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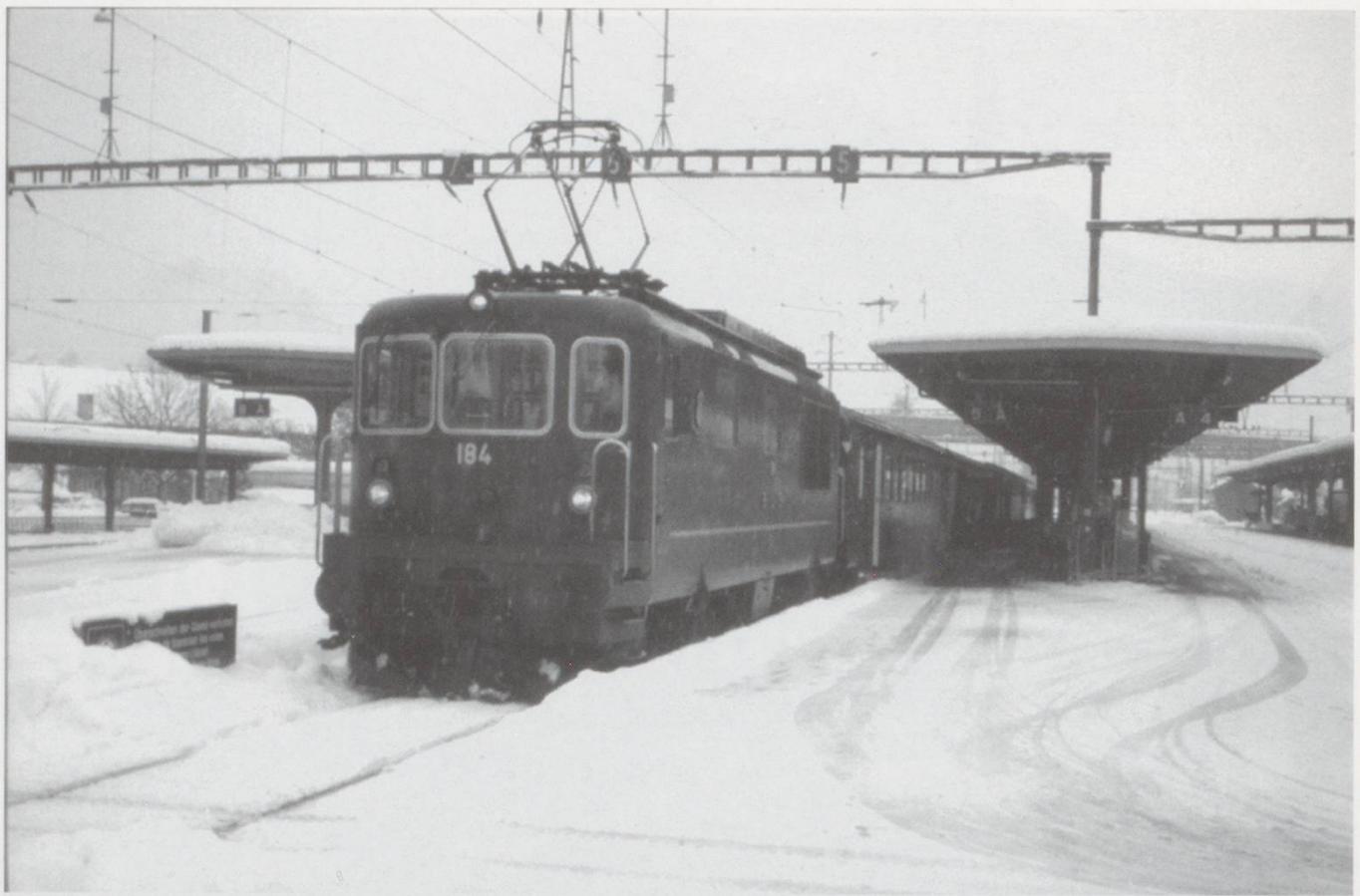
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Interlaken Ost: A BLS Re4/4 No.184 on a Bern express. Feb 99.

