

Especially coveted during the 2nd World War, the Schaerbeek station suffered blemishes that can still be seen today... A concrete bunker was built on the site, probably in 1938, in a place that was kept secret at the time. In fact, it stands in the centre of the area where trains are shunted. In other words, if you take the entrance to the passenger station as your starting point, go towards Willebroek along the canal, by the "Miscellaneous Use Building" or "BUD". This bunker, which measures 12 m x 24 m, was intended to serve as a "health compartment" or small first aid hospital for wounded railway officials. It was an initiative by the

railway company, which came out of the 1st World War traumatised by the destruction to its network and the victims from among its ranks, and was intended to give some reassurance to its employees and prove its goodwill toward them. In the end, the bunker was not used as a hospital but as an air raid shelter. Built to the most modern standards, it resisted the bombardments at the end of the conflict although its roof was partly damaged. Hundreds of bombs, most often dropped by the Allies, fell onto the Schaerbeek station railway installations, causing serious damage.

Finally, during the hostilities, the Nord and Scheerbeek stations witnessed painful separations due to the many deportations after the introduction of compulsory labour to be done in Germany. Emotional images of the return of the men who went to Germany also remained in people's memories. From the 50s, the station was known for its car trains, trains with couchettes that took passengers and their vehicles to their holiday destinations, mostly in the south of France and Italy. This type of service ended in 2000.

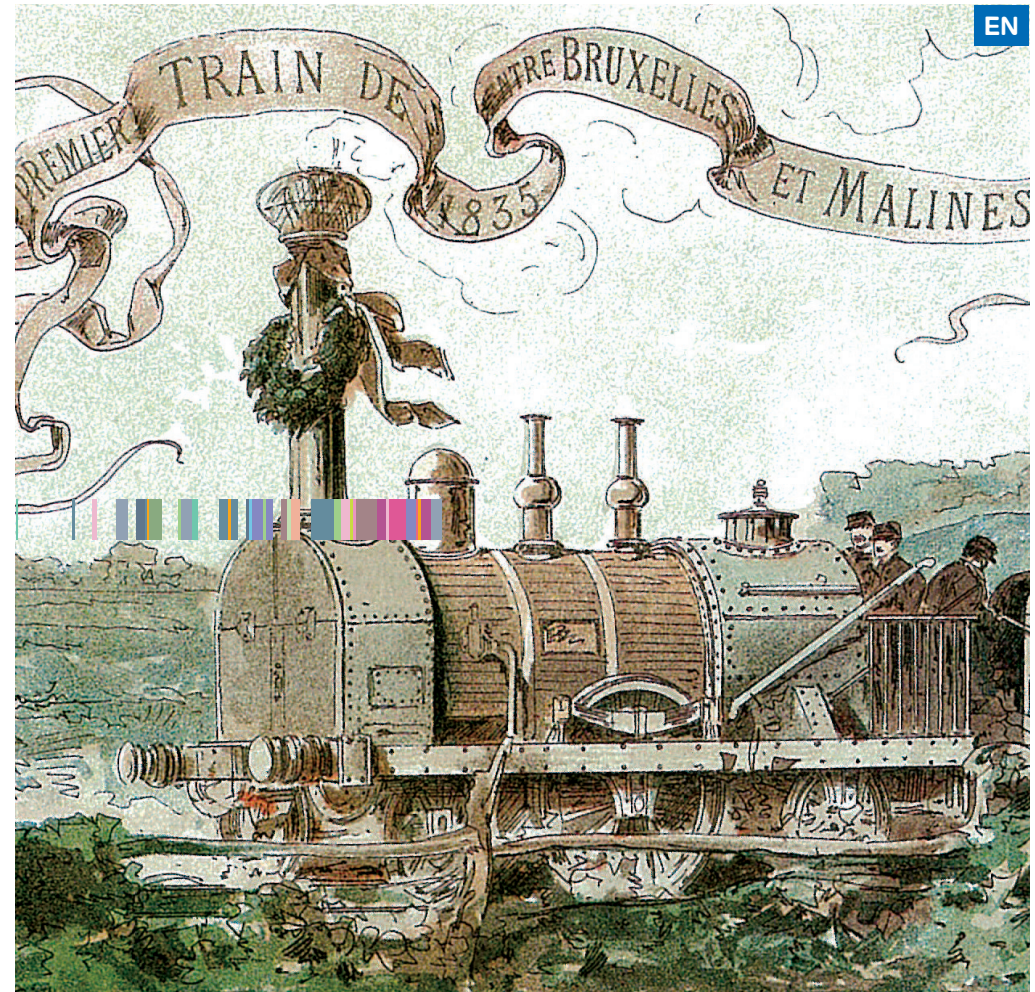
Goods trains, the original reason for the station's existence, went into decline in the 1980s, being replaced by road transport.

Today, the station still welcomes commuters and continues to be the main arrival and departure point for long trains, such as in 2004, with the arrival from Germany of two trains, each 400 m long, carrying the caravans of the Roncalli Circus!

