

6-MONSCHAU

The rise and fall of the Monschau textile mills

Early influence of textile manufacturers on regional development

Monschau and its environs is a fine example of how the beginning of the industrial era impacted on a region with the manufacture of textiles. The natural advantages were exceptional at the beginning of the 17th century: local sheep provided the wool, the lime-free, soft water torrents from the High Fen were plentiful for washing and dyeing, but also to provide the necessary power to drive the fulling mills and grinding mills, while peat from the High Fen was the fuel required for dyeing and drying. There was also an available workforce, as the area had largely avoided the decimation of decades of war. And there were other, less tangible advantages, such as a tolerant policy toward religion, which enabled Protestant manufacturing families to settle in this Catholic area. There were also no limitations imposed by urban weavers' guilds, as Monschau only gained the necessary statute when it became a town on the cusp of the 18th century. The foundations of the textile trade were laid by the local families Schmitz (Monschau) and Offermann (Imgenbroich). An appropriate production model developed: Purchase and storage of the wool, washing, dyeing, fulling and finishing were the tasks of the manufacturer. Spinning and weaving were contracted out to subcontractors and weavers working from home. The weak link of the textile industry in the Monschau region was soon clear: a lack of distribution options. The finished cloth was usually informally distributed by travelling salesmen to individual tailors and seamstresses.

The golden years of the Monschau textile mills

Between 1765 and 1790, the textile trade in the Monschau area was at its height. This success is closely allied with the name Johann Heinrich Scheibler (1705-1765). It was Scheibler who made Monschau broadcloth a household name, a recognisable brand, constantly improved production methods and had a nose for new developments and commercial opportunities. These golden years were evident in the construction of opulent houses and stately premises, among which the famous Red House in Monschau is the most elegant example. But this period also had its darker side. The necessity of skilled workers drove prices up, and although the area was known as a low-wage zone, thanks to the absence of guilds, spinning and weaving was increasingly outsourced to neighbouring Limbourg. Unemployment began to climb steeply, disturbing the social contract. In 1774, there were rumblings of revolt among the weavers, and in 1797 and 1808 the finishing shearers went on strike.

Upheaval under the French (1794-1814) - The mechanisation of textile manufacture

In the years under French rule, from 1794 to 1814, not only were many aspects of everyday life disturbed, but the textile trade went through a deep crisis. Finished cloth was confiscated and export prohibited. But there were also some home-made problems. One of these was insufficient capitalisation of textile mills. Thus, the firms were slow to react to fashion developments, such as the trend toward lighter materials. English manufacturers reacted more swiftly to this new demand. The inclusion of the area left of the Rhine within the French Empire awakened a new entrepreneurial spirit. This was given wings by technological advances, such as water-driven spinning, fulling and finishing machinery. The first steps were being made towards industrial production, to the detriment of small manufacturers. This change manifested itself in ever larger buildings to house the huge new machines. After the reconstruction of Europe at the Congress of Vienna 1814/15, the French market collapsed, and there was also the imposition of inner-Prussian customs frontiers. Yet mechanisation and industrialisation continued apace. Finishing machines deprived the skilled finishing shearers of their jobs, mechanical weaving machines for close-woven smooth cloth put the hand-weavers out of work. The payment of unskilled day-labourers in the spinning mills, including women and children, was increasingly subject to the vagaries of demand. Many broadcloth manufacturers had to throw in the towel. After 1820, the first textile manufacturers began to emigrate to eastern Europe. By mid-century, Monschau had lost its position in the vanguard of developments, hampered by the lack of a rail connection to its markets. In the meantime, more and more mass produced finished cloth was arriving from the east, especially from Lusatia. Monschau cloth could not compete with such prices.

By 1860, there were only eight textile mills still working in Monschau. These were faced with tighter margins and declining orders, producing special materials in small batches. Unemployed textile workers left to seek jobs in larger population centres or to work in agriculture and forestry like their ancestors. In 1908, the tradition of Monschau fine cloth manufacture ended with the closure of the last textile mill “Louis Scheibler Son”.

