool, theatre, restaurants, shops and family entertainment.

OK, so it was built of hideous concrete, but so were most of our towns and cities at that time. Just look at St Nicholas House in Aberdeen, the Wellgate Centre in Dundee or the horrors perpetrated in front of Inverness Castle along the banks of the River Ness to see what damage architects can do when they are let loose.

By the mid-1980s, however, the centre was struggling to decide whether to persist with its winter sports ambitions or to focus on its summer offerings as winter snows became rarer than friends of Sir Fred Goodwin on Facebook. Its recent history has been chequered, to say the least. That said, for all the hate mail Aviemore has received over the years, generations of visitors have enjoyed their stay there and have revelled in the scenery and hospitality of the warm heart of the Highlands.

It might have been dismissed at times by nearby Grantown, Kingussie, Newtonmore and others, but it did much to bring trade to their doors, too.

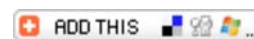
A glance at David and Julie Carman's excellent website www.auldaviemore.co.uk shows there is much nostalgia for the heady days when the centre was buzzing.

As the song says, however, those days are past now and in the past they must remain. Tourism has changed; tastes have changed; Scotland has changed. The climate is changing, too. Any new Aviemore Highland Resort must change with them and develop a quality tourism product with a sharp focus on sustainable use of the fabulous natural environment that surrounds it.

Aviemore doesn't need more takeaways, nightclubs or pubs to secure its long-term future. It needs a sensitive and first-class product throughout. Is it up to the challenge?

The centre is drinking in the last-chance saloon. If it does go downmarket rather than up, I suggest a name for any new pub there.

I would call it The Last Resort.

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