

9-HOHES VENN

The fascination of the High Fen

The High Fen has its share of superlatives: with a total surface area of 4,600 hectares, it is the site of Belgium's largest nature protection reserve and, at 694 metres above sea level at Botrange, also its highest, as well as the country's highest point. But the figures can't tell the real story. The High Fen has to be seen and experienced! This altitude moorland truly comes alive in every different kind of weather: on fine days, a soaring blue sky enhances the view out to every horizon, while in stormy weather, low, heavy clouds give it a threatening aspect. But this fascination is relatively recent. In the 19th century, the High Fen was referred to as an area "where the trees freeze in summer" and stories of people who had gone out and never come home left a grim pall of horror hanging over the region that still gives some visitors the shudders, even today. The more sober ecological vision respects this desolate marshland of bogs and pools on account of its extraordinary capacity for storing vast quantities of rain water.

The importance of moorland:

Moor grass and wild daffodils colour the seasons in the Fen

Heath plants such as broom and heather distinguish the flora of the High Fen. Among its community of plants, we find the wild speckled orchid, marsh gentian, carnivorous sun-dew, cranberry and cotton grass. Since grazing was banned, more and more bushy plants are flourishing, especially moor grass or "pipe grass" as it is known here. This gives the Fen its particular seasonal colouring: in autumn a distinctive rusty-orange tone, and in winter a pale yellow. Woody plants with particular characteristics for their environment, such as the gnarled moor birch, eared willow, the shady mountain ash and occasional spruce trees create strange silhouettes against the moorland sky. In spring, between mid April and mid May, the southern flanks of the High Fen burst into brilliant life with acres of wild daffodils, such as carpet the valley of the Holzwarche in Büllingen. Wild daffodils are the true harbingers of spring in the Fen region. Their sharp, dark green buds piercing even through frozen soil to seek the early sun.

Black grouse, the ambassador of the High Fen

The black grouse is not only the heraldic bird of the High Fen, it also symbolises the precarity of all threatened moorland species, their environment eroded by peat cutting and the draining of wetlands. The behaviour of the black grouse is spectacular in the mating season. In the grey, pre-dawn light the males begin their ritual fights on the spot chosen by a female. After mating, the female retires to lay, brood and hatch her eggs. This taste for a life in shy retirement is helped by the extreme discretion of her camouflage. But such displays of nature are becoming rarer. In Belgium, the black grouse is extinct, except for the refuge they have found in the High Fen. This gradual extinction was already too advanced to be halted by a hunting prohibition in 1966 or the granting of protected species status in 1985. Yet other forest life has reappeared where it was once thought extinct - since 2003, lynx and beaver have once again been sighted in the region.

Altitude wetlands as climate regulator

Moorlands contain about a third of the world's carbon deposits. The great moorlands are to be found in Russia, beyond the northern limit of the Siberian deciduous forests, as well as in North America. With a total area of some 4 million square kilometres, they represent about 3% of the earth's surface. When moorlands dry out, dangerous levels of greenhouse gases are released into the atmosphere. Increased warmth increases evaporation and diminishes their humidity even more, further damaging these already fragile wetlands. Drought leads to the breakdown of organic material, causing releases of CO₂ and their further conversion into carboniferous minerals. However, if sufficient water is present, oxygen cannot reach the organic matter and the carbon is kept secure, eventually converting into peat. But if moorland is allowed to dry or drained, then it becomes a serious carbon provider. Maintaining wetlands is thus an important contribution to climate regulation. The significance of this fact is becoming increasingly recognised at a time when the

question of which technologies are appropriate for Carbon Dioxide Capture and Storage (CCS) is being discussed.

Moorland protects the climate, cyclists too?

