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SWITZERLAND'S OTHER RAILWAYS

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SWISS URBAN TRAMWAYS

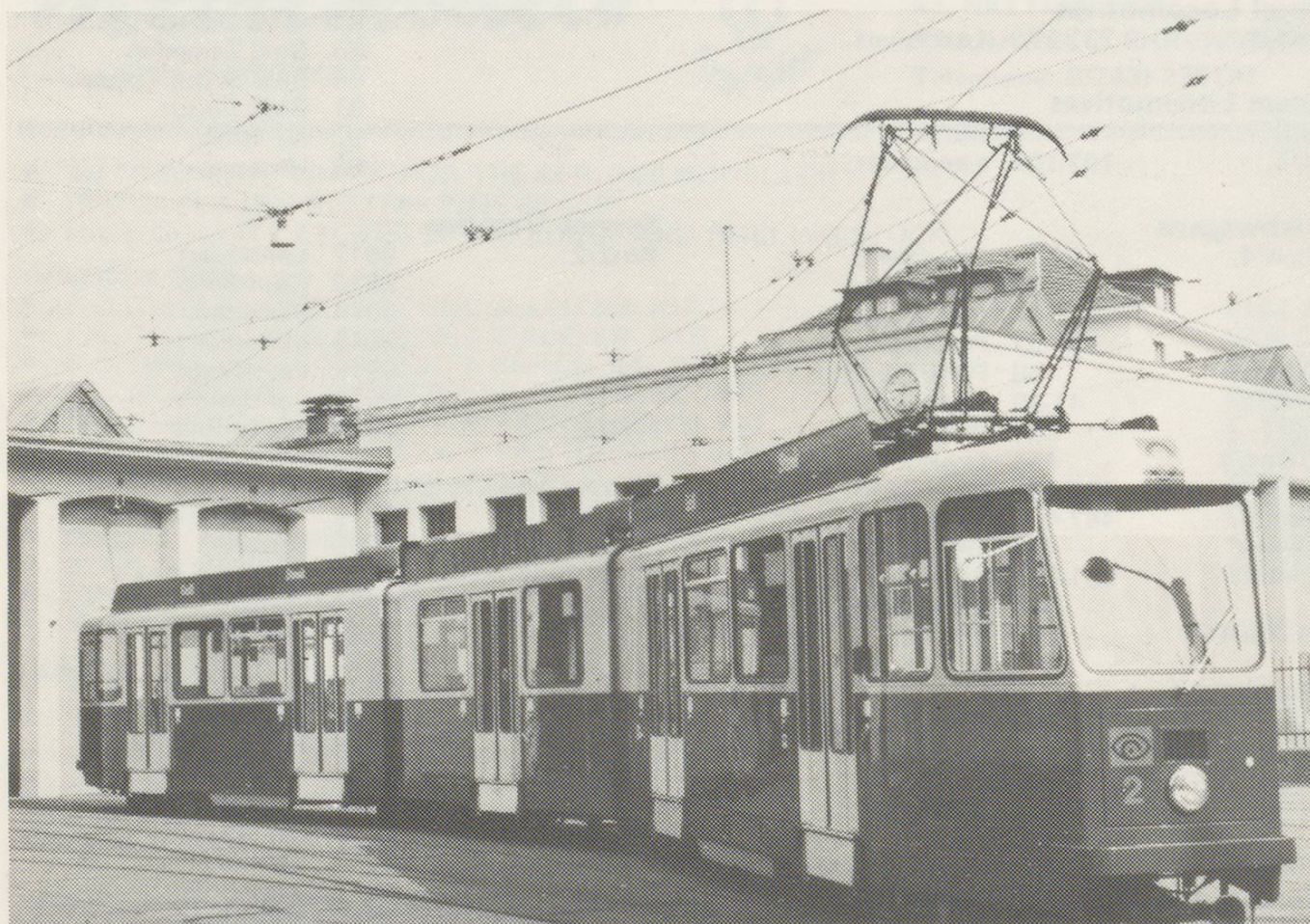
Bern SVB – Städtische Verkehrsbetriebe Bern

By N.P. Wheelwright

Switzerland's capital retains its tramway system which, whilst suffering closures, still retains a network of three cross city routes. The system is noteworthy for the through running of the VBW 'blue' trains into the city streets. At one time the city had the unusual combination of (compressed) air, steam and electric trams operating concurrently on the one system.

