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by Philip Elwin

We usually spend our holidays in the Bernese Oberland and travel the well-known routes radiating from Spiez and Interlaken, with one or two trips each holiday further afield. In this way, over the years, we have travelled some good distances, but a group of lines only touched on briefly lay on our doorstep. The EBT/VHB/SMB group operate a network of rural lines to the north of the Oberland region, and the opportunity was taken on a sunny early October day to explore some of these lines.

We have often watched the red and white passenger railcars and green freight locomotives of the EBT working in and out of the SBB station at Thun, and it was from here that we started out, taking a Burgdorf bound train from the bay platform at the north end of the station. Our railcar set off smartly, ran parallel to the SBB and BLS routes to Bern for a short distance before turning sharply away northwards between factories and across the river Aare on a steel bridge and continuing through the suburbs of the pleasant market town of Thun. The route is single track for the most part with crossing loops at stations. A healthy freight traffic is worked in the Thun area and factory sidings are frequent on the initial part of the line. A second-hand SBB Ee3/3 *Halbschue* is stationed at Heimberg to look after the local freight movements.

At Konolfingen, the first junction, the lineside is more rural although the station is dominated by a cheese factory. At this point connection is made with the single line SBB route from Bern to Lucerne. This station provides a running loop for the SBB and, alongside two further loops for the EBT, one for passenger and one for freight. At the east end of the station both routes cross on the level, with the EBT immediately climbing away high above the SBB. The Federal Railway keeps a Te^{III} four coupled shunter here for local work, although there seems to be little activity apart from postal van movements.

After making our booked connections with up and down Lucerne trains, crossing an EBT Regionalzug working towards Thun and waiting for an Ae4/7 running light from Bern towards Lucerne, we continued northwards, crossing the SBB and climbing high above the dead straight Federal line to Langnau and Lucerne. The scenery is now rolling hills and lush river valleys with farms and villages, picturesque in their rural setting but very much workaday ... and seemingly, no tourists. In this setting the line takes broad reverse curves across meadowland as it climbs through the hills. At each station the goods yard seems well used, with farmers loading potatoes in one place and apples in another; road tankers taking fuel from rail tanks and bagged fertilizer being stacked. All too soon we rolled into Hasle Ruegsau where the line from Langnau to Burgdorf is joined. Provision is made for crossing trains on both routes simultaneously, so four platform roads are available. Double track continues downhill towards Burgdorf, although it reverts to single track after Oberburg where the main EBT works are located. At the other end of the station, both passing loops converge into single lines, the Konolfingen line curves away to the south and that to Ramsei and Langnau heads off to the south east over a level crossing. The EBT maintain a large orange painted Te^{III} four wheel shunter here for local work and handling the inevitable postal van movements on and off passenger workings.

Our journey required us to change at Hasle Ruegsau and so we left our train to continue to Burgdorf on the main SBB Olten-Bern line, and crossed over to the motor luggage van and single coach/driving trailer forming the Burgdorf-Ramsei working. Ramsei is only a few minutes ride down the Langnau route and is yet another junction with a single line trailing in from the north.



EBT Re4/4^{II} No. 112 at Huttwil.

Photo Philip Elwin

Like many British country junctions, Ramsei station seems cramped when dealing with passing trains on the single line and branch line connections to and from Huttwil and Wasen. Everything needs to happen in a short time - if not all at once!

