



No Steam in the Forest

In the second of two articles on lines in north-west France, Philip Horton looks at a railway compelled to use diesel power.

The first of my two articles in NGW101 described how a group of young enthusiasts had joined forces to create a centre for historic French rolling stock at the Lac du Rillé. By then trains had already been running on Le p'tit Train de Saint-Trojan for almost 30 years. Rillé is situated inland some 20km north of the Loire Valley while Saint-Trojan-les-Bains lies just over 200km to the south-west on the Île d'Oléron on the Bay of Biscay.

The driving force behind this railway was a military doctor, Pol Gala. A light railway had opened on the island in April 1902 (Les Chemins de Fer Économiques des Charentes), but this had closed in around 1927. As there was no hope of resurrecting the CFEC, in 1959 Dr Gala proposed a new coastal tourist route for a 600mm gauge railway from Saint-Trojan-les-Bains to the exposed headland of Maumusson where there was an extensive beach. As the beach lacked any road access, Dr Gala envisaged that it would be used by many holidaymakers, a vision which turned out to be true and remains so today.

As a result the Société du Tramway Touristique de St Trojan (STTST) was formed. Although no heavy engineering works were involved, considerable effort was required to cut a route through dense pine forest and dunes, not to mention the need to obtain the various planning consents along with rails, rolling stock and other equipment. Clearance and track-laying started in October 1962 and the first 4.5km

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Above: Billard Type T75D arrives at Saint-Trojan-les-Bains with the stock for the 14.30 departure for the Pertuis de Maumusson.

Right: Map of the line, drawn by Stephen Edge.

Uncredited photos taken by Philip Horton on 2nd October 2013

opened to Gatteau on 30 June 1963. The remaining 2.5km to Maumusson opened two years later.

Locomotives

Although the railway has always wanted to operate steam engines it has been prevented from doing so because of the fire risk to the adjacent forestry. It has therefore built up a fleet of small mainly 4wDM diesels.

The first to arrive were three pre-war 24hp Deutz diesels (nos 1, 2 and 3), which had previously worked for the Delmas Vieljeux shipping company on the docks of La Rochelle. Of greater interest to British enthusiasts are two Ruston & Hornsby diesels (nos 4 and 5). Both were delivered to the French Purchasing Commission in 1946 and no 4 reportedly came to St-Trojan from quarries at





LOCOMOTIVE FLEET

No	Manufacturer	Wheels	Year	Wk no	Other Information
1	Deutz Type OMZ 117.	0-4-ODM	1932	10839	Ex-Delmas Vieljeux shipping company, La Rochelle. Operational on 'bar-train'
2	Deutz Type OMZ 117.	0-4-ODM	1934	11971	Ex-Delmas Vieljeux shipping company at La Rochelle. Operational on the fire train
3	Deutz Type OMZ 117.	0-4-ODM	1936	14436	Ex-Delmas Vieljeux shipping company at La Rochelle. Displayed outside the Tourist Office in Bourcefranc-le-Chapus
4	Ruston & Hornsby (Deutz engine)	4wDM	1946	244867	French Purchasing Commission then quarries at Aubervilliers. Displayed in a lay-by on the Isle of Oléron at the end of the viaduct on the D26
5	Ruston & Hornsby (Lincoln 44HP engine)	4wDM	1946	239382	French Purchasing Commission. Operational but reserved for special trains
6	Billard Type T75P. (Panhard 4HL engine)	4wDM	1945	190	Delivered new to the sandpits at Bourron-Marlotte. Operational but reserved for special trains
7	Billard Type T75D. (Deutz 5 fl 912 engine)	4wDH	?	?	Ex-tile factory at La Rochefoucauld. Operational
8	Billard Type T75D. (Deutz 5 fl 912 engine)	4wDH	?	?	Ex-tile factory at La Rochefoucauld. Operational
9	Billard Type T75P. (Panhard 4HL engine)	4wDM	1945	197	Delivered new to Bourron-Marlotte sandpits. Operational but reserved for special trains
10	Billard Type T75D (Deutz 5 fl 912 engine)	4wDH	?	?	Built with short chassis and lower cab. Used at 'Sea of Sand' amusement park at Ermenonville, Oise from 1963. Operational



Top: Typical train of the 1960s as Ruston 4wDM no 4 heads towards Maumusson. It includes replica Decauville type KE carriages built in 1963 and scrapped in 1997.

Left: One of the early Billards, no 6 of 1945, at Prévent depot in summer 2000.

Both photos by STTST

Aubervilliers in 1965. Both these and the Deutz diesels were fitted with outsized false smokestacks, which gave the engines what was described as a 'Wild West' appearance. The stacks remain a distinctive symbol for the railway and are extensively used in marketing, although the engines are no longer active on ordinary passenger trains.

Today most trains are hauled by three of the line's fleet of five 75hp Class T75 Billard diesels (nos 6 to 10). The original Class T75D was intended for use by the French military, which ordered a batch in 1939. The first loco emerged from the Tours factory in March 1940 but only 52 machines had been built before the German invasion in June. During the occupation Billard built 130 units for the German army.

After Liberation in 1944 the class was extensively built for industrial use in France. Both nos 6 and 9 at St-Trojan (Billard nos 190 and 197) were delivered new to the sandpits at Bourron-Marlotte in July and September 1945. The Le p'tit Train website gives an earlier construction date for these engines but the railway has recently discovered this to be incorrect. The locos do however retain their mechanical transmission and Panhard engines and are therefore officially classified T75P. They are now reserved for special workings. Nos 7, 8 and 10 are now fitted with Deutz engines with hydraulic transmission, while no 10 also has a shorter chassis and cut-down cab. The information available on the STTST locos is summarised in the table although the background of several items is unknown.