The average German produces about 11 tons of CO₂ per annum, the world average is just 4 tons. From a global-warming point of view, 2 tons would be enough. That cycling is gentle on the climate is clear to anyone. But the CO₂ audit is what counts. Because a cyclist also produced greenhouse gases. A person of average weight produces 6 to 7 grams of CO₂ per kilometre of moderate cycling through the burning off of calories. That is a meagre amount in contrast to the 160 - 300 grams of CO₂ released by a car. But it's only part of the story, because there is also the question of how those calories were delivered in the first place: the carbon debt of a red-meat meal is up to 15 times that of a plate of vegetables. And while on the subject of cycling and climate change: the Vennbahn is particularly climate-friendly because, with a maximum gradient of only 2%, the consumption of calories and thus the production of CO₂ are both kept to a minimum.

High altitude moorland – a giant water storage and distribution centre

Moorlands were created after the last ice-age, about 7,500 years ago, through the partial decomposition of plants, primarily sphagnum moss. The moorland of the High Fen is a particularly remarkable water store: the metre-thick peat soil sucks up and holds moisture like a huge sponge. That which cannot be contained runs off in a natural rhythm into rivulets and brooks. These join to form streams and torrents, and eventually the rivers that depart to all the cardinal points, before making for their final destination in the North Sea. Wet moorlands build up above a watertight mantle of clay. They are fed from above by plentiful rainfall, especially from autumn to spring, when the largest share of the annual precipitation (for the High Fen this lies somewhere between 1,400 and 1,700 mm) usually falls. Wet moorland has an astounding storage capacity, the peat moss layer is capable of holding up to ten times its own weight. This giant capacity forces the water-table to rise, even to the full height of the peat moss layer.

The long journey to becoming a protected nature reserve

Today, 4,600 hectares of the total surface of the High Fen are demarcated as a nature reserve. The Fen area was once far greater. On the map drawn up by Joseph Johann von Ferraris, who made the first topographic survey, at the command of the empress Maria Theresia in 1777, of what was at the time the Austrian Netherlands, the high altitude wetland can be seen to cover 12,000 hectares, three times its current area. Pockets of moorland extended as far as today's Gileppe reservoir and into the Hertogen Forest, reached out to Raeren, Roetgen and Lammersdorf. The Fen villages were founded in the middle ages. The process of clearing and draining the Fen began in the 15th century to make way for its use as grazing land and hay mowing as well as for the cutting of peat as a source of household fuel. Forestation was the great theme of the 19th century. The invasive introduction of the spruce fir began, only halting when its pernicious effect on the rest of the system became increasingly apparent. In the 1950s, thinking began to change, and in 1957 the "High Fen Protected Nature Reserve" was established. At the time, it only covered a surface of 1,400 hectares; today it is more than three times that size. The next step came in 1971 with the creation of the trans-frontier High Fen – Eifel Nature Park. This two-nation project has 2,400 km² of its total area in Germany and 700 km² in Belgium. Since 1992, the Fen-Eifel moorlands are strictly protected, with the support of the LIFE-Programm (L'Instrument Financier pour l'Environnement) of the European Union. Heath and moorland are to be encouraged to regenerate naturally.

Cultivation plans and economic valorisation:

Despite human intervention, still "unspoilt nature"

The High Fen has for hundreds of years been described in strongly naturalistic, ideal and romantic terms, as being "far from civilisation", "untouched", "wild", "natural" or "intact". But this is not so. Because the High Fen is a landscape that has been exploited and cultivated. An indication of this lies in the necessity, in 1992, of imposing a series of strict laws to protect the moor and heathland. On

the edge of the High Fen, classic Fen-village settlements such as Xhoffraix, Ovifat, Robertville, Sourbrodt, Weywertz, Elsenborn, Kalterherberg, Mützenich, Konzen, Lammersdorf or Roetgen grew up in the middle ages. Artists, such as the Aachener Heinz Heinrichs (born in 1888) caught the isolation of these hamlets. In his painting “A lonely farm on the High Fen”, tall, straggly trees are grouped around a farmyard beneath a threatening autumnal sky. Deep incisions, literally, were soon made in the “untouched nature” of the High Fen, firstly by the practise of peat cutting for fuel, but also by the building of the main road from Eupen to Malmedy in 1856, and later by the construction of the Vennbahn in 1885. Today, there is a marked contrast between the wide open, bleakness of the Fen and the hedged landscapes of Monschau district and the southern slopes. In 1991, the High Fen won an “Oscar” of sorts, when it was voted “Landscape of the Year” by the organisation “Nature Friends International (NFI)”.