Photo: Paul Russenberger

Forced Back onto the Train

by Paul Russenberger

The children having reached a suitable age, it was time to take them skiing. Knowing that the Swiss teach with a certain panache, and feeling nostalgic for previous visits, it had to be Wengen. However, as half term approached, there came reports from the Alps of avalanches. The Ski Club of Great Britain's web site finally showed resort closure at Wengen and on the Wednesday before we left a picture appeared in a paper of destructive damage to Restaurant Oberland.

After breakfast at Zürich Hauptbahnhof on Saturday 14 February, we boarded a late running train for Bern covered in icicles! Slowly the weather lifted and at Interlaken the sun was shining between serene clouds onto snow covered houses and churches. In Wengen the resort was open and the children were much revived by the ride to the Hotel Bellevue on an electric cart. By late afternoon I had proved to myself that I could still stand on skis and all was looking good for the week!

With great anticipation I joined the ski class on the Sunday morning for the run up to Kleine

Scheidegg in a classic WAB train. As we climbed past the site of the Restaurant Oberland above the village a quietness fell over the passengers. The restaurant had been sliced horizontally in half during the night the previous week, the upper floor being taken clean off. The couple who owned it had been asleep there at the time and both were killed. The cause of the damage was apparently the air blast which precedes the avalanche itself, because the avalanche stopped short of the railway which had been left intact.

While the weather closed in that afternoon, the Monday morning produced perfect conditions - icing sugar snow and a totally clear sky, the summit of the Jungfrau being decorated with wisps of snow being blown away. At Kleine Scheidegg a new, and rather ugly, JB snowplough appeared. Everything was looking even better and I resolved that I was skiing well enough to carry my camera next day. The repainted WAB motorcoaches, numbers 122, 123 and 124, looked far more photogenic than I could have dreamt and I needed shots of the new low floor trailers too. Incidentally,



Lauterbrunnen. Feb 99.

Photo: Paul Russenberger

though they definitely represent a change in character, I like them - they are much easier to enter and leave when wearing ski boots!

Unfortunately, the weather then deteriorated with rumours of impending resort closure due to avalanche risk becoming reality on the Thursday, as the hotel owner told his saddened



Lauterbrunnen station sign, Feb 1999.

Photo: Paul Russenberger.

clientele that morning. I set out through deep snow to the station to find a snowed in BDeh4/4 and an Xrote battling to clear the station tracks. It had to be most photographed Xrote in Switzerland that morning! Never before could so many non-railway enthusiasts have photographed a snowplough.

Amid the air of gloom, I was assured that the line to Interlaken was open and, as it was *Lawinesicher* ("avalanche safe"), there was no likelihood of closure. With some resignation we went down to Interlaken to wander around in the slush. (It is not our favourite place in Switzerland!) As we boarded the 14:32 ex Interlaken Ost the guard was explaining to another traveller "*Wir fahren nur bis Lauterbrunnen*". ("We are only running to Lauterbrunnen.") It was only when I checked the timetable back at the Hotel Bellevue that I realised that the line to Grindelwald was closed, but not severed, due to avalanche danger. There were to be no further workings to Grindelwald for the rest of the week, as the Terry Wogan sound-alike on Radio Berner Oberland confirmed each morning! The real frustration was that about half the ski runs in Grindelwald were open - I just could not get there!

After helping the children on the nursery slope, which was now partly open, and watching a snow stegosaurus being finished, I went down to Lauterbrunnen on the Friday afternoon to do some railway photography. With a family I have found it to be an extraordinarily difficult place to get at. It was even slushier there and all the BOB trains were running in push-pull mode with the motor coach at the Lauterbrunnen end. I noted only the later vehicles and the re-liveried 306, which makes me wonder if the others can operate push-pull. When we left Wengen on the Saturday afternoon it had been raining for over 24 hours and we watched a rather significant avalanche heading for the upper part of the village as we waited for the train - the station staff having abandoned the booking office to watch it.

It was a frustrating week. I had had every intention of following Peter Rose's advice to "get off the train", but it had not worked! An additional frustration was that I had in fact discovered 2 new JB Xrote snowploughs, numbered 52 and 53 with their numbers on paper stickers on the inside of their windows, but could not get back to Kleine Scheidegg to try for a photograph.