

17-BURG-REULAND

Idyllic peace surrounds Weweler church - Reuland station hums with life

Throned high above the confluence of the Ulf and Our rivers stands the church of Weweler. It is not surprising that this idyllic motif was featured on early postcards. One splendid view of the church can be had from the former station at Reuland. Some locals believe that the church, from its position amidst a green heart, watches over the natural peace of the valley and of its people. The view of the church was already eulogised in an 1891 publication entitled "Romantic Valley of the Our" by the Reuland school-teacher Heinrich Pflips: "A beautiful and wonderful landscape opens out before the wanderer's eyes. In the midst of a carpet of meadow green, surrounded by wooded hills, lies Reuland station, while on the opposite hill, the parish church of Steffeshausen smiles tenderly." But the idyllic peace of this place was regularly and frequently breached by busy goings on in the valley below in the hey-day of the Vennbahn before the First World War. And sometimes, that bucolic calm was destroyed completely, as when the Ardennes offensive passed this way in 1944 leaving chaos and ruin in its wake. Like nowhere else on the Vennbahn, the church at Weweler and the station in Reuland stand for the tension that can exist between a turbulent history and a country idyll.

The church at Weweler, sober styling in a modest baroque

The tower of Weweler church can be seen from afar: no "accusing finger of God", but rather a rounded, helm-like, baroque construction. Today's church no longer resembles the original structure from the 14th century. It is an ensemble of building styles from various eras: the nave and choir testify to their late gothic origins in simple manner. The mighty transept arches are supported by a single pillar. This House of God is known as the "single pillar church" on account of this architectural oddity. During restoration work in the 1980s, valuable frescos were discovered. A formal counterpoint to these more severe aspects is the baroque decoration of the building, although this is by no means opulent. The altar bears a gently curving rococo decor. Beautifully restored high altar, choir stalls, communion rail and pews remain from the 18th century. One of the church's treasures is undoubtedly the fine wooden crucifix that probably dates from the 14th century and is the most important religious sculpture in the region. Jesus is shown as smiling. A very rare attribute in such pieces. Perhaps it could be taken as a suggestion to avoid excessive rigour in matters of faith. One is reminded of Umberto Eco's novel "the Name of the Rose", in which such levity is a thorn in the flesh of the pious. Several statues were stolen in 2005 and 2008. Even St Hubertus, the church's patron, could not prevent this from happening ... his statue was also stolen. The floor of the nave contains many grave stones and crosses. And the floor has another, unexpected quality, it forecasts the weather. According to Theo Majeres from Burg Reuland, a passionate expert on blue stone, when the stone covering the well begins to sweat and darken, then the next day will be stormy! This may help cyclists in planning their itinerary if, after consulting the sky without much conviction, they observe this phenomenon and can make arrangements accordingly, entirely in the unpretentious style of the building itself, without recourse to weather shows and satellites.

The churchyard in Weweler - gravestones tell their stories

Weweler church is surrounded by a cemetery. The tranquility here is a gentle presence, unlike the enforced silence of many such places. The people of Reuland bring their loved ones to rest here, just as they always have. The graves are well cared-for, witness to an ongoing conversation between the living and those passed on but alive in memory. Schoolmaster Pflips wrote of this in 1891 in his guide to wanderers: "Many lie at peace here, who have left the demands of this earthly pilgrimage for a place of calm and repose". For centuries, stone-masons have adorned this space with their skill. Graveyards transmit impressions of people and events long past. A visit to the cemetery at Weweler is like a journey through time. Inscriptions on the tombstones list the fallen from two World Wars. Only occasionally can one see on which side they were serving when they fell, German or Allied. Seemingly light damage, as on the first grave you see on entering the churchyard, might be a sign of damage from an older conflict. Willi Wittrock, a retired teacher and engaged historian from Burg Reuland, directs our attention to a cross, on which the left hand of Christ has been broken off. This

damage occurred in the confusing years after the French Revolution. In Napoleonic times, a cold wind was blowing against the church and the clergy. The local people also felt the cold.

Deportation to the French Atlantic islands of Ré and Oleron

People here suffered particularly under such repressions, as we can see in the example of the Majeres brothers, both of them priests. They initially found a hiding place across the border in Kolvenhof, but were then denounced and arrested. On 6th March 1799, Joannes wrote his father, sister and brother-in-law, that: "We have been condemned to banishment on the island of Oleron." then followed a long march under armed guard to the west coast of France. On 14th May 1799, together with other banished prisoners, they were shipped to the prison island "packed in like herrings in a box, unable to sleep." While other prisoners, who had a little money, were able to buy small necessities, the priests had to live "like seminarists". They kept the same clothes day and night. Joannes tried to stay in touch by letter and tried to get his family to send money. In a letter of 18th May 1799 he asks his family to intercede with the postmaster, to find out how best to transmit money to the prison colony. Because, as he wrote, "neither chair nor table can be had for our money, neither have we so much as seen a fire." They had to stay standing or sit on the floor the whole day long in their cells. "Everything that could lead to an amelioration of our spirits is expensive, except the wine; some solace". The letters always end with "I greet you, dear family and friends and all honest people, for whom I may yet remain their willing, if imprisoned comrade, J. Majeres." Joannes Majeres seems to have born up well in imprisonment. Not so his brother, about whom he was troubled with worries that he "appears to be going quite mad." He takes their fate stoically as fulfilling God's inscrutable will. Both brothers died as prisoners on the Isle de Re. However, another prisoner, Pastor Schneiders from Oudler, did at last return home.

