

19-GOEDANGE

The rather reserved implementation of the Vennbahn terminal section

From Lengeler, the Vennbahn plunges into the 790-metre-long tunnel to Wilwerdange in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. On 4th November 1889, with the opening of the connection from St Vith to Troisvierges, the first train steamed through this tunnel. The enthusiasm for the new railway felt by those on the northern side of the massif was reflected in reverse by a most distinct and palpable lack of interest shown by the people of the Duchy. In the regional newspaper, "Kreisblatt für den Kreis Malmedy", we find recorded in the 5th November edition of 1889: "To be honest, on the Luxembourg side, the line is still very much of a mess. A lot of work will need to be done before this project can reasonably be called finished". Reasons for Luxembourg's lacklustre performance and the unenthusiastic attitude of its people and economy might be that the new transport and communications revolution was thought mainly to benefit German industry, and especially the German "Zollverein" or customs union. Work commenced on the 5.2-kilometre-long terminal section of the Vennbahn in the spring of 1887. In September 1888, the last metre of tunnel was broken through, making it the longest on the entire Vennbahn. The tunnelling crew employed mainly Italian workers, alongside a contingent of Poles. These were highly valued for their experience as skilled embankment, rail and tunnel specialists, having worked on similar projects throughout Europe in the 19th century. The tunnel workers lived nearby in the "Trois Baraques" or "three sheds", insalubrious and primitive accommodation at best. Their meagre leisure time was spent mainly on cards and cheap spirits in an equally shed-like and insalubrious public house. This belonged to a certain Herr Knauf who, since his premises in Huldange had been closed down by the authorities, now found a better clientele and less fussy neighbours "up at the crossroads".

Lamps had to stay lit at all times in the tunnel

The tunnel lamp guard was charged with looking after the kerosene supply - which was stored at the "Pétrolbud", near the embankment - for the 90 lamps that hung in the tunnel. These had to be kept alight all the time, day and night. Keeping the lamps burning was a difficult and unhealthy job. Tunnel Guard Knauf had to take his pension at the age of 45. Coal gases from the trains had gravely damaged his health. It took up to a quarter of an hour for the gases to clear from the tunnel, especially when two locomotives had to pull a heavily laden train up the Ulf valley. And when the track inspector went in to walk the tracks for safety inspection, he had to enter his name in the section register as proof that he was in the tunnel.

The frontier tunnel, an inviting, if dangerous, route for smugglers and rustlers

To be accurate, the "Grenzlandtunnel" is actually only in Luxembourg, since it ends a full hundred metres before the Belgian border. But that is of secondary importance for the border section in Ösling. Apparently, only locals, frontier police and smugglers really knew whether they were on Belgian or Luxembourg soil in any particular place. Smuggling was particularly prevalent here in the years just before and after the First World War. The tunnel between Lengeler and Wilwerdange was the perfect smugglers cave, open at both ends, and a great way to magic quantities of livestock across the border without import tax. As one may imagine, this was not entirely without danger. A train once rushed full-tilt into a herd of cattle.

The end of the Vennbahn era - clinking glasses, rattling crockery

With the opening of the section StVith – Ulflingen in 1889, the Vennbahn became an important artery for industrial development, connecting the Luxembourg ore mines with the coal fields around Aachen and the blast furnaces of the Ruhr. At its height, some 30 to 40 steam trains thundered daily through the idyllic Ulf valley. By the early 1960s, this had reduced to only one goods train per week. For André Kleis, today a farmer in Lengeler, visiting his village's local restaurant situated directly above the tunnel was a memorable event in his childhood. When a train plunged into the cutting far below their feet, all the glasses would start to jingle and clink and the crockery in the kitchen would rattle and clatter. For his parents, there was another, very different experience: that of no longer

regularly hearing thundering steam trains, but rather the occasional muffled snorting - the decaying echo of a roar - the last years of the Vennbahn era!

