Histories of Environment and Capitalism in Modern Ireland: Objects and Places




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Environmental Histories of Ireland: Objects + Places

The River Room, University of Galway + Seana Mhac Bog Trails, Connemara, 21-22 July 2026

Participants: Nora Ward, Caimin Walsh, Kerri Sonnenberg, Malcolm Sen, Kevin O'Sullivan, Aoife O'Leary McNeice, Erika Hanna, Patrick Doyle, Juliana Adelmann.

Over the course of two hot days in July 2026, we had a workshop where we shared and discussed our practice and research with one another. Galway was brimming with the Arts Festival, big tops and performers and temporary bars dappled the city. The river room is at the back of the Arts/Science Concourse building, and looks out on the River Corrib, which was lower than usual due to the dry, warm weather. The river room is all glass, cold in the winter and hot in the summer. Summer conferences about environmental history increasingly take place against the backdrop of the unfolding climate and biodiversity crises. Over the two days of the workshop wildfires raged in Europe, the United States, and Ireland. Lots of us were talking about research to do with water and wet places, but even the bog we visited on Wednesday afternoon was uncharacteristically dry.

The workshop was about Ireland, and the changes it has undergone in the last century or so, that are typically interpreted as the nation's journey towards economic growth, industrial development and modernity. These changes were heralded at the beginning of century with the development of electricity, embodied in the high profile hydro-electric scheme on the river Shannon. The Electricity Supply Board was founded in 1927 to administer this plant, and oversaw the ensuing development of further hydro schemes on the rivers Erne, Liffey and Lee, in addition to the ambitious rural electrification scheme that ran from 1940s to 1970s. Bord na Móna was established in 1946 to develop and harvest Irelands peat-bogs and work with the ESB to transform this turf into electricity at peat power stations. The Industrial Development Authority was founded in 1949, laying the foundations for Ireland's focus on foreign direct investment. Ireland joined the EEC in 1972. The EU continues to shape land use and environmental regulations on the island, not least through the Common Agricultural Policy. In November 1980, apple opened the company's first plant outside the US in Cork, and today has been joined in Ireland by other tech giants like google, Airbnb, salesforce and many more. Modern Ireland's landscape and economy has also been shaped by the pharmaceutical industry. Pharmaceuticals make up 45% of the republic's exports, and the country is the world's 3rd largest exporter of pharmaceuticals. While most of these examples apply in particular to the Republic of Ireland, environmental approaches also reveal the porosity and contingency of political borders. The Irish border is an especially wet, leaky and porous space.

Many artists and academics are currently engaging in the history and legacy of these developments, producing work which may be broadly conceived as relating to Ireland, environment, modernity and capitalism.[1] Over these two days in Galway we sought to approach these developments from a social, cultural and environmental perspective. How do the physical traces of this economic and social change manifest materially in the Irish landscape? As a way of answering this question, each participant presented on a particular object or place that is part of their research and practice. Focusing on these case studies provided insights into questions of scale, and relationships between historical actors, both human and more-than-human. We thought about these places and objects in the context of three themes: land use and extraction; human and more-than-human relationships; and emplaced research practices.

[1] For example Aidan Beatty and Conor McCabe (eds), 'Capitalism and Irish studies', special issue of Irish Studies Review, xxxii 2024;); Frank Barry, Industry and policy in independent Ireland, 1922-1972 (Oxford, 2023); Patrick Bresnihan and Patrick Brody, From the Bog to the Cloud: Dependency and Eco-Modernity in Ireland (Bristol University Press: 2025); Sinead Mercier, Michael Holly and Eddie Lenihan, Men Who Eat Ringforts (Askeaton Contemporary Arts: 2020); Sharae Deckard and Lucy Collins (eds), 'Food, Energy Climate: Irish Culture in World Ecology', special issue of Irish University Review, Spring/Summer 2019.

