

Westport

Ireland's First Virtual Town

By **Anne O'Leary**, AMT3D Limited

Over the past decade Westport, situated on the shores of Clew Bay in the shadow of Croagh Patrick in Co. Mayo, has experienced phenomenal growth both as a world-class tourist destination and a prime business investment location.

The appeal of Westport as a tourist hot-spot and as a place in which to live and work is undeniable. With the distinction of being one of the few planned towns in Ireland, Westport is designated as a Heritage Town for its historic architecture and wealth of cultural attractions. Westport's well-kept appearance sees it routinely scoring highly in and winning the Tidy Towns competition.

Westport Town Council is keen to ensure growth continues but at the same time determined to preserve the Heritage and special character of the town. It was with this in mind that they commissioned a firm of market leading visualisation technology specialists to build Ireland's first digital 3D town model.

The model was created using long distance laser scanning and high resolution digital photography with the laser scanning team causing quite a stir around the town when they set about collecting the many millions of data reference points required. The data was then processed using advanced 3D visualisation



Westport 3D Digital Model.



Bridge Street, Westport.

software to produce a high quality interactive and accurate photo-realistic reconstruction of the Town Centre.

Whilst it's fair to say that Westport Town Council's primary motivation for acquiring this unique digital computer model was to show how proposed buildings will impact the existing environment (enabling significant improvements to the initial design, public consultation and overall planning process) it has become clear that there are numerous further applications. There are endless opportunities in terms of tourism promotion and also with respect to the marketing of new and proposed developments off plan.

With originally the historic town centre alone modelled, this has since been expanded to encompass strategic housing and industrial development sites on the fringes of Westport that are already attracting significant investment and jobs into the region.

According to Peter Hynes, Westport Town Manager, "Westport is in a phase of rapid development and part of our challenge is to protect the uniqueness of this special town while ensuring that it grows and develops into the future. Westport is not a museum piece and we need to ensure that it continues to grow

in a sustainable way built on the very solid foundation which we have inherited from past generations. Until now the idea of being able to accurately visualise in 3D how a new development will look and impact on its location has not been possible. This digital model gives us that ability plus a totally unique way of marketing the town to investors and tourists alike."

The digital model 'Westport3D' has generated a lot of publicity for the Town since it was first launched in May 2007 but the crowning glory was when, thanks to the quality of the model, Westport became the first Irish town to feature as a 3D model on Google Earth. There was great excitement locally and nationally when earlier this year a representative from Google made an unprecedented visit to officially launch Westport3D on their fantastic GIS platform. Prior to this, Westport3D could be viewed on line or via interactive CD; but having a presence on Google Earth has brought it to the attention of the global market.

It would be interesting to know what James Wyatt, the architect originally charged with the task of planning and designing the town of Westport in the 18th century, would have to say about how far his grand design has come. ■