The Scheibler dynasty:

The genius of Johann Heinrich Scheibler

As the Red House outshines the other fine buildings of Monschau, so the Scheibler dynasty outshines the other textile manufacturing families. Johann Heinrich Scheibler (1705-1765) gave such a decisive impulse to the Textile industry in the Monschau region that it became the template for the classic textile factories of the 19th century. Scheibler developed Monschau Cloth into a sought-after market item, including its distribution on international markets and trade fairs. He was quick to react to trends and deliberately targeted products and distribution toward luxury goods. In the final years of the 18th century, the Scheiblers developed and built a closed production unit, in which all processes, from spinning to finishing were under one roof.

The Scheiblers, “organically” related into a clan

The Scheibler dynasty originated near Kassel. In the 16th and 17th centuries, they were a well-respected family of clerics and academics, thoroughly integrated into the protestant bourgeoisie of the region. The connection to the Monschauer Land was established through family ties. Johann Heinrich Scheibler, the son of Bernhard Georg Scheibler, Superintendent in Oberbergisch Land, while living under the roof of textile manufacturer Mathias Offermann in Imgenbroich, became acquainted not only with his trade as a merchant in textiles, but also with that good man’s daughter Maria Agnes. After their marriage in 1724, Johann Heinrich joined the textile manufacturing business of Monschau’s leading families, Offermann, Schmitz and Schlösser, as a partner. Four of the sons of that marriage and at least seven grandsons were subsequently engaged in the manufacture of wool cloth in the Monschau region. All of Johann Heinrich Scheibler’s sons were not only active in their father’s business, but also founded textile mills of their own elsewhere, such as Hagen or Eupen. But the expansion of business brought about by this nose for profit and family networking was no serendipitous by-product. Writing in 1937, Johann’s descendent Hans Carl Schreiber saw an organic concept behind this clannish cross-fertilisation. To him it was the application of a protestant template for securing entrepreneurial capital through extended family ties and thus a means to circumvent the divisive realities the Napoleonic Code had caused in matters of inheritance by its insistence on equal shares. The entrepreneurial spirit, furthermore, was no mere artisanal tradition, but manifested protestant thinking in a social milieu marked by progressive scholarship and faith. In addition, the Scheiblers showed a willingness to resettle, to restructure their lives and to take risks that are evidence of a profound trust in the primacy of God to assure success in their endeavours. Finally – and not least – a liberal, protestant openness for sciences, languages and the arts facilitated the understanding of trends and the securing of international connections.

Monschau’s textile magnates develop their industry in East Europe

Subsequent to the restructuring of Europe (Vienna, 1815) Monschau lost 20% of its population as skilled textile workers were hired by new mills in “Congress Poland” in need of competence and know-how for their recently opened markets in Russia. Despite a brief rekindling around 1834, the Monschau textile industry gradually collapsed. Possibilities for modern industrial-scale textile manufacture were physically limited in the Rur valley. Unemployment was rife and emigration took over. Elsewhere in the world, especially in Eastern Europe, labourers and skilled workers were being hired. By the end of the 18th century, a new chapter was opening in the history of German migrants into the Łódź area, when local nobles began to hire German farmers, so-called “Holländer”. Following in their wake came craftsmen, who often played a central role in industrial development. In 1823, the first textile mill was founded in Łódź. So began the transformation of the Polish city into the “Manchester of the East”, with all the good and bad that came with it. The Polish film director

Andrzej Wajda made a monument to this epoch in his 1975 film “The Promised Land”. The author of the novel upon which it was based, the Polish Nobel Prizewinner for Literature Władysław Reymont, has his own monument in Łódź too. Textile and fashion are still important aspects of life in Łódź. The annual Polish Fashion Week takes place there. The great 19th century textile mills give the event the perfect backdrop for showing off the latest catwalk creations.

Karol Scheibler founded his textile empire in Łódź, Poland

Among those who sought their fortune in Poland was Karl Wilhelm Scheibler (1820 – 1881), a distant relation of the Monschau Scheiblers. In 1854, he built Poland’s first mechanical textile mill in Łódź and in 1867 Poland’s biggest mechanical cotton spinning factory. In 1855, he was the first to install a steam engine in a Polish cotton mill. Raw materials were bought cheap and worked on the most modern machinery. But Scheibler did not only build factories in Łódź, he also built decent housing for his workers and schools for their children. Karl Wilhelm, by then known as Karol Scheibler, died in 1881 in Łódź. His grieving wife erected a monumental tomb, a gothic cathedral, in his memory. Today, this mausoleum, together with much of the industrial complex he created, is open to the public, as is Karol Scheibler’s house, an outwardly unpretentious palace with a luxurious interior. Today, this former cotton king’s palace is the rather opulent site of the Polish Museum of Cinematography. After World War II, the family’s heirs were expelled from Poland and their property confiscated, the once proud Scheibler mills were renamed as “The Stalin Works”.