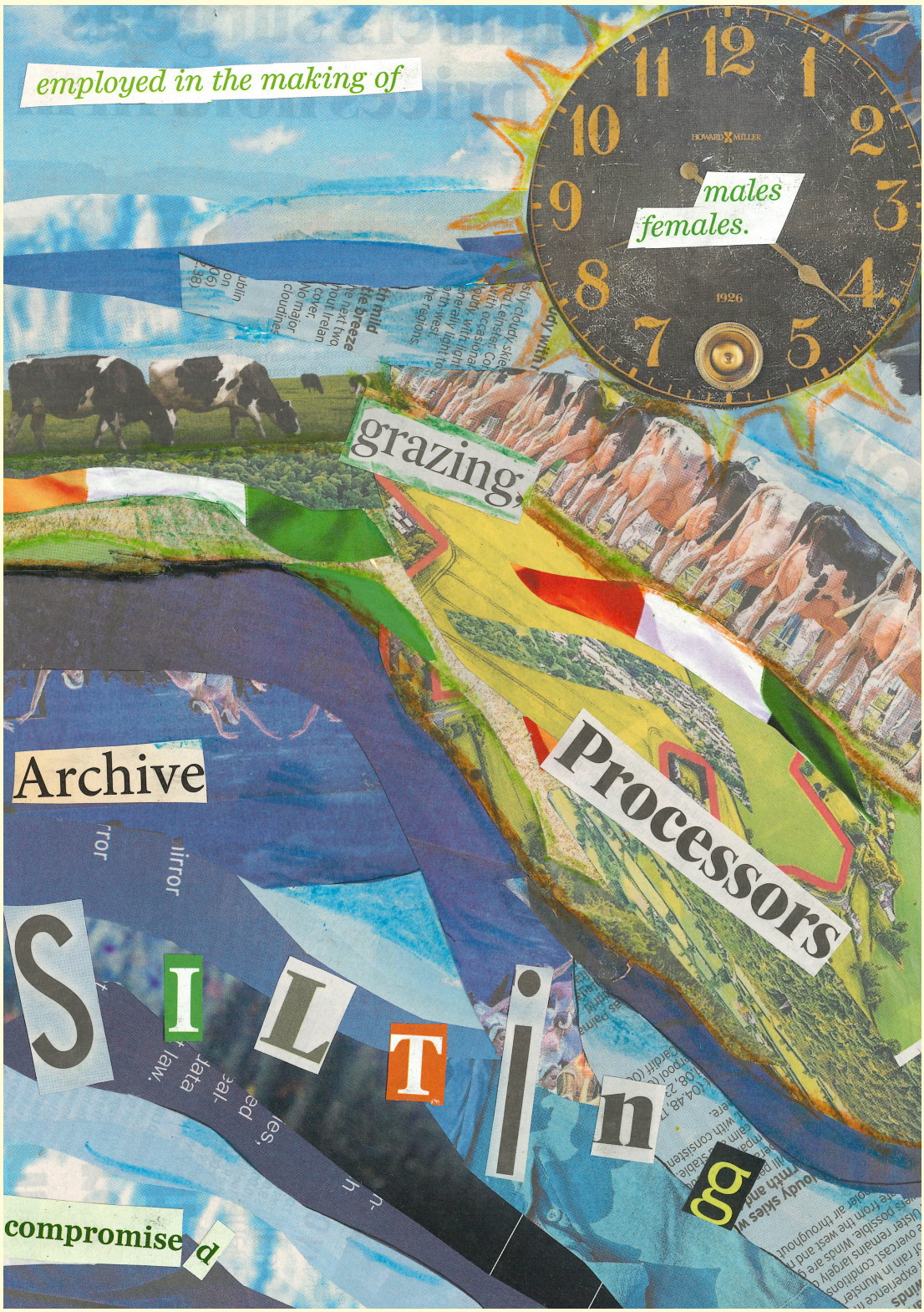
Although these objects and places ranged widely, from a gaff used by poachers to catch salmon on the River Lee to protest music from Carnsore Point, from milk powder to the River Barrow, from silage bails to the Dublin food co-op, particular threads emerged. We talked about narration and storytelling, how do you engage with stories that are not always linear, and range in scale from the molecular to the cosmic? How do you make tangible that which often goes unseen, for example the extinction of a memory, an enormous mound of rubbish lying hidden beneath a thin membrane, or the privatisation of crops and seeds? How are landscapes simplified, scoured and straightened, and what are the unexpected outcomes of this simplification? We thought about bodies in history, both human and more-than-human, and how these bodies are porous and entangled, brought together through eating, breathing, walking and touching. What connects the body of a curlew with that of a farmer, the body of a cow with that of a baby, the body of a salmon with that of a poacher. We engaged with histories of the senses, what the past smells like, tastes like, sounds like, feels like.

