

SCOTTISH MEMORIES

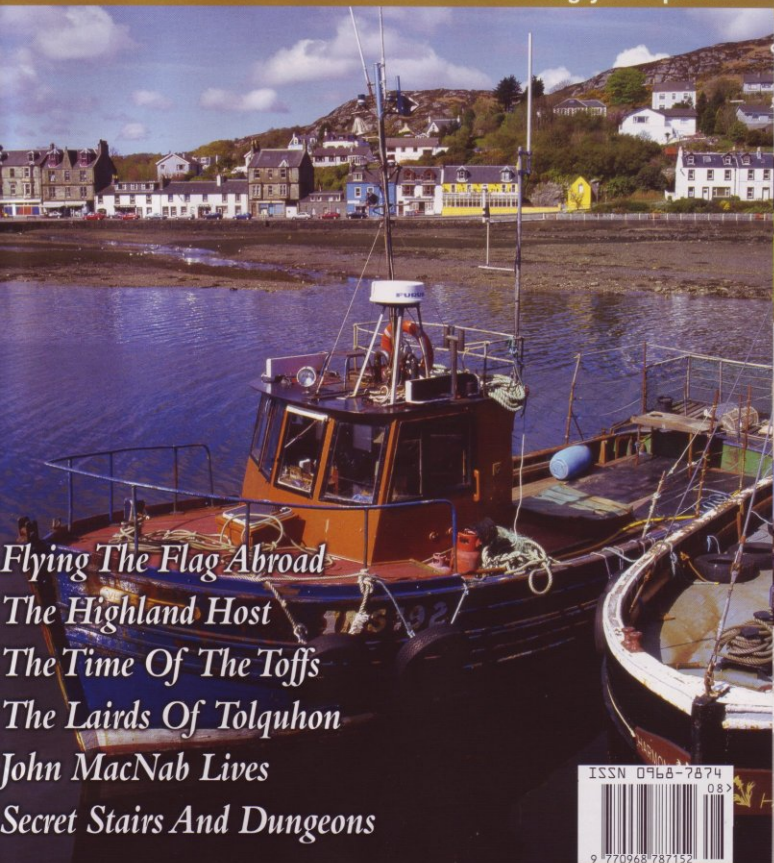


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In Auld Aviemore

Julie Carman recalls happy days in the Highlands

The Aviemore Centre in the central Highlands was opened just eleven days before Christmas in 1966 by Lady Fraser of Allander and for the locals it was nothing less than a revolution in their lifestyles.

Thousands of visitors converged daily on the ice rink, cinema, swimming pool, restaurants, bars, hotels and conference venues and the traditional quietly rustic village which had survived for centuries with a few granite cottages huddled round a tranquil street was transformed overnight.



Photograph courtesy of J. Butler

My father was a long distance lorry driver who eventually graduated into developing his own private coach touring company and, down in darkest England, would regale us with tales of how the wild north was being tamed and brought into modern times and how we would one day spend a wonderful holiday there.

That halcyon time came for me in 1975 and it was a long trek north from my home in Kent and much of it involved pre-motorway meanderings along lonely tracks through isolated villages once we passed over the border.

Because of my father's work, I was a seasoned traveller by the age of 14, though I was still excited as we trundled into Aviemore.

It lived up to all our expectations and had that magical combination of being a dash of urban sophistication amidst all the wild, untamed mountains.

We stayed in an Austrian style motel in the middle of the complex with bunk beds (duvets were then a new concept which local staff for some reason called 'downies') and I learned to ice skate at the rink where our space was sometimes curtailed to make way for curling matches which nevertheless fascinated me. There was also a local ice hockey team incongruously called the Blackhaws (plus a football team called the Strathspey Strollers).

We enjoyed ourselves so much that we went back to Aviemore annually thereafter, staying at a variety of plush hotels, enjoying Highland hospitality and dancing the night away at the La Pigalle disco.

Some of the waitresses were resplendent in tartan skirts and jackets with frilly, white blouses, while we buzzed around in little electric scooters up and down the shopping area. In the latter I bought a pair of goatskin snowboots for £55, a huge amount at the time but I just had to have them.

Again Alpine themes predominated in the posher restaurants with pine cladding and log fires.

There was a go-kart track where all the activity seemed to go on at high speeds.

There were fancy dress parties and I remember a Hawaiian evening and a pirate night when the manager of our hotel turned up seemingly with one leg and a parrot - and I thought I was daring with flowers and ribbons in my hair.

We even went up at Christmas and got to know Santa who turned out to be a local called George who is now a resident in a Kingussie rest home. Santaland was a bit incongruous, consisting of a huge block of ice, a duck pond, a mock Wild West fort and a narrow gauge railway. Cosmopolitan or what?

Craft units included a pottery where models of the Loch Ness monster were made, a jeweller's selling semi-precious stones, including

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Photograph courtesy of J. Butler

of course Cairngorms, and a knitwear store which had a popular if massive Great Dane guard dog on constant patrol who was just a big pet and probably would never have harmed a fly.

There was pony trekking in the surrounding mountains, a dry ski slope and naturally walks into the wild galore, for that was all part of the charm - you could get as much peace and quiet as you wanted well away from the centre of the village and come back to the noise and glitz whenever you wanted.

And when it came to the frantic night life I recall venues such as the Illicit Still, the Post House, the Badenoch, Wolf, Craigellachie, Woodshed, D'Ecosse and Viking Bars, Cynthia's Disco, the Roxy Nightclub, the Winking Owl and the Red MacGregor Hotel.

There were busy chip shops like the Happy Haggis and Geordie's, while singing groups like the Trampies and the Scots Boys entertained till the wee sma' hours, along with visiting artistes such as Billy Connolly, Bill Paterson and Isla St Clair.

We used to queue for the White Lady Open Chairlift up the mountains where the Ptarmigan Restaurant was an iconic feature among the peaks.

Sometimes it got spooky if there was a white out up there and you got stuck in mid-air, unable to see a thing with just the whooshing sound of the skiers far below.

All this has gone. The dome-shaped restaurant found its final resting place at Loch Insh near Kingussie where it is now part of the gift shop and cafe complex.

The Centre became decrepit and had to be pulled down by the end of the century. I stood and almost wept amongst the rubble for three lost decades that had gone out of my life and out of Highland life generally.

I recalled those long ago Christmases when the staff invited widows and widowers, who found themselves alone for the first time at Christmas, to join them at the Centre for a festive lunch; and I could remember when the hotel staff delivered hot meals on sleds to pensioners during severe winter weather.

Having such memories is a joy, so much so that my husband and I decided to set up a website in honour of the magical spot that was once the Aviemore Centre. There was nothing about it on the Internet, so last year we set to work on putting something together.

In six months we had 3,400 hits and a plethora of letters, e-mails and photos from folk all over the world. They are now on our website where we seem to have sparked a revival of interest.

I hope this might inspire you also to take a trip down memory lane and if you ever visited Aviemore during its heydays then please share your recollections with us. We look forward to hearing from you. Our website is at www.auldaviemore.co.uk 🌸

