ALLIED RAILWAYS OF THE WESTERN FRONT

NARROW GAUGE IN THE ARRAS SECTOR

BEFORE, DURING & AFTER THE FIRST WORLD WAR

MARTIN J B FAREBROTHER & JOAN S FAREBROTHER

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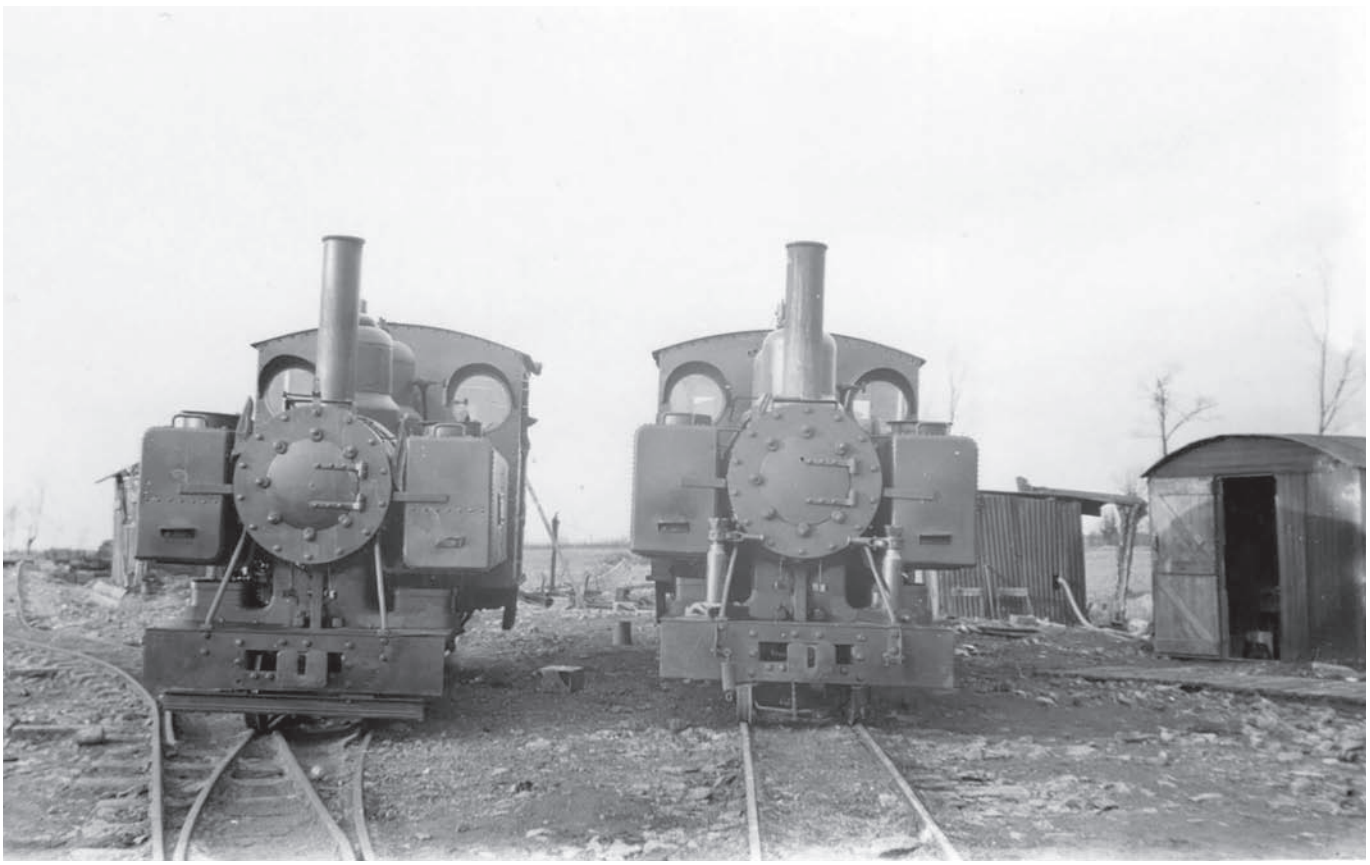

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0.2 The restored belfry in the Grande Place (main square) at Béthune, in September, 2008. This belfry is said to be the model for the logo of the *Région* Nord-Pas-de-Calais. (*Authors*)

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Abbreviations

Railways and railway companies, past and present, including heritage organisations

AC	Anvin-Calais line (see *Tortillards of Artois,* Oakwood Press, 2008)
AMHC	Amberley Museum and Heritage Centre
AMTP	*Association du Musée des Transports de Pithiviers*
APPEVA	*Association Picarde pour la Préservation et l'Entretien des Véhicules Anciens*
ARB	Aire-Rimeux-Berck line (see *Tortillards of Artois,* Oakwood Press, 2008)
BA	proposed Béthune-Armentières line
BBH	proposed Béthune-Bruay-Houdain line
BE	Béthune-Estaires line
CdN	*Compagnie du Nord*
CEN	*Compagnie des Chemins de Fer Économiques du Nord*
CFCD	*Chemin de Fer Cappy Dompierre (P'tit train de la Haute Somme)*
FR	Ffestiniog Railway
L&BR	Lynton and Barnstaple Railway, North Devon
LBNGRS	Leighton Buzzard Narrow Gauge Railway Society Ltd.
LF	Lens-Frévent line
MRT	Moseley Railway Trust
MTVS	*Musée de Tramways à Vapeurs et des chemins de fer Secondaires français* (Valmondois)
SNCF	*Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer Français*
SNCV	*Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer Vicinaux (Belge)*
TPT	*Tramway de Pithiviers à Toury*
VFIL (or CGL)	*Compagnie Générale des Voie Ferrées d'Intérêt Local*
WHHR	Welsh Highland Heritage Railway
WHR	Welsh Highland Railway
WLLR	West Lancashire Light Railway
WOLT	War Office Locomotive Trust

British and Dominion Armies, First World War

Aus. PB	Australian Pioneer Battalion
Aus. LROC	Australian Light Railway Operating Company
BTLC	British Transport Liquidation Commission
Bttn	Battalion
CRT	Canadian Railway Troops
GHQ	General Headquarters
Gp RCC	Group, Railway Construction Companies (RE)
LRFC	Light Railway Forward Company
LROC	Light Railway Operating Company
NCO	Non-Commissioned Officer
RC	Railway Company (RE)
RCC	Railway Construction Company
RE	Royal Engineers
ROC	Railway Operating Company
ROD	Railway Operating Division (RE)
TC CE	Tramways Company, Canadian Engineers
TCC	Train Crews Company (light railways, RE)
WD	War Department

Other abbreviations (some used mainly or wholly in tables, maps, and diagrams)

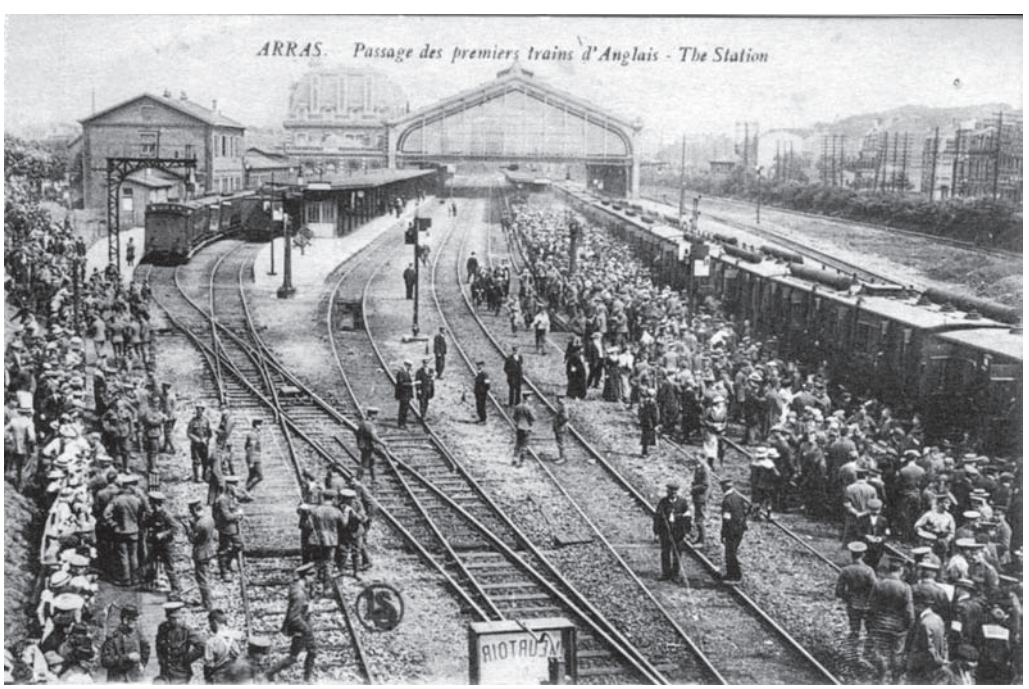
ACNF	*Ateliers de Construction du Nord de la France (de Blanc Misseron)*
AWM	Australian War Memorial, Canberra, Australia
BV	*Bâtiment des Voyageurs* (passenger building)
CGIT	*Compagnie Générale Industrielle de Tranports*
CWGC	Commonwealth War Graves Commission
HM	*Halle aux Marchandises* (goods building)
IWM	Imperial War Museum, London
LGV	*Ligne de Grande Vitesse* (high speed railway line)
LR	Light railway (60cm gauge)
MG	Metre gauge
MRL	*Ministère des Régions Libérées* (Ministry for the Liberated Regions)
MTP	*Ministère des Travaux Publics* (Ministry of Public Works)
PN	*passage à niveau* (level crossing)
SACM	*Société Alsacienne de Construction Mécanique*
SG	Standard gauge

Introduction

As we began writing, the centenary of the beginning of the First World War was imminent. During this war, the British and Dominion (now Commonwealth) armies began to arrive in France. The immediate events leading to war began with the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914. The First World War formally began for France on 2 August 1914, when the German Army attacked directly on their mutual frontier in Alsace and Loraine. However, the major German attack came through Belgium. The British declared war on Germany to defend the neutrality of Belgium. The German Army moved rapidly south towards Paris, with the French army and the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) retreating before them. They had almost reached Paris before they were stopped at the Battle of the Marne in September 1914.

