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**Charting Economic Change in
West Cork, Ireland, since c. 1960¹**

DAVID R. STEAD

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This paper exploits published and unpublished data to chart the remarkable economic changes that have occurred in a rural Irish region over the past fifty or so years. In c. 1960, the West Cork economy was overwhelmingly dependent on agriculture and experiencing long-term decline. The region began to be revitalized from around the late 1980s, reflected in, inter alia, a rapid reversal of long-standing population decline and growth of employment in the service sector. West Cork has, though, been adversely affected by the current sharp economic downturn, and there remains a persistent division between the relatively affluent east of the area and the less prosperous west.

Key words: Economic change, rural development, Ireland.

¹ David R. Stead, UCD School of Agriculture, Food Science and Veterinary Medicine, Agriculture and Food Science Centre, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland. Email: david.stead@ucd.ie.

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INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the 1960s, West Cork was a peripheral, rural region of Ireland clearly dependent on small-scale farming and overwhelmingly in long-term economic decline. Nearly fifty years on, the area's economy has (remarkably and largely unexpectedly) been revitalized, symbolized by the appearance of business parks and luxury hotels – at least before a sharp deterioration during 2008-9. This paper makes a modest contribution to the literature on agrarian change by utilizing published and unpublished data to chart economic developments in West Cork over the past two generations or so, providing a long-run sub-county case study to complement national and sectoral level studies of agricultural and rural change in modern Ireland (such as Commins 2005; O'Connor and Gorman et al. 2006).² What follows builds upon a short report by Commins (1999) which tracked selected changes in the area using statistics from, at the latest, 1997. As well as updating it, this paper extends Commins' work by including additional indicators and commentary. The approach, then, adheres to a 'rural observatory' method, whereby researchers periodically re-examine a locality to ascertain continuity and change (Havinden 1999 is another example). This would seem to be particularly appropriate considering the very significant changes in the Irish macroeconomy, and in European agricultural and rural development policy, since the 1990s (see, for instance, Clinch et al. 2002; Matthews 2005; McArdle and Clemenger 2009). The paper provides a more systematic discussion of long-term change in West Cork's economy than was possible in the insightful overviews of social and economic change in the region that have recently appeared (notably Crowley 2006, ch. 7; Sheehan 2007;³ Hopkin 2008).

The first section below defines the study area and outlines the chronically depressed state of its economy in c. 1960, when according to one colourful recollection West Cork was 'the arse end of the back of beyond' (cited in Crowley 2006, 178); Boland (1958, 10) called it 'Ireland's blackest emigration district'. The early 1960s is a convenient baseline due to the availability of data and analysis in the pioneering *West Cork Resource Survey* (Murphy 1963). In the next section some of the subsequent economic changes – up until c. 2006 – are identified using statistics from, *inter alia*, successive Censuses of Population and Agriculture; 2006 provides an opportune breakpoint – at least in terms of data availability, being a Population Census year – before the current

² See also the other academic studies cited herein and outreach publications such as J. Phelan, 'Rural Ireland: Regeneration or Degeneration?', *Agriculture 2007, Irish Farmers' Journal [IFJ]* Supplement, Dec. 2006, 36-9.

³ Plus interviews broadcast on 6 July 2007: podcast available at www.rte.ie/radio1/farmweek/.

economic downturn. Major post-1960s developments include the rapid reversal of long-standing depopulation and the growth of employment in the service sector. The paper concludes with a brief account of West Cork's troubled economic position at the time of writing (March 2009). What follows focuses on the modest task of identifying and benchmarking continuity and change, rather than analyzing the causal factors determining the fortunes of the local economy – an exercise which falls beyond the scope of the current paper but which forms the next stage of this research project.

WEST CORK, c. 1960

Opinions differ over the exact definition of the West Cork region. Herein, following Commins (1999), the area is demarcated as the six Census of Population rural districts (RDs) of Bantry, Castletown, Clonakilty, Dunmanway, Schull⁴ and Skibbereen, along with the two urban districts (UDs, effectively towns) of Clonakilty and Skibbereen. Figure 1 maps the study region, which is situated on the southwest Irish coast and comprises 219,497 hectares. Together, these eight RDs and UD contain 95 census electoral divisions (EDs), the smallest spatial unit for which (many) statistics are published, although in recent years due to confidentiality restrictions most data for the very small Whiddy ED are combined with the neighbouring Bantry rural ED. The boundaries of these EDs have remained unchanged over the time period covered by this paper.⁵

[Figure 1 about here]

In response to a request from concerned local organizations, during 1960-2 researchers from the then recently-formed An Foras Talúntais⁶ (now Teagasc) undertook 'a comprehensive survey of the agricultural resources' of the region as defined above, apart from Clonakilty RD and UD. A confidential summary report from this major undertaking, the first of its kind in Ireland, was sent to the Department of the Taoiseach (head of government) in August 1962 (changes in cropping patterns and livestock production seemingly excited most interest there), and after an unexpected delay, the full survey was published nine months later as the *West Cork Resource Survey*

⁴ Traditionally, Skull.

⁵ Personal communication from Frank Daly, Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. Unless otherwise stated, all statistics herein are taken or calculated from the pertinent Population Census.

⁶ The Agricultural Institute, the national research organization for the industry.

