

From Poster Boy to Poster Boy?

By Adrian Miles

Believe it or not that's me, a bonny bairn in a tabloid advertising campaign for a coal merchant's, that none of the family can remember the name of incidentally. And that's me also on the front of the Perth Courier this year, the precursor to this had been an e-mail from a previous customer of mine that said she was interested to see me on the front page; my first reaction to this news was 'Oh - what have I done now!' The juxtaposition of the two photographs from the point of view of the KSB core campaign pillars could perhaps be lessened if I emblazoned the words 'sustainable', 'environmentally-friendly' and 'clean' across the coal advert but I think some might question that.



As one of Beautiful Scotland's newer judges, I find myself in the privileged position of interacting with and assessing a wide range of community groups, all with the common goal of improving their local environments through voluntary efforts within those communities. And how did I get here?

A brief history: Born in Croydon, Surrey, where I spent my formative years to the age of 19. Up through the ranks of British Telecom from a humble time-sheet clerk in Exeter to a marketing executive for satellite communications in London. A variety of posts - the most interesting I look back on now was my time with mobile communications in their infancy when hand-portable phones were the size of a house brick and cost customers over £4000.

Taking voluntary redundancy at a time of personal crisis I started again at the bottom of the ladder and fast-forward another six years until I was unfortunate enough to brush up against cancer. Again I took redundancy to focus on my treatment. This was, however, a generally positive period, a great time to re-evaluate life and explore more fulfilling options for a potential future. Perhaps a good example of the 'Green' therapy that is so widely advocated nowadays; I was painting fences,

Beautiful Scotland judges Sandy Scott and Adrian Miles alongside Coupar Angus Pride of Place's Anne Easson and Tracy Thom enjoy a floral display in the village during their assessment visit yesterday.

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... A Perthshire town which has struck gold at various national gardening contests has welcomed judges from Beautiful Scotland. The Pride of Place (PoP) team has been working flat out with residents of Coupar



filling skips, delivering flowers, jet-washing patios, working in an office a couple of nights a week, and yes, gardening. The fact that I had already had an allotment locally for a number of years seemed not to have encouraged a more general interest in horticulture; ironically I was also the lazy shirking fourteen year old who had once performed rain-dances on Sunday mornings to avoid going to my father's allotment with him!

It was my time in the off-licence on quiet shifts where I would read gardening books and so start to learn what would become my profession for the next 20 years (to date). Eventually settling to a good round of local gardens with various soft and hard landscaping projects and on-going maintenance. I ended up going back to college to gain a formal qualification in horticulture and then on to teach the same subject, taking over from my old tutor - a veritable 'Yoda' as I liked to call him. My time teaching with East Surrey College was a most rewarding and enjoyable time, it was a great 'learning discipline'.

In 2007 a 'techy' friend of mine with a 'start-up' company asked me to star in his gardening program 'Through the Garden Gate', and this was to be delivered through a hitherto little heard of technology called Podcasting! We delivered 5 programs and a 6th never got to air before his company folded in the financial downturn.

I moved to Scotland in 2009 to be closer to my parents. I left behind a garden of dramatic palms, bananas and olives. Soon realising that the nearest I would come to a banana in Fife was that spelt with a 'Y' on a blue sticker in fruit baskets at the local Co-op, I adopted a plant palette more suitable for the local climate - unusual woodland plants with an emphasis on dramatic shape, colour and texture. I didn't lose my love of roses though and have noted with some relief that some grow far better in Fife than Surrey - my beloved Bourbon roses!

So gardening in Scotland - re-starting again in so many ways. A new life and a new partner too. One of my first gardens was 'our' garden at 'Helensbank' in Kincardine which required much work but was finally opened to the public under Scotland's Garden Scheme in 2015; it was featured in the Scottish Press along with two more of the gardens I work on. My own in Newburgh was also open for the first time in 2018, along with 6 others in the village, all under the Garden Scheme. With a total of 300 visitors to my tiny patch - a mixture of the informed to the purely inquisitive, I must admit that I had expected to witness something like the trampling of wildebeest on the Serengeti. It was, in the end, a thoroughly enjoyable experience - and the garden escaped unscathed.

To Judging: 'Who am I to judge?'

It's a responsibility not taken lightly I can assure you, with much soul-searching, empathy and late-night scribblings. As one in a pair of judges that visit each community in the Beautiful Scotland campaign, I have been fortunate enough to have good mentors, and for the last two years have benefitted extensively teaming up with Sandy Scott from Aberdeen City Council. It's all about balancing initial impressions and conclusions with a more reflective approach, and bouncing ideas off your fellow Judge. My expertise is in horticulture and I am, to be honest, quite critical - after all it accounts for 50% of the marks in the assessment. Sandy has been the lead judge in our pair and tempers my critique whilst adding his own thoughts, especially on the areas where I have less experience. It's very much a two-way street. After each tour we discuss our initial thoughts before parting company. This is followed by many exchanges via e-mail and phone over the next couple of weeks so that we reach an assessment we are both happy to present back to the groups. It's most important to be prompt and thorough as even at my tender age of 55, it's easy to miss a point on our intensive tours.

Whilst I have only seen the seasons in the gardening world come and go for the last 20 years with any great interest, it does add up to a significant number of days out there in the thick of it. I think you have to reach the stage in life where you feel you have an area of expertise you can put your hand up to and say 'I'm good at that' - and that my opinion is valid. I initially struggled with this last point during my first year of visits as I was always over-whelmed by the incredible efforts made by the groups and feeling 'who am I to judge?' Giving sufficient time to each group for a thorough review is the best and only way I can truly do justice to their hard work and enthusiasm. I probably spend 5 to 6 hours writing up and reviewing each one.

We visited nine groups this year that had entered the 'Large Village' category, some old hands and some new faces, but very varied communities. Horticulturally the pressures are very different;

Inverbervie on the coast will be coping with salt air and drying easterly winds in Winter, whereas Forth at nearly 1000ft up on a high ridge, few trees and lots of wind farms - well the hanging baskets are never going to hang vertically, usually at a kilter - all these things have to be taken into consideration. One group even hand-washed their bus stops.

Judging has taken me to places in Scotland I've never been to before. I've met some of the highly motivated and committed people that do all that 'behind-the-scenes' work that we take for granted when we pass through a town or village. So when it comes to the end of our tour with each group it's always we who express our thanks for the over-whelming efforts being made by communities to 'Keep Scotland Beautiful'. Lastly I should mention one of the best parts of judging - and that's the home-baking. Unfortunately for Sandy, my co-judge, as it's me with the camera, it's been him caught with the scone or the lemon drizzle cake!

So in summary, there's a lot of expectation loaded on our visits and, although intensive, it's extremely rewarding, very humbling and I have thoroughly enjoyed the privilege and experience.