The BEF and parts of the French and German Armies moved back north; the Germans to try to secure northern France and the channel ports, the French and the British to successfully prevent this. The armies dug in and the war of movement became a war of stalemate along the 'Western Front'. Once the armies had dug in, it became apparent that advances in weaponry had made defence easier and less costly of men and materials than attack. The northern part of the Western Front ran from just west of Ostend through the north of Belgium and the eastern parts of the *départements* of Nord, Pas-de-Calais, and Somme. This meant that the Allies (Britain, France, and Belgium) held the major ports of Northern France, but not a large part of the coal mining and industrial area of northeast France. The Western front did not change position much until 1918, despite costly battles. The USA joined the war in 1917, and by 1918 the American Army became a major force in France. In spring 1918 the German Army made a last effort, advancing almost to Amiens and threatening Paris again. However in the summer and autumn of 1918, the Germans were steadily pushed back. Hostilities ended with the signing of the Armistice in a railway carriage in the Compiègne forest on 11 November 1918.

The British sectors and approximate army positions from 1914 are shown in Figure 0.1. From October 1914 the Belgian Army held the front line from north of Ypres (now Ieper) in Belgium to the sea. The British Army held the front line from Ypres south to around La Bassée in France, in the east of the *département* of Pas-de-Calais north of Lens. The French held it from La Bassée south. The British Second Army were



0.3 The arrival of the first troops of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) at Arras main station in 1914. (*Authors' collection*)

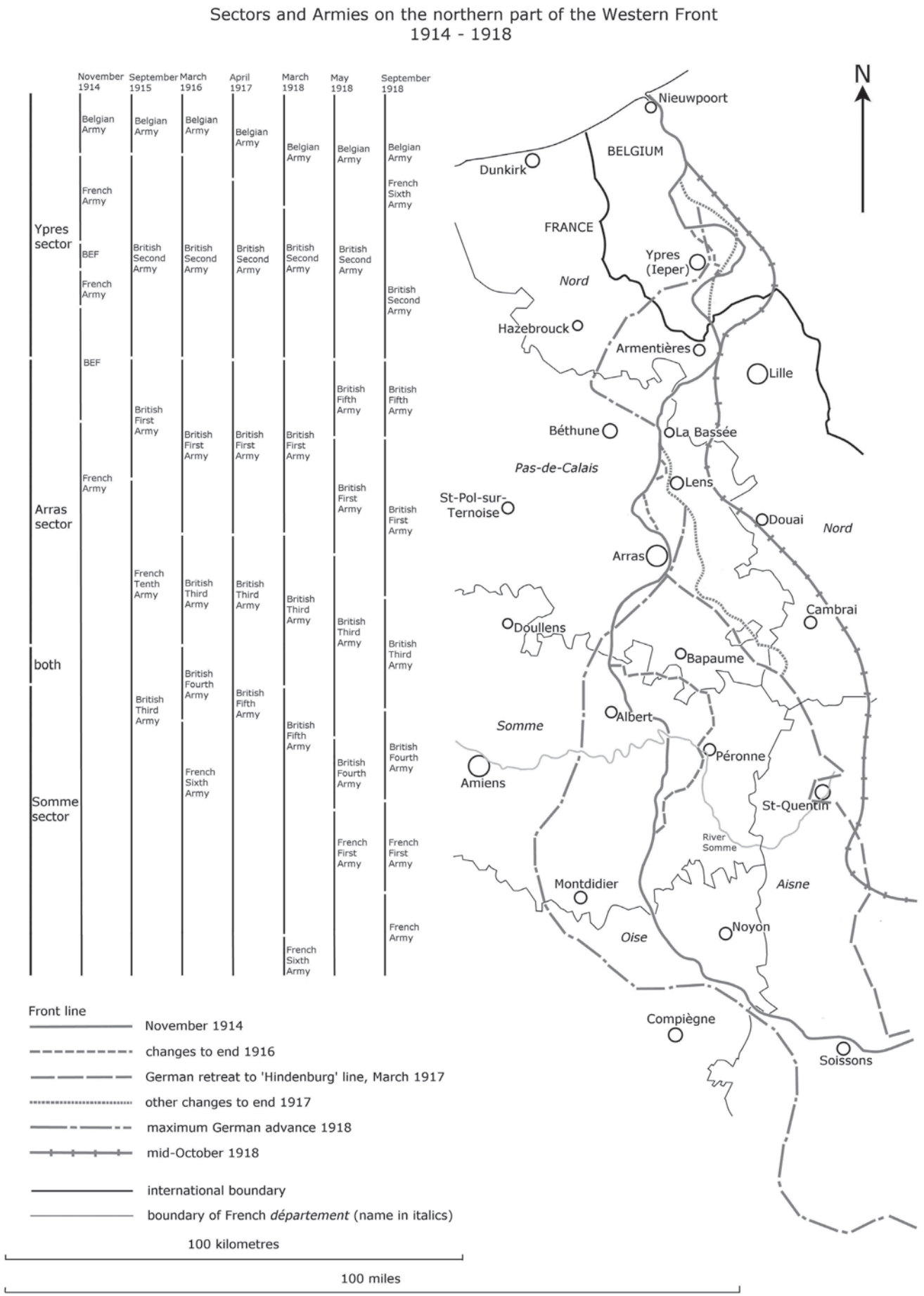

Sectors and Armies on the northern part of the Western Front
1914 - 1918
November 1914
September 1915
March 1916
April 1917
March 1918
May 1918
September 1918
Ypres sector
Arras sector
both
Somme sector
Belgian Army
French Army
BEF
British Second Army
British First Army
French Tenth Army
British Third Army
British Fourth Army
British Fifth Army
French Sixth Army
French First Army
Front line
November 1914
changes to end 1916
German retreat to 'Hindenburg' line, March 1917
other changes to end 1917
maximum German advance 1918
mid-October 1918
international boundary
boundary of French *département* (name in italics)
100 kilometres
100 miles
N
Nieuwpoort
BELGIUM
Dunkirk
FRANCE
Ypres (Ieper)
Nord
Hazebrouck
Armentières
Lille
Béthune
La Bassée
Pas-de-Calais
Lens
St-Pol-sur-Ternoise
Douai
Arras
Cambrai
Doullens
Bapaume
Albert
Somme
Péronne
Amiens
St-Quentin
River Somme
Montdidier
Aisne
Oise
Noyon
Compiègne
Soissons

Figure 0.1.

responsible for the line in Belgium from Ypres south, and in France in the Nord *département*, down as far as the Armentières area. The British First Army extended south in the Pas-de-Calais *département* as far as just north of Lens, until the Battle of Loos in September, 1915. From March 1916 the British Army took over the responsibility for the front from Ypres down to the river Somme. The British First Army now took over the front almost to the Scarpe valley just north of Arras; and the British Third Army from there south to Hébuterne, at the north end of the 1916 Somme battlefield but still in the Pas-de-Calais *département*. From there south was the British Fourth Army, and later also the Fifth, to the beginning of the French Sixth Army almost on the Somme river. The Fifth Army held some of the front line around Bapaume, in the south of the Pas-de-Calais *département* in 1917, until this was taken over again by the Third Army from 1 June 1917.

The British front line from March 1916 until summer 1918 falls easily into three sectors, which are from north to south:

The Ypres sector, held by the Second Army, from Ypres in Belgium to just north of Armentières in the Nord *département* in France. This corresponds with the ancient territory of Flanders, in Belgium and the northern part of the Nord *département* in France.

The Arras sector, held by the First Army (and from April 1918 also partly by the Fifth Army) south from Armentières to Arras, and by the Third Army in Arras and south to the area of the Somme *département* border; this corresponds roughly with the eastern part of the Pas-de-Calais *département* (the Pas-de-Calais *département* being the historical *Comté*, or County, of Artois), and parts of the adjacent southern part of the Nord *département*.

The Somme sector, held at times by part of the Third Army, by the Fourth Army, and later also the Fifth Army until April 1918. This corresponds in 1916 with the part of the Somme département to just north of the River Somme, but later extended south of the river. The Somme sector is therefore in the ancient and modern region of Picardie (Picardy), comprising the *départements* of Somme, Oise and Aisne.

There is a grey area at the south end of the 'Arras sector' as we have defined it. In the summer of 1916, the Third Army extended south to Hébuterne, in the south of the Pas-de-Calais département. This was at the north end of the 1916 Somme battlefield, and is properly considered with the Somme sector. However the area east of there, around Bapaume, formed the starting points for the Fifth Army Bullecourt attacks in 1917, and then leading to the Battle of Cambrai in Autumn 1917 (Third Army). These are very much part of the story of the Arras sector, and are therefore included in this book. This overlap is identified in the sector breakdown in Figure 0.1.

Of the three sectors, more has been written about those around Ypres and on the Somme than about the Arras sector. However the front around Arras was of the utmost importance, and the battles in this sector no less ferocious and costly. The Arras sector south of La Bassée was held by the French Army until March 1916, the period of the First and Second Battles of Arras, which included struggles for the hill of Notre-Dame-de-Lorette and for Vimy Ridge. Especially important during the British period were the spring Third Battle of Arras in 1917, which included the Canadian action to take Vimy Ridge; the Battle of Cambrai in autumn 1917; and the summer 1918 advances east of Arras. Arras and Ypres were, with Verdun in the French sector, the three key towns never taken by the German armies during the First World War.

It was during the Battle of the Somme in the summer of 1916 that grave deficiencies in the supply lines became most apparent. As part of general mobilisation at the beginning of the war, the French Government had placed all railways in the country under military control, although the railways generally continued to be run by the regular personnel. In 1916, Sir Eric Geddes, an experienced railway manager who had previously worked in London with Lloyd-George when the latter was Secretary of State for War, was appointed Director General for Transportation, France, and given the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in the Engineering and Railway Staff Corps. He was given responsibility for standard gauge and 'light' railways, roads, and canals, but not 'mechanical transport' (motor road vehicles).

This recognised the importance of transport, and especially railway transport, in the effort to win the war. In 1916 it was agreed that the British Army could operate on French standard gauge lines, and in December 1916 there was a further agreement for the British Army to import locomotives and wagons for these lines. The British Army Railway Operating Division (ROD) operated extensively on the standard and metre gauge railways in Belgium and the north of France from 1916. The agreement also led to the building and operating in Belgium, Nord-Pas-de-Calais and Somme of military standard gauge railways exclusive to the British Army, which we have called 'British Army lines'. An increase in the rate of railway building and upgrading followed, culminating in an enormous effort in 1917 and 1918.