On the second afternoon of the workshop we put together the contents of this zine, using cuttings from newspapers along with material we had brought relating to our objects and places. We each made a page that related in some way to our object or place, and reflected the conversations we had been having. We shared different parts of the newspapers and magazines with one another that related to our objects and places. The methodology is different to traditional modes of academic production. It is speedy and informal. The materiality of the paper in our hands, fingers sticky from pritt stick melting in the high temperatures, and smudged with marker and crayon, also felt like an antidote to the abundance of AI methods we are daily encouraged to use in order to do things faster, more efficiently and with a sheen of ephemeral immateriality. This of course masks the carbon footprint and material impact of AI, which requires enormous amounts of water, electricity and land. Making this zine connected us to our objects and places in a tangible way. I hope that leafing through the following pages will also make you feel connected to these questions. There is a blank page at the end, I invite you to fill it with your thoughts on an object or place that is important or interesting you.

Aoife O’Leary McNeice, July 2026

Objects + Places

Juliana Adelmann - SMA Infant Formula
Patrick Doyle - Dublin Food Co-Op
Erika Hanna - Upper River Barrow
Aoife O’Leary McNeice - Salmon Gaff
Kevin O’Sullivan - Kinsale
Kerri Sonnenberg - Tramore Valley Park
Caimin Walsh - Anti-Nuclear 12’ Single
Nora Ward - The Round Baler


employed in the making of
males
females.
grazing,
Archive
Processors
SILTing
compromised



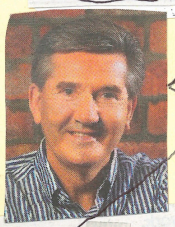


Here's to a tasty summer!



IRISH ENVIRONMENTAL
SCANDAL

It's been said
at
DUBLIN FOOD CO-OP





cows will never truly die.

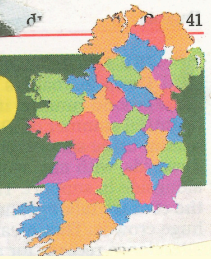
Life made deliciously easy



Earth
JUST A MEMORY

41

AMAZING IRELAND



Our country, as you've never thought about it before ...

RAINFALL, FLOODING, DRAINAGE, ECOLOGY ON THE RIVER BARROW.

a much lighter rainfall would create a flood

than would have been necessary twenty

years ago. Each year the bed of the river

is getting more choked up, and less rain causes

a flood.'[9]

ducks breeding in the area in vast numbers



ducks as beautiful things,

damming the river so cattle can drink.



He describes them as valiant too, in the way they defend the nest against would be attackers.

Still I pictured them making their way through the grasses, the shimmer of the estuary drawing them towards it all the while.

an uncertain wandering through

frequently loses itself in a swampy flat,

a plain where the river

undrained and undrainable region,

by the numerous weirs and

mill-dams from Athy onwards'.

to be converted into a shallow lake in winter—an

rendered hopelessly so

'each bird a boat rippling at will the sweet wide waterway.'

It is unnecessary for me to refer to the beneficial influence which such works as