Two larger 6wDM diesels arrived in 2008. They were built at the Faur factory in Bucharest in 1984 for the 750mm gauge Mansfeld Mining Railway in the former East Germany. They never ran at St-Trojan as their wheelbase was too long and they have now left the railway.

In 2001 the line received its first steam engine, an ex-German army 'Brigadelok' 0-8-0T built by Kraus at its Munich works in 1918. After industrial use, including at a sugar-beet line in Maizy, it passed through several private owners before arriving at St-Trojan from St Eutrope. It was hoped to restore the engine and convert it to gas burning to avoid the fire risk, but this proved to be impractical and it has recently been sold for use on the Leighton Buzzard Railway in the UK.

Carriages – and a railcar

The line has an extensive fleet of carriages, most of which have been built by the railway at Prévent depot.

The first were constructed in 1963 as replicas of the Decauville type KE on the old Réseau de Royan à Ronces-Bains, using old Koppel chassis and bogies from the First World War. Most were built with roofs, although some were open vehicles for use in fine weather. There was also a bar car, replaced by a new one in 1996.

By 1997 the chassis of the whole fleet had been severely corroded by the sea air and were scrapped. They were replaced by new replicas of stronger construction but using the original bogies – all now have roofs. Two 'Prestige' carriages with glass windows were built in 1999 to a design based on those running on the island's CFEC until 1927, and a further vehicle in 2004 specifically for pushchairs and wheelchairs.

The final passenger vehicles are a Decauville-Crochet Class X-AT3 petrol-electric car of 1926 and a trailer. The trailer has already been restored and was used as a mobile ticket office for a time after St-Trojan station burnt down in 1997. The power car originally worked on the Savoie tramway at Chambéry until it closed in January 1933 and later saw use on tramways at Calvados and Pithiviers. In 1952 it went to another tourist line, the Petit train du Cap-Ferret situated some 120km south of the Île d'Oléron. The car was eventually acquired by the St Eutrope group in 1975 before coming to St-Trojan as a virtual wreck in 1997. It awaits restoration, probably with a new diesel engine with hydraulic transmission.

Along the line

Operating a railway along what is in effect a long sandbar has caused major problems over the years. After most winters accumulated sand has to be bulldozed off the line before it can be opened, while expensive coast protection work has been required on the section west of Gatteau.

Since the line opened the coast at Maumusson has retreated by around a kilometre repeatedly undermining the terminus station. This was particularly severe at the end of February 2010 when storm Xynthia caused havoc along the west coast of France. Worse was to come during the winter of 2012/13 when land containing the turning loop at Maumusson was completely washed away. As a result it has been abandoned and locos now use a new triangle, opened in May 2013, to turn and run round their trains.

During 2014 trains ran daily until early October. During the peak season of July and August 12 trains left St-Trojan for Maumusson between 10.00 and 18.15 but by

October this was reduced to just three at 11.00, 14.30 and 16.00; the journey takes 30 minutes. The lack of customers after the August rush was obvious to my wife and I when in October we joined just four other passengers on the 14.30 departure from St-Trojan, headed by Billard Type T75D diesel no 10. As a response to the cool autumn weather this included both 'Prestige' carriages with glass windows.

On approaching St-Trojan the train had stopped outside the station and the engine detached. No 10 then ran round a triangle of lines before coupling up to the back of the train. At busy times a second train would be able to leave the single platform in use at St-Trojan and pass the arrival. As there was no other service running, no 10 immediately propelled its train into the station.

On departure from St-Trojan the trains run parallel to a minor road which eventually goes to Gatteau Plage. We soon headed inland through the pine forests where there was a small halt, followed by a loop for trains to pass at busy periods. The forest then opened up as we passed a large equestrian centre before plunging back into woodland.

Shortly before arriving at the first station our train ran alongside Prévent depot, where much of the line's rolling stock could briefly be viewed. The adjacent station had originally served a large hospital known as 'Le Préventorium' for victims of tuberculosis. Its buildings were originally a base for American seaplanes and their pilots during the First World War.

Our route then passed through more forest before the train arrived on the coast at Gatteau Plage, the last point on the railway that can be reached by a public road. After Gatteau the line runs above the beach



Above: A pair of Ruston & Hornsby 4wDMs built in 1946 were among the first engines to arrive at St-Trojan. No 4 is today displayed in a lay-by. The large 'smokestack' became a trademark of the St-Trojan line.

Below: No 7455 'Brigadelok' 0-8-0T of 1918 was pictured sandwiched between Billards at Prévent depot. It has since been sold for use on the Leighton Buzzard Railway (NGW 94 page 10).

offering splendid views of the bay and the coastline on the opposite side of the Pertuis de Maumusson, the channel separating the southern end of the island from the mainland.

The railway then heads inland again through more forest before arriving at the coast on the western side of the spit. Here no 10 was turned and ran round its train using the new triangle already described. After a brief visit to the beach the six passengers returned to the train ready for departure at 15.15 and arrival back in St-Trojan was at 15.45. **NGW**

More Information

Details of the line can be found on Le p'tit Train's website: www.le-petit-train.com. The author wishes to thank Jean-Yves Nezondet, president of the STTST, for providing photographs of and information on the line and its rolling stock. Also to Mick Morgan, John Browning and Éric Fresné of the Industrial Railway Society for help with identifying the Ruston and Billard diesels. Thanks also to Stephen Edge for producing the map.

