

# 3

## The railway line

You have probably noticed how straight this path is. That's because it used to be a railway line. It was part of **the line from Calais to Anvin** which passed through Acquin. Built in **1882** to improve communications in this rural area, it was operated by the Compagnie Générale V.F.I.L. (Local Interest Railways). 95 kilometres long, it connected the coast with the rural villages in the countryside. But it was by no means a railway track like those operated today by SNCF. These small "local interest lines", also called **metric-gauge lines (V.M.)**, were much narrower (1 metre gauge), making them cheaper to build and to operate. They were the fastest means of getting from A to B at that time.

### Carrying passengers...

These small lines enabled people **to visit relatives or work further afield**. Children would also go to school by train. Robert Broussart, from Zouafques, remembers going through Acquin to get to his **school** in Fruges, where he was a boarder. It was even possible to put bikes on the train, in a compartment specially reserved for them.

### And goods!

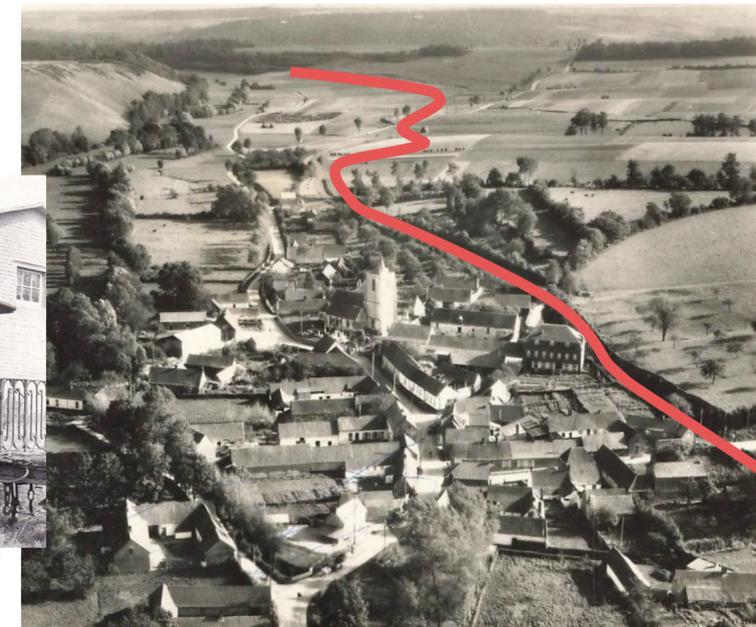
The train facilitated trade, by transporting various types of goods (foodstuffs, building materials, etc.). **Farm produce and artisan goods** would also be taken to the markets and processing industries located on the line: along the Anvin-Calais line there were no less than **44 breweries, 43 flour mills, 17 brick kilns, 9 paper mills, and 7 tanneries!** Wagons loaded with sugar beet were taken to the weighbridge at Lumbres, then redirected to Pont d'Ardres where there used to be a sugar refinery (it only closed down in the last decade). The railway line was also used to transport **coal and cattle** - but only in small quantities owing to the narrow gauge of the wagons.

### Inevitable closure

Apart from **the problem of transferring goods** from these small lines to the main railway lines, in the 1920s their profitability became an issue, as well as the management of such a large number of metric-gauge lines. **Road transport** became increasingly more cost-effective, both for passengers and for goods. After WW2,



Second class passenger car at Acquin station, 1955 (postcard, photograph by M. Rifaült, coll. J.-L. Rochaix).

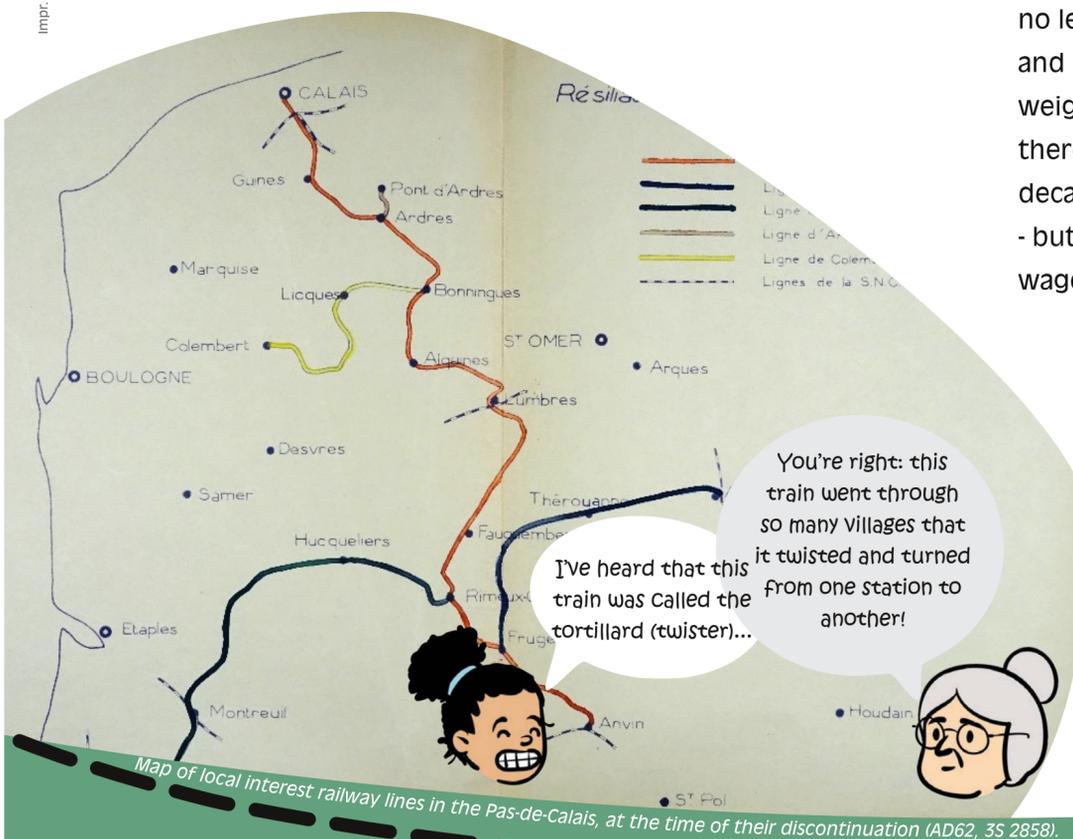


View of the village around 1960 in which the path of the old railway line, which went as far as Lumbres, is shown in red (postcard, coll. CHHP).

these "potato trains" as they were known, only attracted small numbers of passengers, and were mainly used for transporting bulk goods (sugar beet or potatoes). The line was closed on **28 October 1955**. Marcel Declémy, a farmer from Marck-en-Calais, and Pierre Dewilde, owner of the station café-hôtel in Lumbres, remembers **dismantling the rails**. They were sold one by one (at bargain prices) to scrap metal dealers around the region. The sleepers were even used by farmers to make fences.

### From iron to grass: the track is given a new lease of life.

The old Anvin-Calais line has been rehabilitated in the Lumbres area. It is now well used by **walkers** visiting Acquin, is a designated **voie verte (greenway)** in Lumbres, with a section devoted to **rando-rail (rail biking)** in Nielles-lès-Bléquin.



I've heard that this train was called the tortillard (twister)...

You're right: this train went through so many villages that it twisted and turned from one station to another!

Map of local interest railway lines in the Pas-de-Calais, at the time of their discontinuation (AD62, 3S 2858).