these produce upon the climate of the country, or to allude to the removal of

fogs, hoar frosts, and their chilling effects upon the ripening of the corn and

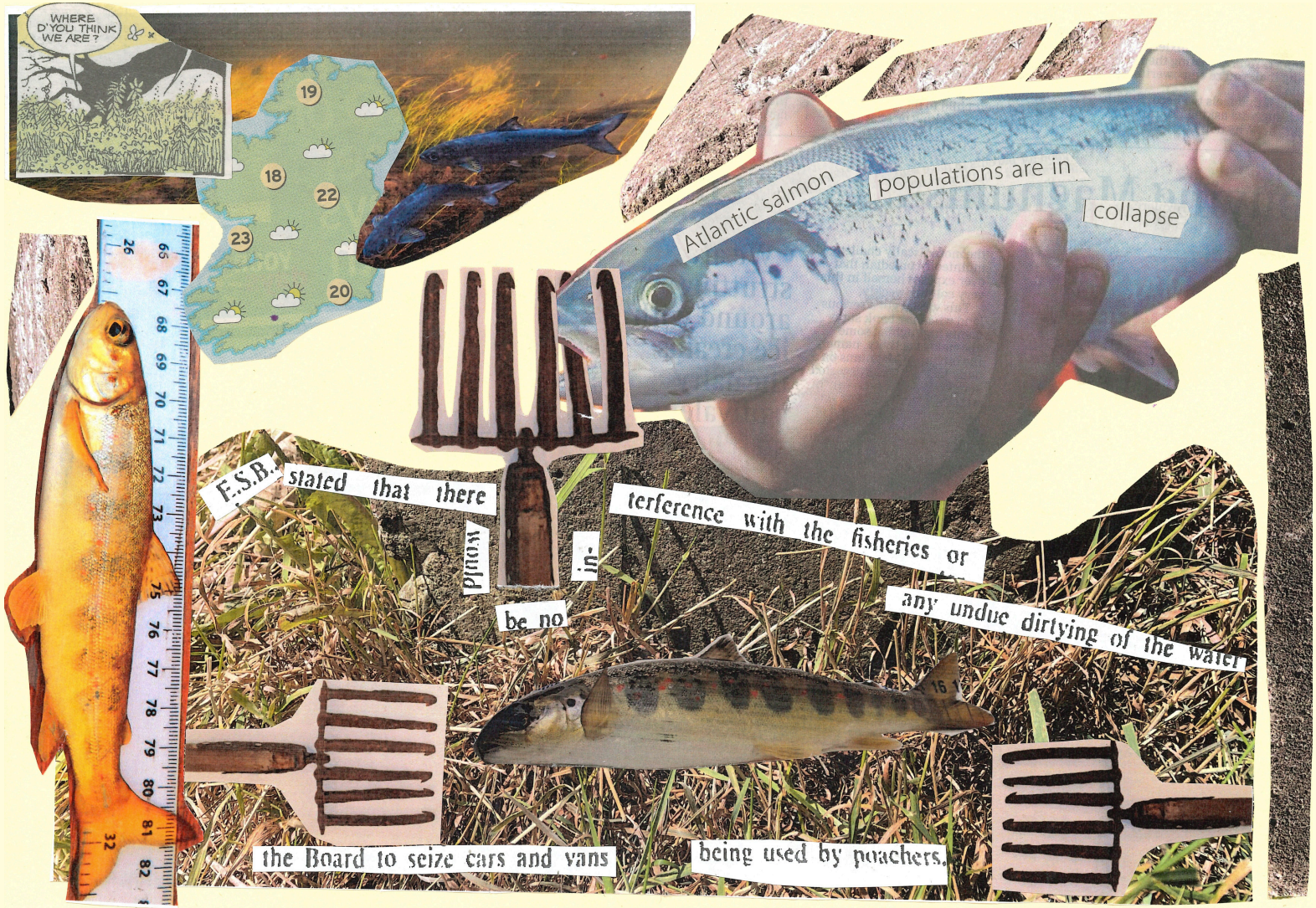
fruits; of these things you have most palpable evidence; or is it my business to

allude to the general advantages that will accrue; these are all matters for your

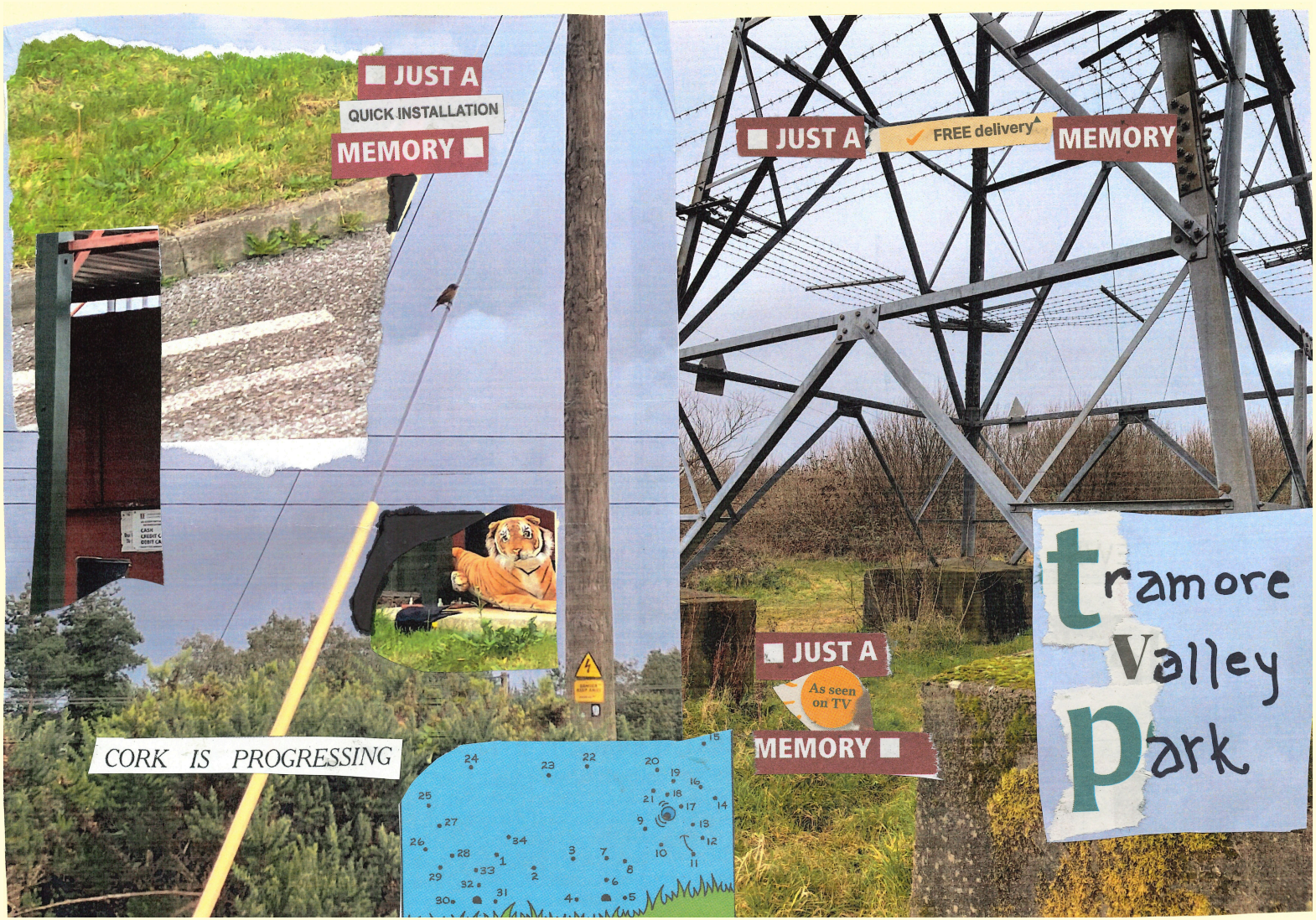
own consideration;

