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La Gare de Chatelleraut Chateauf

Rail86 is a model railway club in Châtelleraut, situated about 80 miles inland from the Bay of Biscay, halfway between Paris and Bordeaux on the river Vienne, a tributary of the river La Loire.



The club has built several layouts in 'N' and 'HO', is planning to embark on further projects in 'HO' and 7mm scale narrow gauge, and has most recently built the transportable exhibition layout of Châtelleraut-Châteauf in 'HO', after deciding to model a real station. The main railway line from Paris to Bordeaux passes through the town on its journey to the South-West, where the station (referred to historically as Châtelleraut-PO and opened in the 1850s) was part of an important junction for two cross country lines. One of these was the line to Châtelleraut-Châteauf and Loudun in the West (built in the 1880s) and the other to Le Blanc and Tourmon in the East. Thus, it was a natural choice to recreate an artistic impression of the station of Châtelleraut-Châteauf, notwithstanding the challenge of the limited space on a transportable layout.

Trains ceased running there many decades ago, hence the interpretation of the station and its surroundings are "what might have been in the 1970s" if the line had survived. The layout includes accurate models of station buildings, railway structures, plus other major buildings and features such as hotels, houses, cafes, businesses and garages, etc., which were measured on site and photographed before being modelled by various club members. The bridges used to hide the transition of the track to the fiddle-yard are based on structures from the line itself, although the immediate context is inevitably fictitious. The 1931 plans were adapted to the available space: in the goods yard one track was deleted and another displaced, whilst one of the through lines was omitted and the large network of sidings serving the old factories on the main line station side (long since abandoned, demolished or rebuilt) had to be truncated. At the same time a fictitious engine shed was added on the Loudun approaches of the station to add both operating interest and balance to the overall vista, although all such facilities were at the main line station about two kilometres away. The line between the main line station and Châtelleraut-Châteauf crosses the river Vienne on a steel truss bridge to the North of the town centre, this is included on the model along with a traditional low draught river sailboat from previous centuries, this is quite legitimate as a preserved sample is kept securely moored to the Henri IV 16-17c stone bridge, in the middle of the river. Above all, the quality and authenticity of the buildings and structures was paramount. As the emphasis is on the scenery and buildings, ready to run locomotives and rolling stock are used.

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THE LINE HISTORY

In 1879, Charles de Freycinet, Minister of Public Works, adopted a project for the construction of 150 railway lines intended to serve the sub-prefectures. The line linking Châtellerault (on the Pairs-Bordeaux main line) to Loudun (on the old Tours-Les Sables d'Olonne line), on which the station of Châtellerault-Châteauneuf is situated, was part of this plan.

The line was declared a public utility by the Act of February 21, 1880. After some inevitable turf battles between communes, the route was decided finally from a short list of four and work commenced in September 1881. The organisers recruited local and regional labour and also Italian workers. There were few accidents (three workmen killed in total and a broken leg when one slipped on horse droppings), winter and other disruptions. At Châteauneuf the construction of the platform was completed in 1885, but the ancillary works (earthworks, constructions, buildings) continued after then.

It was the Poitevin company, Caillaud-Degenne, which won the contract to build the 8 intermediate stations and the 50-odd crossing gatekeeper's houses along the line.



Monts s / Guesnes, Lendoître and Châteauneuf were to have a 4th class station building (4 windows at the front and a goods shed of 10x21.5m); the others would have a 5th class station building (3 windows at the front). They would all have in common a footpath, lamp house, toilets, and platform shelter, goods shed with high platform and loading ramp, baggage swing, loading gauge ... Lendoître and Châteauneuf were to have a Hachette book stall. The station at Savigny, being mid-way between Châtellerault and Loudun, was to have a water tower and water crane. Their construction was phased staged between 1884 and 1887. The crossing gatekeeper's houses were all built to the same plan, 5.45x8m: a ground floor with living kitchen and fire plus a bedroom and staircase to the upper floor which was divided into a loft and one small room with mansard roof. A lean-to store was attached to this small house. Some had a cellar that was accessible from the exterior. Each was equipped with a well. There were 55 constructions along the line: the metal trellis bridge over the Vienne, the two bridges over the Envigne, over bridges and under bridges for local roads, and numerous small bridges straddling streams and ditches. Engine sheds were located at Châtellerault and Loudun.



