

Suisse sur la Deûle - en dimanches

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Calum Alexander




ABOVE: Neuchâtel No.74 waits at Wambrechies.

Photos: Calum Alexander

The commune of Wambrechies is a pleasant residential suburb of Lille situated on the canalised la Deûle. On both banks of the river the former towpaths have been turned into well-used cycle/walking routes that give residents of Lille access to the flat Flanders countryside that runs up to and across the nearby Belgian border. Once this whole area was served by a network of local and interurban tramways, virtually all of which had disappeared by the 1960s. However, on the eastern bank of la Deûle some 3km of metre-gauge tramway follows the busy towpath and on Sundays from April through September elderly tramcars carry enthusiastic passengers along a memory of what once was.

Although the principal trams used on this service are carefully preserved relics of the former local networks, on most operating days one of the vehicles is normally from Switzerland. The operation, technically the 'Tramway Touristique du Val de Deûle', is run by volunteers from the association 'AMITRAM' (Association du Musée International des Transports Métropolitains) that operates from a small Dépôt in the adjacent commune of Marquette-lez-Lille. The association has a collection of 20 trams of which six are from Swiss operators: Bern (1 plus trailer); Basel's BVB (1); Genève (1); Fribourg (1), and Neuchâtel (2). Unfortunately most of these are located at 'AMITRAM's' main Dépôt some distance from their canal-side operating area. This is not open to the public. For their regular operations three cars and an overhead maintenance vehicle are kept in the modern facility near the southern end of the line. This is open to the public on operating days, and also has some displays on the history of tramways in the area and the founding of the association in 1968. Details of the Swiss trams at 'AMITRAM' can be found on their (French only) website www.amitram.asso.fr On a visit in April 2017 Neuchâtel Ce2/2 No.74 was in service. This small vehicle was built by SIG in 1921, only seats 20 -

plus 25 standing, and operated until 1976 in its home city before moving to France for preservation.

The original 2.2km of the 3km long canal-side line came into operation in 1995 thanks to the financial assistance of the communes it serves, plus other funding bodies. Trams operate at 20-minute intervals between 14.00 and 18.00 on Sundays, and additionally between 15.00 and 17.00 on Wednesdays in the school summer holidays. An end-to-end one-way trip takes around 12-minutes, with a return ticket costing €5. Services can be joined at four points en-route - although not at the midway passing loop. The original line was just from Marquette to Wambrechies but in 2003 it was extended 800m north to the Ferme Saint Chrysole, a water-side wedding and conference venue. The long-term plan is that the track should be extended another 3km to the next community of Quesnoy-sur-Deûle. From Central Lille Wambrechies is easily reached by the frequent 'Transpole' Line L1. The southern terminus at Marquette is a short walk from the route of the less frequent Line 88 bus. Wambrechies itself is well worth a visit as it has a canal-side Château, which houses a museum of puppets and old toys, plus a splendid garden. Also on the canal there are the buildings of the Claeysens Distillery founded in 1817, and famous for its Jenever. Since 1999 the buildings, complete with their 200 year old equipment, have been classified as an historic monument. 

BELOW: Lille tram.