(Murphy 1963).⁷ Unfortunately none of the original research material pertinent to this paper has obviously survived, other than the detailed soil survey field maps.⁸ None the less, the published data can be supplemented with other contemporary sources, notably the 1960 Agricultural and 1961 Population Censuses; the unpublished Small Area Population Statistics (SAPS) from the latter;⁹ a 1964 survey of Skibbereen town and immediate hinterland (Jackson 1967); and the handwritten minutes of the meetings of Clonakilty UD Council during 1960-1.¹⁰

These sources depict a peripheral region in general long-term economic decline. Researchers summarized the study region in Murphy (1963) as ‘a low income area for the major portion of the farm families and for a considerable portion of the non-farm families’, noting ‘serious problems’ in the community (p. D23). The chronic reduction in population is the most salient single indicator of long-term decline: by 1961, depopulation had been ongoing for over a hundred years (Skibbereen is notorious for its suffering during the Great Famine of the 1840s). Table 1 reports data on population, and other economic indicators, for West Cork as a whole and its eight constituent RDs and UDs in c. 1960. West Cork’s rate of population decline – totalling 6.3 per cent since 1956 – was very heavy by national standards and the experience in the remainder of the county (excluding Cork City), and was accelerating because there was no longer a natural increase of births over deaths to partially offset the very sizable net out-migration from the area (Commins 1963). Furthermore, the population lacked strong representation of the age groups typically associated with economic vigour. The ‘demographic vitality’ ratio of Commins et al.

⁷ National Archives of Ireland, Dublin, TAOIS/S 16536 B/1/95, B/62, copy of Murphy (1963) and associated correspondence, Aug. and Sept. 1962. The national farming press summarized the survey without adding comment (*IFJ*, 15 June 1963, 16). Teagasc’s official history contains only bald references to the project (Miley 2008, 54, 118).

⁸ The author is indebted to Máire Caffrey, Head Librarian, Teagasc, and colleagues for searching that organization’s archives. Other sources tried were two of the four authors on the socio-economic section of the survey (Patrick Commins, now sadly deceased, and Rosemary Fennell) and the uncatalogued Fennell archive at the Museum of English Rural Life, Reading (D DX 1001). The author thanks Rosemary Fennell for answering inquiries and Jonathan Brown for bringing the Fennell collection to his attention. The soil survey field sheets were browsed through at Teagasc’s Johnstown Castle Research Centre, Wexford; Eddie McDonald and Patrick Sills provided generous assistance.

⁹ Held at Central Statistics Office (CSO) Census Office, Swords, County Dublin. Barbara O’Keeffe and Colm Solan, CSO, kindly answered queries. McCarthy (1960/1) discusses the 1961 Population Census.

¹⁰ Cork City and County Archives, Cork City, Clonakilty UDC 1/8-9. For local reaction to Jackson (1967), see *Southern Star*, 16 Jan. 1965, 2, 11; 4 Nov. 1967, 4; 23 Dec. 1967, 6.

(2005) measures the number of 20-39 year olds expressed as a ratio of persons aged 65 and over: West Cork's ratio of 1.34 was well below those in Cork City (2.62) and the rest of Cork outside the city (1.88), and marginally lower than in neighbouring County Kerry (1.46).

[Table 1 about here]

The fundamental importance of farming to the West Cork economy is reflected in the statistic that almost two-thirds of those aged 14 or over who were at work were principally occupied full- or part-time in agriculture, forestry or fishing (column three in Table 1); other sources indicate that agriculture was the dominant employment source of the three (CSO (undated), tab. 27; State Forestry Division (1963), B80; State Fisheries Division (1963), B82). Almost all farms were mixed enterprises but the key sector was livestock, especially dairying. Even excluding tracts of rough grazing hill and mountain land, 70 per cent of farmland was under pasture, and much of the crops grown were consumed by on-farm livestock or in the farmhouse. Dairying accounted for almost two-fifths of the total value of agricultural output west of Clonakilty RD, with cattle and pigs each comprising just over a further fifth and crops a mere 7.6 per cent (Attwood and Fennell 1963, tab. 13). The region's value of agricultural output per acre (column four) may have only been slightly below the national average (inferred from Murphy 1963, D17), but 40 per cent of 'holdings' west of Clonakilty were just 1 to 30 acres in size (0.4 to 12.1 hectares) and 'a very high proportion', including some of the larger farms, were very low output operations which were not financially viable (Attwood 1963; Attwood and Fennell 1963). Grassland production was characterized by poor pastures, poor sward management, insufficiently widespread use of fertilisers and inadequate hay feed; hence stocking rates were well below what was technically feasible (Conway and Nolan 1963). Moreover, mechanization was extremely limited; for instance, about fourth-fifths of dairy farmers milked by hand (Curran et al. 1963, B63-5). West Cork's fishing industry, meanwhile, employed over 500 men in 1960, mostly part-time. The government was trying to revive this sector which was still suffering from the loss of the US pickled mackerel trade in the 1930s, for example by investing in Castletownbere harbour and subsidizing new boats and training schemes, but take-up was 'disappointing'. Fish-handling, ice-making and boat-building premises were adversely affected by poor demand (State Fisheries Division 1963).

The accuracy of rateable property valuation figures (column five in Table 1) was seriously questioned at the time because the valuations had not been systematically updated since the mid-

nineteenth-century (Walker 1962, 13-15; 1964). For what the comparison is worth, the West Cork mean of £4.3 per capita was below the £5.4 in the remainder of the county (excluding Cork City), but above County Kerry's £3.3. This ranking persists when the property valuations are expressed in per acre terms, although the gap between the study region and the rest of Cork (£0.8 per acre) widens substantially. More securely, average turnover per shop in West Cork was noticeably below the Munster average of £5,220. West Cork's reported unemployment rate was reasonably low, at 3.6 per cent, but this figure needs to be treated with much caution because there must have been some hidden unemployment in agriculture. The final two columns of Table 1 show that many private dwellings lacked electricity (partly because power lines had not reached the locality and partly because householders were unwilling or unable to purchase it) or a modern form of water supply. Up to a third of households outside the towns had to draw water from a well or other source over 100 yards distant (Commins 1963, C97-9). These aspects of local infrastructure were inferior to those in rest of the county and in Kerry, particularly in regard to electricity (for instance, only a quarter of Kerry's private dwellings lacked electricity).