I held my gaze on the ducks and the ducklings a very long time, until at last they turned into a field and were lost from view.

'From troubles of the world, I turn to ducks.'


WHERE D'YOU THINK WE ARE ?
19
18
22
23
20
Atlantic salmon
populations are in
collapse
F.S.B.
stated that there
Prior
in-
terference with the fisheries or
be no
any undue dirtying of the water
the Board to seize cars and vans
being used by poachers.


running out of oil
crude oil costs spike
profit plummets
exploitative
Kinsale
Energy
tension impacts market
stress
Petrol price to surge
local
Social
always prepared
life
MONEY IS THE NAME OF THE GAME
creative
Staying power
a harsh lesson
fear
LOOPY
nature.


JUST A
QUICK INSTALLATION
MEMORY
JUST A
FREE delivery
MEMORY
JUST A
As seen on TV
MEMORY
CORK IS PROGRESSING
tramore
Valley
Park

BUILDING
A NATIONAL MOVEMENT

CUMHACHT ADMACH? UAFÁS

GET TO THE POINT!

The anti-nuclear struggle is international and intensifying – we're part of it and have a unique opportunity to stop nuclear power before it takes root in this country. Nuclear power can only be stopped by force of people power.

Irish ANTI-NUCLEAR



Only a democratic movement controlled by the people, involving young and old and active in opposing nuclear power in every part of the country will stop this project of destruction.

We have urgency

Carnsore, Kilrush, Easkey, Whiting Bay, Salterstown or South Armagh – we don't want the stuff anywhere.

'Contractors are without doubt the mechanical heartbeat of today's farming'

AN CHOMHAIRLE OILIUNA TALMHAIOCHTA

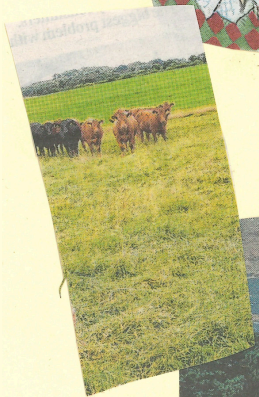
FARMERS !

Teagasc

CATCH THE CRIMINAL



Come to Your Senses



Farmland birds in decline

the Curlew and Lapwing, have been plummeting.



IT HAPPENED IN JULY





Big bales, big business

To encourage silage making, IFA President Joe Rea is seeking a full VAT refund on silage equipment up to a maximum of £10,000. Hay making should be banned in this country, he said.



silage

connects me to home

farmland birds,

banned


Seomra Cois Abhann
River Room
AS-203
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AS203 River Room