The subjects of this book are the narrow gauge railways of the First World War Arras sector. The Arras sector corresponds mainly with the eastern part of the *département* of Pas-de-Calais. The First World War Arras sector included, to the north of Arras, a

0.4 A train of tipper wagons hauled by a Simplex 20hp tractor conveys troops of the King's (Liverpool) Regiment near Arras on 28 June 1917. The troops have probably been working on the light railway and at the back to the right other men are still at this work. (*IWM Q2813*)

large part of the coal-mining and industrial areas of Northern France. Of particular importance for this book are the areas around Lens and Béthune. Many in France regard the term 'narrow gauge' as not including the metre gauge but only gauges less than this. This was also the view of the British Army in the First World War, to whom the metre gauge was coupled with the standard gauge as 'Broad Gauge Railways'. 'Light Railways' were, with very few exceptions, of 60cm gauge. However, we have written here about all railways of less than standard gauge in this sector. These have been placed in the context of the existing and new standard gauge lines. In addition, the narrow gauge history of this area has been followed from the beginnings, through the First World War, and then on into their subsequent use, up to final closure of the last lines in 1957.

The railway infrastructure before the First World War was key to the developments during the war. After the war these railways played a major part in the recovery and reconstruction. However the war had a major effect on the later development of railways in these parts of France. If the war had not occurred railways, particularly secondary lines (those of *Intérêt Local*), might have been more extensive, and might have been in a much better position to compete against road transport. The war, and financial problems afterwards, impaired infrastructure investment, including in particular electrification.

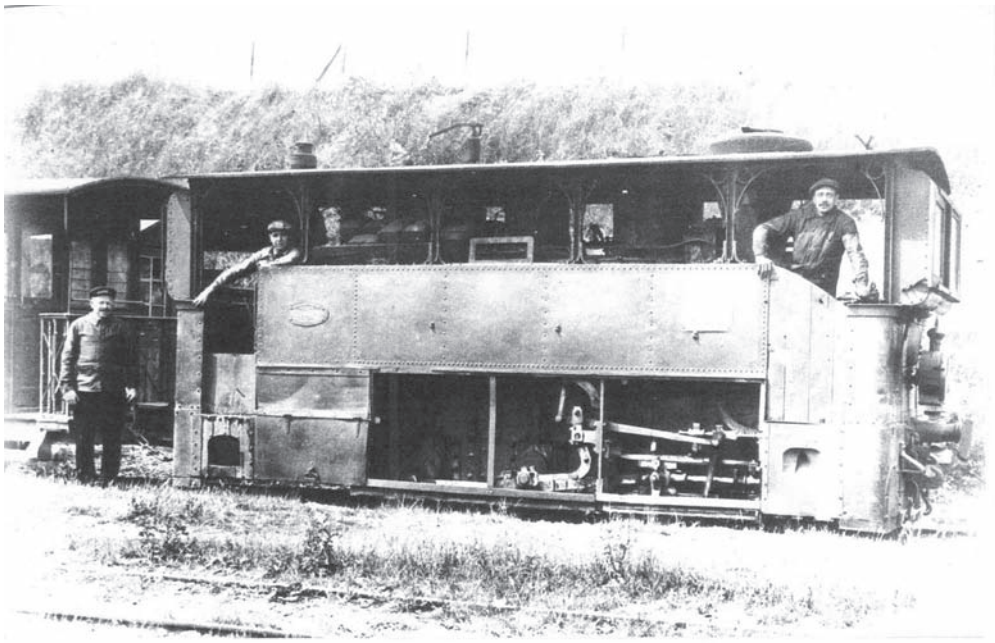
It was the French (and in the Ypres Sector the Belgians) who had been fighting on their own territory, and had to live with the major consequences. The British and Dominion armies, and the American army, and others, came and 'did the business'. They then contributed to clearing up, for a very few years, and mainly their own material, and went home.

In the Arras Sector before the First World War there were two significant metre gauge lines, but the 60cm gauge lines were short and industrial. During the war the metre gauge lines played a significant part, but the major military developments, first French and then British, were standard and 60cm gauge lines. After the war both the narrow gauges continued, but the 60cm longest, serving the sugar beet industry.

Railways further west in the Pas-de-Calais *département* also played an important part in the First World War. There is some information on these, especially on standard and metre gauge developments, in our previous book, *Tortillards of Artois – The Metre Gauge Railways and Tramways of the Western Pas-de-Calais* (Oakwood Press, 2008).

In chapter one we provide an introduction to some of the relevant history, geography, and industrial and railway development of this area. Chapters two and three cover the history of the two metre gauge railways of this area before the First World War. Chapter four deals with the general history of railways, and particularly the British and Dominion armies' light railways, during the First World War. Chapters five and six address the detailed First World War narrow gauge history of this sector area by area. After this we describe the post-war history of these railways, and finally, in chapter twelve, summarise what can be seen now, including some walks.

We have made all the translations from French. We have followed the British convention for the configuration of wheels on locomotives. The French convention is only to count the wheels on one side



0.5 Blanc-Misseron 0-6-0T No. 46 at Aubigny-en-Artois. This locomotive, manufactured in 1899, was put into service on the metre gauge Lens-Frévent line in January 1900, possibly transferred from the CEN Valenciennes network. (*Photograph M. Fohanno; collection Claude Wagner*)

of the locomotive and not to use hyphens, so that a locomotive that is to us a 2-6-0 is to the French a 130.

French local government

In 1790, during the French Revolution, the country was reorganised into administrative units called *départements* (departments), roughly equivalent to counties in the UK. The old counties and regions were swept aside, with each *département* having a *Préfet* (Prefect), appointed from Paris to run the services of the State, and accountable to central government. Each *département* also has an elected assembly, the *Conseil Général*, with a president, to run locally delegated services. The *Préfet* and the *Conseil Général* run the *département* from the main administrative town or city, the *préfecture*. Outside the largest conurbations, *départements* are divided into *sous-préfectures*: these in turn are each composed of a number of *cantons*, which are themselves composed of *communes*. In the countryside each village is a *commune*, with its own *Maire* (Mayor). The reintroduction of *régions* in 1982, between the central government and the *départements*, is largely irrelevant to this book.

Tortillard

Since the early twentieth century, the word *tortillard* has frequently been used for trains on narrow gauge, and especially metre gauge, lines in France. There are examples on old photographs and postcards of many lines from that period. The derivation is probably from the verb *tortiller*, to twist or twirl. It probably began as a comment on the twisting or tortuous nature of many narrow gauge lines. An alternative title has been *le tacot*, *tacot* being an informal term for an old-fashioned and defective vehicle, or 'old banger'.

Times and timetables

In summary timetables all times have been given in the 24 hour clock. All these tables are abstracted from the originals. All of the original timetables are in the 24 hour clock, except for some in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which are in the 12 hour clock, with the trains marked *matin* (morning) or *soir* (evening) over the departure from the station of origin. In the text we have given all times in the 12 hour clock with am or pm. In France the timetables were published by the *Librairie Chaix*, of Paris, often referred to simply as the *Chaix*.

Goods traffic

The terms *grande vitesse* and *petite vitesse* appear in this book. As the name implies, goods sent *grande vitesse* travelled faster, but they cost more. They travelled on passenger or mixed trains, in the care of the *chef du train*, the man in charge of the train who also fulfilled the functions of conductor and guard. Baggage, dogs, small parcels (*colis*), money and valuables, and freight packages of a manageable size travelled in this category. Passenger receipts were also sometimes classed under *grande vitesse* for accounting purposes. Goods going *petite vitesse* would be all others, mainly those goods which were heavy or loose or went as whole wagon loads. They would go in wagons in mixed or goods trains. There are more than sixty items in some price lists for *petite vitesse*, including coal, coke, wheat, marble, oil, and, of course, sugar beet. These were usually put into four categories for charging purposes. Cattle and other large animals also went *petite vitesse*.

Units of measurement

Length and distance

1 metre (m) = 100 centimetres (cm) = 1,000 millimetres (mm) = 3.28 feet (ft) = 3 feet 3⅜ inches (in)

1 yard (yd) = 3 feet (ft) = 0.9144 metres (m)

1 kilometre (km) = 1,000 metres (m) = 0.6214 miles = approx. ⅝ mile

1 mile = 1.6093 kilometres (km)

In this book distances are in metres or kilometres, except where the originals are in Imperial units, as in British Army documents from the First World War. For some other important distances in the text we have added the distance in miles in brackets to the nearest ¼ mile. Heights are in metres but again important heights are also given in feet to the nearest foot.

Weight

1 kilogram (kg) = 1,000 grams (gm) = 2.2046 pounds (lb)

1 tonne (metric ton) = 1,000 kilograms = 2,204.6 pounds

1 ton (Imperial ton) = 2,240 pounds

Volume

1 litre (l) = 1.76 pints (pt)
1 gallon = 4.546 litres (l)

Money and Prices

It is always difficult to compare prices and value for money over long periods of time. We have, however, given some fares and prices in the text, so we will try to put these into context. Using the Retail Price Index, £1 sterling in 1900 would now be worth about £70. Around 1900, £1 was worth 25 French francs. The French franc was devalued during the First World War, and again rather sharply afterwards. In 1919, £1 was worth 36 francs. By 1959, £1 was worth about 1,000 francs, and in 1960 France brought in the new franc, worth 100 of the old francs.

