

Normal student life has of late been put on hold, with exam week being followed by study tour week we are now back into relatively normal time. The change of scene was welcome, and three intensive days saw us travel from Cork through the gently undulating hills and sandy coasts near Clonakilty, through to the harbour of Baltimore and further west to the rugged Mizen Head. Although the main themes were landscape types, rural resources and development, many, many other themes crept in - from tax incentives to discussions on beauty and sublimity, from city and county policy coherency to rural housing, and - rural Ireland as a whole. One of our lecturers, perhaps after seeing so much ribbon development, actually queried whether rural Ireland existed at all – and promised a Mars Bar for anyone who could prove their case.....

This was more difficult than we imagined! We saw picturesque coastal villages, with 'tacked on' estates of holiday homes, which are struggling to even maintain their public transport. We saw water bodies polluted by untreated effluent from residential development. We saw extensive residential development in remote coastal areas which have no other facilities. We saw land uses being relocated from town and village centres to outside these settlements, and much ribbon development. Day one seemed to show us a suburbanized countryside, but this was clearly rectified on the second day, by the time we reached Mizen Head's expanse of rugged and somewhat bleak but certainly quite unspoiled landscape. So it seems that there may be not one but several rural Irelands that exist – perhaps the Mars bar could be won by conceding that many of what we automatically consider to be 'rural' areas, are actually highly suburbanised landscapes, and that relatively unspoiled rural areas, while they do exist, are increasingly being encroached upon as this trend of suburbanisation continues.

We did, however, also see many positives – thriving villages and towns, beautiful landscapes and seascapes, rural diversification such as forestry plantations, windfarms and other alternative enterprises. Rural diversification, which we often read about in the context of agricultural change, is necessary for and possible in these areas, but in my view must be developed with caution in order to enhance and not detract from the landscape and natural resources.

While not quite throwing caution to the wind, a courageous move by two farmers was demonstrated to the group in the construction of a wind farm of five wind turbines, with a combined output of 4.5MW. The considerable financial outlay was a surprise to many of us, yet the turbines seemed to yield a good return. The opportunity for us to walk around the turbine bases and experience the scale, sight and sound of the wind farm in the landscape was certainly invaluable and something which cannot be replicated in a lecture theatre!

So it's back to the lecture theatre this week, but only briefly as we leave for our European study trip later this month.....