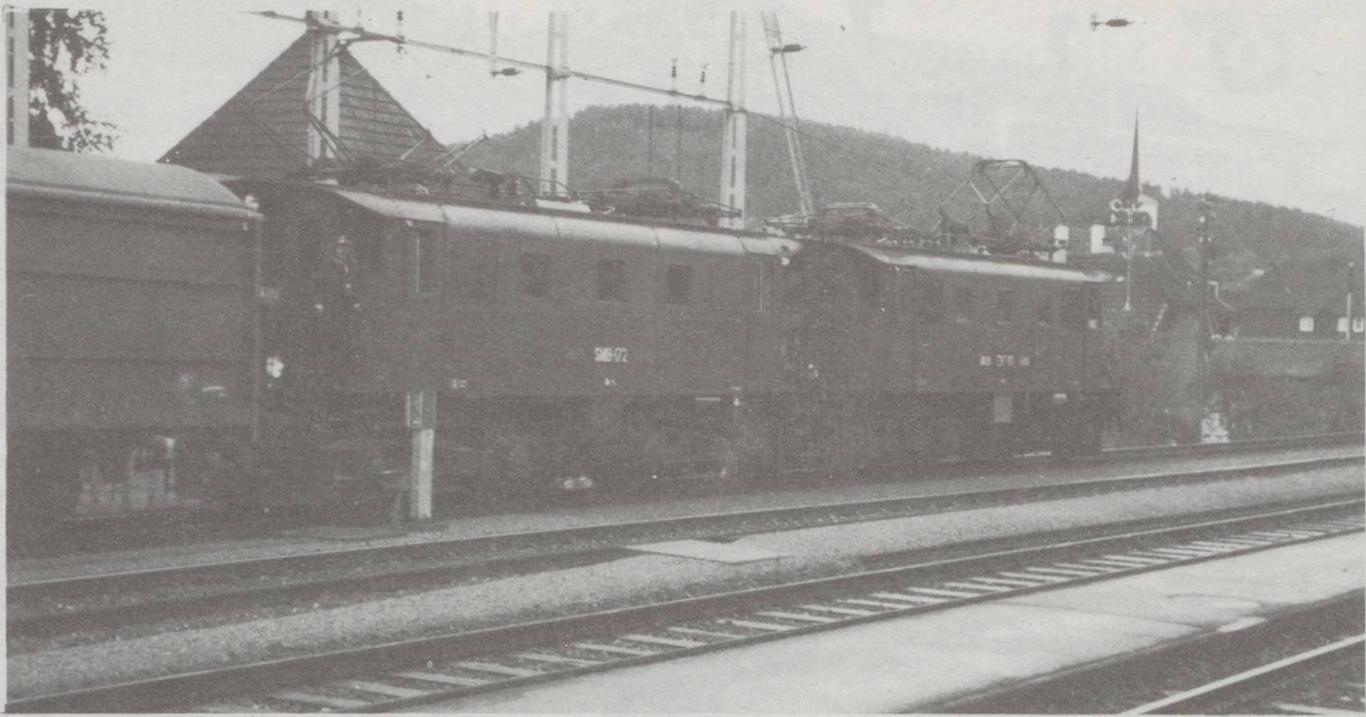
The Huttwil line joined from the north just before the platform and a change of both train and direction was now necessary. The adjacent platform held a two coach railcar for Hasle Ruegsau and close behind another Motor Luggage Van and trailer for Sumiswald and Huttwil.

The Basel-Hasle train quickly departed and that for Huttwil pulled up to allow us to board, then soon set off, briefly retracing our route before bearing northwards for Sumiswald. The scenery remained rural, with rolling hills, wooded on top and good views on each side. This certainly was a local train, the passengers seemed to know one another and the guard knew everyone! A hilltop Schloss at Sumiswald can be seen for some distance whilst the station is yet another junction, this time for Wasen. Another Te^{III} is stationed here and there are a number of sidings in addition to the usual passing loops. Roughly every other working runs up to Wasen, but our train continued to Huttwil on the Langenthal-Wolhusen line.

Huttwil turned out to be something of a gem. The Ramsei line runs in from the south over a level crossing and straight into the station which has three platform faces along passing loops with a goods loop on the far side. A large running shed adjacent to the station was at the time home to three steam locomotives and an old electric railcar. Two Swiss six-coupled tank engines and a slightly larger tank engine of German origin could be made out through the windows.

Despite the busy nature Huttwil and its comprehensive track layout, all points and crossings seem to be hand thrown from ground levers rather than from a single central control.

