



WALKER AT LARGE

Reporter David Walker speaking personally

Gaelic charm is lost on me

Falla do's Leagaidh Ghallaid

I'VE had enough of Gaelic. There I've said it.

I didn't say garlic there - I'm not a vampire - but Gaelic, that strange language that's everywhere in our midst despite no one actually speaking it.

Don't get me wrong; I don't mind the language itself, the practice of it, or its traditions - I even think it's laudable that people are trying to keep it going - just keep it well away from me, I'm not the only one to feel that way either, see page 4.

The inextinguishable bureaucrat-driven rise of the Gaelic movement and its continued encroachment into an overwhelmingly English-Scottish-speaking populace has, to my mind, been annoying and anachronistic at best, and flinty sinister at worst.

Where else does a language get such frequent public airings in a country where just 1% of the population can speak it? If a phrasebook-wielding tourist who was trying to speak to you in your 'native' tongue approached you, would you be able to reply? No, I didn't think so.

I suspect that such basic phrases as "A bhail Gàidhlig againh?" (Do you speak Gaelic?), the more advanced "Tha mi ag iarraidh brioigaid!" (I want a cookie) or "Kaw uha KEU-ma shin KAW-la roor uh CHOO-nik mee ahm-royer?" (Who was that sheep I saw you with last night?) would go right over your head.

As a Largs resident, you've got more chance of winning the EuroMillions lottery than meeting a genuine Gaelic speaker.

Ohay, bad example - but you get my point. When you examine the facts and figures of this matter, it's flintily mind-boggling that so much attention and money is poured into a language that's been slowly dying of its own accord for

centuries.

It's also a geographical nightmare. If Gaelic isn't being force-fed in schools, then it's confining locals and visitors alike on the most basic of maps and street signs. Too often, Gaelic actually appears first to motorists, prompting much confused signalling, last minute braking and sudden u-turning, if not actually getting people lost altogether. In your desperation you might declare, "Chan eil mi a' tuigeadh!" (I don't understand!). In fact, the whole enterprise is lost on me.

There's also no getting away from the fact that it's a bloody nuisance. If we as a newspaper were to give as much precedence to Gaelic as some do, then right now you'd be reading the An Leagaidh Ghallaidh as Post a' Mhòidhain News; Snappy, it ain't.

Incredibly, and so does it come at some cost to you and me. North Ayrshire Council actually employ a Gaelic Development Officer, who currently helps in average 23 classes on the subject across the region. It's so obscure, we might as well further subsidise a Native Indian Executive or an Assistant Supervisor of Eskimo Studies.

To me, 22 Gaelic classes sounds like a lot of unhappy children - just another form of those boring piano lessons foisted on uninterested kids by their over-zealous parents, the kind of lessons that the recipients gleefully forget about as soon as they were old enough to leave them behind.

Frighteningly, ministers were even recently being urged to double the number of children entering Gaelic education each year, part of a draft five-year plan aimed at reversing the decline in the language.

Government agency Bord na Gàidhlig said

they wanted to see the number going into Gaelic primary one classes doubling, before insisting that children learning more than one language went on to enjoy greater benefits throughout their education. But surely they could enjoy the same benefits by learning a language that could actually be applied and utilised in a modern world?

Elsewhere the president of one of Gaelic's oldest organisations, An Comann Gàidhealach, has called for the language to be used more prominently on the Western Isles. Once again, this suggests that those attempting to perpetuate Gaelic are fighting a tide of apathy by promoting it where it is simply not wanted or required.

Today, just 60,000 in Scotland speak Gaelic, most of them in the Western Isles, and all of them bilingual in English. Five times that amount speak Cantonese across the UK, 10 times as many speak Punjabi, while 20 times more speak Urdu and Bengali.

Yet, none of those languages have their own publicly subsidised TV channel costing £17 million a year, or the protection of parliamentary acts.

The propaganda merchants tell us that if Gaelic does indeed die then this generation of Scots will have been complicit in a grievous act of folly, that something of Scotland's soul will have been lost forever. They say that not many other countries have their very own ancient tongue and one that carries some of the most beautiful music, poetry and prose in Scotland's bounty.

But the death of a language is surely as un-



avoidable as the rising of the tide; it becomes obsolete because it is obsolete. Like Latin, it falls by the wayside because it becomes outmoded, impractical and unwieldy - and no amount of marketing, promotion or money can change that.

By any normal yardstick, Gaelic should barely exist in modern day Scotland. It exists in a naive historical landscape, redressing old rural grievances rather than expressing new metropolitan demands.

Only on a superficial level does it help the tourist trade by rewarding visitors with that quaint sense of difference that all visitors seek. It's pleasing primarily because it conforms to

the stereotypes of a Scotland that no longer exists - but ultimately it's as superfluous as the Loch Ness Monster or a wee Australian dressing up as one of our national heroes and telling us that he knows all about our freedom.

Personally, I think our nation often has enough trouble learning its primary language, never mind another one. Many of us are still getting the hang of this English thing - throwing yet another language into the mix might just tip a few people right over the edge.

I suppose all that's left to say is Tha mi duilich (I'm sorry), Feumaidh mi faibh (I have to go) and Mar sin leibh an dèidh (to be for now).