Many of the itinerant workers were lodged in private houses and there were instances of records not being kept, taxes not paid, petty thefts, drunkenness, fines (2F seems to have been typical) and a dog taking dislike to one of the workmen – the owner was fined for allowing his dog to be off the leash.

Further difficulties arose as some of the Communes which had promised funds to encourage the construction of the line defaulted on their promises, some of these cases dragged on into the 1890's, 5-10 years after the line was opened.

The line was opened on Sunday September 19 1886 by the Secretary of state for the Navy, other Government officials, local dignitaries and councillors. It is recorded that their inaugural train was decorated with tricolour flags. The State dignitaries took the train from Tours, whilst the others boarded at their local stations along the line's route from Loudun to Châtellerault.

The train departed from Tours for Loudun at around 1.00pm and was met there by the Prefect of the Vienne and Conseil-Municipal. Following lunch at Loudun the train continued on its way and was invariably met at each station by the cheering populace, often with much ceremony and fanfares such as the "Chant de départ" and the "Marseillaise". At Châtellerault a large parade of gendarmes on horseback and gymnasts was held, followed by a banquet at 6.00pm in the Hotel Universe and then a firework display on the quayside of the river Vienne. It was after midnight when the train made the return journey. The line was opened to commercial traffic the following day with three passenger trains each way and two freight trains. Journey times ranged from 1.30 to 3.00 hours for passengers and 3.26 to 4.05 for the goods depending on the schedule. Speeds of 50mph (80kph) were reported and were considered fast for that epoch. The passenger trains were made up of two or three coaches of 1st, 2nd and 3rd class and goods wagons plus guard's/post van at the rear, hence the longer journey times on some of the trains.



The line was single track, 51km long and served 12 stations: Châtellerault-PO; Châtellerault-Châteauneuf; Scorbé Clairvaux; St Genest d'Ambière; Lendoître; Cernay Doussay; Savigny s / o Faye; Berthegeon; Mountains s/ Guesnes; Le Bouchet; Le Bourdigalière and Loudun. From Loudun to Savigny s / o Faye, the route followed the crest of the watershed with gradients better than 1/100. It then followed the course of a small river to Lendoître beyond which it climbed back up to Scorbé Clairvaux to avoid its meandering course and then descended again to pick up the course of the river Envigne to Châteauneuf. After crossing the river Vienne, the line joined the main line into the station at Châtellerault. On the far side of Châtellerault main line station, a separate line continued the link to Le Blanc and Tournon as originally envisaged in the 1879 plan. Today, this has

all but disappeared except for a few road bridges and the occasional scar of an old embankment or cutting. There was also a tramway/spur to the Manu, being the armaments factory dating back several centuries, the tracks are still visible at the factory and one can trace the route of the spur by the curvature of the boundaries where the trackbed has not been built over, and a remaining derelict railway crossing gate.

The train allowed the rapid transport of local produce. Wine from Berthegeon in a 4 cubic metre cask wagon, oak and walnut of the neighbouring Scévolles forest from Monts, melons, asparagus, shallots from Lendoître. On fête days at Mont's and Lendoître additional trains were run. The local population demanded extra stops: footpaths were subsequently created at the level crossings at Cernay- Doussay and The Bourdigalière. The

kitchen window of the crossing gatekeeper's house served as a ticket office at Cernay. By 1914 even small halts were recording up to 25 passengers per day; by the 1920's passengers were taking bicycles with them and extra stops were being introduced for the goods trains.

The line had its moment of fleeting glory in September 1912. That year the French Army held 10 days of manoeuvres involving several thousand men, under the command of Marshal Joffre, on an area from Saumur to Châtellerault (a distance of some 100 miles). Several foreign delegations were invited including Russia, which was represented by the Tsar's uncle the Grand Duke Nicolas. His special train was parked at the station in Bethagon on a track especially prepared for the occasion.

Between the two wars, advances in agriculture resulted in the construction of grain silos in the freight stations and the birth of further traffic: fertilizer, grain, agricultural machinery... The evening trains would collect produce for the Parisian markets the following morning. Some 20 wagons of produce per day would leave Lencloitre alone in high season.



Electricity was installed in the 1930's. The only serious accident occurred on the 1st July 1935 with one fatality, this was due to the condition of the track.