Glossary of Railway and Related Words in French

Note: some of these words have other meanings outside the context of railways

adj = adjective, nm = noun, masculine, nf = noun, feminine, pl = plural

abri	nm	shelter
accotement	nm	verge
aiguille	nf	points
appareil	nm	device, probably points
arrêt	nm	stop (lower grade than halt)
autorail	nm	railcar
baladeuse	nf	open passenger trailer
bascule	nf	weighbridge, sugar beet loading point (Vis-en-Artois)
bâtiment	nm	building
bestiaux	nmpl	livestock
betterave (à sucre, sucrière)	nf	beet (sugar beet)
(pont) biais	adj	oblique, angled (bridge)
boulon	nm	bolt
buse	nf	pipe, duct, conduit
carrière	nf	quarry (but also career)
(chef) cantonnier	nm	(chief) platelayer (permanent way maintenance man)
chauffeur	nm	(of steam locomotive) fireman (of railcar) driver
cheminot	nm	railway worker
colis (postaux)	nmpl	small parcels (parcel post)
déclassement	nm	declassification
desserte (ferroviare)	nf	(rail) service
éclisse	nf	joint plate (rails)
entretoise	nf	brace, strut, stay
essieu(x)	nm	axle(s)
fosse	nf	ditch, pit, coal mine
fourgon	nm	baggage van intended for a passenger train
galet	nm	flint, silica, pebble
garage (de machines)	nm	siding (engine shed)
gare	nf	station
guérite	nf	booth
houille	nf	coal
houillère	nf	coalmine, colliery
lampisterie	nf	lamp store
locotracteur	nm	diesel locomotive
machine (à vapeur)	nf	(steam) locomotive
magasinage	nm	warehousing
marchandise(s)	nf	(in plural) goods
mécanicien	nm	engine driver
messagerie	nf	freight forwarding
navette	nf	shuttle
nœud (de voie ferrée)	nm	junction (railway)
octroi	nm	tax office
passage à niveau (PN)	nm	level crossing
passerelle	nf	footbridge
pétard	nm	explosive fog signal
plaque tournante	nf	turntable
poutre	nf	beam (wooden) girder (metal)
raccordement	nm	chord, loop line, connection line
ramassage	nm	trains of odd vehicles/ miscellaneous traffic
rame	nf	rake/ group of vehicles or wagons
râperie	nf	sugar beet shredding and initial processing factory
remblai	nm	embankment
remorque	nf	trailer
sucrerie	nf	sugar factory or refinery
tablier (métallique)	nm	(metal) platform (of bridges)
talus	nm	bank
tampon (de wagon)	nm	buffer
terrassement	nm	excavation
tirefond	nm	large screw for fixing rail to sleeper
triage (gare de triage)	nm	sorting sidings/ marshalling yard
tranchée	nf	(railway)cutting: (military) trench
traverse	nf	sleeper
voie (de garage)	nf	track (siding)
voyageur (-euse)	nm(f)	passenger

Chapter One

Introducing the Arras Sector and its Railways

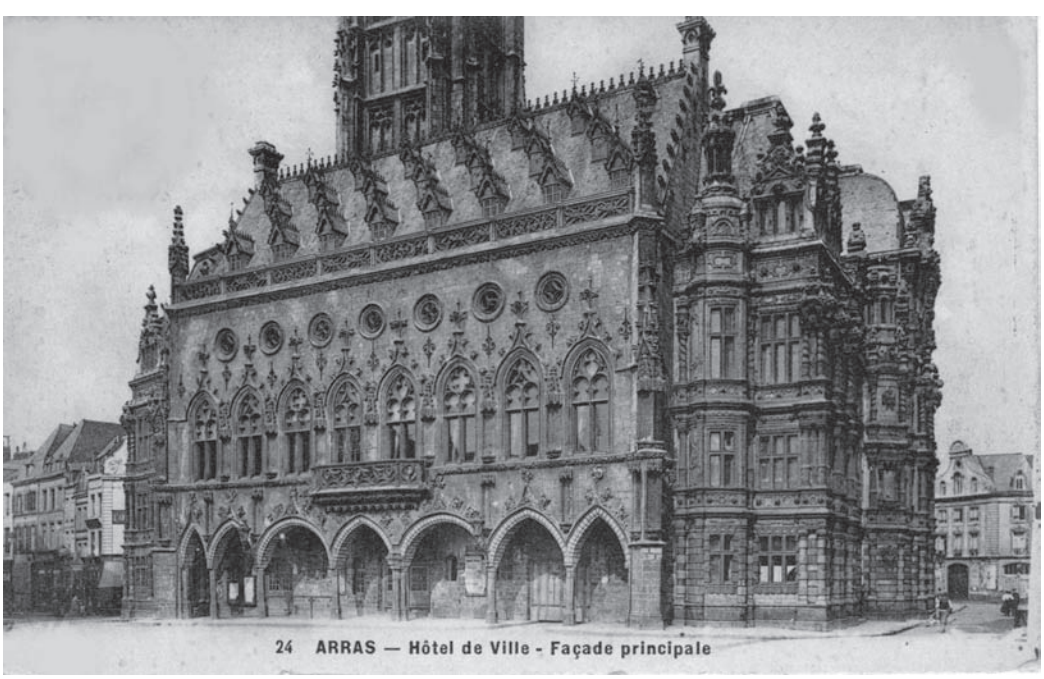
The Arras sector corresponds mainly with the eastern part of the *département* of Pas-de-Calais. North of La Bassée, the front line for most of the First World War was on or near the boundary with the Nord *département*, in the areas of Neuve Chappelle and Fromelles. North of this, the front line crossed the very narrow part of the Nord *département* at Armentières, and then into Belgium (see Figure 0.1, with the introduction). The Pas-de-Calais *département* is the fifth largest in France. The capital of Artois, Arras, is the *Préfecture* of the *département*. In 1982 the Nord and Pas-de-Calais *départements* became the *région* Nord-Pas-de-Calais, with the administrative centre in Lille, *Préfecture* of the Nord *département*.

The western part of the Pas-de-Calais is, perhaps, better known to English visitors than the eastern, since not only is it nearer, but also it boasts a fine coastline with famous cliffs and wonderful beaches. The eastern part, the main setting for this book, has stretches of beautiful countryside, but also contains some of the most industrialised areas in France. Until the French stopped mining this area in 1990, coal was the basis for its industrial development. However, long before the coal was first brought to the surface, this part of northern France was already a prosperous manufacturing area.

History

The area covered by the Pas-de-Calais *département* is that of the old *Comté* (County) of Artois. In the thirteenth century France, following trouble with Flanders, was anxious to secure her Northern borders, hence the Comte d'Artois became a key player. In 1237, Louis IX therefore gave the county to his younger brother, Robert, in order to secure the succession of the area for the crown. In the fourteenth century a daughter inherited Artois and by her marriage to Phillip the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, the county was absorbed into Burgundy. Thus by the fifteenth century Arras, as the capital of Artois, had become a very important town with a ducal palace and frequent visits by the Burgundian court.

The rise of Burgundy continued to threaten France, and in 1414 (the year before Agincourt) the French laid siege to Arras but after several frustrating months they gave up and returned to Paris. Things continued in this way throughout the fifteenth century with another unsuccessful siege in 1475. It was only with the death of Charles the Bold in 1477 that France was able to take Arras. It was not to last, however; Burgundy had passed to Charles' only child, a daughter, Mary. She married Maximillian Hapsburg who soon took Arras back from the French to make it part of the Spanish



1.1 The Town Hall (Hôtel de Ville) in the Petite Place (now the Place des Héros) in Arras. Photograph taken before the First World War. (*Authors' collection*)

1.2 The area near the Town Hall in Arras, showing some of the damage suffered in the First World War. The damaged belfry of the Town Hall can be seen back right. Photograph probably taken after the war, with a light railway being used for tipper trucks to clear the rubble. (*Authors' collection*)

Netherlands. Battles for the city continued, with the French gaining it in 1640 but losing it in 1654. All was finally settled with the Peace of the Pyrenees, in 1659, and Arras became French. It was still seen as a frontier town and Louis XIV set his military architect, Vauban, to build the citadel, which still stands. For about 250 years Arras prospered peacefully, but all was to change in the twentieth century when she found herself once again on the front line and under siege.

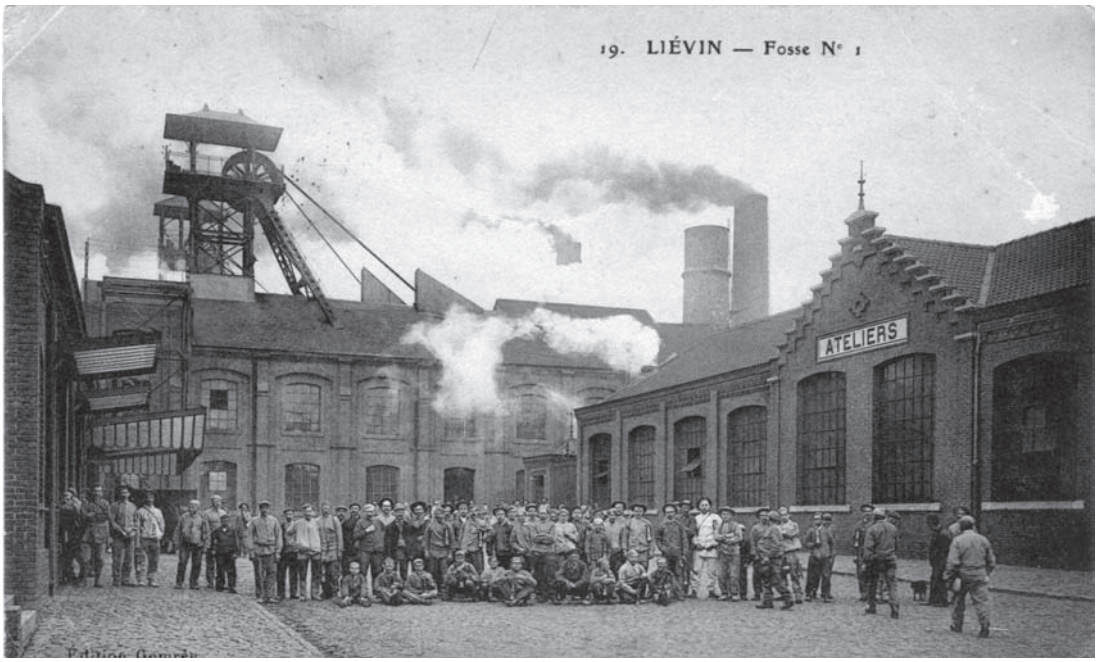
Geography

The Eastern Pas-de-Calais is an area of geographical contrasts. Turning the clock back many millennia to before the last Ice Age, what are now called the Weald of Kent and the Pas-de-Calais were joined together. For this reason they share the same chalky soil. The Strait of Dover (in French the Pas-de-Calais, after which the *département* is named) is now believed to have been formed over 425,000 years ago. The current view of the cause for this is that an ice-dammed lake in the southern North Sea burst and the land bridge was swept away. The resulting strait is 19 miles across at its narrowest point. The chalk of Dover Cliffs therefore continues into France, where it first appears as Cap Blanc-Nez. The chalk continues to run down across the Pas-de-Calais as a dramatic escarpment, notably seen at Vimy Ridge and Notre Dame de Lorette, near the centre of our area. Back from the edge on the chalk uplands, the scenery changes to pleasantly fertile and wooded areas. Artesian wells were first discovered in this area, *artésian* meaning 'of Artois'. The chief crops of this area are wheat, maize and sugar beet. At the bottom of the ridge you are suddenly on the heavy clay of Flanders.

Overall the watershed runs from northwest to southeast. North and east of this the rivers, notably the Scarpe and the Lys, flow across the plain to the North Sea. A good number of these are navigable, and there are numerous canals, especially down on the plain. This was notable for its windmills. The railways we will describe also stretch south and west of the watershed, to the river Canche, which flows west into the English Channel. Further south is the Authie, which is for most of its course the boundary between the *départements* of Pas-de-Calais and Somme, and therefore historically the division between Artois and Picardy.