Regional development through roads and farms

Plans to open the Fen to cultivation have existed for centuries. The first of these was drawn up under the French administration from 1794 to 1814. The moorlands would be drained by cutting ditches, so that sheep could one day graze there. Fortunately, the nearby towns blocked the plan, for fear of their industries losing the precious, pure Fen water. In 1837, the Stavelot leather manufacturer Henri Fischbach published an essay detailing plans for the cultivation of the High Fen. This called for an infrastructure of roads and the funding of agricultural development, the construction of farms for rent and the large-scale planting of beech and conifer. According to Fischbach, this would give employment possibilities to those whom the increasing mechanisation of regional industries was rendering jobless. He hoped these jobs would also make smuggling unnecessary and that the new roads would open up the attractive region to visitors. He was convinced that the Romans had deforested the once rich woods of the High Fen, which had led to the unproductive moorland taking over.

In 1856 forestation begins

Otto Beck, a senior civil servant and councillor for rural affairs, cherished plans for cultivating the High Fen. In 1864, he published an almost missionary project, laying particular weight on what he believed would be a beneficial change in the climate of the area (diminished evaporation causing less crop-rotting rainfall, etc). But at that time, 1864, forestation had already begun, ever since Hans Hugo von Kleist-Retzow, President of the Rhine Province, had travelled through the Fen region on 27th June 1854. The results of this very important provincial visit were laid before the ministry: The High Fen had to be forested, as soon as it could be drained. This should, however, take into account the needs of local communities for grazing and haymaking. The development project was deemed to be “in the general interest of rural culture”, which meant that the State would carry the cost. In 1857, forestation began and as 1858 opened, a “principle forestation plan” with an implementation perspective of 30 years was drawn up. Forestation and drainage followed in several thrusts. The tree of choice was the Norwegian Spruce, whose vigorous growth was considered ideal for the economic needs of the time. The last plantings under this plan were still being carried out, for example in Mützenich Fen, even after the Second World War.

The sheep went, the spruce came

It may seem hard to believe today that the High Fen was once a pasture land. Toward the end of the 19th century, there were still cows grazing in the “Stuhl”, a fenland meadow near Raeren. And “Fenhay” was harvested there, too. But the Fen grazers were generally more ovine than bovine. Sheep typified the image of a Fenland village right through the 19th century, grazing the wasteland areas. At 8 o’clock every morning, the pipe of the village shepherd summoned his bleating charges, who came running from every family stall at the sound. They would all be gathered together into a herd on the “Scheidplatz” (“division place” = where the herd is divided up again in the evening), before the shepherd and his dog led them out to the Fen. When coming home, the shepherd and dog had to take care to keep the herd together, so that none went astray. Wolves were still a danger to the flocks until 1870. When the sheep did not want to leave their grazing, that was reckoned to be a sign

of bad weather tomorrow. However, if they were easy to drive home, then tomorrow would be fair. An understanding of the weather and a talent for naturopathy were both domains in which shepherds excelled by nature of their employment. For the sociable and garrulous, these taciturn figures, whose lives were spent alone out on the Fen with their herd, appeared like strangers to their own folk. And, like strangers, they - and their sheep - were due to vanish as the forestation programme expanded and the spruce trees advanced ever higher up the Fen.