Cuddy (2005) highlighted three factors that, in general, inhibit economic growth in rural areas. Each applied to a greater or lesser extent to the region at this time. The first, and most important for 1960s West Cork, was the relatively low degree of integration into the (global) market economy. Not only was the region geographically distant from major markets (Cork City being the closest), but more fundamentally its farm structure was numerically dominated by smallholdings where a 'considerable amount' of produce was consumed on-farm, not sold for cash; hence Attwood (1963) wrote of 'a peasant agriculture with production on a subsistence basis' (quotations at pp. C1, C18). Most of West Cork's land endowment, though, was unfavourable for intensive farming. Only about a third of the area west of Clonakilty RD contained high or medium quality soils (Conry and Ryan 1963). Much of the north and west was hilly or mountainous rocky terrain, including three very rugged, exposed peninsulas, which essentially was suitable only for extensive grazing and to some degree forestry.

Cuddy's second causal factor was that specialization in agriculture was problematic because the well-known low price and income elasticities of demand for commodities contribute to making real farm-gate output prices unstable and decline on trend over time, thereby putting pressure on family farm incomes. Understandably, considering the small saleable surplus produced on most local holdings, Murphy (1963) made almost no mention of output prices, but the national-level data in O'Carroll (1962, sect. 9) clearly indicate price volatility and also provide some suggestion

of a cost-price squeeze which might have been experienced by some of the larger commercial farmers in the area. A very serious problem, as Attwood (1963) identified, was that West Cork lacked the non-agricultural employment opportunities necessary to absorb labour being pushed out of farming. This was in some measure due to Cuddy's third, spatial factor. Low population density – overall 23 persons per 100 hectares – severely inhibited the development of entrepreneurial activity not linked to agriculture because local demand, labour supply and communication and transport infrastructure were very limited relative to urban centres. West Cork's roads were poor, and despite vehement local opposition, its entire rail network was closed in April 1961 (Johnson 2005).

Such problems were exacerbated by a very low level of human capital, a fundamental driver of economic growth. Just 13 per cent of residents surveyed by Murphy (1963, C100-3) had received full-time education beyond primary school, that figure falling to just 4 per cent among the farming community. Not many more locals had availed of part-time adult classes, except those living in the towns. Jackson (1967, 18-24) found far higher rates of post-primary education around Skibbereen town, but still almost no residents there had been educated to third (University) level. Furthermore, the local agricultural advisory service was not delivering satisfactory knowledge transfer due to low demand from farmers, especially on the ubiquitous small farms, and supply-side difficulties catering for the many holdings spread over long distances (Commins 1963, C104-7). Finally, Boland's (1958) polemic argued that West Cork had been neglected by the national government and state-controlled agencies who had allocated grants to industry, and public capital spending, to other depressed regions (a 'disgraceful scandal'), alleging that this was due to West Cork's lack of political influence and distance from Dublin administrators. All these and other factors, then, combined to produce pressure for out-migration as locals sought work elsewhere, thereby producing a cumulative process of economic decline. Morale was very low. And this was occurring against a national backdrop also characterized by chronic poverty and emigration, albeit with some signs of an economic upturn (Ó Gráda 2008b).

Table 1 shows, though, that the scale of decline was not homogenous across West Cork. There was a reasonably clear division between the RDs of Bantry, Castletown and Schull in the west and the generally more prosperous eastern RDs of Clonakilty, Dunmanway and Skibbereen. The three western RDs were particularly disadvantaged in terms of, *inter alia*, soil quality and distance from markets; correspondingly land productivity there was substantially lower, and population decline typically proportionally greater, than in the east. Average family farm income

was as much as 44 per cent higher in Dunmanway and Skibbereen RDs compared to Bantry, Castletown and Schull (weighted average calculated from Attwood and Fennell 1963, tab. 15), reflecting the more intensive dairy and cattle production in the former districts and the more low-intensity sheep production in the latter. The far-west peninsula RD of Castletown clearly had the most acute problems; Clonakilty was at the other extreme. On the estates of the Shelswell-White family of Bantry House, which provided a small amount of employment, accumulated rent arrears in June 1961 which were ‘probably irrecoverable’ totalled 37.7 per cent of the annual rental on the Castletownbere estate compared to just 4.6 per cent on the nearby Bantry estate and no arrears at all on the adjoining Glengarriff estate.¹¹ Despite concerns about the rateable property valuation statistics in Table 1, they do not appear to be a bad indicator of relative prosperity, since as expected the values fall from east to west.

Taking the Table 1 indicators at face value, the region’s two UD’s do not seem to have been more affluent than the hinterlands they served as service centres. The UD rateable property valuations are among the lowest, and their reported unemployment rates the highest, in the table – although allowance must be given for the non-updating of valuations and hidden agricultural unemployment. The rate of depopulation in Clonakilty UD was low by West Cork standards, but that in Skibbereen was much larger and indeed was the greatest of all UD’s in Cork. According to Jackson (1967), Skibbereen was a market town lacking industry and with almost no large employers; traditionally it was dependent on farm trade but the town was being adversely affected by the loss of some of this business to the co-operative mart and the creamery outlets which largely bypassed the town. A knitwear factory had recently closed (Boland 1958, 6-7). Clonakilty UD Council, meanwhile, were concerned with the lack of industry in their town (as well as with perennials such as the state of the roads and the availability of public transport). In West Cork’s towns and villages generally there was a surplus of small retail shops and bars with low turnover and profit and very often with no paid employees. Even though many of these businesses were not the sole income source for their owners, or indeed run as profit-maximizing enterprises, inevitably most would eventually have to close (Stevens 1963; Jackson 1967, 24-7).

¹¹ Boole Library Archives, University College Cork, Cork City, BL/EP/B/1569(14), estate annual report, 1960/1; *ibid.*, 1759/1, PAYEasy wages book, entries for 1965. The Castletownbere figure was probably not due to lax collection, for the bailiff there under whose tenure almost all of the arrears accumulated was said to have given very satisfactory service.