Vennbahn and the textile industry

The Vennbahn came too late to save the Monschau fabric mills. Already in 1855, the textile manufacturers of Monschau had formed a committee with the aim of bringing a railway connection to the area to improve business. The idea was also floated of linking the region to the planned line from France to the Prussian-Luxembourg border. So there was a general sense of anticipation and relief in March 1856 when Herr von Harenne, Landrat of Monschau, announced that “with due regard to the proposed railway from Eupen via Montjoie to Luxembourg ... surveying and levelling work would soon commence through the communes of Röttgen, Conzen, Mützenich and Kalterherberg”. However, their joy was premature, as initially nothing happened. Thereafter, a new demand would be introduced every now and again, further decisions were vehemently urged from the town and regional authorities, petitions were drawn up and resolutions were passed, all of which spilled much ink and filled many rooms with cigar smoke. This period of vacillating between hope and disappointment finally came to an end after 30 years. On 15th May 1882, King Wilhelm I of Prussia, Emperor of Germany, signed the decree whereby the State government was at last enabled to construct a railway between Aachen/Rothe Erde and St Vith.

What’s in a name – will the station be named for Montjoie, Mützenich or Monschau?

However, long after the decision to build that line had been taken, the verbal wrangling continued. Now it was just a matter of naming the station, which was already under construction in 1854/55. The station was sited on land belonging to the village of Mützenich, at that time an independent locality. So it seemed only proper to name it Mützenich Station. The town fathers of Monschau insisted on Montjoie, as a gesture of respect to their status as “district town” (Kreisstadt). After weary negotiations, a solution (literally) was found, involving a quantity of vintage Monschau wine, usually reserved for celebrations, passing from the vintners of the district town to the village fathers of Mützenich. This clinched the deal for “Bahnhof Montjoie” ... if only until 1922, because thereafter the Vennbahn treaty required that stations in the Monschau district should be named according to “current German nomenclature”. Never much more than a transit point, the station was categorised as class 2, higher than it really deserved. Only a hundred years later, Monschau station was torn down.

Building the Vennbahn

The route through Lammersdorf – homes would have to be sacrificed

The Vennbahn was “a difficult birth”, according to the Lammersdorf historian Dr. Bernd Läufer. In 1855, the project was being pushed, mainly by wealthy Monschau textile magnates, as essential for the future of the area. These founded a committee to advance their aims. In February 1883 the mayor of Lammersdorf was informed in a letter from the railway’s directors in Cologne of the projected Vennbahn route. The following April, the planned section was visited by the representative authorities in order to publicly address any objections raised by landowners and others living along the route. In the event, only seven of these claims involved concrete changes to the plan. The issues were mainly with regard to access to fields or water sources. By August 1883, it was finally clear which properties would be affected by the Vennbahn and just how much. Finally, 85 meadows and fields belonging to 45 families were carved up. In the centre of the village, four houses had to be demolished to make way for the embankment. Among these was the home of widow Gertrud Genter, struggling to raise three children alone. She had hoped that her house would be spared, but hope was not enough. She received compensation of 117 “Reichsmarks” for her razed property. This was not enough either. Her new home cost her 3,000.

After much wrangling, the site of the station is decided in favour of Lammersdorf

In 1882, with preparatory work beginning and surveying under way for the embankment, the neighbouring authorities of Lammersdorf and Simmerath began to compete for the site of their local station. At stake was the longed for economic upturn that those arriving might bring. Although the Simmerath village representatives and Herr Landrat Rennen were vociferous in praising the advantages of their community to the “Royal Railway Directorate”, a meeting held onsite in June 1884 tipped the final decision in favour of Lammersdorf. When the first Vennbahn train rolled in on 30th June 1885, only a provisional, wood-clad frame building stood ready to receive travellers. It was only in 1905 that the imposing building in timber, brick and blue-stone was finally finished. Despite surviving two World Wars relatively unscathed, just 50 years later it had already outlived its usefulness and was soon demolished.