Coal Mining

The extensive coal fields of the Pas-de-Calais – the majority around Béthune and in the Gohelle area around Lens – are part of the coal basin that extends from Kent through Belgium via Mons and Charleroi into Germany and the extensive mines of the Ruhr. In France, the seam (*gisement*) runs for 120km, varying in width from 4 to 12km. The depth of the seam varies tremendously, adding to the difficulty of extraction, and frequent rock falls led to numerous accidents. Coal was first discovered near Boulogne in 1682 but the first large find was near Fresnes in 1720. This coal, however, was of poor quality. In 1734, a rich seam was discovered at Anzin, near Valenciennes, in what is now the Nord *département*. The Anzin Company was formed in 1757 from smaller mines, and this became ultimately the most profitable mine in the area, with



1.3 *Fosse* (coal mine) No. 1 of Liévin. Postmarked 26 August 1914. See also Area 4, chapter five, and *A tour in Lens and Liévin*, chapter twelve. (*Authors' collection*)

its shares rising from 300 Francs to 23,000 Francs in 1893. By the French Revolution there were thirty pits in the area producing a million tonnes of coal per year. In the nineteenth century the mines benefitted from the mechanical improvements of the Industrial Revolution. Coal was discovered in the Pas-de-Calais area at Oignies in 1842, and was followed by rapid expansion of the Pas-de-Calais coal fields. A major change, of course, was in transport, and the railways soon monopolised the movement of coal from the mines and the delivery of supplies.

Until the First World War the industry prospered, with mines in the hands of a few companies who were able to exploit their asset for the benefit of usually absent shareholders. During the Great War, a large part of the coal field around and east of Lens was in German hands, and they helped themselves to much equipment from the mines on their side of the front line. However, the miners still had to produce the coal needed to help Germany's war effort. The 1920s saw boom time, followed by the great depression of the 1930s. With the German invasion of 1940, history repeated itself. This

1.4 Women working as coal sorters, Béthune area, with coal tub. (*Authors' collection*)

time the French miners were less biddable; many joined the Resistance, and in 1941 a strike led to 200 miners being shot in Arras and 250 deported to Germany. By the end of the war coal was scarce and in great demand. So miners were recruited from Poland, Italy and North Africa. There were major strikes in 1947 and 1949, and by the 1950s miners were the best paid workers in France. The increasing difficulty of extraction and a decreasing demand for coal led to falling outputs. In 1959, 29 million tonnes were mined. By 1977 this had fallen to 6.6 million tonnes, 3.2 million tonnes by 1983, and 1.3 million tonnes by 1987. The number of miners fell accordingly from a peak in 1953 when there were 220,000. However, even as the industry declined the numbers of retired or working miners in the area remained high, and by 1988 there were estimated still to be 220,000 retired or working miners in the area. Lens, Liévin and Béthune were the towns at the centre of the Pas-de-Calais mining area. The last mine in the region, closed in 1990, was at Oignies, ironically the first Pas-de-Calais mine, which opened in 1842. As a result of mine closures the area has suffered serious economic decline with high unemployment.

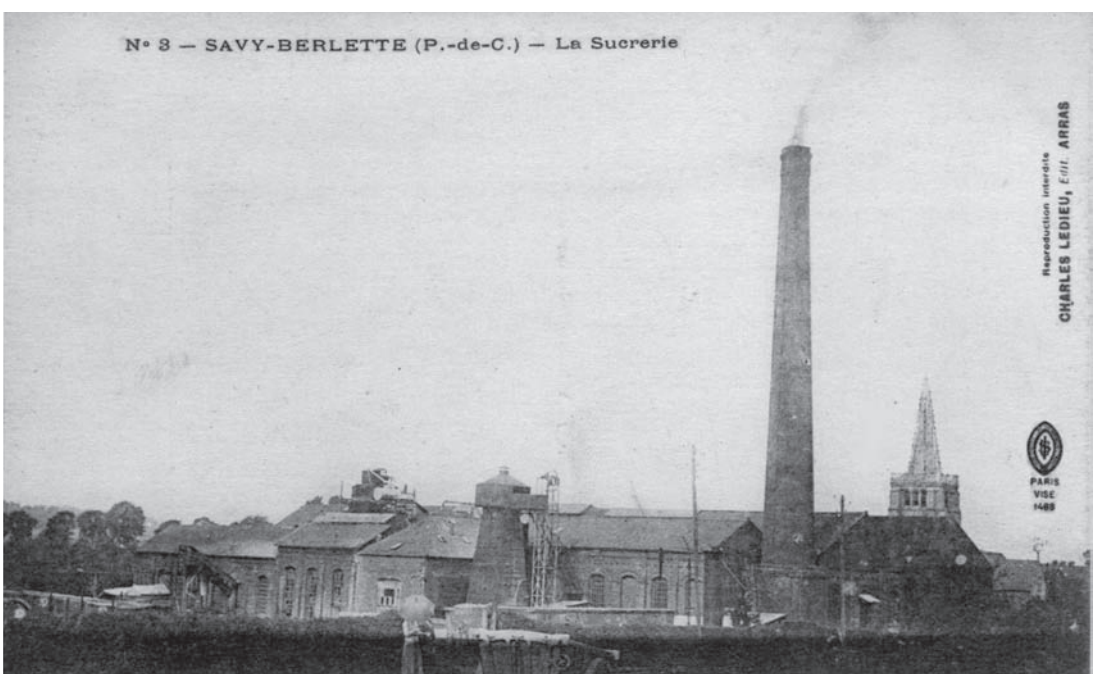
Sugar beet

Of the other industries that developed in the area the one of most interest here is sugar production. The sugar content of beet was known in Germany from the middle of the eighteenth century and increased by selective breeding. It was near Arras, in 1810, that the first sugar in France was produced from sugar-beet. The inventor of the French industrial process, Jean-Baptiste Quéruel, developed the German technology. Along with his sponsor, the industrialist Benjamin Delessert, he was well rewarded by Napoleon, because of the shortage of West Indian sugar cane during the British blockade. As we will describe later the sugar refineries used narrow-gauge railways extensively. Nord-Pas-de-Calais is still a major producer of French sugar, providing one-fifth of the national total.

To produce sugar, the beet is washed and then shredded, and the sugar extracted with hot water. The raw juice is purified and condensed down and the sugar is then crystallised from the concentrated syrup. After extraction the beet strips are pressed to remove water and remaining sugar, and the waste (*pulpe*, pulp) can be used as animal feed. Frequently the whole process is carried out in one factory (*sucrerie*). In the area east of Arras after the First World War, the initial extraction was carried out in a *râperie*, and the juice was then transferred to a central factory for final sugar production (see chapter eight). Sugar beet can also be used to produce alcohol, in which case the factory is often called a *distillerie*.

Béthune

Béthune was a major centre with 14,000 inhabitants in the thirteenth century. It prospered as a textile producing town for the next several centuries. By the nineteenth century the population had reached half the modern level. As the textile industry declined in the latter half of the nineteenth century it was replaced by coal mining and the town became famous – or should we say notorious – as the town of the *'gueules noires'* (black throats), referring, one imagines, both to the pit-heads and to the state of the miners. In an attempt to shed this sinister image the town has been remarketed using 'Beffy', a winged dragon, as its mascot. The



1.5 The sugar factory (*sucrerie*) at Savy-Berlette, with the church spire behind to the right of the chimney. The metre gauge Lens-Frévent line ran along the road in the foreground, serving the factory. The standard gauge line from Étaples to Arras, also serving the *sucrerie*, is on the far side of the factory. (*Authors' collection*)

name comes from Béthune's famous belfry, a 33m high tower topped by a 17m high campanile. This tower was built between 1388 and 1400. Its famous carillon has thirty-five bells that chime on the hour. The original bells were removed from Thérouanne and re-hung in Bethune on the orders of the Spanish Emperor, Charles V. The belfry has become such a symbol of the area that it features on the official Nord-Pas-de-Calais logo. In the First World War, Béthune was in French and British hands throughout. However, the German Army came close in 1914, and when they made their final offensives in 1918, they were only stopped just short of the town, flattening much of it in the process. Because of the town's bravery and suffering it was awarded the *Croix de Guerre* and the *Légion d'Honneur* by the French Government in 1918. The son of the author Rudyard Kipling, John, was declared missing during the war and his father spent the rest of his life trying to find out what had happened to him. His body was finally discovered on the outskirts of Béthune in 1992, unfortunately far too late for his father, who had died in 1936.

Lens

It is said that Lens was a Roman town and that its name comes from its first consul, Lentulus, but possibly this story was made up in the seventeenth century. There is, however, no question that Lens is an old town whose early importance came from its position on the Cassel-Amiens road. It certainly had a tenth century castle to guard the road. Centuries later it became a key stronghold in the wars between France and Burgundy, since it was often on the front line. Having suffered through the centuries, by the sixteenth century it was virtually deserted, and a map of 1557 shows just eight houses. The town recovered in the first half of the seventeenth century until, in 1659, following the final settlement between France and Spain, the town reverted to France. Louis XIV ordered the town's walls to be pulled down and the stones sent to Arras to build the citadel. During the French Revolution, Lens was ultra conservative, with a Marquis for mayor. He ended up in prison in Arras and the church was demolished. The nineteenth century saw a revolution in agriculture with the development of new fertilising methods but real prosperity came with the discovery of coal. The population tripled in a few years and Emile Bosly, from Lens, became the central figure in the nascent union movement. He led two strikes at Anzin and fronted the union, for many years a secret organisation, through the First World War, when he refused to leave Lens, which was in German hands throughout. By the end of the war the town was completely destroyed. Emile Bosly played a major role in rebuilding, and he died in 1928. Lens did badly again in the Second World War, with the town much damaged in 1944.

Notre Dame de Lorette

This dramatic site on top of the escarpment of the Artois hills became, after the First World War, a major French war memorial and cemetery. It started life, however, as a small chapel, built in 1727 by Nicholas Florent Guilbert, an artist from Ablain St. Nazaire, the nearby village. He had made a pilgrimage to Loretto, in Italy, and had been cured of his many ailments. On returning home he decided to build the chapel to house the image of the Virgin Mary he had brought from Italy. His chapel was destroyed in 1794 during the Revolution but was rebuilt in 1816 and extended in 1880.

