

12-BÜTGENBACH

The High Fen – a borderless world of water

Water is the decisive element in the High Fen landscape. Many streams and rivers have their source here, fed by the excess water draining off the high moors that have formed over millennia since prehistory and the ice ages. This gigantic sponge is, in its turn, nourished by plentiful rainfall, hail and snow. The intensity of precipitation up here is due to a geo-climatological peculiarity. The High Fen is the first significant altitude that winds driving heavy, wet cloud from the English Channel must encounter on their way eastward. Here the moist air mass is forced to rise and cool off dramatically, thus condensing out the water vapour to fall as rain, hail or snow. Annual precipitation here is between 1400 and 1700 millimetres per annum, almost entirely in the months between autumn and spring. In comparison, the rain-rich North of Luxembourg, not so far away, only receives 900 millimetres. This means that the climatic situation is generally fair for cyclists between spring and autumn, at least with regard to water from above. But these are also ideal conditions for the water bubbling up from below, which serves on certain cycle routes in the higher reaches of the Fen as a permanent and refreshing accompaniment.

The High Fen, a giant cistern, supplies its rivers all around

Countless rivulets and brooks begin their journey in the High Fen, linking up with one another until by and by you have a river. Among the brooks and streams that leave the source area of the High Fen in different directions are: the Soor and the Gileppe to the north; the Ru de Dison, the Sawe and the Satte to the west; the Hoëgne to the south-west, with the Bayehon and the Ru des Trôs Marets heading south; while the Rur, the Hill, the upper Weser and the Getzbach all run east. These quietly burbling rivulets often show colouring or other signs that might disturb the casual observer: an off-white crown of foam does not indicate pollution, but rather vegetal residues from clay and turf. Streams that run red indicate an iron-rich, naturally carbonated spring. On the edge of the High Fen lie the sources of other important rivers for the Belgian east and the Eifel, such as the Amel, the Warche and the Warchenne. Of these, the Vennbahn crosses the Rur, Warche and Warchenne on bridges and viaducts.

By bike over streams and rivers

Crossing the many water courses by bicycle can be impressive where a viaduct is involved. In the immediate vicinity of the High Fen, such crossings are the viaducts in Reichenstein across the Rur and in Bütgenbach over the Warche. Between Aachen and Kornelimünster, the viaducts traversing the Rollefbach and the Iter mark the Vennbahn route on the north slope of the Fen approach. The Grölisbach has its source at Roetgen station. North of Lammersdorf the Dreilägerbach springs directly out of the Vennbahn bed, while slightly to the south of this are the Paustenbach and the Heppenbach ("bach", if you're wondering, means stream or brook). A few metres from the former station at Konzen is the source of the Kall. The road follows the valley of the Laufenbach down to the Rur in Monschau. The Rur is crossed in Kalterherberg-Ruitzhof /Küchelscheid and followed up into its source area just before Sourbrodt. Then come, to the south, the Warche and Warchenne, as well as the Amel in Montenau. Following the Vennbahn route will never bring you into close contact with the Weser, which flows into the Ourthe in Liege and on to the Maas. However, the high rail embankment does briefly run tangential to that river at its very earliest stages, near Konzen.

Dams and reservoirs as stations along a watercourse

Myriad are also the reservoirs and lakes, which capture these water courses, to slow them down or dam them up, occasionally even re-routing them altogether through some man-made diversion. Some of these have similar functions to stations on the Vennbahn. All of this happens for the purposes of storing fresh drinking water or generating electricity. Fen water is provided to consumers' kitchen taps in a roughly 80-kilometre radius. Near Eupen the Weser and Gileppe reservoirs can be visited. On the Vennbahn side of the High Fen six dams and lakes can be found (with the damming of the Warche at Bütgenbach and Robertville in 1932 and 1928, an otherwise

stormy and unpredictable river was tamed). These provide plentiful supplies of water to the paper mills and tanners of Malmedy. With a volume of 11 million cubic metres of water and a surface area of 125 hectares, the dimensions of the Bütgenbach reservoir are impressive. The Rurse to the north east of the Monschau district is, with its 203.2 million m³ of reservoir, even the second largest in Germany. Add to this the Kall valley dam at Simmerath, the Dreilägerbach dam near Roetgen and the Perlenbach dam near Monschau and the magnitude of the water reserves bounded by the Vennbahn become clear.

