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Swiss Life



A visit to Spiez

THE Swiss Railway Enthusiasts Society visits Spiez this year, Europe's last main line junction that is not nationalised. It makes a profit and pays its way. The passengers are more important than the staff!

For me, no visit to Switzerland is really satisfying without a call at this last haven of private enterprise where, until recently, the booking office would change money for you until 11pm at night, if you so wished.

I have been there by train, by motor car, by preserved 1929 Pullman and even by DSG diner. Spiez has changed a bit but it is about to change radically.

You will still find an antediluvian 300 class BB with nice coupling rods in the refuge beside platform 1, parked so you can admire it from that splendid tearoom with its garden that forms part of the Terminus Hotel.

But the tram, or Virbindungsbahn, that started from what is now part of the Terminus' front entrance, has long gone. It had two four wheel and one bogie trams and a depot half-way; also some four wheel trailers.

The Aeschi Bus (which still runs of course to Aeschi) now also takes you from the BLS station down to the BLS Lake Thun steamers at the landing stage.

Most of the trains nowadays are Emus or railcars needing little shunting, though coaches are still fly-shunted about the place by BLS only Ee 3/3 No.401; the shunters wear orange and use walkie talkies.

There is hardly a dull moment as there are always coaches and

wagons to go for, or come back from, repairs at Bönigen beyond Interlaken Ost.

The big through expresses are now so heavy they seldom join or divide at Spiez, but run through to and from Berne. Whereas before the war...

This "all-electric line" inherited a few tank engines from the Thunersee Bahn which it took over, and when I visit Spiez I think of No 401 as modern, though it must be 40 years old.

No. 76, its predecessor, seemed much more romantic, though it was just an ordinary E3 SLM O-6-OT.

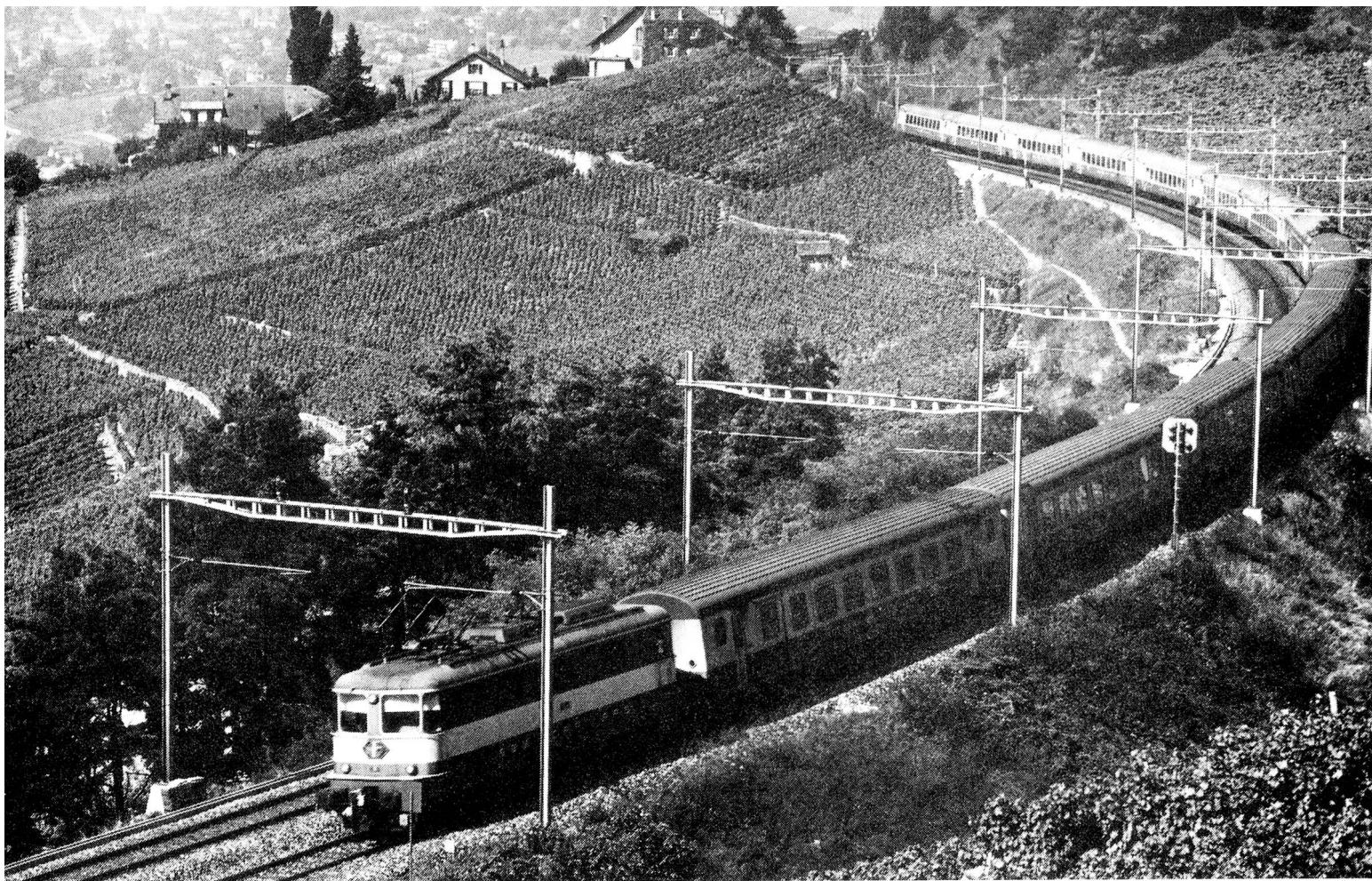
Shunters wore blue smocks and those uniform caps, in some cases, worn also by train conductors, and they had little naval style pipes which they blew when wanting the driver to stop, speed up or re-start.

