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THE B.L.S. 75TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS

By Alan Pike

I was fortunate enough to be present during the main week of the celebrations which had gone on for a considerable period. A significant number of members of the Society were also present, indeed the lounge of the Alpha Soliel Hotel in Kandersteg looked like a branch meeting of the Society.

To start with I will bore you with a bit of history. There had been a plan for an international railway through the Alps to Italy as long ago as 1857, but it was not until a concession for a line from Spiez to Visp was granted in 1891 that a serious attempt was made to breach the Lötschberg by rail. The concession was taken up in 1889 by the Canton of Bern and, with the help of French capital the Berner Alpenbahn, Bern-Lötschberg-Simplon Railway was constituted on 27 July 1896, two months after the opening of the Simplon Tunnel.

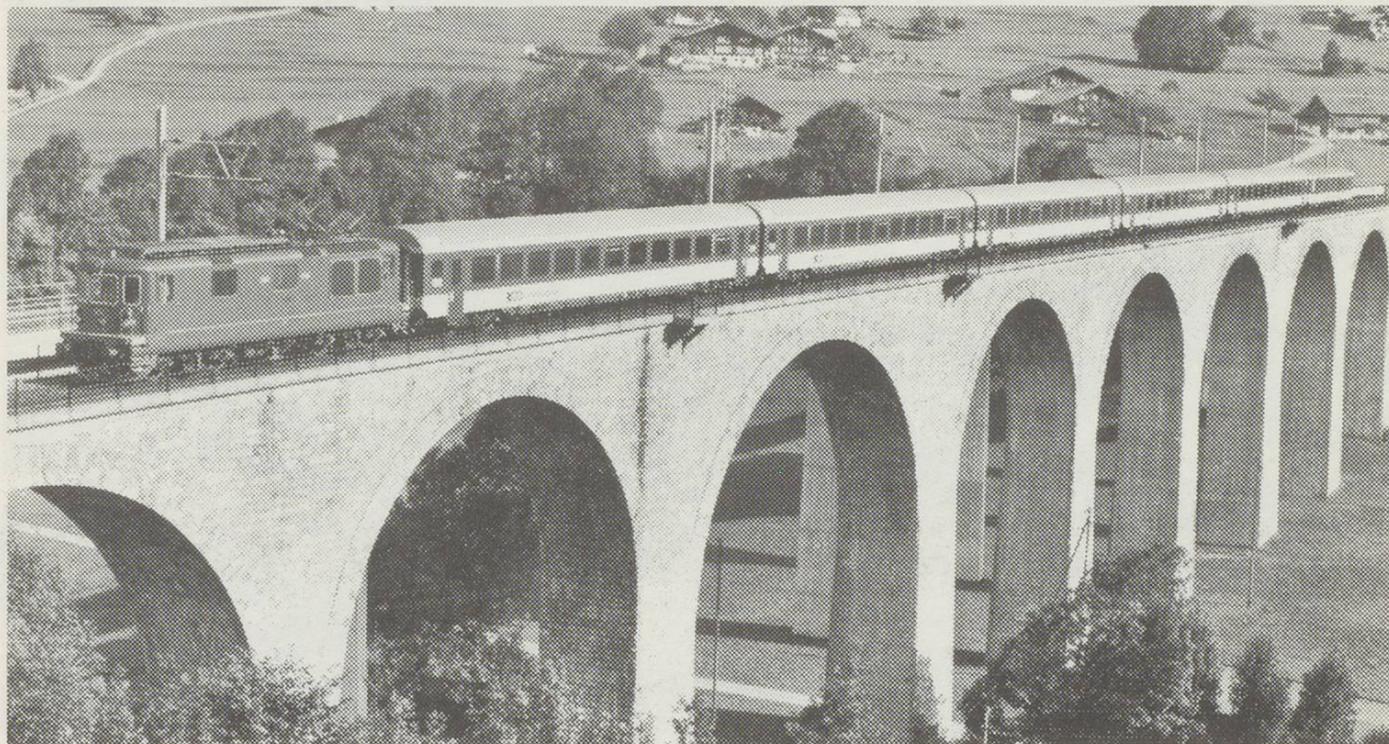


Visitors from near and far for B.L.S. 75.

Photo: A. Pike

The Spiez - Frutigenbahn which covered part of the route opened for traffic on 25 July 1901. The railway was taken over on 1 January 1907 by the Lötschberg Company which already had a line running from Thun to Interlaken and thence to Bönigen on Lake Brienz. This railway also operated steamer services on the lake of Thun and Brienz and these are still run by the B.L.S.

Much has been written about the engineering marvels of the line. Suffice to say that the most significant engineering work is the Lötschberg tunnel on which construction began at Kandersteg on 15 October 1906 and on the next day from Gopenstein. For a start, all went well with the use of an advanced type of boring machine which averaged 33 feet per day. But on 24 July 1908, at 2.30 a.m. disaster struck when a dynamite charge broke into a fissure in the floor of the Gastern Valley above. Water flooded into the workings for a mile and sadly 24 Italian workers lost their lives. Work was held up for several months and eventually it was decided to abandon and wall off two miles of the northern tunnel. Both headings were then curved to the east well clear of the danger spot and this has resulted in the tunnel having three curves and to be 800 metres longer than the planned length making a total of 9 miles 132 yards. The tunnel was opened on 15 July 1913.