Despite the obvious problems, Murphy (1963) suggested that West Cork had development potential, at least in the primary sector. There was considerable scope for raising farm productivity, for instance through the wider use of lime and fertilisers and better grassland management accompanied by higher stocking rates, including a possible five-fold increase of sheep on many upland areas. The survey also recommended, *inter alia*, the expansion of early potato production and the introduction of new/alternative crops, such as the revival of flax and hemp. However, Attwood and Fennell (1963, C42) warned that: 'It seems most unlikely that any feasible scheme of development would turn the great majority of the unviable holdings into strong economic units'; only the currently financially-marginal farms could be helped. For the others, a continuing process of concentration was predicted through amalgamation on the death or retirement of their present occupier. (Much of this could be said for agriculture in the rest of the country too.) Sea fisheries, meanwhile, had 'tremendous potential' if the required capital, labour and entrepreneurship were available. Tourism was seen as another growth industry, given West Cork's mild, sunny summer climate, pleasant beaches and scenic beauty which, assisted by the diffusion of the motor car, had already brought growing numbers of visitors to the area in recent years to engage in angling and other activities (including holidaying emigrants). Among the various initiatives were ongoing improvements to Clonakilty's townscape appearance and a new 'horseback holidays' scheme in Bantry.¹² Jackson (1967, 9) noted steep rises in land prices along the coast and in the Skibbereen area generally over the previous ten years which to large extent were due to tourist-sector-driven investment, for example in farm accommodation and beach chalets. The tourist trade was very seasonal, though, being confined to the three summer months. But as well as potential, Jackson identified some complacency about the scale of the changes required and a possible barrier to development arising from small farms and shops being a valued, traditional part of local life.

SELECTED CHANGES, c. 1960-c. 2006

A brief report by Commins (1999), a member of the original survey team, updated 'selected aspects' of Murphy (1963) for the period up until the mid-1990s. Commins focused on two elements of post-1960s change: population size (and composition) and total numbers at work; and the farm economy. This section updates his study for the years up to the 2006 Population Census, and extends it by considering a third aspect, namely developments in the important tourism sector. Many of the trends Commins identified appear to have largely continued.

¹² Boole Library Archives, BL/EP/B/2038, newspaper cutting, June 1961.

The first row of Table 2 states the annual percentage changes in West Cork's population over each intercensal sub-period since 1961. Population decline more-or-less continued for the next three decades, with the notable exception of a period of growth during 1971-9. Hence Boland's (1958, 3-4) 'black outlook' was correct: 'Will things [depopulation] improve? Certainly not.' West Cork's aggregate population reached a nadir of 47,608 in 1991. Subsequently, and strikingly, depopulation was quickly reversed. Total population had exceeded its 1961 level by 2002, and the annual growth rate continued to accelerate. Observers such as Hopkin (2008) have highlighted the role of inward migration in driving post-1991 population growth. Indeed, West Cork's fertility rate has fallen from an estimated 110 births per thousand females aged 15-44 years in 1961 to 78.5 in 1991 and 70.5 in 2006.¹³ This sustained population growth was unprecedented by the region's historical standards. The final three rows of Table 2, however, show that West Cork's growth rates (and 2006 population total relative to its size in 1961) were not as impressive as those in County Cork and Ireland as a whole, or – to some extent – those in Kerry. Moreover, local concerns remain about the continued out-migration of the young and single, especially females and those possessing a third level education (West Cork Enterprise Board [WCEB] 2007, 21, 23). None the less, West Cork's population age profile has slightly improved over time; its demographic vitality ratio rose from 1.34 in 1961 to 1.45 in 1991 and 1.6 in 2006. Even the females-only vitality ratio increased between 1991 and 2006. However, as Table 2 shows, each of the three comparator areas have a markedly higher ratio, with at least two inhabitants aged 20-39 for every person aged 65 plus.

[Table 2 about here]

The post-1991 population turnaround occurred to a greater or lesser extent in every RD and UD. As the other rows of Table 2 indicate, the improvement has been least pronounced in Castletown RD, which even lost residents in the latest intercensal sub-period and whose 2006 population is still nearly a fifth below that 45 years previously. The populations of Dunmanway, Schull and Skibbereen RDs have almost recovered to their 1961 levels, while in Bantry and Clonakilty RDs those levels have been significantly surpassed. Generally, though, the best experience over the 45 years covered by the table was in the two UD, particularly Clonakilty: they were usually able to

¹³ Calculation method cf. Commins (1999, 6), other than using all females instead of just married ones as the population at risk due to the very substantial increase in the proportion of births outside marriage nationally (see Ó Gráda 2008a, fig. 3).

maintain their population before 1991 and experienced many of the highest annual growth rates after that date.

The fall and rise in the aggregate population is reflected in the total numbers at work (full- and part-time) reported in Figure 2. A notable difference is that the revival in employment begins over 1986-91, one intercensal sub-period earlier than for population growth. This is in line with the experience nationally and is indicative of the timing of the commencement of economic revival, since employment tends to react faster to economic change than population. Another difference is that total numbers at work did not exceed their 1961 level until 2006, a little later than aggregate population. Figure 2 also shows the significant – but very familiar – long-run structural change which has occurred in West Cork’s economy. The three sectoral categories are deliberately broad chiefly because it was felt that further disaggregation would be of limited value given levels of pluriactivity in the area. The absolute and relative number of workers principally employed in agriculture, forestry and fishing have declined very substantially over time; in 2006, these sectors accounted for just 14.6 per cent of total employment – although this was much higher than in the rest of the county, even excluding Cork City, and in Kerry (6.0 and 8.3 per cent respectively).