The master masons of bluestone transform it into tombs and sacred art

Gravestones are silent witnesses to times past. Their creators, the stonemasons, will tell you that death is part of their daily life. It does not frighten them, but it definitely touches them. For the tombstones in the Our valley, the masons preferred a particular type of blue stone, from Recht, a village near St Vith. This stone is well-known far beyond the borders of village and land for its exceptional qualities for masons. It is well known in church construction as a stone for doorways, lintels and crosses. Many of these blue gravestones carry the Christ monogram JHS, which was a practise common among masons from the Tyrol in Switzerland. From the 17th century, these artisans travelled to foreign lands looking for work, as their own narrow valleys offered insufficient employment and few perspectives in their profession. Their skill was highly valued. Among them were such famous masons as the baroque master builder Jakob Prandtauer, who built the Stift Melk Abbey near Vienna. Thanks to this juxtaposition of skill with regional stone of quality, some fine ecclesiastical works, churches and monuments were crafted in East Belgium. But apart from the material record, these masons left something else behind them, according to Willi Wittrock from Weweler. He is convinced that the vestiges of a Tyrollean accent can still be found in the lilting dialect of the people of Recht. In the church at Weweler are two neo-Gothic windows framed in bluestone, and the main door also contains bluestone elements. Today, this blue-grey to violet stone has lost none of its attraction. Sadly, the station built at the end of the 19th century in the valley at Reuland has little of this atmospheric charm.

The river Our has to make way for the new station at Burg Reuland

On 31st October 1887, work began on the Lommersweiler – Troisvierges section. At the Luxembourg end, work had already started in the spring of 1887. On 1st December 1889, the section of Vennbahn from St Vith to Troisvierges was opened. Work had been hard and complex, especially in the valleys of the Our and Ulf, on account of the tunnel, bridges and viaducts. But not only these; the station at Burg Reuland had also made demands on the skills of planners and engineers. Situated two kilometres outside the village centre, not far from the confluence of the river Ulf into the Our, its construction was no easy undertaking. Firstly, a 250-metre-long stretch of the river Our had to be moved toward Steffeshausen. Then, the resulting site had to be raised and levelled. The material for

this came conveniently from a nearby quarry, which involved the disappearance of a mountain top! The original riverbed is still visible as two ditches in front of and next to the reception building. To the right of the entrance was the waiting room, to the left were the luggage office and a small extension, while straight ahead was the ticket office. The station had two main lines and two sidings, one of which was equipped with a loading ramp. As was customary at the time, the station also contained an apartment for the station master and the technical inspector as well as offices for Post and Telegraph services. Near the station were two pubs as well as two shops for groceries and building materials.

“Reuland Halt”, where the Vennbahn and the Kirchweg (church road) once crossed

For almost 500 years, from 1313 to 1803, the chapel at Weweler served as church to the parish of Reuland. Its members arrived via the Kirchenweg, which towards its end became the Kreuzweg and climbed the steep ascent to the church. With the construction of the railway, this route was cut in two. In order to spare the churchgoers a dangerous dash across the tracks, a bridge was built which, due to its sheer and sloping aspect, demanded quite some effort to climb over. The locals called it the Hülscneider Bridge or the “leaning bridge of Reuland”. A spring with drinking water was nearby. In the Second World War, a symbiosis of rail embankment and church path created, through a section of bridge clad in zinc sheet, the extra “Reuland Halt”. But this in-between station did not last long. On their retreat through the valleys, sapper commandos of the German Wehrmacht blew up many items of infrastructure along the Vennbahn. The Kirchweg stayed buried under rubble for some years thereafter. Fortunately, at the time the railway was being built, there was another route to the church of Weweler, running from the former schoolhouse, across a bridge over the river Ulf and up to the railway. This route then led under the railway embankment and, via a small flight of steps, finally arrived at the original foot path.

Business at the station

Passenger travel was hardly satisfactory after the station was opened. From 1890, there were only four trains daily in each direction, and these were inconveniently timed with regard to connections. On the other hand, goods traffic grew quickly. Since the opening of the section Lommersweiler - Troisvierges in 1889, the former branch line Aachen - St Vith - Prüm had become an international connection linking the coal fields near Aachen with the iron ore mines of Luxembourg and Lorraine. From October 1905, the maximum Vennbahn freight speed was increased from 27 kilometres per hour to 40. At the height of the Vennbahn service, prior to the First World War, 100 trains thundered through the Our and Ulf valleys daily, as opposed to only 16 passenger trains. At Reuland station, the goods trains had to halt and take on a shunting engine to give support from the rear so as not to fail at the steep climb up to Lengeler. Freight wagons were also coupled onto passenger trains, to keep up with the exceptional demand. Service was basically one track. Only in 1914 were the first passing loops constructed at Reuland and Lengeler. Such a dense schedule meant that accidents were not that exceptional, some even with loss of life, as in December 1913, when a train driver and stoker were killed. With the reduction in coal and ore transports from the 1930s, business at the station returned to being largely local: wood and potatoes were loaded here for other markets; coal, coke and ground “Thomas slag” were delivered.