Watercourses stay, nations and territories change

Just how much a river can affect the history and legends of an area over hundreds, even thousands of years is well demonstrated by the river Hill. It bubbles from its spring not far from Botrange, Belgium's highest point. In Roman times, it marked the frontier between the administrative districts of Tongeren (Civitas Tungrorum) and Cologne (Civitas Agrippinensium). From 1815 to 1920, it separated Prussia from the United Kingdoms of the Netherlands and their successor state, The Netherlands, followed by their regional successor, Belgium. Testimony to this fact can be found near one of its springs, the Fontaine Périgny, where the border stone 156 BP (Belgium-Prussia) still stands. Before the French Revolution, the Hill marked the border between the Duchies of Limburg and Luxembourg, and for many centuries, it has been the natural separation between the bishoprics of Cologne and Liege.

The Rur as a battle front at the end of World War II

To what degree an idyllic river can become a serious bone of contention in wartime is shown by the example of the Rur. In the Second World War, it formed the so-called "Rur-Front", the line between German and Alliance troops in the winter of 1944/45. In the beginning of February, in an attempt to halt any further allied advance, German sapper commandos blew up the Kermeter surge tunnels at the Urft valley dam, as well as the valve banks and the ground outlet gallery of the Schwammenauel dam on the Rurse. The US Army was brought to a standstill by the Rur, which these desperate measures had turned into a mighty torrent. On 23rd February, it was decided to attempt the crossing with assault craft and auxiliary bridges. At 06:00 on the first day of the "Operation Grenade", the first US marines crossed the Rur over a temporary bridge near Jülich.

Watersheds - the only frontiers respected by watercourses

According to an ancient ethnological saying, mountains divide and rivers unite. But to be more precise, river basins, those areas where rivers gather their source water, are separated by watersheds, and for this to occur not even a mountain is required. One particular watershed of continental significance is the line of demarcation between the source collection basins of the Maas and the Rhine. This begins in the French "Département des Vosges" and, on its northern sweep towards the Dutch National Park "De Biesbosch" where it ends, it intersects the Vennbahn between Born and St Vith. At the junction of the two, only a simple sign is there to draw a traveller's attention to this potent hydrographical fact. At Losheimergraben, the watershed leaves Belgium and moves into Germany. High on the Öslings plateau, two watersheds come together, that of the Rhine-Maas basin runs up against the smaller watershed between the rivers Our and Woltz. There was already an ancient road here, even before the Romans, who built their roads along watersheds so as to keep fording and bridge-building to a minimum. Cyclists today prefer the gentler river valleys to the watershed routes with their steep climbs. But there are little, local watersheds that are often almost undetectable. An indication may exist, however, in the names of nearby places, as is the case with the two Vennbahn localities of Born and Faymonville. Born is an old and poetic name for a well or source, while "Faymonville", according to the wallon linguist Stany Noël, is a vintage name meaning town beyond the source.

The Our - a river border as common territory

However, there is one river in the Vennbahn region which could be considered as a sign of the new Europe, and that is the river Our. It rises in the southern foothills of the High Fen, near Eichelsberg in



the Büllingen suburb of Manderfeld. At Wallendorf on the Germany-Luxembourg border, it flows into the Sauer. Although the Danube, flowing through no less than ten nations, is known as “the” European river, the river Our has a particularly European flavour. This is because, along its entire length as the border between Germany and Luxembourg, it is the “mutual sovereign territory” of both these nations, a “condominium”, as such an arrangement is known. Thus, the border does not run along either one side or the other, neither is it to be found exactly in the middle, nor yet as a line connecting all the deepest points in a cross-sectional survey. No, the borders of both Luxembourg and Germany are represented by their respective riverbank. Between them flows the river as common sovereign territory.