The SNCF was created on the 1st January 1938 following the nationalization of the old companies, which previously held the right to operate the railway lines. The resulting 'rationalisations' proved fatal to the line and passenger services were withdrawn on the 15th May 1939.

In 1944 after the allied landings in France, military action seriously affected the line: an allied bombing raid (NZAF Mosquitos) successfully attacked a fuel dump in the local forest and the Châtellerault-Châteaneuf station facilities, six tank wagons of fuel were destroyed in the station itself. Subsequently, explosive charges were placed under local bridges by the retreating invaders, but many were sabotaged by the local resistance. Both the historic Henri IV Bridge and the first 19th century reinforced concrete bridge built in France were thus saved (some 60 tons of explosives were placed under the Henri IV bridge alone); both main and local railway bridges across the river Vienne were destroyed on the night of August 30th to 31st. Road bridges to the North of the town were destroyed by the Luftwaffe. In 1944 a German military train with field gun etc. was misrouted to Monts-sur-Guesnes instead of Monts and created some perturbations to the occupiers, and much mirth amongst the local population.

Passenger services were temporarily resumed from May 22nd 1944, but had to be limited to railcars from Loudun to Châteaneuf-Châtellerault due to the destruction of the bridge over the river. Final closure to passenger traffic was during the summer 1946. The bridge was rebuilt in 1955.



The section Lencloitre-Châteaneuf was the first to be closed to freight traffic on the 26th September 1980. That from Bouchet to Lencloitre followed on the 1st June 1987. The official journal of the 26th September 1992 records the completion of the closure of the line. The track was lifted shortly afterwards.

Fortunately, the General Council of the Vienne and town councils decided to use it to construct a cycle way running some 40km from Châteaneuf to Bouchet. So the line still survives for public use, albeit by ramblers and cyclists (mountain bike tyres are advised). Most buildings (stations, goods sheds, and level crossing houses) have been purchased and renovated by individuals with varying degrees of taste.

Also, a departmental steam tramway which ran from Châtellerault for nearly 70km through the valley of the Vienne to Chauvigny in the South and onwards to Bouresse was built in the early 1900s. It is recorded that on the tramway, the male passengers were regularly required to help push the train up the gradients – and on one occasion some left the train altogether, ran past it up a hill and enjoyed a glass of wine in a café before climbing back on board when the train finally reached the summit. Few traces of the line remain, but the bridge over the river Vienne at Cenon has survived and is now used by road traffic.

Today, the TGVs with some 24,000hp available cover the 300km journey from Châtellerault to Paris in 80 odd minutes ...

CONSTRUCTION OF THE LAYOUT

The layout is specifically designed and built for ease of assembly at exhibitions and consists of either five or eight transportable and stackable modules with identical dimensions (1,2m x 0,6m) plus corner modules where the track turns and runs into an equal number of 'fiddle yard' modules at the rear. The track alignment at the joints is such that two specific modules can be omitted where space is limited. The legs fold up into the bases of the modules and are fitted with height adjusting screws to allow for uneven floors. The backdrop is made from 8mm plywood in two sections fitted with vertical slides so that the upper section and lighting pelmet can be raised to operating height. A front panel is hinged to form a plinth that hangs down to hide the legs; when both this and the legs are folded up and the lighting pelmet is lowered, a strong box is created which has additional fixings so that it can be securely stacked to another for safe transport and storage.



The actual baseboard is covered with a layer of cork to reduce noise, the track is Peco streamline 100 secured with track pins, plus electrofrog points fitted with Lemaco slow-motion point motors. The sleeper web is cut and the sleepers respaced to the equivalent of 18 per 12m in the sidings, as was the norm for the French State railways in the late 1800's. The sides of the rails are painted with Humbrol 73 to create the rust colour and the ends of the check rails picked out in white. Moistened industrial sand is used for the ballast, laid onto wood glue and then left to dry for several days.

Generally, 3mm foamboard was used to make the walls of the buildings with wooden corner reinforcements. Doors and windows were built individually according to the size needed, use being made of pre-printed sheets where possible and appropriate, roofs are overlaid strips of drawing paper, painted fine sandpaper was used to create Crepi finished and concrete block walls and plastic strips for metal strip cladding.

Published by Howard Smith

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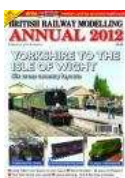
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