On 4 October 1914, German infantry took possession of the hill. It was won back with great difficulty and

1.6 The chapel at Notre-Dame de Lorette as it was before the battles around it in 1914 and 1915. (*Edit. Charles Ledieu, Arras; Authors' collection*)

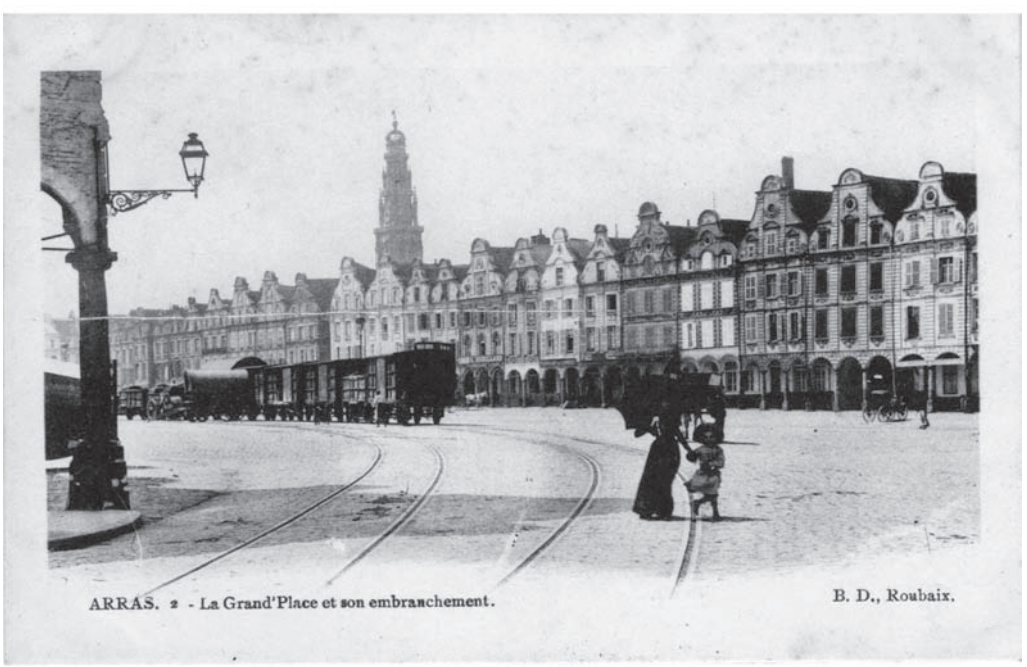
heavy losses in May 1915, by the French XXI Corps (Tenth Army) during the second battle of Artois. In the same battle XX Corps took La Targette on the back slopes of Vimy Ridge, and advanced into the edge of Neuville-St-Vaast. In the valley between Vimy Ridge and the hill of Notre Dame de Lorette the 70th Division struggled to take Carency, which was extremely heavily fortified by the German army, but Carency and Souchez were both recaptured. These battles were very costly in French lives, equaling those lost at the more famous battles of Verdun. To commemorate this loss of life Notre Dame de Lorette was developed as a memorial. The Ossuary was inaugurated by Marshall Pétain in 1921. It took four years to build and contains the bones of 8,000 unknown soldiers. There is a special rota here, where ordinary people offer a day a year as attendants. The Basilica was the inspiration of Eugène Julien, Bishop of Arras, who is buried there. Britain gave six of the stained glass windows. The cemetery has 20,000 named graves with identical headstones, including General Barbot of the Alpine Corps. There are also 1,000 Muslim and Jewish graves and two mass graves of 5,000 bodies each. About 11,000 more French soldiers are buried at the National Cemetery at La Targette, 6km south east towards Arras. These two cemeteries rapidly became places of pilgrimage, attracting large numbers of visitors. The final tally of dead should include the 12,000 bodies returned to their families for burial.

Development of railways in the Arras sector

The main network of standard gauge lines in the Arras area is shown in figure 1.1, together with the narrow gauge (60cm gauge) and metre gauge lines which are the subject of this book, as they were in 1924. The standard gauge lines provide the background for the latter.

The definitions of lines of *Intérêt Général* and those of *Intérêt Local* were codified in the *Loi Migneret* of 1865. Lines of *Intérêt Général* were those of sufficient length, importance, or strategic worth to be at least partially a charge on the State, and were administered by the Ministry of Public Works in Paris. Those of *Intérêt Local* were administered by the *département* concerned, and were (and are still) a responsibility of the *Préfet*. The Chief Engineer of *Ponts et Chaussées* (bridges and highways) for the *département* reported to the *Préfet*, and was also responsible for railways. Local Engineers were based in the chief towns. Unless otherwise qualified, the terms 'Chief Engineer', 'Local Engineer' or 'Engineer' in this book refer to these departmental employees, not to employees of the operating companies. Although the right to build and operate the railways was conceded to companies, the State and the *départements* kept very firm control over them. They had to give permission for all changes to the *Cahier des Charges*, which was the original very detailed agreement about building and operating each line. It is for this reason that so much of the paperwork survives in the departmental archives, even when most of the individual companies' archives have disappeared.

The Freyciney Plan in 1879–1880 further encouraged the development of lines of *Intérêt Local*. Within this category tramways were also defined; these were lines built at least 70% in roads, or on the verges of roads. For a full discussion of all these decisions and their effects we recommend chapter one of *Minor Railways of France*



1.7 The standard gauge branch lines in the Grande Place at Arras, with wagons being unloaded onto carts, before the First World War. (*B.D., Roubaix; Authors' collection*)

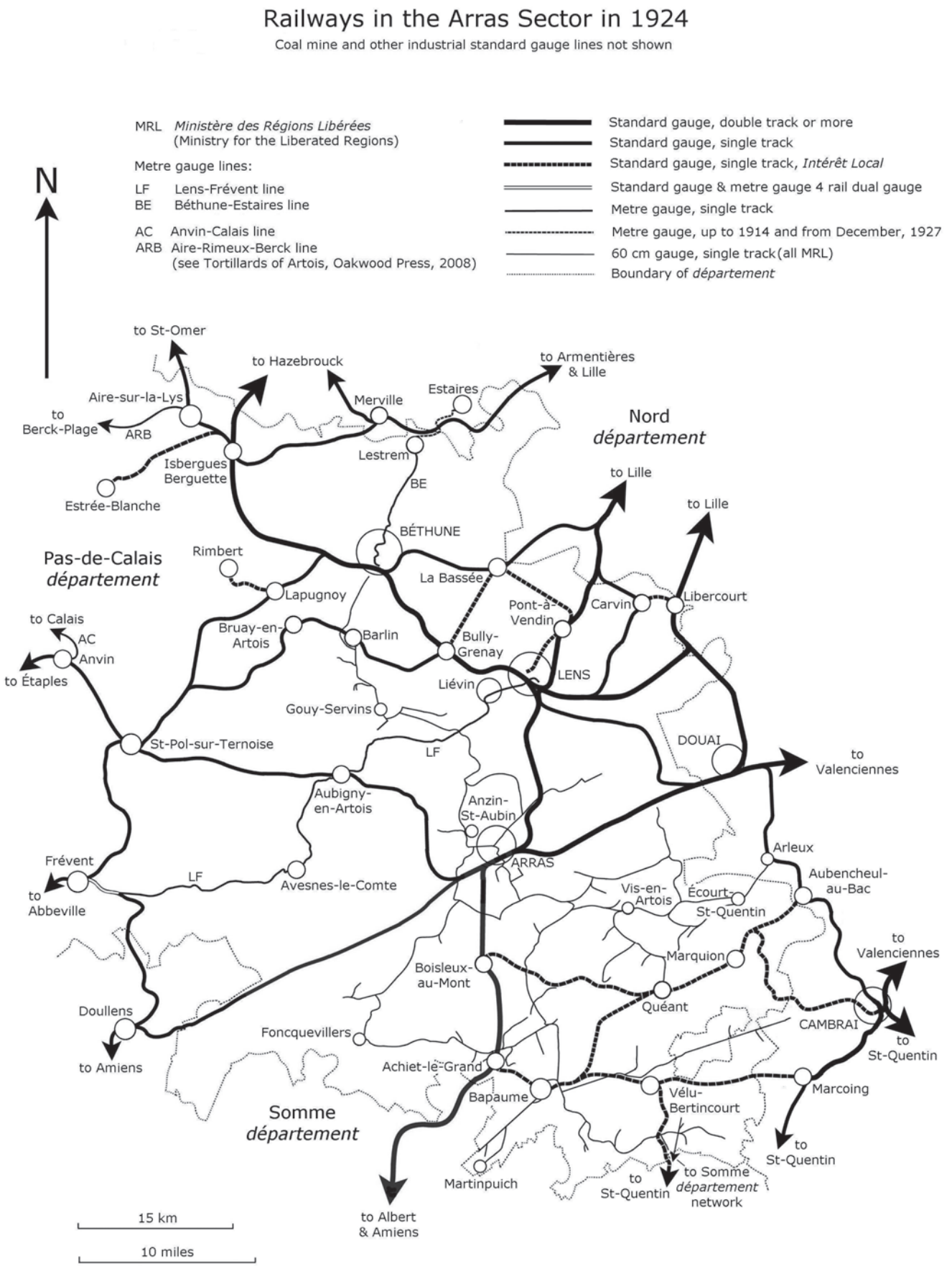

Railways in the Arras Sector in 1924
Coal mine and other industrial standard gauge lines not shown
MRL Ministère des Régions Libérées
(Ministry for the Liberated Regions)
Metre gauge lines:
LF Lens-Frévent line
BE Béthune-Estaires line
AC Anvin-Calais line
ARB Aire-Rimeux-Berck line
(see Tortillards of Artois, Oakwood Press, 2008)
Standard gauge, double track or more
Standard gauge, single track
Standard gauge, single track, Intérêt Local
Standard gauge & metre gauge 4 rail dual gauge
Metre gauge, single track
Metre gauge, up to 1914 and from December, 1927
60 cm gauge, single track (all MRL)
Boundary of département
N
to St-Omer
to Hazebrouck
to Armentières & Lille
Aire-sur-la-Lys
Merville
Estaires
to Berck-Plage
ARB
Isbergues
Berguette
Estrée-Blanche
Lestrem
BE
Nord département
to Lille
to Lille
BÉTHUNE
Rimbert
Pas-de-Calais département
La Bassée
Lapugnoy
Pont-à-Vendin
Carvin
Libercourt
to Calais
AC
Anvin
to Étaples
Bruay-en-Artois
Barlin
Bully-Grenay
LENS
Liévin
Gouy-Servins
St-Pol-sur-Ternoise
LF
DOUAI
to Valenciennes
Aubigny-en-Artois
Anzin-St-Aubin
ARRAS
Arleux
Frévent
to Abbeville
LF
Avesnes-le-Comte
Vis-en-Artois
Écourt-St-Quentin
Aubencheul-au-Bac
Marquion
to Valenciennes
Boisleux-au-Mont
Quéant
Doullens
to Amiens
Foncquevillers
CAMBRAI
to St-Quentin
Achiet-le-Grand
Bapaume
Vélu-Bertincourt
Marcoing
to St-Quentin
Somme département
Martinpuich
to St-Quentin
to Somme département network
to Albert & Amiens
15 km
10 miles

Figure 1.1.

