

The summer season has well and truly arrived. People are wandering around, posing for photos and pointing things out to each other. Ice cream is being licked and postcards are being posted.

I did my first stint in our museum on Sunday. Thanks to the National Trust for Scotland's concentrating all their efforts on one battlefield, our local museum now is open only through the efforts of volunteers. Most of us only have to do a few days over the whole season, although there are others giving a lot more of their time. It was fun for the few hours I was there. We had a bit of a rush at the beginning and then it steadied out for the rest of the day. Once I got the hang of the till, and found the kettle, I was sorted.

Very few of the visitors paid: most were members of NTS or one of its associate organisations and so got free entry. There were families on a day out, and a few couples enjoying a holiday before the schools are off and the guesthouses fill up. Many of them asked about the future of the museum as they had heard about the threats to its closure.

I suspect some of them came to visit only because they heard it was closing. It's like coming across a road accident. You go to see what is happening. You offer your help and your sympathy and if neither works, you are forced to bear witness to their demise. Or you could simply walk away leaving it up to others to take responsibility for the mess.

The people I met on Sunday all said they wanted the museum to survive. They hadn't come to gloat over the threat to its existence, but to show some solidarity and to enjoy it while it was there.

It's funny how when something is practically on your doorstep, you don't pay any attention to it and then one day it's gone. It's the Woolworths' syndrome. No-

one ever went until there was a threat it would disappear and then all of a sudden it was the best shop ever. Just like the butchers and other local shops.

I was brought up in Glasgow, but have visited the Burrell Collection more times since I left than I ever did when I lived there. Then I would travel to the Highlands at weekends to see places that I never go to now I live here. Although I dare say if any of them are about to disappear I've no doubt I'll suddenly want nothing more than to go there again.

But recently I have been hearing people say that this museum has had its day and that we should allow it to die in peace. That maybe this would apply to many of our museums, that the NTS should be wound up, and its properties and land left to survive on their own or quietly go downhill.

NTS is a charity that doesn't receive state funding for day to day operations. Its income comes mainly from the public in the form of membership fees and legacies. The current economic climate with the poor returns on investments has vastly reduced the value of these legacies at the same time as costs have risen, and visitor numbers continue to drop. People prefer shops to museums now.

We don't have access to information about how the NTS manage the money they do get, so questions about how they spend their money will have to remain unanswered for now. Those who put their trust in the Trust will have to do just that.

I have written in this space before about state aid for the arts and heritage. Whilst acknowledging the many competing claims of community, health and education, there is an acceptance from our leaders that at least some state aid should be set aside to help preserve our cultural heritage. If we are not prepared to pay for these things, directly or indirectly, they are simply not sustainable. Once lost, they

may be lost forever. Buildings fall down, documents decay and treasures get lost or broken.

In all the excitement about MP's expenses and pandemics, we cannot lose sight of what is happening on our own doorsteps. It might not affect you now, but its coming.