A length of rail-bed, enchanted and locked away

In later years, the ironic greeting question “Is the tunnel still there?” would be posed less and less. For some inhabitants of northern Luxembourg, it had slipped into a forgotten time. Paul Aschmann wrote in his 1961 article (“Zug in den letzten Zügen”) of an excursion to the Vennbahn tunnel, at a time when already hardly any trains were running: “From the guard’s cottage, a path leads through the dense undergrowth, opening onto a rotting, moss-overgrown, slime-smooth stair descending into the deep, with an equally worm-eaten and slippery banister to hold on to. Suddenly, the shiny rails are directly below us, gleaming away from the damp, arched walls, running first straight as a die, then curving off left between rocks and bushes.” Today, the embankment is cleared for cycle traffic; the sleepers were removed in 1983. In 1985, a green light was given for the sale of the section. The new owner submerged part of the cut under water to form a row of nine fish ponds. This standing water not only physically but also symbolically drowned the Vennbahn, sinking it deep in the past. After the tracks were salvaged, the tunnel was bricked off at both ends to become - in the words of Jean Stephany, passionate railway embankment cyclist - “an enchanted and forgotten mineshaft in the northernmost tip of the country.”

The crossing guard’s cottage as it once was

Crossing guards had to be permanently present, to ensure the safe and smooth running of their section. That called for a high degree of self-sufficiency. Thus, more than a mere living and working space was required. Today’s owner of the crossing keeper’s cottage on the road from Troisvierges and Huldigen tells us that the property consisted of two buildings: a house and a lean-to. On the ground floor of the house were the living room and kitchen, on the upper floor were two bedrooms opening out of one another for the crossing guard’s generally large family. The house had a cellar for half its length, containing a storeroom and also a built-in oven. Building materials were local rough stone, only the sandstone for the window lintels was quarried further away. Crossing keeper cottages generally came with their own goat, maybe even a cow. These were stalled in the lean-to, which also served as a store room. Originally, they were even stalled indoors. The entry part of the ground floor opens on the south-west, living room and kitchen to the north-east. Thus, the keeper always had a clear view up and down the track below.

The crossing guard’s cottage today - keeping the old with contemporary additions

Today, the crossing guard’s cottage is a weekend home for family and friends of the current owner. The ground floor will contain a lobby, living room, kitchen and bathroom. On the upper floor are the bedrooms, while the former lean-to stall will become a store for the pellet-fired heating system, as well as a general storeroom. The architect Pol Holweck is careful in making changes, wanting to keep the atmosphere and substance of the old building as unchanged as possible. So, not only is the entire flooring to be re-used, but it will remain “a bit time-roughened in appearance”. Only two major changes will be stylistically contemporary: a big single window on the west side of the cottage and the new roof, no longer in tiles but in zinc sheeting and, of course, equipped with solar panels.

The arguments over the tunnel, a tug of war between ecology and cycle tourism

Today, there are powerful laws to protect natural reserves and endangered species. Living space and biotopes must be left undisturbed as far as is feasible. This is the reason for the limited use of the Lengeler Tunnel by cyclists. Just a year before the Vennbahn cycle route was surfaced, a 300-strong colony of rare bats was discovered in the tunnel. Among the nine catalogued regional species, the Pond Bat was found here for the first time in Luxembourg. In the winter months, the protected bats use the tunnel as their refuge against frost. Thus, the tunnel stays closed to bike traffic from 1st November to 31st April. However, with a stretch of embankment between Huldigen and Lengeler, an alternative route is available the whole year round. Jean Stephany remembers his father, who worked for the railway, telling him of sighting deer in the meadows and woodland along the track in



the early morning dew: “Those who love nature will notice that the northern tip of the country is still a very natural landscape. That we have to cut a swath through such beauty, in order to make it accessible for those who wish to discover it, is one of the ironies of our fast and fickle epoch”. Today, the track takes one through a Natura-2000 protected reserve.