

Thinking small leads to big dividends

Ruaridh Nicoll

Sunday October 29, 2006

[The Observer](#)

Some years ago, I decided to live in the Highlands and chose a remote village because I remembered that it had a good pub. I wanted to get some work done and 13 months in the hills seemed like a good idea, but the pub was there to ensure my sanity. Unfortunately, I discovered it had burnt down. It made for a lonely stretch. At the time, the Highlands were full of villages struggling to survive, with schools disappearing, shops struggling, pubs burning down.

Now, one of those rare reports with the power to shock has pointed out that the same is happening to Scotland's towns. As the cities thrive, towns such as Helensburgh, Kirriemuir and Dunbar are disintegrating - socially, physically and economically. The authors of the small towns report argue that communities with a population of between 2,000 and 20,000 face a 'time bomb' of decay.

Given that the report was produced by the South of Scotland Alliance, a collaboration between Borders and Dumfries & Galloway councils, it's not so shocking that its authors call for the Scottish Executive to champion small towns. 'National agencies, such as Scottish Enterprise and Communities Scotland, do not give priority to small towns,' they say, pointing out that a third of the population lives in such places.

The report is shocking only because it draws into sharp focus something which should have been obvious. Increasingly good roads mean that towns across Scotland are suffering the same fate. Just look at estate agents' schedules for pretty farmhouses and the mileages from the main cities are printed in bold.

The authors point out several good news stories of towns pulling themselves back from the brink. Wigtown, Castle Douglas, Kirkcudbright and Moffat have picked specialist subjects - books, food, art and health respectively - and made them their own.

The only one I know well is Wigtown. A bleakly beautiful town, its broad main street splits as it falls across the Galloway Machars to the mudflats of the Solway Firth. Reliant on farming, Wigtown was also sinking when a shop owner decided to make it Scotland's 'book town'. Now the main street is lined with second-hand bookshops and there is an increasingly important book festival every year.

That shop owner wasn't alone. A builder who had bought a defunct local distillery also fell prey to imagination. Realising what he had, he shelved plans to turn the building into houses and restarted production. Wigtown didn't require much help from Edinburgh. It needed the determination of a few committed individuals, unburdened by interference from the Scottish Executive.

The small towns report makes much of work being done in the Highlands. This is astute, for there is a revolution going on in the mountains. Land reform has brought in community

ownership, backed by the Scottish Land Fund. This allows local communities to mark out pieces of land they feel they could usefully take over - for a shop, leisure centre or even to keep as a working forest - then help them with the funds to buy it.

There are other initiatives. The Royal Burgh of Lauder (population 1,200) may be too small for this report, but it's a perfect example of a town shaping its own future. The Lauder Development Trust is trying to get the Convention of Royal Burghs operating again. The convention disappeared when burghs were stripped of their local government responsibilities in 1975, but Lauder is trying to recreate what was once a hugely powerful political block. This exuberant wee burgh is also involved in a campaign to protect land held in the common good. Over the years, common lands have been sold off, their income squandered. There are now petitions in Parliament to ensure what remains is properly marked out, the rental kept in appropriate accounts held for the good of the people.

Finally, this report thrills me because of what lies behind it. One of its authors, Ian Lindley, has arrived from over the border, having been at the heart of successful English attempts to revitalise their market towns. Now he is meeting the revolutionaries coming down from the Highlands. If the small towns, 262 of them says the report, can find a few highly motivated people from within, there should be great hope for the future.