Building the embankment – initially only one track, later two

In January 1884, the contractor, “construction assistant Stomm of Lammersdorf”, was designated for the section between Paustenbach and what is today Hoscheit. Topsoil was removed, trees and hedges felled and site access tracks were laid. One particular requirement was the provision of a system of ditches in the Fen areas, to ensure that the foundations were not regularly flooded in that high precipitation region. On the basic foundation, a 20-centimetre layer of broken stone was laid. This was then covered with another 20-centimetre layer of gravel. Now the wooden sleepers and iron track could be laid. By the end of August 1884, the section between Lammersdorf and Konzen was finished. The section to Roetgen needed longer, as more complex preparation of the terrain was needed. But by 7th March 1885, the section round Lammersdorf was complete. On 15th April 1885 the first train rumbling up from Aachen/Rothe Erde to Monschau arrived in Lammersdorf. The new rail connection was an immediate success. Every day, trains thundered down the track from the industrial and mining communities of Lorraine and Alsace, the Aachen district and the Ruhr. Almost overnight, freight traffic developed to such a dense schedule that the single-track line quickly reached capacity. It was soon clear to all that a second set of rails would be needed. By 1893, this extension was already well under way on the Raeren-Lammersdorf section. This followed a repeat of the wearisome process of enquiry, expropriation and compensation that had already been such a thorny path for many of the villagers. Construction was slower than expected, taking nearly 18 years. Widening the many bridges was the most time-consuming aspect.

Construction site tourism was a new attraction

The construction of the Vennbahn required intensive use of diverse techniques. Hundreds of thousands of cubic metres of earth had to be moved, rock formations blown up and cleared, paths and bridges built, snow-dams erected, sleepers and tracks relaid. Stations had to be built, with all

their associated offices and features. The workforce consisted, for the most part, of casual workers from localities along the route, who had been recruited through the local press. Reinforcements also came from Poland and Italy, the latter bringing their reputation as skilled rail builders. This benefitted those in Lammersdorf who profited from providing catering and lodging to this small army. Even before the Aachen/Rothe Erde to Monschau section was opened, the Vennbahn was already having a beneficial effect on tourism. A local paper, the "Montjoie'r Volksblatt" reported on 26th January 1884 that people from Konzen, as well as from neighbouring villages, could be seen organised into groups, even several times a day in fine weather, making tours of the construction site. And of course, those living nearby followed the developing railway line with lively interest.

The end of the Vennbahn track began in the 1980s

"It was so similar and yet so strangely different. The machines moved slowly along the embankment near Lammersdorf station. But there, where columns of workers had laid down the fat sleepers and the heavy rails 125 years ago, this time the track was being cut up into manageable sections and then lifted off and away from its clinker bed". These lines end Dr. Bernd Läufer's account of the building and final dismantling of the Vennbahn at Lammersdorf. Stripping the tracks had already begun in 1982 of the section between Brand and Kornelimünster. On 12th May 2004, the "Aachener Zeitung" asked: "Is this the beginning of the end for the Vennbahn?" The article reported on the work busily progressing at Lammersdorf station, a week after a convoy of heavy machinery showed up there. Dismantling moved on apace with the ancillary buildings and the sidings, yet the original line "seems unaffected by all this so far, as if to say: not yet!" Two and a half months previously, the same paper had reported on a break-in at the level-crossing operator's cabin. Material was missing. Perhaps this spontaneous and irregular attempt at stripping the line was the reason for work progressing so swiftly now on definitive decommissioning of the railway facilities.

The Vennbahn embankment becomes the Vennbahn Cycle Track

After planning permission was granted in the spring of 2010 for the conversion and surfacing of the 13-kilometre-long cycle track section between Raeren and Lammersdorf, the rails torn up and the embankment cleared, construction work was officially started on 4th November 2010. By the following summer, the section was completed. The local council of Simmerath engaged to assume the costs for the access extension and conversion of the Vennbahn embankment to a cycle track, this amounted to some 100,000 Euros. The cyclists would still be peddling through Belgian territory, since the embankment still belonged to that country. It was this curious fact which confronted the authorities on both sides of the border with a whole raft of unusual challenges: mutually introduced applications for planning permission on behalf of a neighbouring state for one's own section of track from one's own planning authority; differing regulations and guidelines for the arranging of cycle tracks and their intersection with normal roads; use of languages for signposting; clarification of the appropriate authorities for construction and maintenance, policing and emergency services obligations ... But there was always a will, so in the end, a way could always be found.