Architecture and decor



The designer of both stages of the railway complex was the architect Franz Seulen, for the State Railway Administration. He also designed the Jette and Ostend stations and tended to produce buildings in an eclectic style. The first station building has a central section with a bell tower, flanked by two buildings of unequal size, in height, length and width, giving it an asymmetrical appearance. It includes the administrative area (ticket office, waiting room), a technical area and the stationmaster's office. Even though the exterior of the first building has kept its original appearance, the interior preserves only a few of the original elements. The section on the right, built after the First World War, was also built in an eclectic style, with two obvious inspirations: the Flemish Neo-Renaissance and Art Nouveau. Several materials were used: brick, stone, metal, etc. The complex of buildings making up the station was classified as a heritage site in 1994.



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train museum / train world, a former railway giant



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Origin and development



Opened in 2015 in the old Schaerbeek station, which still continues some of its activities, this enormous space is dedicated to the history of Belgian railways. In a building that blends a heritage site with new construction, the museum displays historical vehicles, objects, photos, text and audiovisual archives, etc., with a scenography designed by François Schuiten. The history of Belgium's railways coincides almost exactly with the birth of the Belgian state. The end of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands (approximately the Benelux territory and the entity out of which Belgium was created in 1830) meant the end of the hegemony of transport along navigable routes – with the port of Anvers in the forefront – and led to the diversification of the means of communication. In 1835 the first national railway was inaugurated. It linked Brussels with Malines, starting from the Bruxelles-Allée-Verte station, which was built along the Willebroeck Canal, on the site of the old heliport, now occupied by the Maximilien Park. The Gare du Nord was built shortly after the opening of the ancestor of the Gare du Midi, the “Bogards Station”. Opening in 1846, although its commissioning and the first train traffic date from 1841, the first Gare du Nord was located on what is now Place Rogier. It was replaced in 1952 by the Gare du Nord that we see today, a few hundred metres away in the municipality of Schaerbeek. The former station that houses Trainworld was built in two stages, one starting in 1887, which is on the left, and the other in 1919, the big building



on the right that gives it its present-day appearance. However, even before 1887, there had already been railway-related activity on the site, since in 1864 there was the “Helmet” halt, a tiny station with a humble shack from where passengers and goods boarded the trains. It is said that this shack might have been an old, disused wooden carriage that had served as a shelter for the crossing guard. This discreet little station is therefore the forerunner of the Schaerbeek station. At the beginning of the 1870s, the Minister of Public Works realised that, with the success of this mode of transport, it was time to reduce the congestion at the Nord and Allée Verte stations. The obvious increase in rolling stock coming into Brussels and the growing goods traffic finally convinced the state to build a new station.

The Schaerbeek station was therefore a “shunting station”, where wagons were “shunted” to form trains, or a “marshalling yard” or special station for sorting and organising the wagons before forming them into goods trains. It also had a facility for maintaining and repairing the trains. In spite of these advances, it was necessary to wait for the city planning that took place in the 1880s (the construction of the Place Nationale, now Place Princesse Elisabeth, and the building of the new Schaerbeek Town Hall on Place Colignon) for the first station building to be constructed in 1887, which today is the section on the left. In the first few years of the 20th century, the triumph of the Railways was clear, leading to the development of a network. In 1913 it was decided to build an intermediate station linking the north and south. This is what is normally called the “North-Midi junction”, which only came into operation in 1952. Because of this, the Schaerbeek station replaced the Gare du Nord while the latter was out of commission and it was necessary to modernise and enlarge it for these new duties. The scheduled expansion was enormous, including in particular a shed for engines and carriages and a workshop. The work was postponed because of the First World War and ended in the 20s, giving rise, among other developments, to an enormous building reserved for passengers.

Tours and detours



On 5 May 1835 the first train on the European continent set out to link Bruxelles-Allée-Verte with Malines. What an event! The novelty of it and ignorance gave rise to fear: would one's breath be cut off at that speed? Wouldn't the cows be disturbed by the passing trains and no longer give any milk? Three locomotives, La Flèche, Stephenson and L'Elephant, set out at the head of three trains, pulling 30 carriages and 900 passengers, to finish the 22 km journey in 50 minutes. The return trip, this time with just one train, was marred by a technical problem – a significant drop in the steam pressure – which forced L'Elephant to abandon its 30 carriages in the middle of the country for some time

while it went to fill up with water in Vilvoorde, before returning! The decision to build the Schaerbeek station involved a process of expropriation, which took in part of the Monplaisir estate (including the Château of the same name) and some collective pasture land used by breeders from the municipality. The original surface area was only a few hectares but in recent years the site has grown to over 200 hectares!

In the second half of the 19th century, the urban planning of the Brussels region was quite limited... The second section of the Rue Royale-Saint-Marie (i.e., what is now Avenue Princesse Elisabeth starting at what is called the Cage aux Ours (Bear Pit)) was not paved and did not have any houses! The inhabited area around the station arose because of the houses built for railway employees.

During the 20th century's two world wars, the station was occupied by the Germans, who made it the hub for their troop movement and materiel and munitions supply strategy.

