R"estrictions imposed during the COVID pandemic had a profound impact on many heritage railways in Europe and beyond. One of the saddest affected was the Tramway Touristique de l’Aisne (TTA) in the Belgian Ardennes. Operation had been somewhat fitful for a number of years, blighted both by shortages of staff and rolling stock unreliability, such that by 2020 the whole operation was almost moribund.

Planning a speculative visit to this remote line became risky because of the likelihood of meeting one of many suspensions of service, and by 2022 only occasional journeys were operated. For this earliest of all Belgian tramway heritage operations, opened in June 1966, the future looked desperately bleak and many believed it would cease completely at the end of the 2022 season.

Then a miracle happened. The TTA’s line is laid wholly within the Province of Luxembourg, a region rich in beautiful scenery and historic buildings but with little industry aside from forestry to support its population. The TTA line is a cut-back of a once much-longer U-shaped route totalling over 60km (37 miles) that linked Mellery and Manhay, serving a host of small communities to which its operations were a lifeline; the 11.2km (seven-mile) section that survives was opened in stages in 1909-11.

Exceptional in its great length, it was otherwise typical of many former Vicinal rural lines, worked initially by steam trams and later by Autorails until the all-conquering motor bus took over passenger services in the late 1950s. That some of this line has survived at all is remarkable and a tribute to visionaries who realised its potential over 60 years ago. Now the local authorities have stepped in as patrons and, not wishing to lose an important tourist attraction in the region, have played a major part in promoting its renewal.

Although much work was started by the previous team of volunteers, an important step forward was achieved recently by the establishment of a completely new Board of Management, comprising representatives of the two municipal councils, Érezée and Manhay, together with a group of sympathetic tramway enthusiasts. Critically, the new board has formed a new link with the established ASVi museum line at Lobbes-Thuin, a move that will in due course prove of mutual benefit, but initially will bring an invaluable experience to bear on TTA resuscitation work.

Rapid revival

Those who toiled behind the scenes to set up the new board did not wait to start rehabilitation of the line; work that had already been started by TTA volunteers before the pandemic was accelerated and finalised. The diesel-engined draisine works car 9594 (Plasser & Theurer, 1980), well known as one of the Vicinal works cars active in the 1980s for the construction of lines 80 and 90, played an important role. It carried out all kinds of work as the fleet of four TTA Autorails was nearly dead, with just AR.133 surviving.

Car 9594, inactive for decades, was transferred from Anderlues to Blier in late summer 2018 during a clean-up operation of the Anderlues site by TEC.

The entire line, with rails and sleepers, was inspected and replaced where necessary. Lineside foliage was stripped back, with 1.5m clearance each side of the track in railway fashion to ensure a clear passage for the trams and remove risk to passengers. The first item of rolling stock – Autorail AR.133 – was taken out of the depot at Blier, checked and repaired, and the entire operation – trams, infrastructure and lineside equipment – presented for a formal Ministry inspection in late July. Full credit must be awarded to the working party for the quality of its work, which resulted in this inspection being passed with flying colours, allowing operation to be resumed from 26 July. The Ardennes countryside once more resonates to the throaty roar of the Vicinal Autorail.

Clearing the entire track was a major operation; for example, the sidings and passing-loop at Dochamps had been completely obscured by unchecked vegetation. Any visitor to Blier depot in recent years will need no reminding that the 37 items of rolling stock have been stalled in haphazard fashion and many have not turned a wheel for years. Amongst these is a flat-wagon bogie trailer submerged amongst long grass, which turned out to be of invaluable service in transporting surplus wheel-sets during the depot clearance.

None of the rolling stock has been disposed of but all has been repositioned in a logical manner ready to receive much-needed attention in due course. This is the work of several years, but if this season’s efforts are anything to go by there will soon be several items of rolling stock traversing the line that have not been seen for many years.