[Figure 2 about here]

Employment in ‘other production’ (principally manufacturing and construction) increased in importance until 1981; one key cause was the building and operation of an oil terminal on Whiddy Island, Bantry Bay, which opened in 1970. Another, much smaller scale, driver was the establishment of a food processing factory in Skibbereen in 1964. In the 1980s the significance of this employment category stagnated, partly because the oil terminal ceased operating after an explosion in 1979 that killed 51 people, and instead became a pure storage facility – otherwise West Cork has been devoid of large-scale heavy industry. Employment in ‘other production’ picked up again from the 1990s. One growth area was in niche manufacturing and small- and micro-scale food processing: the latter comprises approximately half of all manufacturing firms in the region (WCEB 2007, 22; O’Reilly and Cashman 2008, 7). The Carbery Group’s cheese plant at Ballineen is, though, a notable employer. Another growth area was in construction. Well before the crash in this sector nationally in 2008-9, researchers were warning of potential overdependence on the booming construction industry, questioning whether it provided a sustainable basis for rural development (for instance, Commins 2005). In 2006, 14.2 per cent of West Cork workers were principally employed in construction, up from 8.9 per cent in 1996 (and

an identical percentage in 1986). By this measure, the region was marginally more exposed to construction on the eve of the sector's downturn than was the case nationally (11.1 per cent of employment in construction in 2006), in the rest of Cork (12.3 per cent, again omitting Cork City) and in Kerry (13.5 per cent).

But clearly the biggest increase in jobs was in the catch-all residual category 'services', which as Figure 2 depicts employed practically three-fifths of those at work in 2006, up from a quarter in 1961. Information and communication technology (ICT) services has been one notable source of growth, aided by, *inter alia*, the opening at the start of the new millennium of West Cork Technology Park, located just outside Clonakilty. Development agencies aimed to attract firms and employees through promoting the perceived high quality of life available locally; before the 2008-9 downturn, employment in the park exceeded 800 (West Cork LEADER Co-operative [WCLC] 2007, 2). Tourism was another growth area – this is one of two industries which will now be discussed in more detail.

Tracking post-1960 change in the farm sector is hindered by data problems which unfortunately limit the comparisons which can be attempted. In addition to alterations to statistical definitions and categorizations, the data from the last comprehensive Census of Agriculture – held in June 2000 – are now outdated, and due to confidentiality restrictions, are not fully available for every RD.¹⁴ None the less, the familiar structural shift towards fewer, larger farms is evident. Although the statistics are not directly comparable, in the five RDs west of Clonakilty the number of farms appears to have approximately halved between 1960 and 2000, from 7,314 'holdings' of at least one acre (Attwood 1963, tab. IV) to 3,637 'farms' of at least one hectare (2.47 acres) or engaged in intensive production. Reflecting increased farm size, the percentage of the total larger than c. 20 hectares almost doubled from 31 to 58 per cent over this period. Including Clonakilty RD, there were 4,540 farms in all of West Cork in 2000, 1,111 (19.7 per cent) fewer than counted in the 1991 Census, with their mean size having risen from 25.3 to 32.2 hectares, lower than in the rest of the county (39.9) and Kerry (32.7). Still, in 2000 only 621 holdings were 50 or more hectares in size. Interestingly, the number of farms of under 10 hectares increased from 462 to 834 in the 1990s, probably reflecting an influx of incomers establishing smallholdings producing what Sage (2003) calls 'alternative good food' – that is, high-quality artisan or organic foods

¹⁴ Since 1980 an Agricultural Census has been conducted roughly every ten years. Fiona O'Callaghan of the CSO kindly provided the 2000 data at RD level and helped with other inquiries.

which are embedded in the locality, for instance because of the use of local raw materials, and are branded as such and command a price premium (Skeaghanore Duck, for example). This steady stream of new businesses farming and processing ‘good food’ is an important recent change.

Census data also show a leap forward in production levels and technology over the long-run. In 2000, cattle numbers were 71.1 per cent higher than forty years previously, while sheep numbers had grown by 173.6 per cent. Mechanization has helped to transform West Cork agriculture: far more, and better quality, milking machines and a near five-fold increase in tractors between 1960 and 2000. Such mechanization has been a crucial factor depressing labour demand in agriculture (recall Figure 2 above). There has, though, been a substantial withdrawal from tillage; by 1991, the total area under corn, root and green crops was only three-quarters of its 1960 level. About three-quarters of West Cork farms were classified in the 2000 Census as specialist beef or dairying enterprises, with the latter appearing to be a little less important than in 1991; around one in ten farms were mixed grazing livestock operations with a few specialist sheep producers and almost no specialist tillage farms. Commins (1999) concluded that, in line with the poor resource base, by the mid-1990s farming in the most westerly RDs of Bantry and Castletown in particular had generally receded to low-intensity sheep and cattle production and dependency on direct transfers paid under Europe’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The same picture must more-or-less hold ten years on, especially given national evidence on the low profitability of drystock systems nowadays (Breen et al. 2008). Noting the increases in suckler cow and younger cattle numbers over the long-term, Commins also highlighted significant falls in the importance of dairy cows in the 1980s, except in Clonakilty and Dunmanway RDs; and in line with the national experience it was the 1980s when sheep numbers very substantially increased. Sheep accounted for more than half of the livestock units in Castletown RD in 1991 and over one third in Bantry, although subsequently aggregate West Cork sheep numbers have declined, again following the national trend. Reflecting the richer soils in Clonakilty RD, however, agriculture there was of far higher intensity than in the aforementioned two western RDs. What tillage production remained in 2000 was very largely located in Clonakilty, and in 1991 half of the livestock units there were dairy cows. In 2000, sheep farming remained concentrated in Bantry and Castletown RDs; dairying was concentrated in the three eastern RDs; with beef production being more evenly distributed geographically. Hence total cattle per hectare in 2000 fell from east to west, from 2.51 in Clonakilty RD and 2.01 in Skibbereen RD to 0.92 in Bantry RD and 0.74 in Castletown RD. Conversely, sheep per hectare increased from east to west, from only 0.24 in Clonakilty to 2.26

and 3.01 in Bantry and Castletown respectively.¹⁵ The latter two RDs have maintained their share of aggregate sheep numbers over the long-run (just over three-fifths in 1960 and 2000), whereas the three eastern RDs increased their share of total head of cattle (77.3 per cent in 2000) – indeed, there were slightly fewer cattle in Castletown RD in 2000 than 40 years previously.