(W. J. K. Davies, Plateway Press, 2000). A businessman or a company would usually be the originator of plans for railways of *Intérêt Local*, frequently with local encouragement. If found suitable after public and other enquiries, the proposed line would be declared of *utilité publique* ('in the public interest'), and the concession to build and operate the line would be granted to the businessman or company for a fixed number of years. A *Compagnie* or *Société Anonyme* (limited company) would be formed at or before this stage. At the end of its life, local agreement was sufficient to close a line, but the formal decree of *déclassement* (declassification) had to come from the office of the President of France, and would be published in the official journal of the Republic.

The *Compagnie du Nord*, which was eventually responsible for all lines of *Intérêt Général* in the area covered by this book, was formed in 1845. The first lines north from Paris were to Lille and Valenciennes, opened in 1846. The line to Lille ran via Amiens, the principal town of the Somme *département*, and Arras, principal town of the Pas-de-Calais, and then to Lille via Douai (Nord *département*). A branch of this from Lille to Calais via Armentières and Hazebrouck (both Nord) and St-Omer opened in 1848.

From 1848 a double track main line was open all the way to Boulogne from Amiens, where it left the main line to Lille. The remaining part of the coastal main line, from Boulogne to Calais, was not opened until 1867, after long discussion about the route, and from then the boat trains to Calais from Paris used this route, instead of going via Arras and Hazebrouck.

The railways came to Lens in 1860, with a double track line from the Douai to Lille line at Leforest. The standard gauge double track *Ligne des Houillères* (line of the coalfields) between Lens and Béthune, and on to Lillers, Isbergues and Hazebrouck, opened in 1861 and every mine had a standard gauge branch. Soon the countryside around Lens and Béthune was criss-crossed with branches to mines. Within the mines too there were networks of railway lines, with coal loading sidings where trucks could be shunted under the washing and grading sheds and be loaded directly with the coal. The direct line between Arras and Lens via Vimy opened in 1882, and direct lines from Lens to Lille, Armentières, and Douai followed. Béthune was also connected east to Lille through La Bassée.

In 1874 a cross-country line was opened from St-Omer to Boulogne. A double track as far as Arques was shared with the line to Isbergues (Berguette) and Armentières. From Arques it was a single track line to the west via Lumbres and Desvres. Southwest of Boulogne, at Hesdigneul, it joined the Amiens to Boulogne main line.

The line from St-Omer to Armentières opened between Arques and Isbergues (Berguette) in 1878. The line was single track from Arques where it left the line to Boulogne. At Isbergues it met the *Ligne des Houillères*. The line from Berguette to Armentières, also single track, opened in 1874. This section passed between the Pas-de-Calais and Nord *départements* several times east of Calonne-sur-la-Lys.

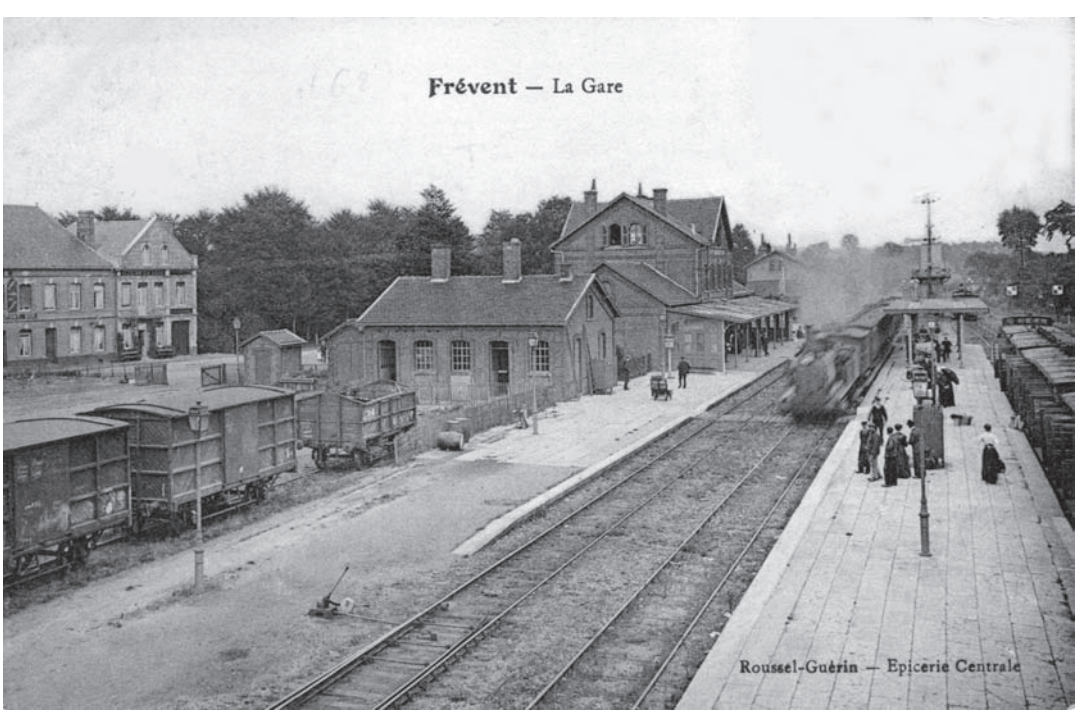
Another cross-country line, from Arras to Étaples, opened at each end (from Arras to St-Pol-sur-Ternoise and from Étaples to Montreuil) in 1875, but the central section between Montreuil and St-Pol did not open until 1878. The line was built as single track, but

1.8 The original *Compagnie du Nord* station at Lens, before its destruction in the First World War. The tracks of the metre gauge line from Lens to Frévent can be seen crossing the forecourt in the foreground. (*Authors' collection*)

1.9 The *Compagnie du Nord* station at Béthune, probably before the First World War. The tracks of the metre gauge tramway from Béthune to Estaires can be seen crossing the forecourt in the foreground. (*Brevet L. D. F. Fournier Edit; Authors' collection*)

was doubled by French and British railway engineers during the First World War. It returned to single track afterwards. This line was crossed at St-Pol by the line from Bèthune to Abbeville (Somme *département*), opened in stages between 1875 and 1879. The line north of St-Pol was opened in 1875, and joined the *Ligne des Houillères* at Chocques, just west of Béthune. This line was linked across south of Béthune in 1878 by another line, from Brias to Bully-Grenay on the Lens-Béthune line. South of St-Pol the line from Bèthune to Abbeville went through Frévent, where the station was opened on 14 May 1876, in the presence of the *Préfet* and the mayor. The link south from Frévent to Doullens was also opened in 1876. All of these lines were single track.

Although Doullens is in the Somme *département*, it is geographically on the edge of the south of the Pas-de-Calais, since it is on the River Authie. As well as the line from Frévent, there was a single track line south from Doullens to Amiens, and another single track line east to Arras. This latter was opened in 1876, and joined the line from Étaples to Arras just west of Arras, at Achicourt.



1.10 The standard gauge platforms at Frévent, looking east, with a train arriving from St-Pol-sur-Ternoise, probably from Béthune. Postcard postmarked 1908. (*Authors' collection*)

Standard gauge lines of *Intérêt Local*

In general, standard gauge lines were of *Intérêt Général*, and those of metre gauge and narrower gauges were of *Intérêt Local*, but there were exceptions. In the area of interest of this book, there were no metre or narrow gauge lines of *Intérêt Général*, but there were a considerable number of standard gauge lines of *Intérêt Local*. These fell into two groups. The first group were in the coal-mining area around Lens, and were really developments of mining lines to carry passengers to serve the mines and associated communities. The second were a group of lines in the mostly rural area south east of Arras. Lines in both of these groups are listed in Table 1.1. A detailed discussion is beyond the scope of this book, but the second group were of some importance in relation to the light railways of the First World War south of Arras (chapter six) and to the subsequent Vis-en-Artois sugar beet railways (chapter eight), and these are therefore briefly described here.

The line from Boisleux to Marquion in the Nord *département* (26km, 16 miles) was opened in 1878 to 1880. Another Company extended this line to Cambrai (another 20km, 12 miles) in 1899, but the running was given to the Boisleux to Marquion management. The combined line ran a rather contorted course east from the junction with the *Compagnie du Nord* line from Amiens to Arras at Boisleux to the junction with the *Compagnie du Nord* lines at Cambrai. The similar west to east line further south, from Achiet-le-Grand on the *Compagnie du Nord* line from Amiens to Arras, to Bapaume initially, and then on Marcoing on the *Compagnie du Nord* line from Cambrai to St-Quentin, was 33km (20 miles) long and opened between 1871 and 1878. Both these lines terminated in the Nord *département*. The line from Vélu-Bertincourt ran from the junction with the Achiet to Marcoing line at Vélu south into the Somme and then the Aisne *départements* to St-Quentin. It was opened by 1880. A link between Frémicourt on the Achiet-Marcoing line and Quéant on the Boisleux-Marquion line was built by the British Army, from Vaulx junction, near Frémicourt, to Vaulx-Vraucourt by January 1918, and on to Quéant later in 1918. The First World War link from Marquion to Aubencheul on the line from Douai to Cambrai was built by the German Army. More information about these in the First World War is given in chapter six, with

Table **1.1** Standard gauge lines of *Intérêt Local* in the Arras sector.

