

**Zeitschrift:** The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK

**Herausgeber:** Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom

**Band:** - (1977)

**Heft:** 1727

  

**Artikel:** How the Roman conquest of Britain helped developments in ancient Switzerland

**Autor:** H.W.E.

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-688870>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 16.02.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

Paul Bessire has many interests; he has played a lot of tennis and golf and indulged in riding, and in his younger days enjoyed winning ski-ing prizes. He is a very keen gardener and loves carpentry.

One of Paul's great qualities is loyalty, and he is also a very modest man. I had great difficulty in getting his agreement that his birthday should get a special mention. But his many friends will want to wish him an enjoyable birthday and many happy returns. Good health and happiness together with his wife and family for many more years to come.

MM

## Swiss Rifle Association

The 1977 Bisley meetings will be held on: 24th April, 8th May, 22nd May, 5th June, 19th June, 4th September, 18th September and 2nd October.

Further details and applications for membership to: The Hon. Secretary, 58 Dickens Rise, Chigwell, Essex.

## NEWS FROM THE COLONY

# HOW THE ROMAN CONQUEST OF BRITAIN HELPED DEVELOPMENTS IN ANCIENT SWITZERLAND

IN his delightful recent after-dinner speech to the Anglo-Swiss Society the Geneva historian, Prof. Denis van Berchem, cast some interesting new light on the first stirrings of "modernisation" of life in very ancient times in the region of the lower Valais and the Lake of Geneva, thanks to the expansion of the Roman imperial power culminating in the conquest of Britain. We are privileged to offer our readers a slightly shortened version of his talk as follows.

My theme for tonight, Prof. van Berchem said, is related to the Roman conquest of Britain in the year 43 after Christ, originally planned by the Emperor Caligula but achieved only two years after his death under his successor Claudius. How this well-known event affected the destiny of Switzerland is well worth exploring. Speaking of Switzerland at that time is, of course, a glaring anachronism as that name did not come into use before the Middle Ages or even more recently.

But I cannot find a more suitable word to designate a territory which in Roman time was divided between several provinces and inhabited by various nationalities: the Helvetians on the actual Swiss plateau, the Rhetians in the Eastern regions and a mosaic of small tribes of Celtic, Ligurian or Illyrian stock in the Alpine valleys.

The Helvetians had been defeated by Caesar, but not immediately incorporated in the newly-created province of Gaul. They found themselves annexed

under Augustus as a result of the conquest of Rhetia and of the whole of the Alps. Their territory had not the extent we find later. West Switzerland with the town of Avenches belonged to the Seguari still established on both sides of the Jura.

Very little is known of the Helvetians in the half-century corresponding to the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius. We have not a single inscription to throw any light on their social or political condition. Apart from a few places occupied by Roman forces we find no traces of imported wares. The townships were still built in wood and the material reflects Celtic civilisation.

Everything changes only with the accession of Claudius to the government of the Empire. Numerous inscriptions bear testimony of the rapid Romanisation, if not of the whole population, at least of the local aristocracy. New roads marked by milestones connect towns rebuilt in stone. Why all this change at that time? I may say with confidence

that it was the result of the opening of a new road over the Col du Grand St. Bernard, connecting through the valley of Aosta and the basin of the lake of Geneva Northern Italy with the Rhine Valley, North Gaul and the shores of the English Channel.

The Roman road builders were actually in no hurry to open up the Alpine passes. Caesar was apparently content using other longer routes for his repeated journeys and Augustus opened some Rhetic passes, such as the Brenner, east of present-day Switzerland, and in the west he had a road built over the Petit St. Bernard leading to Lyon. But the Grand St. Bernard, though used for centuries by traders, was at that time still completely neglected. Thus the Helvetians remained at a dead end and poorly developing until the new road over the Grand St. Bernard was opened to traffic at the very beginning of the reign of Claudius. There followed important territorial and political changes affecting the population of the areas concerned. The road was, of course, not built to please the Helvetians. It had to serve imperial needs, not least as the shortest way from Italy to Britain.

No doubt the opening of the campaign in Britain brought great anima-

# GENEVA

# £17 SINGLE

BY COACH.

Regular departures from our office. Journey duration 24 hours.

PARIS £10 MILAN £19 BOLOGNA £20 VENICE £21 BELGRADE £23 SALONICA £25 ATHENS £25

For Full Information Apply:

## ALECOS TOURS LTD.

3a Camden Road, Camden Town, NW1 9LG. Telephone: 01-485 6078 (Open Saturdays)

tion also in our country with troops moving and carriages rolling along the new road. Most important and lasting changes occurred in the political set-up and material features of our country which had suddenly come under close attention by the imperial government.