Another indicator of the persistent east/west intensive/extensive divide is the differential take-up of the Rural Environment Protection Scheme (REPS), a government policy established in 1994 under what is now the ‘second pillar’ of the CAP. Participation in the REPS is both a cause and a consequence of low-intensity agriculture: farmers choosing to join the scheme are paid to follow environmentally-friendly farming practices, yet participants are very likely to be those farmers whose production systems were close to or already meeting REPS standards (O’Connell and Harte 2006). In 1997, the proportion of the total agricultural area farmed under the scheme was far higher in the three RDs in the west than those in the east (Commins 1999, tab. 11). Unfortunately data on the current situation are not available.¹⁶ The general impression, though, is that while the regional gap might be closing partly because the latest version of the REPS is perceived to be more attractive to dairy farmers, the regional pattern of the late 1990s probably largely continues.¹⁷

Tourism, meanwhile, is an integral part of today’s West Cork economy. Tourists continue to be attracted by the area’s natural endowments alluded to above, together with its local character, celebrated by Somerville-Large (1991) and Enright (2004). The promotional literature highlights the picturesque coastline, unspoilt environment, colourful villages and the various – largely outdoor – activities now available; Clonakilty town, in particular, continues to win tourism awards. Visitor numbers to West Cork are thought to have ‘grown constantly during the last two decades’, but again analysis is hindered by the lack of geographically disaggregated data (O’Reilly and Cashman 2008, 7). While statistics from Bord Fáilte (the Irish Tourist Board) on visitors to counties Cork and Kerry combined could be used as a crude proxy of the growth of West Cork tourism, perhaps a less unsatisfactory indicator – especially over the long-run – is provided by data on visitor numbers to Bantry House and gardens, located adjacent to Bantry town. Bantry House was about the only tourist attraction in the 1960s charging an entrance fee. Visitors averaged 1,966 per annum over 1960-1, rising to 8,398 in 1970-1 and 14,953 during

¹⁵ In the rest of Cork the figures were 2.01 cattle and 0.54 sheep per hectare; 1.32 and 1.72 in Kerry.

¹⁶ Personal communication from Nick Gregg, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

¹⁷ See *IFJ*, 10 May 2008, 27-8; 31 May 2008, 27.

1976-7. Nowadays, the figure is around 30,000.¹⁸ These statistics, then, confirm O'Reilly and Cashman's impression of the continuous growth of West Cork tourism.

Alongside rising visitor numbers in the last decade or so has been the burgeoning construction of holiday homes. Such was the scale of building that, before the abrupt halt from 2008, fears were expressed that West Cork's very character was at risk from unsightly development (for instance, Sheehan 2007, 13, 204-7).¹⁹ The construction boom also included the building of a handful of luxury hotels in the coastal villages and towns. For Crowley (2006), the tourist sector has directly created jobs in peripheral areas where very little other employment exists – but she expresses concerns regarding the low-skill, low-pay and seasonal nature of at least some of these jobs. For example, nearly half of the 88 staff at a hotel and leisure centre in Clonakilty are seasonal.²⁰

Finally, it is possible to obtain some (albeit imperfect) overall sense of West Cork's relative position of prosperity nationally. In 1996, according to the typology of Commins et al. (2005), most of the region's coastal EDs – and indeed almost all of Bantry and Castletown RDs – were 'high amenity and diversifying consumption spaces' (although the tip of the Beara peninsula was a 'very marginal' area), with much of the inland remainder being 'strong agricultural areas adjusting to output restriction'. A more recent dataset that can be utilized for benchmarking is the material deprivation index of Kelly and Teljeur (2007), calculated from 2006 Population Census data on the prevalence of unemployment, low social classes, rented accommodation and car ownership for every ED in Ireland. No ED in West Cork was ranked in the lowest decile of Irish EDs that were the most materially deprived, and only 10 were placed in the 8th and 9th deciles nationally – although 26.3 per cent of the study region's population lived in these 10 EDs, which interestingly included both UDs. Conversely, a fair number of EDs, 32, were ranked in the top two deciles as being among the least materially deprived EDs in the country; 27.5 per cent of the

¹⁸ Boole Library Archives, BL/EP/B/1802, notes of visitor totals; Hopkin (2008), 97, 116. The length of the summer opening season has not increased very greatly over time. In 1970, visitor numbers suddenly more than doubled, almost certainly due to the broadcasting in the UK the previous year of a television serial filmed in the house and locality.

¹⁹ The *de facto* population growth figures given earlier are not greatly distorted by the inclusion of tourists and holiday home owners, since Population Censuses are taken on a Sunday night in April. According to the 2006 Census, the total population usually resident in West Cork was just 1,093 fewer than the total stated in tab. 2 above: a 2 per cent difference.

²⁰ *Irish Examiner*, 16 July 2008, 7.

aggregate population lived in these EDs, exactly half of which were located in Clonakilty RD and most of the remainder in Dunmanway and Skibbereen RDs. As also might be expected, all EDs in Castletown RD were ranked in the bottom half of EDs nationally. The results using 2002 Census data were very similar.