Line	*Between*	*and*	*length km (1)*	*opened*	*closed*		*notes*
					passengers	*goods*	
Northern (mining) group							
Carrières of Estrée-Blanche	Berguette	Estrée-Blanche	14	1868	1937	1950	
Mines of Marles	Lapugnoy	Rimbert	7	1862	before 1938	1980	HBNPC from 1946
Mines of Bully	Bully-Grenay	La Bassée-Violaines	10	1862	before 1938	1970	HBNPC from 1946
Mines of Lens	Lens Ste-Elisabeth	La Bassée-Violaines	17	1868–1883	1957	1983 (2)	HBNPC from 1946
Mines of Carvin	Libercourt	Carvin	5	1865 (3)	1950	1970	HBNPC from 1946
South eastern group							
Achiet to Marcoing	Achiet-le-Grand	Marcoing	33	1871–1878	1966	1969 (4)	VFIL 1930 PdeC 1961
Vélu to St-Quentin	Vélu-Bertincourt	St-Quentin	52	1879–1880	1955	1955 (5)	VFIL 1930
Boisleux to Marquion	Boisleux	Marquion	26	1878–1880	1962	1969	VFIL 1930 PdeC 1961
Marquion to Cambrai	Marquion	Cambrai	20	1899	1962	1964	VFIL 1930 PdeC 1961
Frémicourt to Quéant	Frémicourt	Quéant		1917–18 (6)	1962	1969	VFIL 1930 PdeC 1961
Marquion to Aubencheul	Marquion	Aubencheul-au-Bac		1917 (7)		1939	VFIL 1930

HBNPC *Houillères du Bassin du Nord et du Pas-de-Calais* (nationalised)
VFIL *Compagnie Générale des Voie Ferrées d'Intérêt Local*
PdeC *Régie départementale des transports du Pas-de-Calais*
(1) Length of principal line. With mining and other industrial branches total lengths usually more
(2) Still in use by SNCF from Pont-à-Vendin to La Bassée-Violaines as industrial lines to factories
(3) Overhead electrification 1935
(4) In use until recently from Achiet to Bapaume as a private industrial line
(5) Date of closure of section in Pas-de-Calais
(6) British Army construction
(7) German Army construction

1.11 The original Lens Sainte-Elisabeth station, Lens terminus of the standard gauge line of *Intérêt Local* to La Bassée-Violaines, owned by the *Compagnie des Mines de Lens*. This building was destroyed during the First World War. (*Authors' collection*)

the related light railways in the Third Army area south of Arras.

Apart from the originally military lines, these lines were built by companies associated with Émile Level, who had many other railway interests, including the Anvin-Calais and Aire-Berck metre gauge lines in the western Pas-de-Calais. It is therefore no surprise that in 1930 the management of these lines was taken over by the *Compagnie Générale des Voie Ferrées d'Intérêt Local* (CGL-VFIL), who by that time had taken over many other lines in the 'Level empire', mostly metre gauge, in the Nord, Pas-de-Calais, Oise and Aisne *départements*. Except for the line from Vélu to St-Quentin, the management of these lines was taken over by the Pas-de-Calais *département* in 1961, and they closed progressively during the 1960s. The only one which remained until recently was the stub from Achiet to Bapaume, as a private industrial line serving factories. This is now also disused, but the rails have not, at the time of writing, been taken up.

1.12 The station at Bapaume on the standard gauge line of *Intérêt Local* from Achiet-le-Grand to Marcoing. Postcard postmarked 1907. (*Authors' collection*)

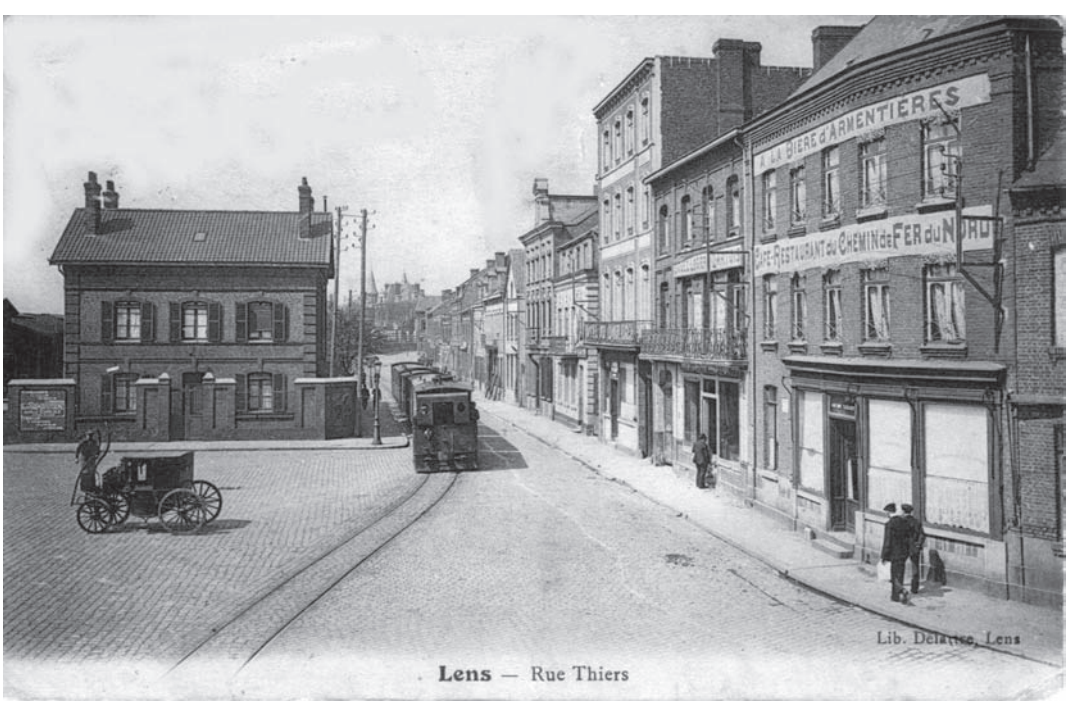
Chapter Two

The Metre Gauge Railway from Lens to Frévent and Related Lines and Tramways 1884 to 1914

We will discuss later the proposals to link Avesnes-le-Comte into the railway network from 1875, but it was in August 1884 that M. Deguisne, a civil engineer from Béthune, first proposed a railway from Lens to Frévent via Liévin, Aubigny and Avesnes. This proposal and the length of line foreseen, at 53.25km (33 miles) were remarkably close to those of the line finally opened in 1895. By August 1886 detailed proposals for the line and the funding were made to the *Conseil Général*. The plans were much as built, except that halts were proposed at Cambligneul, between Camblain-l'Abbé and Agnières, and at Grand-Rullecourt, between Beaufort and Liencourt. Both these would have involved some deviation from the route as built. Of 71,000 francs promised, 2,000 came from Lens and 6,000 from Liévin, in expectation that the densely populated area around Lens would receive a more frequent service. The *Compagnie des Mines de Liévin* agreed to put up 18,000 francs. Presumably they knew that towns such as Avesnes, large purchasers of their coal, would be encouraged to buy more once the railway was operational.

In the end, in 1890, it was the *Compagnie* (sometimes referred to as the *Société*) *des Chemins de Fer Économiques du Nord* (CEN) which was given permission to build three metre gauge lines, including this one, in the Pas-de-Calais. The other two lines were in the western Pas-de-Calais and were linked. These were from Le Portel, a suburb of Boulogne, to the main station in Boulogne, and from Boulogne station to Bonningues-lès-Ardres on the Anvin to Calais line. These were opened between 1900 and 1902 and are described in our previous book *Tortillards of Artois – the Metre Gauge Railways of the Western Pas-de-Calais* (Oakwood Press, 2008). The line which forms the subject of this chapter was the first of the three to open in 1895. CEN was a Company associated with the empire of the Belgian entrepreneur Baron Empain. He had many railway and industrial links in Belgium, including Tubize, a company making *bicabine* type locomotives.

The general practice of putting the termini in alphabetical order, regardless of their towns' relative importance, indicated that this line would be called the line from Frévent to Lens, and indeed it was so called in some early documents, and on the timetables



2.1 A train on the metre gauge Lens-Frévent line, hauled by a Franco-Belge locomotive of *bicabine* type, enters the station forecourt at Lens from the Rue Thiers. This postcard was written to an address in Baden-Baden on 24 October 1914, and is postmarked by the Field Post Office of the German 29th Infantry Division. (*Authors' collection*)

published by the *Chaix*. However it became more usual to call it the line from Lens to Frévent. The timetables published by the Company ran this way and the main depot was at Lens. We have therefore called the line 'Lens to Frévent'. However the detailed distances along the line are all measured from Frévent, including in Table 2.2.

Building and Opening

The line was conceded to CEN for ninety-nine years on 15 February 1890, and declared *d'utilité publique* on 8 August the same year. It was opened in three sections; from Aubigny to Frévent on 7 January 1895, from Lens to Ablain on 18 May, and the middle section from Ablain to Aubigny on 3 September 1895. An official opening of the whole line took place on 17 October 1895, with local dignitaries taking a ride on the train; these included the Chief Engineer of the *département*, representing the *Préfet*; local departmental engineers from Béthune and St-Pol-sur-Ternoise; the Chief Engineer of CEN; a Senator for the *département*; and the Mayor of Lens.

Description of the line

A plan of the line is shown in Figure 2.1. Although this line has been referred to in some quarters as a tramway, it was classified in all the official documents as a railway of *Intérêt Local*. Only 33 per cent of the line ran in public roads or on their verge. More than 70 per cent was required to classify a line as a tramway. The 'official' length of the line as originally built stretched from the mid-point of the main passenger building at Frévent to the forecourt of the *Compagnie du Nord* station at Lens. In fact the platform and later shelter for the Lens-Frévent line at Lens were about 50m further on, just to the east of the station forecourt. For distances and heights of stations and other stops see Table 2.2.

The detailed plans of 1891, which are the earliest we have seen, differed in important respects from the line as finally built. The main change was that, originally, the line was to have left Frévent station along its own path where as built it shared the *Compagnie du Nord* line from Frévent to Doullens in dual gauge almost as far as Bouret-sur-Canche. The description of the line given here is of the line up to 1914. The modifications after 1919 in Lens and Liévin are described in chapter ten.

The railway went roughly west, south-west from Lens to Frévent, but, as with most similar lines, it followed a very winding course. This was to avoid difficulties with the terrain, which would have required heavy engineering. Another motive was to serve communities along the route, although even so some villages had their station some distance from the village itself. An example of this is Villers-au-Bois, with the station in open country 1.6km from the village centre. The 'as the crow flies' distance between the ends of the line was 41km, compared with the actual line length of 53.74km.

Figure 2.2 shows more detail of the line in Lens and Liévin, as it was in 1914. The line began at its own single line platform immediately east of the *Cour des Voyageurs* (station forecourt) in front of the main *Compagnie du Nord* station at Lens (height 38.8m, 127ft). The line crossed the *Cour* in the roadway and remained in the roadway until it took its own path west of Liévin, 4.85km away. From the *Cour* the line followed the Rue Thiers

2.2 A train in the lower part of the Boulevard des Écoles in Lens, headed towards Frévent. Postcard postmarked 1908. (*Collection André Artur*)