The system's maximum extent of over 17 Km in 1932/5 was only a little greater than its current length as the closure of the three routes to Güterbahnhof, Länggasse and Brückfeld, have been balanced by the opening of a new extension, to Saali, in 1974.

The heart of the network, common to all routes, is from Hauptbahnhof to Zytglogge, the now pedestrianised main street Spitalgasse/Marktgasse. Here trams and trolleybuses can be photographed passing the fountains and against a backdrop of arcaded buildings. The quiet approach of the electric vehicles has necessitated the painting of a green line on each side of the 'danger' area as a warning to jaywalking pedestrians and transport photographers.



SVB New Artic Tram Unit. No. 2. Route 9

Photo: SVB

The tram stop at Hauptbahnhof, linked to the station by a maze of subterranean thoroughfares, is the main interchange for the SVB services, with many trolley/bus routes terminating in adjacent streets. In order to cater for the traffic volume there are two platforms for each direction, in a staggered arrangement to take up the minimum road width. The loading platforms are also used by trolleybuses. The terminal loop around the nearby church appears to be almost unused, but the loop towards the west does see some occasional use.

The majority of the routes are traditional road centre running. Fortunately, most of the roads beyond the city centre are wide enough to allow this without obstruction from parallel road traffic. Where there is insufficient space for passenger islands at tram stops traffic lights have been installed to protect the passengers crossing the road to reach the tram. Much of the southern part of route 9 has been modernised and moved to a roadside reservation as has the non traffic section, from Weissenbühl to route 9, which allows more direct access to Eigerplatz depot.

The principal exception is the 1974 extension of route 3 to Saali. This follows the VBW, still road running, from Burgernziel as far as Egghölzli and then diverges along Stadtbahn style right of way to the terminus in a newish housing development. The terminal layout indicates unfulfilled ambition to extend towards Gümmlingen, although the town is already served by the VBW and SBB.

The VBW currently enters Bern along route 3 to terminus tracks at Kirchenfeld (SVB Helvetiaplatz), short of the river, and thus some distance from the city centre. There are plans to extend the route through the city over SVB tracks, possibly onto the southern section of route 9. This route, VBW line G, uses the 'blue trains' which include some trailers from the OEG (Mannheim, West Germany). This entire fleet is due for replacement within the next few years, probably with articulated tram style vehicles.

Prior to the building of the new Hauptbahnhof and the underground route in from Worblaufen the VBW and SZB interurbans entered Bern over other SVB routes. The VBW followed the northern section of route 9 from Stadion to a terminus in Kornhausplatz and the SZB joined the now closed route from Brückfeld at Tierspital. This terminated in Bahnhofplatz, on the town side of the new station building.

The SVB system is run from three depots although that at Weissenbühl, terminus of route 3, is only used for stored vehicles. The depot at Burgernziel, eastern junction of routes 3 and 5, is the P.W. depot and houses many of the departmental cars. The depot is home to the preserved stock whilst also providing some cars for the daily service. The principal tram depot is at Eigerplatz, on route 3, which shares the site with the SVB central works, trolleybus and main bus garages. The works are almost self-sufficient and includes wheel profiling equipment. SVB also carries out 99% of the maintenance on its approximately 330 (Autelca) ticket machines.

The fleet consists of two batches of Swiss standard bogie cars with matching trailers and a fleet of 8-axle double articulated cars which run, without trailers, predominantly on route 9. The prototype double articulated car, No. 401, is unique in its use of 4, single axle, radial bogies. This design was not sufficiently successful to be perpetuated but it can be seen during peak hours, operating with a trailer, on route 3.