Labour was cheaper than coal, so there was as much fly-shunting as possible. Wagons had brakesman's platforms or cabins, four and six-wheel bogie open platform coaches all had their screw hand brakes.

More modern bogies with closed ends have brake wheels and are much harder to control, requiring one to lean out acrobatically.

Standing on platform 1 I dream of No. 76 snuffing about the yard with besmocked shunters blasting away at it or winding brake handles for dear life.

Dreaming is a dangerous occupation as both No. 401 and the shunters are now silent, and come creeping up along that curious acute angle level crossing



George Behrend takes a nostalgic look at Europe's last unnationalised main line railway junction

on platform 1 leading to the local goods depot, to catch the dreamer unawares.

The ghost of No. 76 seems to be there still, among the BLS 200 class Ae 6/8s, the 300 BBs and the occasional SBB Ae 4/7s that are alive and well about the station. That is, unless it happens to be Friday.

Not that the BLS timetable differed much on Fridays. An Ae 6/8 200 used to whizz over the Lötschberg every afternoon with just one wagon-lits sleeper from Berne to Rome, with inscriptions in Italian instead of French, which I had never seen before.

Attached also was a postal van and the SSG tea car that ran to Brig (teak, of course, very probably the one now in Lucerne Museum).

The 300 class used then to be 1BB1 (without "Bern Lötschberg

Simplon" in big letters like the 200s) and mostly ran on the Zweisimmen branch – pardon, I mean of course the SEZ, for the intriguing thing about the BLS is the way each member of the group's stock carries its own initials BN, GBS, or SEZ as well as BLS. The first two come no nearer Spiez than Thun or Bern.

Nowadays the EBT sometimes runs through engines to Interlaken but pre-war I never saw one. But, of course on Fridays...

On Fridays No. 76 retreated to the famous depot which I never visited, despite 53 years of going to Spiez. Chopper equipment, Ae 4/4s that inspired most of the SBB and SNCF BB electrics mean nothing to me. I have never asked to visit the place.

Alongside No. 62 a large 2-8-2T that lasted until 1967, No. 76 received its weekly boiler washout,

while No. 54 which I seem to recall was an 0-4-0T took its place in Spiez yard (was it originally No. 4?, I am never quite sure).

No. 62 was used for works trains when the wires were down and also pushing the snowplough; its moment of glory was 1963, centenary of Cook's excursion over the Gemmi Pass, when it hauled a special passenger train from Kandersteg.

Spiez signalling was of course mechanical, bells clanging loudly day and night. Those shunting signals that form I or X according to direction rattled romantically in their joints for No. 54 to join portions of Interlaken trains to those from Brig to Berne or to Zweisimmen locals.

Last and not least there was the Oberland Express of wagons-lit cars only (save for the SSG diner) from Calais and Paris to In-

terlaken, with sometimes a Brig sleeper to be coupled or detached.

Thanks to this marvellous Takt Fahrplan and socialised railways, if you wish to travel via its route today, you have an obligatory change at Berne and Belfort (and also Bienna and Delamont on one of the two through services) while the Calais route to Chaumont has no through service whatever – a series of autorails or through trains from Southern France to Lille providing leisurely connections.

The society, like everyone else, now frequently flies to Switzerland!

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