Both the main line from Langenthal to Wolhusen and on to Lucerne and the



A pair of Be4/4s run through Konifingen on a Hasle-Ruegsau to Thun freight.

Photo Philip Elwin

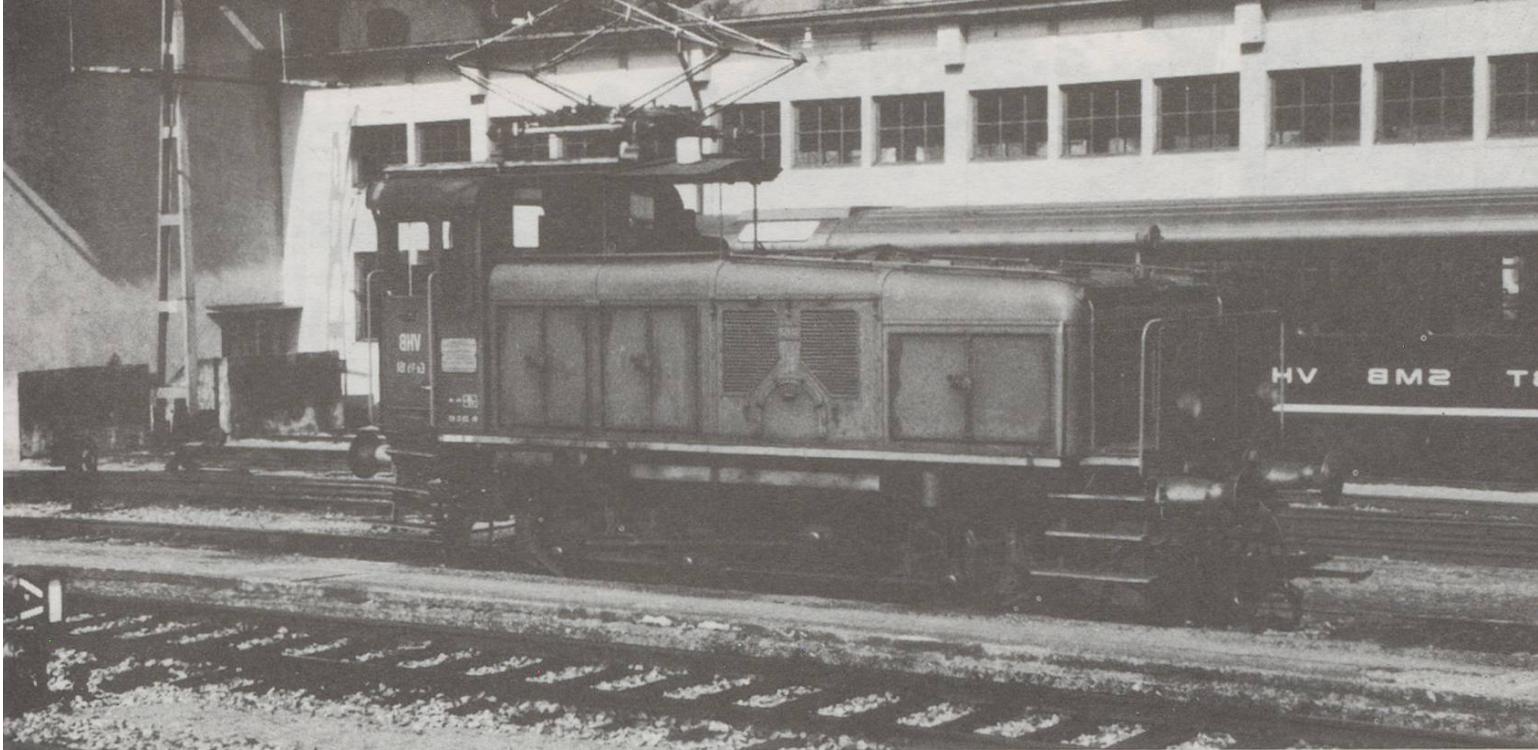
branch to Sumiswald and Ramsei enjoy a frequent service of stopping trains. For the most part these are two coach railcar sets of RBDe4/4 motor coaches and driving trailer. De4/4 motor luggage vans and driving trailer coaches work on and off the branch and variety is provided by through Lucerne workings from Langenthal, which were in the hands of SBB Re4/4" locomotives hauling two elderly coaches. On the freight side, an ex.SBB Ee3/3 Halbschue is provided for shunting, still painted in SBB red/brown, while goods trains are handled both by the EBT version of Re4/4" and the distinctive EBT BoBo bogie electrics with end shunters platforms, the latter often working in pairs.

