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125 Years of the Vitznau Rigi Bahn

by Anthony J. Lambert. Photographs as credited

The Swiss seldom do anything by halves, and the 125th anniversary of the Vitznau-Rigi-Bahn is no exception. The focus of the celebrations is the restoration of VRB No. 7, which was the very first locomotive built by Schweizerische Locomotiv & Maschinen-Fabrik (SLM) in Winterthur. Thanks to No. 7's owners, the Dübi Foundation, and Fredy Rey, the Director of the Swiss Transport Museum in Luzern, where the locomotive has been on display since 1959, it was sent to Winterthur on 7th March 1995 to be returned to working order.

Its restoration has been a marvellous achievement, made possible only by the dedication of SLM's employees who contributed about 70 per cent of the work on a voluntary basis. This included office staff as well as the engineers, who were under the direction of

Werner Müller. Boiler work entailed only new tubes and cladding, but the brakes and drive axle have been completely renewed.

To promote the anniversary celebrations, the RigiBahnen and the local tourist offices organised a special event on 14th May for television, radio and print journalists from all over Europe. Besides No. 7, the railway steamed the two SLM built H2/3s of 1923 and 1925, Nos. 16 and 17, and brought out the historic electrics on the Arth-Rigi-Bahn: BCFhe2/3 No. 6 of 1911 and BDhe2/4 No. 7 of 1925. The trains operated in parallel along the section between Rigi-Staffel and Rigi-Kulm where the two railways run side by side, providing a spectacular and rare sight. An outstanding lunch was provided in a marquee at the summit, prepared by the Swiss National Cooking Team who were world champions in 1995.



Previous page: No.7 near Rigi-Staffel with a special train in May 1996. Photo: Anthony J. Lambert.

Above: A decorated No. 7 and No. 16 photographed by the turntable at Vitznau. Photo RigiBahnen/Heidi Duss-Bürgi.

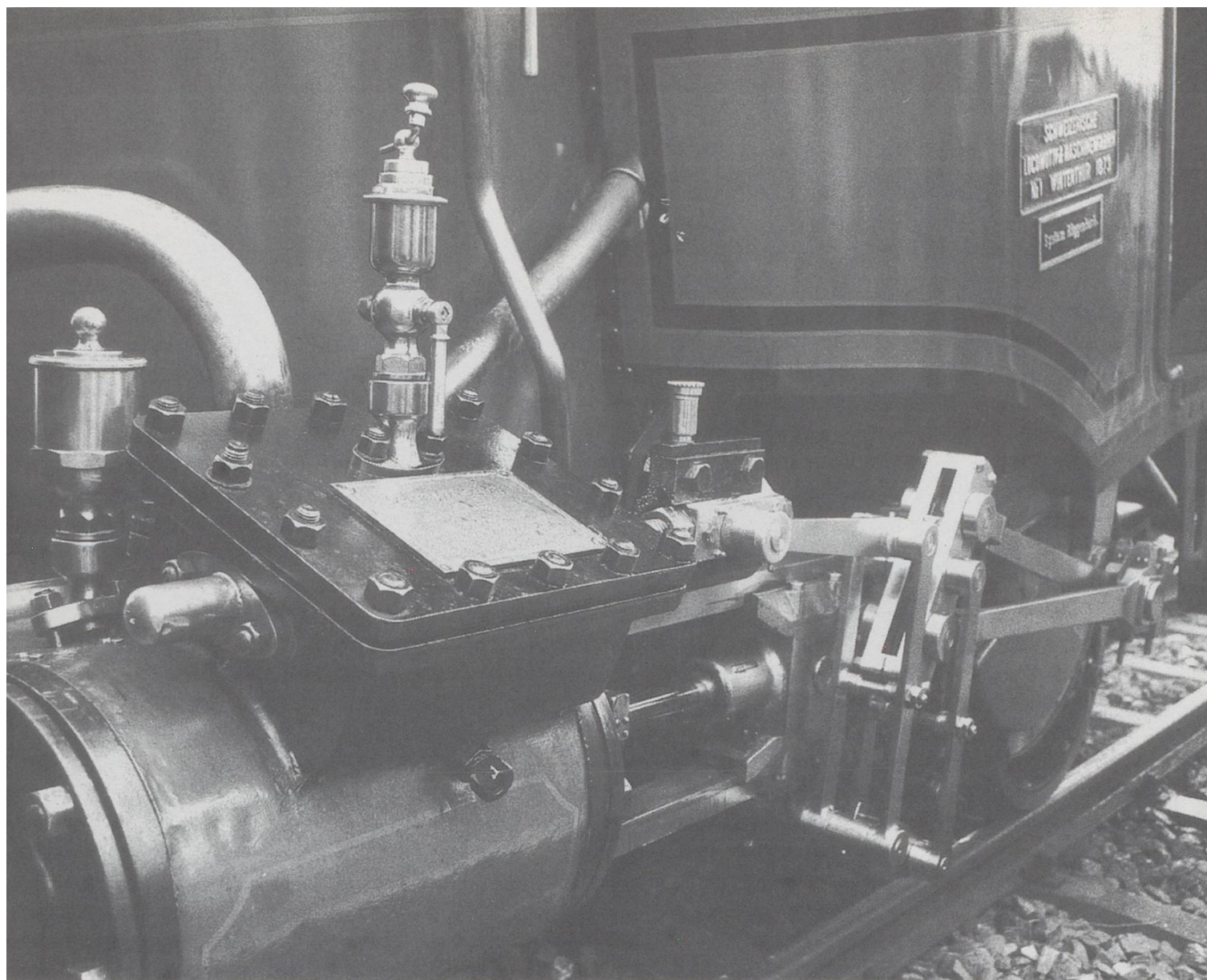
Sadly the weather failed to rise to the occasion - quite literally, since cloud wreathed all but the lowest 500ft or so, making it difficult to photograph the splendid cavalcade which had been laid on by Werner Willi, Managing Director of the RigiBahnen, and his team.