At the foot of the Grand St. Bernard the present-day town of Martigny became under the name of Forum Claudii Vallensium the chief-town of a new "civitas" uniting the Upper Rhône Valley formerly divided between four small tribes.

Further along the same route the territory of the Helvetians was extended to the Lake of Geneva in the South as far as the Jura and Avenches became its new chief-town. This and all other townships of the area, such as Martigny, Lausanne, Yverdon and Soleure took on a completely new aspect with markets, shops, aqueducts, etc. as in classical Roman towns appearing everywhere, as well as trading and shipping associations.

In conclusion, Prof. van Berchem dilated upon the important role an Italian banker, Flavius Selinus, played in helping to finance much of these new developments, based at Avenches, where he settled and died at a ripe old age. But, more important, he was the father of Vespasian, who followed Nero as Emperor and had his own son and later successor Titus brought up at Avenches by his grandparents, while Vespasian took part in the conquest of Britain as a legion commander.

It was he, foreseeing the wealthy development chances amongst the Helvetians under Roman influence, who

advised his father to establish himself at Avenches and who raised the town to the

status of a Roman Colony in the year A.D. 73 or 74. H.W.E.

## CITY SWISS CLUB

The City Swiss Club held its 111th Annual Banquet and Ball as usual at the Dorchester Hotel on 19th November.

If the attendance at this event — still regarded as socially most important in our Colony — was somewhat less numerous than on many previous occasions it was no doubt due to the increasingly serious economic situation in our host-country which was also reflected in the inevitably rising cost of admission.

Yet, it was a pleasure to see a well-balanced mixture of the older and the younger generations enjoying themselves at the tables and on the dance floor until 2 a.m. although the menu also, with saddle of lamb as its main dish, seemed to reflect the sterner mood of our times.

After dinner the Club's president, Mr. Roger Suess, welcomed the guests, amongst whom especially our Ambassador and Madame Ernesto Thalmann, the chairman of the Anglo-Swiss Parliamentary Group, Mr. Bryant Godman Irvine, M.P., the Ambassador's right-hand man Minister K. Fritschi and the President of our Federation of Swiss Societies in the U.K. Mr. Bernhard Simon and their ladies.

In his speech Dr. Thalmann, diligently striking a lighter vein in keeping with the festive occasion had only good news to impart to his listeners, such as that Britain is again the leading champagne-importing country while Switzerland also is not doing too badly in that

respect holding the 7th place; that Anglo-Swiss relations are at present vastly benefiting from the influx of Swiss Christmas-shoppers in their thousands confusing the staffs of Harrods and other monuments of Britishness with their motley dialects; and finally that the Swiss, despite appearances, are really deeply romantic spenders. They spend 95 francs per head per annum on flowers — more than any other nation in Europe! In conclusion the Ambassador rewarded his hosts with the following pleasing words, which after him were also echoed in an equally charming address of thanks to the Club by Mr. Godman Irvine, M.P., speaking on behalf of all invited guests.

We quote Dr. Thalmann's flattering peroration verbatim:

"The City Swiss Club's 111th Annual Banquet and Ball is proof, if proof were needed, of the vitality and prosperity of your fine Society. At a time when so many clubs, charming survivals of the old British way of life, have become sadly empty in the evening, your gatherings still seem to attract quite a number of people.

"For this achievement, Mr. President, you deserve my congratulations. And tonight, being members of this men-only Club, we have a bonus because we are lucky enough to have persons with us in whom we recognise our sweethearts. We have to confess and accept the fact that once a year we are more than delighted to be escorted by what is erroneously called the weaker sex. H.W.E.

## SPECIAL EASTER FLIGHT NOW AVAILABLE

### 8th TO 11th APRIL 1977

OTHER FLIGHT ARRANGEMENTS

## ZURICH

**Weekly departures  
for  
7 and 14 days**

## PRICES FROM: £49

Price includes: ★

- ★ RETURN JET FLIGHT (EX. GATWICK)
- ★ PORTERAGE AT AIRPORT
- ★ TOURIST ACCOMMODATION, EN PENSION, ON BED AND BREAKFAST BASIS
- ★ BAGGAGE ALLOWANCE — 15 kilos (33 lb.)

Contact:

**CROSSGATES TRAVEL LTD.**  
273 NEW CROSS ROAD, LONDON SE14  
Telephone: 01-692 7471/2

IN CONJUNCTION WITH CHANCERY TRAVEL. A.T.O.L. 359 B