Having arrived by the haphazard method of taking the next convenient train, we now had the problem of getting back in time for dinner. The timetable listed the next train as a Guterzug, which might not adhere to the published schedule.

Indeed this train, which conveyed passengers only as far as Sumiswald, was being marshalled even as we watched. By the time it pulled into the platform it comprised a motor luggage van, coach for the passengers and three wagons. Just before departure a Tm2/2 shunting tractor was added to the rear, marked for repair at Oberburg. This had only moments before arrived on the rear of a goods train from Wolhusen and was transferred, with some difficulty, under its own power.

Right on time we set off and turned immediately onto the Ramsei branch. With only a handful of passengers and a warm, sunny afternoon, there was no complaint at having the window pulled all the way down to enjoy the whistle being blown for every farm track crossing as we ran smartly through the glorious countryside. A passenger was dropped off at Hausernmoos and a few minutes later we rolled into Affoltern-Weier. By this time our lady guard had acquired a bright orange dust coat and radio to begin shunting operations.

Much running to and fro followed, with the spare shunting tractor we had on tow left on the through line out of the way. Affoltern has its own Tm2/2 which was brought into play. We dropped a bogie fuel tank on the goods loop to join two others awaiting unloading and a grain wagon on the siding.



Ex SBB Ee3/3 Halbschue No. 151 at Huttwil.

Photo Philip Elwin

A great deal of distant locomotive whistling proved to herald the Huttwil bound Regionalzug waiting to pass through, so we ran back to collect the tractor we had left on the main line, only to find there was not enough clearance between us and the stock now marshalled behind the Affoltern shunting engine in the siding. After a good deal of discussion, the local shunter managed to knock everything further into the siding so we could collect our tractor and retire to the passing loop out of the way.

The delayed two car electric set pulled in, discharged passengers and mail to the waiting postmen and then continued on its way, leaving us to tidy up. This involved pushing the spare tractor once again onto the through line, allowing the local Tm2/2 to pull a wagon out for us and then take refuge in its own siding, so that we could reverse and couple up before departure. Unfortunately our newly added wagon quite liked this station and once we were all but ready to go, refused to release its brakes. This caused more delay, much advice was swapped, eventually our driver dragged the train forward in an effort to free things, without any real effect. Eventually someone discovered what was wrong and soon we were underway to complete our much delayed journey to Sumiswald.

At Sumiswald it was the end of the ride for passengers and we had to wait for a passenger train off the Wasen branch. Our mixed train however proceeded to shunt in the sidings opposite the station and, still with coach attached, set off for Ramsei ahead of us.

After a short wait the two car set pulled in from Wasen and we set off for the short run to Ramsei, admiring Sumiswald Schloss on its nearby hill. There is only one intermediate station, Grunenmatt, and with an excess of whistling we came to a halt on the crest of a hill at a red signal. Ahead and below could be seen the Guterzug, which soon set off ahead of us. I expect its driver was fed up with playing trains. this allowed us to pick up some waiting passengers and then complete our run into Ramsei.

We were so close on the heels of the Guterzug that both trains seemed to roll to a halt simultaneously. We were now quite late, so a quick change was made to the waiting Hasle Ruegsau train, which set off immediately for its short run down the valley. From Hasle-Ruegsau good main line connections allowed us to retrace our steps to Thun to conclude a really enjoyable day out just watching trains 