Visitor improvements

The new board has several projects in mind to improve the visitor experience. One objective of the new link with ASVi is to enter into periodic rolling stock exchanges. The TTA line originated with steam traction, and when first designated as a heritage line regular steam operation was a feature. This ceased in 1989, but one steam locomotive remains. It is firmly intended that steam operation will be resumed, although no timescale prediction can yet be made.

A museum building has also been built, which currently houses steam locomotive HL.1075, ‘royal’ trailer A.165 of 1904, and enclosed passenger trailer A.1348 of 1909. Nearby there is a children’s playground and small amusement park.

The 2023 timetable features three journeys: departures at 13.30 and 15.00 from Pont d’Érezée to Forge à la Plez, and a final one at 16.30 all the way to the ultimate terminus at Lamorménil. There are no advertised return times, but as a rule the trains wait for around ten minutes at their respective termini, whilst the motor car runs round and is re-coupled to the trailers. Operation from 26 July and in August was on Saturdays and Wednesdays and an autumn service has been introduced on Saturdays only in September and October (last operating 28 October). The timetable is identical on all days. Adult return fares between Pont d’Érezée and Forge à la Plez are EUR10, while the return fare for the through journey to Lamorménil is EUR15.

TTA’s biggest disadvantage is its relative inaccessibility, especially in a country where rural bus services have been reduced to a level even lower than in the UK. It is currently impossible to travel both to the line and return from it by public transport on any day during the summer season. For those without private transport, the only really practicable solution is to take the TEC bus from Namur to Hotton (Mondays-Fridays) and hire a taxi to Pont d’Érezée, and vice versa for the return.

At a time when several UK heritage railways are suffering at the hands of officialdom, what a refreshing change it is to learn of such a welcome re-awakening in Belgium, actively supported by local authorities.

› With grateful thanks to Luc Koenen for additional reporting.
1. The only steam tram locomotive on the TTA rolling stock roster is 1919 type 18 HL.1075, built by Les Ateliers de Construction Grand-Hornu. It is displayed in the newly-constructed Exhibition Hall at Pont d’Érezée. Mike Russell

2. News of the renaissance and re-opening of the TTA travelled fast, and less than three weeks after the inaugural journey a three-car set was necessary to convey passengers. Autorail AR.133, with baladeuse trailer A.8944 of 1916 and enclosed trailer A.1344 of 1908 in tow, is leaving Pont d’Érezée on 12 August. Mike Russell

3. The ex-SNCV draisine 9594 shunts two long out-of-service cars at Blier on 15 July. Nearest is A.215, a 1920-built second-class brake trailer for steam service. Ahead is trailer A.10760, also built in 1920 but for electric service. Luc Koenot

4. During extensive clearing of the depot at Blier, several vehicles that had not seen the light of day for years were moved onto open access tracks. Hauled by Autorail AR.133 on 15 July are A.2355 (a brake wagon for steam service from 1899) and a wooden freight wagon, A.18253, from 1926. Luc Koenot

5. Extensive lineside work had to be undertaken before the TTA route was in a state suitable for official inspection. To assist in vegetation clearance, the former TEC draisine (SNCV 9594), at Blier depot since 2018, was pressed into service – seen in action on 13 July 2023. Luc Koenot

6. A longer rake of rolling stock outside Blier depot on 15 July with second-class trailer A.1208 for steam service dating from 1907 (nearest), one of several cars approved for passenger service. Luc Koenot

7. Retrieved from the depths of the overgrown tracks at Blier is this bogie flat wagon, A.8139 built in 1914 by La Métallurgique, that proved invaluable in moving many wheel-sets during depot clearance; wooden-bodied Standard trailer 19669 of 1930 (formerly motor car 9817) is sandwiched between it and Autorail AR.133. Luc Koenot

8. An impressive rake of mixed rolling stock during shunting operations at Blier on 15 July. Behind Autorail AR.133 are A.2355, A.18253, flat wagon A.7295 and hoist wagon A.4149. The two enclosed trailers in rear, A.1208 and A.1344, are members of the current fleet. Luc Koenot