The history of the VRB (and ARB) is probably familiar to most SRS members, but the September Railway World has an article on the subject. Rather than repeat much of its content, a few notes on the less well-known history of No. 7 may be of more interest.

Designed by Niklaus Riggenschach, No. 7 was the first of a batch of four locomotives ordered from SLM to help cope with a higher demand for seats than the VRB's promoters had anticipated. Construction began in the late autumn of 1871 at the newly opened works, the creation of the Uxbridge-born Englishman Charles Brown. After serving only part of his seven-year apprenticeship at the London firm of Maudslay

Sons & Field, Brown moved to Winterthur to build steam engines for Sulzer before setting up on his own. Nos. 7 - 10 cost S.Fr.39,000 each and were delivered in the summer of 1873. Minor teething problems required work at night to ensure that the locomotives were ready for service the next day. Their slow maximum speed of 7.5km/h meant of course that far more trains were required to move a given number of visitors up the mountain than even the first electrics, which could manage 18km/h.

In common with the nine other vertical-boilered 'distilleries', as they were jokingly called, No. 7 was part of a ten-year programme to rebuild them with horizontal boilers. This took place between 1882 and 1892, Nos. 7 and 8 being the last two to be converted. When and by whom No. 7 was rebuilt in its original form after it was withdrawn on electrification of the VRB in 1937, I do not know - hopefully another member can shed light



Above: A close-up of the slide valve casing and motion on No. 7. Photo: Anthony J. Lambert.

on this. Presumably it was done between 1937 and 1939, when it went on 'national exhibition'.

During 1996 No. 7 is normally working only between Rigi-Staffel and Rigi-Kulm, operating between 10 and 16 trains a day over this section until 20th October. However, there is the opportunity to travel up the whole railway on No. 7 by riding in what was the luggage section of No. 7: on the positioning working from Vitznau to Rigi-Staffel each day, leaving at 08.28, up to seven people can sit in the space in front of the boiler for the 1 hour 18 minutes journey. The fare of S.Fr.77 includes the section on from Rigi-Staffel to Rigi-Kulm, travelling in the coach propelled by No. 7. Advance booking is required.

The railway's other steam locomotives will propel two of the older passenger carriages from Vitznau to Rigi-Staffel on the first and third Saturdays of September, and the vintage electric

of 1911 is operating on the second and fourth Saturday of the month. Again, advance booking is required. Music groups from Switzerland, Italy and Germany (not of the kind likely to appeal only to the tone deaf) are performing at weekends in Vitznau and Rigi until October, and the eight hotels on the Rigi are offering special rates and regional culinary specialities - canton Aargau in September, cantons St. Gallen, Thurgau, Schaffhausen and Appenzell in October.

It is a wonderful experience to stay a night on the Rigi, especially if the weather is clear enough for a spectacular sunset or dawn. Besides the exceptional panoramas to be had from the mountain, there is an extensive network of footpaths over the Rigi, which has five summits ranging from 5,088 to 5,905 ft. One of the footpaths has been created from the trackbed of the 4 ½ miles adhesion railway that ran from Rigi-



Above: No. 7 was delivered by boat from Luzern to Vitznau, where most of the village turned out to welcome the returning veteran.

Photo: RigiBahnen/Milly Bürgi-Barbier.

Opposite Page: Two more views of No. 7 captured by Chris Elliott.

Kaltbad, an intermediate station on the VRB, to Rigi-Scheidegg (see Swiss Express 4/7 September 1995 and 4/8 December 1995). The great Alpinist and skier Sir Arnold Lunn regarded this as one of Switzerland's finest mountain walks. About one-third of the way from Rigi-Kaltbad to Rigi-Scheidegg, one of the three long bogie coaches survives in use as a holiday cottage beside the trackbed. Still on its bogies, with RSB on the axleboxes, it has an 1874 builder's plate from Waggonfabrik of Fribourg. The walking time along the line is 1 hour 50 minutes.

Although the possibility of No. 7 being allowed to operate again next year is being discussed, as part of the 150th Swiss railway celebrations, no one is putting any money on it. So unless you can wait until 2021, don't miss the opportunity to see the world's only vertical-boilered rack engine at work!

For railway bookings:

Rigi-Bahnen, CH-6354 Vitznau, Switzerland .

Tel: (0041) 399 87 87

Fax: (0041) 39987 00.

For Hotels:

Rigi-Tourismus, CH-6356 Rigi Kaltbad, Switzerland.

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