ECONOMIC DOWNTURN, 2008-9

West Cork's economic situation has deteriorated rapidly in 2008-9 on the back of the sharp national and global recession triggered by the 'credit crunch'. The region's economy appears to be vulnerable, not just on account of the construction industry's comparatively large weight in employment, but also because the products of the good food and tourism industries are typically characterised by a high income elasticity of demand – hence these prominent sectors in West Cork are likely to be particularly affected by contracting consumer income. Furthermore, if national data is any guide, two of the three major local farming systems – beef and sheep – currently remain under economic pressure, while profitability in dairying has significantly deteriorated after an exceptional 2007 upon the reversal of the milk price boom (Breen et al. 2008; *IFJ*, *passim*). Figure 3 shows that, after drifting upwards for some months, from September 2008 there has been a steep acceleration in numbers signing on the 'Live Register' at the social welfare offices in the study region.²¹ Ireland's Live Register is not designed to measure unemployment because it includes part-time, seasonal and casual workers entitled to welfare benefits, but nevertheless it is widely used as a leading indicator. Yet because of its design, and also because local offices of registration do not serve specific geographical boundaries, it would be too cavalier to compare the totals in Figure 3 with the population at risk. However, for what the comparisons are worth, the percentage increases between September 2008 and February 2009 indicate that the experience in the Clonakilty office was less adverse than in Bantry and Skibbereen (55.6 versus 74.7 and 73.3 per cent rises respectively), while the percentage increase across the West Cork offices was a little higher than in the rest of Cork (excluding the city) and Kerry (67.4, 53.6 and 62.9 per cent rises respectively).

[Figure 3 about here]

The latest macroeconomic forecast, published in mid-March 2009, predicts further contractions in Irish Gross National Product in 2009 and 2010, and an unemployment rate of almost 16 per cent

²¹ Brendan Curtin, CSO, kindly answered data queries. Fig. 3 cannot be extended further back in time because the closure of Dunmanway local office means that a consistent time-series is not available.

by the end of 2010 – with the timing and extent of recovery ‘subject to considerable uncertainty’ (Mc Ardle and Clemenger 2009). One helpful stimulus locally will derive from the budget allocation to West Cork Development Partnership, the successor to WCLC, in November 2008 of €14.6m over four years. None the less, if in the past West Cork’s fortunes have been tied quite closely to those of the national economy, then a negative and uncertain short-term outlook for the macroeconomy must mean a negative and uncertain outlook for the short-term future of the region’s economy.

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Table 1. Economic Indicators, West Cork, c. 1960

Area	Population (and total percentage decline since 1956) ^a	Demographic vitality ratio	% persons aged 14+ at work in agriculture, forestry and fishing ^a	Agricultural output per acre (£) ^c	Rateable property valuation per capita (acre) (£) ^a	Average turnover per shop (£) ^e	% persons aged 14+ out of work ^a	% private dwellings without electricity ^a	% private dwellings with traditional water supply ^{a,g}
West Cork	50,575 (-6.3)	1.34	62.9	9.8^d	4.3 (0.4)	3,800^d	3.6	43.6	64.7
Bantry RD	7,814 ^b (-3.1)	1.31	54.8	6.8	4.0 (0.3)	5,100	3.8	46.5	60.0
Castletown RD	5,066 (-9.1)	1.15	71.7	5.7	3.0 (0.2)	2,300	2.9	52.0	79.0
Clonakilty RD	9,691 (-4.5)	1.61	71.2	n/a	5.1 (0.6)	TBA	3.4	33.3	67.2
Dunmanway RD	8,283 (-6.2)	1.45	64.6	11.2	4.5 (0.4)	5,900	4.3	38.0	65.7
Schull RD	4,123 (-9.1)	1.02	73.8	8.8	4.4 (0.3)	1,800	2.3	57.3	76.3
Skibbereen RD	11,153 (-7.7)	1.34	72.9	14.2	4.4 (0.4)	3,400 ^f	2.8	58.2	74.9
Clonakilty UD	2,417 (-4.0)	1.20	3.6	n/a	3.3 (7.2)	TBA	7.6	4.4	3.5
Skibbereen UD	2,028 (-7.9)	1.35	4.6	n/a	4.0 (8.1)	—	5.7	10.5	14.7

Notes: Data pertain to 1960 unless otherwise stated. Population figures are for the *de facto* population, that is including visitors present on census night and omitting usual residents temporarily absent.

a Data are for 1961.

b Including 2,234 in Bantry town.

c Probably gross output. Includes production consumed in the farmhouse.

d Across the RDs and UDs stated below.

e In 1956, rounded to the nearest £100.

f Including the corresponding UD.

g From a public well, fountain, pump or other source (not public mains or private piped).

Sources: Unpublished CSO SAPS; CSO *Census of Population 1961*; Attwood and Fennell (1963), tab. 14; Stevens (1963), tab. 4.

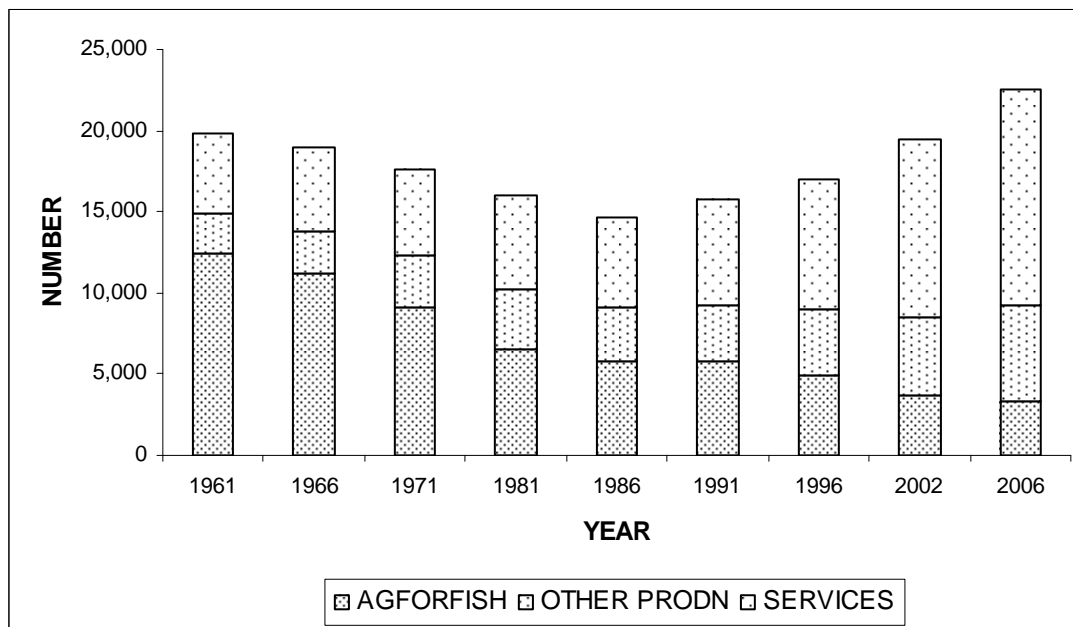
Table 2. Intercensal Rates of Population Change, West Cork and Elsewhere, 1961-2006 (% per annum) and 2006 Population Totals