A series of 'double ended' bogie cars and trailers remain 'on the books'. The power cars are supposedly stored although one car was noted 'available for service' as recently as mid 1985. These cars were built for predominantly singled ended working which meant that the offside sliding doors remained manually operated whilst the nearside folding doors were air operated. The trailers, which are distinguishable for their air operated sliding doors, remain in operation until replaced with standard bogie trailers purchased from Zürich (VBZ) in late 1986.

THE MARTIGNY – CHÂTELARD RAILWAY

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

By A.J. Pike

The class 319 of the Thames Link service are not only the electric units to use the overhead contact wire and the third rail during their point to point journeys. As is so often the case, the Swiss got there first. On the 20th August 1906 a metre gauge line was opened between Martigny, in the Rhône Valley to Le Châtelard Frontier, the French frontier. This was extended on the 2nd July 1908 to Vallorcine on the PLM system, later the SNCF. Until 1931, it ran through the town of Martigny but, on the 1st March of that year, a direct line was built from the CFF station at Martigny for 0.63 kilometres to La Batiaz which provided a better connection with the main line.

As far as Vernayaz, 3.99 kilometres from Martigny, the railcars on this roadside line draw their 800v DC traction current from the overhead line. At Vernayaz, lies the main depot which houses not only the modern rolling stock but also some splendid specimens dating from the opening of the line which are used on special trains and occasionally on work trains. The yard is electrified on the overhead system but in the small curving station, one has the first sight of the third rail raised much higher above the sleeper level than in Britain. Here, too, the Strubb system begins as the train enters a tunnel and begins to climb sharply.



ABDeh4/4. No. 7 and Bt at Vernayaz Workshops

Photo: A. Pike

It is perhaps surprising that a mountain railway which receives its fair share of snow in winter should choose the third rail. Maybe money was saved on tunnelling because the height of the bore could be reduced. No doubt, more knowledgeable members of the society can provide the answer.

After some time the line emerges on a ledge part way up the mountainside with an impressive view to the right down the Rhône Valley to St. Maurice. If one is travelling on the CFF down the Rhône Valley in the direction of Brig and looks out of the right hand side, the site of the line is proclaimed in large letters just near this point.

Climbing yet more and turning now towards the French frontier, the train arrives at the neat timbered station of Les Marecottes, 8.85 kilometres from the start. This little town is a popular holiday resort but one needs to be good in wind and limb as, in common with most of the other villages along the valley, it clings to the precipitous mountainside.

From hereon, one is recommended to sit on the left hand side of the train to get the best views. The most important intermediate village on the line is Finhaut with a picturesque station which gives good views down the valley. It is worthwhile making a pause here, not only for refreshment and to enjoy the view, but also to watch the trains crossing.

From Finhaut, at a height of 1224 metres, the line runs on a narrow ledge and after passing through several short tunnels, descend to Châtelard-Gietroz at 1126 metres above sea level. This is the site of one of the older power stations and under cover, on the right, one may sometimes see some of the older rolling stock stored. It is also notable for a remarkable funicular about which I might write a note on some other occasion. It is the only one I know of which employs a large block of concrete to prevent the cars from becoming airborne.



ABDeh4/4 No. 8 at Vernayaz station.

Photo: A. Pike

Just 2.8 kilometres inside France, the Martigny-Châtelard makes an end on junction with the SNCF system which is also metre gauge and uses the third rail for current supply. This is an equally fascinating line but perhaps I should leave it to our colleagues in the SNCF society to write about that.

I have not visited the railway for some four years but a note in the *Eisenbahn Amateur* says that, on the stretch between Salvan and Tretien, the concrete bases for an overhead line have been installed for operation in 1987 so the third rail may be on the way out. There have also been meetings between both staff and management of the SNCF and the MC with a view to substantial improvements on the through route between St. Gervais, the railhead for the SNCF standard gauge system, and Martigny to improve services and assure the future of the line which they call "Metro des Alpes".