Forestation begins to meet some resistance

Planting the wastelands in the High Fen was initially welcomed by the local communities. But gradually the lack of free grazing, hay and leaf fall (for the lining of livestock stalls) began to be a problem. Forestation met with its first resistance. From 1862, it could only be advanced by the threat of forced measures in communities such as Elsenborn, Sourbrodt or Ovifat. The pro and contra discussion raged. The District Commissioner of Malmedy, Eduard Freiherr von Broich, remarked in this context: "Local communities and individual Fenland farmers are at last beginning to develop a sense of proprietary concern and the desire to take their own measures towards reclaiming and cultivating the heathlands, wastelands and marshes. Up till now, the foresters have had it all their own way ..." Finally, mounting resistance led to the programme being halted. By 1875, 18 years after it was begun, only 1,300 of a planned 3,999 hectares of wasteland had been forested. By 1893, that area had risen to 1,982 hectares, still just half of the intended 30-year target ... a goal that should have been met in 1887.

At last the Vennbahn arrives!

On 1st December 1885, the section of Vennbahn from Monschau via Weismes to Malmedy was opened. The weather was mild, "considering the season, a real spring day". This suited the feelings of the Fen villagers who had waited since the opening of the initial connection between Aachen / Rothe Erde and Monschau, as one might wait for spring, hoping that the trains might one day "bring new life and business to their region". But the railway soon had to overcome the rude conditions that were more typical of winter in the Fen. The Malmedy District Commissioner looked back on the first Vennbahn winters. "Some years, we were totally cut off. When the locomotives could no longer force their way through, a postillion was engaged to ensure that the mail arrived. When he could no longer get through, the telegraph became our last connection to the outside world. The Vennbahn also changed the attitudes of its passengers toward the Fen and the Eifel. The Aachen newspaper "Echo der Gegenwart" ??? reported on a journey taken with the new train: "One would not have thought, after traversing the raw wilderness of the High Fen, that the Eifel could be so sweetly beautiful". The Vennbahn became known in the High Fen itself as "Bimmelbahn" (Jingle Train) because the engine drivers had to continually sound their warning bell at the many crossings of every isolated cart-track to avoid collision with ox-drawn wagons piled high with peat billets or hay bales.

The moors of the High Fen as local fuel provider

Peat is created in the moorland as an organic sediment from incompletely decomposed plant matter. Thus, peat is nothing more than an early stage of coal. For centuries, moorlands have been exploited for peat extraction. In its processed form, peat cut from the High Fen served mainly as fuel, its calorific value being similar to that of brown coal. Knowing this, it is quite understandable that the locals were eager to exploit this nearby fuel source, all the more so given the harshness of the Fenland winters. Although elsewhere coal and brown coal, with the help of the railway, was being delivered into every home, up in the High Fen, things were not so advanced yet. Even after the arrival of the Vennbahn, it was still a long time before the people of the Fen villages considered changing over to coal or coke. A family home required between 15,000 and 20,000 peat sods to get them through the winter. Leo Dohmen, in his book "Hermit of the High Fen" (1935), described the life of a peat cutter thus: "When the spring weather came, hundreds of young men and girls from the surrounding villages would set out in the mists of early morning into the fog-bound Fen, returning in the evening. With green twigs, they would mark out their plot, then the work would begin. Before cutting the peat sods, the men first carefully peeled off the top layer of heath vegetation in squares

to be used later to line the sides and floor of the cut, so that nothing would be left exposed ... Meanwhile, the girls and women loaded the sods onto wheel barrows and trundled them off to the drying site ... where the sods were laid in rows and stacks next to one another ... Sun and air would quickly dry and harden the peat billets, as sufficient space was always left for the wind to blow through". Heavy wagons, pulled by a pair of horses or oxen would bear this hoard of fuel into the villages in mid August, beginning as soon as the hay harvest had been safely brought in. The sods were then neatly stacked in the "turf stall". Twenty cartloads or more were needed to supply an entire winter.

