

The Oignies-en-Thiérache slate mines

Of the thirty-one “test pits” bored in Oignies, only around ten slate mines were actually operated. A number of mine entrances can be made out along the banks of the *Ry d’Alyse* and on the hilly slopes of the Chestion: the *Ancienne ardoisière de Oignies* and the *Sauveur, Trou du Diable, Notre-Dame* and *Saint-Théodore mines*, to name but a few whose remains are still visible.

The people of Oignies placed a great deal of hope in two major mines, the *Trou du Diable*, operated sporadically from 1810 to 1926, and the *Ardoisière Saint-Joseph*, known as the *Hamérienne*, from 1852 to 1926. However, both changed hands several times over the years, and ultimately failed to bring lasting prosperity to the area.

The Oignies slate mines were in fact outperformed by the Fumay mines, which boasted a superior quality slate and, above all, better transport connections thanks to the River Meuse, the road network and the railway.



The Oignies slate mines

In Oignies, these means of transport were sorely lacking and the roads were often impassable. The inauguration of the tram line to Olloy in 1911 came a little late!

The key factors in the success of a mine were money, skilled workers, competent engineers and effective management. Unfortunately, all mine directors did not live up to these specifications, defaulted on payments, dismissed workers for no serious reason in the middle of the week and failed to monitor the risk of accidents. Some even opened bars close to their mine and pocketed a percentage of the sales.

Faced with the shortcomings of the Belgian mining companies, most of the workers in Oignies headed for the French slate mines, less than two hours’ walk away. Working on the other side of the border opened up the possibility of smuggling tobacco, alcohol and coffee... a perilous but lucrative activity that was much appreciated by the local population.



The entrance to the Hamérienne slate mine

The Groupement des Ardoisiers de Oignies

In 1936, a group of workers, together with the director of the *Ardoisières Saint-Joseph* and *La Renaissance* in Fumay, founded the *Groupement des Ardoisiers de Oignies*, which bought the uncut stone in Fumay to process it in Oignies and sell it on in Belgium and abroad.

An initial workshop was set up in the barn of the *Magasins Généraux* on rue Saint-Antoine, now rue Roger Delizée, which today houses the *Maison des Jeunes de Viroinval*.

A new workshop, which has since been converted into a village hall, was soon built in the hamlet of *Zorizette du Scrupia*, in the Oignies municipal woodland. Worked exclusively by Belgian workers, production reached a peak of 1,478,700 slates in 1937, before being interrupted by the onset of war.

In 1941, new operators attempted to take over the old mines, but shut down production for good in 1954.



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