BLS Re4/4 No. 163 "Grenchen" with new MkIV coach set on the old Kander Viaduct.

Photo supplied by B.L.S.

Enough of history: let us get down to the festivities. I joined many others on the 14 August on a local train heading for Frutigen which was to be the scene for the electric locomotive parade. Just north of Frutigen an enormous field had been set aside - overlooking the Kander viaducts - to accommodate the masses of people wishing to view the proceedings. Special shuttle services were run to a temporary station to get them there. The more energetic could walk a mile or so to the site. One of the shuttle trains was made up, rather like Jacobs coat of many colours, with rolling stock of several railways (and I regret that whilst I saw it several times I failed to note the respective owners of the various coaches).

I bumped into Neil Wheelwright who had surveyed the scene before I had arrived. We decided to take up a position not far from the station just to the south on a foot bridge where we maintained an unobstructed view of each locomotive as it passed just below us. Our photographs are certainly not as impressive as those taken of the parade on the Kander viaduct but we have plenty of detail of what the electrical gear on the loco roof looks like and some reasonable side elevations.

The parade was led by S.E.Z. Ce4/6 No. 307 which followed an enormous freight train made up of vehicles to accommodate an unbelievable range of specialised traffic.

The next day, in glorious weather, I made my way from Interlaken to Bern to join the special train composed of 1930's stock hauled from Bern to Thun by S.B.B. locomotive Be4/4 No. 12320 in its brown livery. The locomotive trundled at its best speed to Thun where it was replaced by a B.L.S. Ae6/8 No. 205 built in 1939 to a 1926 design, which demonstrated its prowess with a seemingly effortless performance to surmount the north ramp to Kandersteg thence to drift down to Brig. I left the train there to have a look at the B.V.Z. at Visp and to attempt to photograph the train on its return journey to Hohten.



*B.L.S. Ae6/8 No. 205 with Historic Coach Train.
Brig station. B.L.S. 75 Years.*

Photo: A. Pike

For the 16, 17 and 18 August a splendid journey was arranged by the B.L.S. involving the S.E.Z. locomotive Ce4/6 No. 307 and two open balcony coaches from Bern to Thun thence, the small ex steamship "Spiez" - now motor driven - took up the journey to Därlingen where a temporary platform had been built so that one could board the vintage train hauled by G.T.B. steam locomotive E3/3 No. 3, in splendid green livery with gleaming brass work for the short but spritely run to Interlaken Ost. Here one could transfer to the doyen of the B.L.S. fleet the steam powered paddle steamer "Lötschberg" for a period trip across the lake to Brienz. The storm which had been following us arrived with a vengeance soon after we got there and those of us waiting to board the Ballenberg Dampfbahn train of four wheelers hauled by S.B.B. Brünig locomotive G3/4 No. 208 were thoroughly soaked. Nevertheless, a spirited run from Brienz back to Interlaken Ost brought to an end a damp, and a damp day.

Towards the end of the week it seemed that trains were converging on Interlaken from all over Switzerland and parts of Europe to join in the climax of the week's celebrations the steam locomotive parade at Därlingen. The day turned out to be the coldest and one of the wettest I have experienced in Switzerland in August but I was privileged to watch the proceedings from the comfort of the stationmaster's lounge above

the canopy of Därlingen station. For the thousands who stood in soaking conditions for over two hours, it must have been a frustrating experience and few could have obtained much in the way of decent photographs. Nevertheless, stay they did and were treated to impressive series of trains hauled by steam locomotives ranging from diminutive tank locomotives to a massive French S.N.C.F. type 141R and German class 01 Pacific.

Considerable credit must go to the senior officer of the B.L.S. dressed somewhat informally with a yellow jacket and sheltering under an enormous umbrella who, with the help of an equally soaked gentleman with a loud hailer and the skill of the stationmaster - Herr Ursprung - operating the control panel, managed to interweave the special trains with the regular traffic to such good effect that, I am told, the longest delay to a regular train was only 20 minutes.

The next day, those who had not previously visited the static exhibitions of standard gauge material at Interlaken West or the narrow gauge material at Interlaken Ost were able to do so in good weather conditions. They were also able to see some of the unusual motive power in use sometimes on regular services, for example on the standard gauge an E.m.u. from as far away as the Sensetalbahn - which had once been owned by the B.L.S. group - was shuttling between Interlaken and Spiez. On the narrow gauge, a B.A.M. railcar was hauling trains to Meiringen and a De4/4 of the Chemin de Fer de Jura was hauling trains on the B.O.B. Not to be outdone the S.P.B. was operating one of its rare steam services from Wilderwil to the summit of the Schynige Platte.

Sunday afternoon, armed with a working timetable, I and some colleagues were ensconced alongside the track at Spiez and were able to film the return of many of the special steam trains in conditions which one could have hoped would have applied the previous day.

All credit must go to those who organised the event, particularly those who played a major part in assembling such diverse collection. Those who operated the railway over the period must surely be congratulated for the efficient way in which it was carried out.

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