

Our towns are lost in Dickensian style smog

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'I can see clearly now,' sang Jimmy Cliff - but the bould Jimmy never spent his winters living in Wexford or Enniscorthy.

The towns of the county are frequently shrouded in murk during the chilly months from October to March - and we only have ourselves to blame.

The cause of this Victorian style smog is not a matter for complex rocket science.

Just look out over our housing estates at dusk and watch the chimneys start to pump out their smoke.

Though traffic and industry may play some small part, it is the humble domestic fire which is the principal culprit.

Ask anyone who has asthma in the family and they are likely to speak of fearful evenings which trigger attacks of breathlessness. They know when it is best not to stir out even to buy a loaf of bread in the corner store, let alone risk life and lung playing sport.

The green image we like to portray of our land is sullied by our fondness for smoky coal and open fires.

If we won't believe the testimony of those who suffer from the effects, then perhaps we should listen to John Wenger, Ian O'Connor and Eoin McGillicuddy.

They make up the team of environmental scientists who visited Enniscorthy recently to research the town's atmosphere.

They parked a high-tech monitoring station at the back of the public library in Lynton Road and now have a computer load of data on Enniscorthy winter air.

Their samples are being analysed to identify the chemical composition of all the millions of little particles suspended in the stuff that Scalders breathe.

While it will take many months to make full sense of their sampling, a few preliminary facts are already evident.

For starters, it can be confirmed that exhaust fumes contribute to the stuff which leaves us with a steady background of pollution.

More surprisingly, though Enniscorthy may be far from the shore, the presence of drops of chlorine shows that sea spray is blown this far inland.

But the overwhelming component among the particles detected is the carbon belched out from cosy local hearths to become a seasonal hazard.

This initial diagnosis is backed up by running air through filters which are changed every six hours.

In cold and calm conditions, the filter inserted perfectly white at 6 a.m. of an Enniscorthy evening emerges horribly black when removed at midnight.

There can be just one princi-

pal source of such filth. It has to be coal. We are breathing diluted soot.

These atmospheric particles are invisible to the human eye,' says John Wenger, 'but they do lead to health problems.'

He and his colleagues from Cork have the hardware for keeping track of these little devils which may be no more than a few microns in miniscule diameter.

The scientists' chief weapon is a US made 'aerosol time-of-flight mass spectrometer,' not much bigger than a photocopier. Though modest in size, its complex laser and computer technology means that it comes with a price tag of around €460,000.

One of just five such spectrometers in Europe, it is capable of working out whether the smut passing through its pipes comes from timber or coal or diesel.

It was stationed at the library as part of a national study being carried out with the backing of the Environment Protection Agency.

The team had already done a stint in Killarney where similar problems came to light.

Their visit to Enniscorthy was followed with interest by Wexford County Council officials, including Brendan Cooney and Ian Plunkett.

They confirmed that, though there is a ban on the sale of smoky coal in Wexford town, sooty smog remains a problem there.

They spoke of loads of cheap coal being delivered from Northern Ireland to Oylegate from where it is relayed on to the town.

THERE CAN BE JUST ONE PRINCIPAL SOURCE OF ALL THIS FILTH IN OUR AIR. IT HAS TO BE COAL. WE ARE BREATHING DILUTED SOOT.



Eoin McGillicuddy and John Wenger during the air pollution check in Enniscorthy by UCC. INSET: Ian O'Connor.

It seems that consumers take great heart from seeing flame in their fireplaces, though flame breeds smoke. And householders all around the county are fearful that a ban on old-fashioned coal will hit them in the pocket as the replacement fuels are more pricey.

Many of them also remain fiercely loyal to their open fires not least because, though stoves may be 60-plus per cent more efficient in their use of fuel, they are also discouragingly expensive.

Once dirty Dublin has been subject to restrictions on the sale of coal since 1990 and similar regulations have been in force since 1995 in Cork city. The result is that despite their large populations, their heavy traffic and their considerable industry, they are markedly nicer places to live and breath than Enniscorthy, New Ross or Gorey on a winter's night.

'This will require national legislation,' suggests the council's Brendan Cooney. He makes no secret of the fact that he would like to see the entire Republic, and preferably all of the island of Ireland, designated a smokeless zone.

'A smoky coal ban would improve air quality and health,' agrees John from UCC. 'We have to find new ways to heat our homes.' He is due to present the results of all the research, including the Enniscorthy library experience, to the EPA in spring 2016.

There is a strong case to be made for initiating legislative action long before then. Poor air costs lives.



Ian O'Connor carrying out the air pollution check.