

2. The rural world: a setting for life and leisure

Belgian landscapes have been directly influenced by the very early blossoming of urban and industrial developments in Belgium. Initially purveyors of fresh supplies, in the XIXth century, the countryside provided the labour necessary for industrialisation. However, the rural exodus was only translated into decreases in population at the time the birth rate fell, which is several decades after the first departures for the towns. With the relaxation of limitations on mobility from the second half of the XXth century, the countryside became a desirable place to live, far from the pollution of the towns. Since the end of the sixties, rural Belgium has experienced a demographic renaissance that today goes beyond the first wreath of urban sprawl (map 57). The very dense network of motorways allows one the luxury of combining living in the country with employment in town. Nevertheless, some rural communes, particularly those located along the border with France, appear excluded from the renewal.

With the return and arrival of population, the rural world, which for half a century had been being demoted purely to agriculture and forestry, has been recovering a variety of activities. The part of agriculture is giving way to other uses, which are, however, based on the characteristics peculiar to the countryside, particularly the availability of space. Of these uses, housing and recreation are the new major players in the Belgian countryside. Nevertheless, one should not forget that they often rely on the continued existence of a rural morphology that only agriculture and forestry can maintain. The availability of space and the density of the road and motorway network have also attracted other activities such as industry and some peripheral urban functions such as rubbish tips into the rural environment. The marginalisation of agriculture and the improved accessibility of the countryside allow us to glimpse a fundamental change in lifestyles which should more and more resemble those found in the towns. Nevertheless, if a town is the expression of centrality, of the absence of distance, the countryside remains the place where

distance matters.

Economic activity, population and housing are the main topics of other sections of the Atlas de Belgique, and hence this chapter deals only with certain major developments in the rural world using data available at the beginning of 2004. After a recapitulation of the demographic dynamics of these areas (2.1), residential use is approached via changes in the housing stock (2.2) and an analysis of the questions in the socio-economic survey of 2001 relating to the opinion of the inhabitants on the quality of the environment and services (2.4). These questions make it possible to grasp the fundamental dialectic of country life in Belgium, between the availability of a quality environment, which may succinctly be translated into the availability of space, and the distancing of services and places of employment. Despite the size of Belgian communes, nearly 55% of Belgians work outside the one in which they live. If the proximity of the town is the primary factor in recent residential dynamics, the financial market, the attractiveness of the countryside or linguistic factors complete the picture of explanatory factors (map 57). In many regions a genuine economic split has established itself over the course of the last few decades. The less wealthy who want to have property available are obliged to move a little further from their place of work or are condemned (in the manner of many Belgians) to live in town.

Over 700 000 new homes were built in Belgium between 1981 and 2001, 70% of them outside the conurbations. They stamp their mark on rural landscapes. As with demographic developments, we may observe an east-west contrast in the growth in the number of homes, with larger gains in the west (map 58). Conversely, if we look at the role in this development played by homes built after 1981, we observe a north-south divide (map 59). Comparing the maps makes it easier to discern both residential dynamics and construction in the rural environment. An increase in the number of homes without new building is explained by a restructuring of existing buildings (division of buildings into multiple homes) or by the restoration of buildings

that were not used as main residences. The inverse position would correspond to a renewal of the housing stock.

The north-south divide is also apparent in the price of building plots (map 60). The price of plots varies by a factor of three between Wallonia and Flanders. In Flanders, the price almost doubled between 1981 and 2001, whereas in the Walloon countryside the trend is downwards instead, except around the hubs of Brussels, Aachen and Luxembourg (map 61).

Accessibility thus seems to be the key factor in the development of rural districts in Belgium towards integration with an urban system. Nevertheless, the quality of the environment, and in particular how it is portrayed (map 63), is an additional parameter in understanding how the countryside is changing. The socio-economic survey of 2001 included questions on the opinion of households on air quality, cleanliness, the external appearance of buildings and noise in the neighbourhood of their homes. Mapping out these opinions emphasises the divide between the framework of urban and rural life. Nonetheless, living in the country to enjoy a quality environment represents the other side of the coin to the distancing of services. Mapping satisfaction with the available public transport, shops and social and educational services at the scale of the communes before merger demonstrates not only the low satisfaction among country people and substantial regional diversity (particularly in the case of social and educational services), but also disparities within communes between market town and village.

In Belgium, country districts, unlike the towns, do not have exceptional tourist sites on a European scale. Tourist development thus relies on quasi-domestic tourism, which consists in offering the inhabitants of Belgian towns, as well as their Dutch and German neighbours, a place for relaxation. The geography of second homes is dealt with in maps 67 and 68, which delineate the three tourist regions – the south of the Sambre-Meuse Valley, Kempen and the Coast. These are also where pressure from tourism is highest

(maps 70, 71).

The marginalisation of agriculture (which does, however, remain the main user of land) and of typically rural styles of living, together with the integration of country districts with urban systems via alternating migrations or as recreational zones give rise to a variety of claims on the areas inherited from long agricultural occupation. The production area of yesteryear has become a consumer product as a setting for life or recreation. The world of rural Belgium is multi-functional and an integral part of a more far-flung system in which it doubtless has a wider part to play.