Area	1961-6	1966-71	1971-9	1979-81	1981-6	1986-91	1991-6	1996-2002	2002-6	Total 2006	2006 total as % 1961	2006 demographic vitality ratio
West Cork	-0.68	-0.28	0.24	-0.08	-0.26	-0.32	0.30	0.85	1.36	53,565	105.9	1.60
Bantry RD	-0.14	0.41	0.52	-0.55	-0.17	-0.51	0.72	1.05	1.66	9,260 ^a	118.5	1.55
Castletown RD	-1.56	-0.94	-0.29	0.07	-0.33	-1.34	0.89	0.08	-0.27	4,146	81.8	1.26
Clonakilty RD	-0.52	-0.57	0.28	0.05	0.36	-0.18	-0.05	0.91	2.45	10,933	112.8	1.88
Dunmanway RD	-0.86	-0.61	0.05	-0.28	-0.35	0.05	-0.03	0.29	0.87	7,937	95.8	2.00
Schull RD	-1.03	0.09	-0.25	-0.66	-0.33	0.05	0.52	0.72	0.42	4,077	98.9	1.13
Skibbereen RD	-0.79	-0.41	0.26	0.59	-0.38	-0.25	0.02	0.56	0.63	11,129	99.8	1.29
Clonakilty UD	0.04	0.07	1.63	-0.87	-0.97	0.07	1.15	4.33	2.28	3,745	154.9	1.90
Skibbereen UD	0.00	0.75	0.10	0.21	-1.23	-1.07	0.36	0.64	4.23	2,338	115.3	2.21
Ireland	0.47	0.65	1.64	1.12	0.56	-0.08	0.57	1.34	2.06	4,239,848	150.4	2.96
Cork County & City	0.56	0.78	1.53	0.80	0.51	-0.11	0.49	1.08	1.87	481,295	145.7	2.83
County Kerry	-0.63	-0.002	0.84	1.00	0.23	-0.36	0.70	0.85	1.38	139,835	120.1	2.03

Note: a Including 3,309 in Bantry town.

Sources: Calculated from successive CSO *Census of Population* and Census SAPS Microdata File © Government of Ireland.

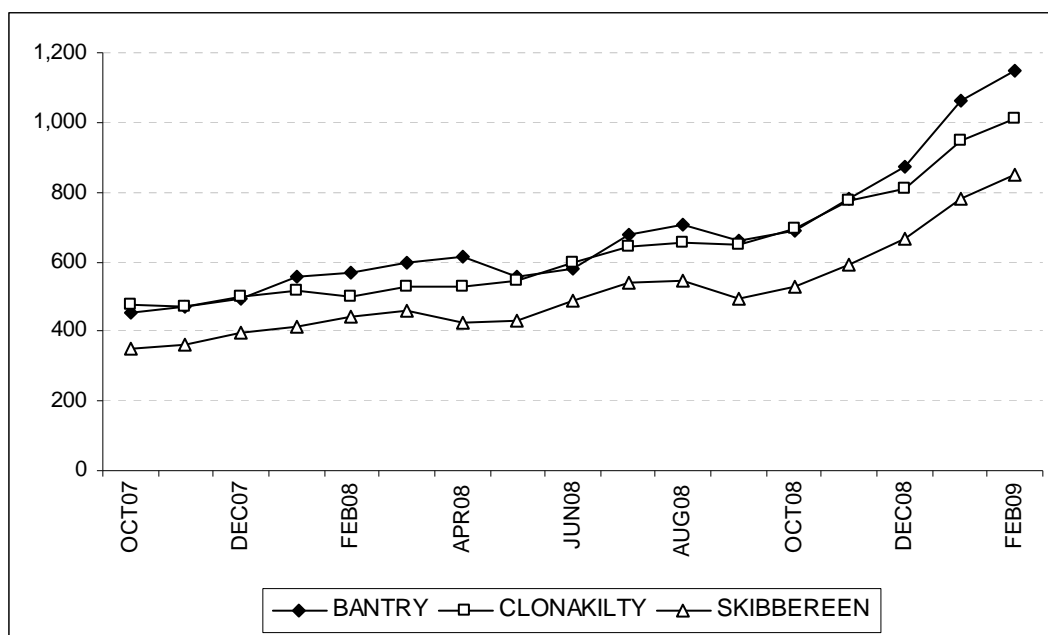
Figure 2. Total Numbers at Work by Sector, West Cork, 1961-2006



Notes: Sector labels denote, respectively, agriculture, forestry and fishing; ‘other production’ (mining, quarrying and turf production; manufacturing; building and construction; electricity, gas and water supply); and services (the residual). The 1979 Census did not request employment information, and in 1981 the data capture changed from persons aged 14 and over to 15 and over.

Sources: As for Table 2, plus unpublished CSO SAPS.

Figure 3. Monthly Numbers on the Live Register, West Cork Social Welfare Offices, October 2007 to February 2009



Note: The Bantry figures aggregate numbers at the branch and local office.

Sources: CSO Live Register Additional Tables, available at www.cso.ie.