The peat cutters of Sourbrodt

Like no other Fen community, Sourbrodt has represented the skill of the peat cutters since the 16th century. That this still continues has to do with an ancient right of use that was once negotiated with the local squire and is still valid today. In 1956, the year that the Belgian State placed extensive areas of the Fen under protection, a legal manoeuvre was started to prevent the people of Sourbrodt from cutting peat in "their" Fen. The villagers resisted, citing their ancient privilege, and won. However, the right to cut peat will cease if ever a full year passes without them having exploited it. In 1889, an attempt was made to industrialise peat cutting, with Sourbrodt station as a distribution point. However, it did not prove economically viable, nor could the quality compete with that of peat from the Friesian moors. Rudy Giet was born in Sourbrodt in 1926, he can still clearly remember the years when he would go out peat cutting with his father. His parents ran a small holding, although his father worked as a mason and his mother as an itinerant milk maid. Income was meagre. They were happy that they could cut their winter fuel from the Fen, especially in the pre-war years. "Once it was clear that the frosts had passed, not before 1st May, we Sourbrodt "turfers" (Troufleurs) would spend the entire day out on the Fen, setting off by first light at four-thirty." Cutting the sods took about a week for the family, Rudy's father would have to take days off for this. In autumn, the peat billets were carted into the village, tractors only started doing this work after the war. Of particular value were the sods from deep cuts, where the peat was richest: "that burned better and hotter", says Rudy Giet. Today there is only one peat cut in Sourbrodt, "La Béole", where a few households still cut their winter fuel. Rudy Giet tells visitors all about the art of peat cutting at the Nature Park Centre in Botrange, where he works as a guide. He is happy that this ancient skill has neither entirely died out nor been forgotten. "Besides" he adds "I just love the smell!"

The High Fen of artists and authors:

Artists catch the elemental High Fen landscape for posterity

"Bleak" and "beautiful" is a combination of adjectives we often find used by the first leisure visitors to an otherwise inaccessible region at the turn of the 20th century. The arrival of the railway meant that town-dwellers could travel in comfort to isolated areas. Artists were pacemakers in the development of interest in the Eifel and Ardennes. They mainly came from the artistic "capitals" of Koblenz and Dusseldorf. One of these was Alfred Holler, a contemporary of August Macke and the Eifel and Rhine region's most important Impressionist Realist of the German school. After marrying, he moved to Eupen in 1910. Some of his paintings are of the High Fen. In these he shows a particular affinity for trees and shrubs deformed by prevailing winds and grasslands swept by the elements. Even more dramatic is a Fen painting by the Liege impressionist Dieudonné Jacobs: across the broad reach of the bleak moor landscape extends a vast and threatening sky, heavy with ponderous cloud. These, painted in thick brush strokes, are in contrast with the more filigree brushwork of the Fen itself. A feeling of being exposed to the forces of nature is created. Winter in the High Fen is the chosen subject of painter Lucien Hock, who lives there. His works present the moorland like a stage, tensely awaiting great events.

Authors praise the High Fen but are concerned for its future and that of its people

The High Fen was late in finding its literary streak. Guillaume Apollinaire (1880 – 1918) came to visit in his youth while staying in Stavelot. He wrote an ode to the Fen landscape in "Fagnes de Wallonie". In one of its verse, he describes "my wounded feet, entangled in the tenderly entwining shrubbery of

blueberry and cranberry". In 1906, the first "Fen novel" to be written in German was published in Essen. "The House on the Moor" by Nanny Lambrecht, a schoolteacher from Malmedy, was a socially critical treatment of the clash between tradition and modernity in the High Fen region. Two years later, "The Fen Cross" by Clara Viebig was published. For this author, who was born in Trier, the title stands for the cross of poverty born by generations of Fenland villagers around the turn of the century. She questions the value of progress as nature and the natural life of man is shoved aside by the arrival of the machine age. The Malmedy author Ludwig Mathar, born in 1882, belonged to a later generation and cherished his relationship with the Malmedy Fenland. His three Fen novels are partly biographical. In "The Tailor of the High Fen", he constructed a monument to the builder of the "Baraque Michel". His works helped a broader public to find their way here. The Verviers writer Albert Bonjean was not only a Fen author, but also its lawyer. He depicted in writing and song the magical grace and beauty of the moorland. In 1910, he founded an association for the defence of the landscape and heritage of the High Fen.