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Autor: Russenberger, Paul
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HARD HATS & WELLIE BOOTS - Paul Russenberger

The last Saturday in April found me at an almost deserted Victoria station in London for the first Gatwick Express of the day. Two others wandered across the concourse to the booking office. At Gatwick it was different as airline passengers recovered from a night on the sofas and others, like me, checked in. easyJet took me to Zürich and what really did feel like a more civilised atmosphere, but perhaps I was simply rather more awake.

SBB to Bern and a tram to the meeting place across the Aare Gorge, where I was able to recover properly before the meeting started with due Swiss precision at 14.00. Usually representing the Swiss Railways Society at an exhibition means extolling the virtues of Switzerland – not difficult – rather than sitting behind the Union Flag of the UK, feeling rather more British, wondering if my piece will have translated into German intelligibly and whether the others will understand it.

We were duly welcomed by the City of Bern after Urban Rüegger had formally opened the proceedings. The visitors give their presentations first and I followed a representative from Germany. I was able to encourage my hosts by commiserating over the problems with Swissair, comparing it to the situation with our railway infrastructure owner and pointing out that we were still running trains here in Britain and they were still flying. I was proud to mention that interest in Swiss railways in Britain is increasing if the SRS membership list is a valid indicator. I then listened to what I had said translated into French and wondered why I had not given in French to start with. (In fact I spoke in German because Bern is in German speaking Switzerland.) I should add that any rumours that I had thought of congratulating the Swiss on gaining a silver medal for curling in the Winter Olympics are entirely unfounded!

The meeting proceeded as all such gatherings do, with Urban Rüegger summing up and closing. During his closing remarks, our Society was honoured in that he referred to its success in the continuing increase in membership. The dinner afterwards was much more of a relaxation. During it I was approached by Richard Blatter who is in charge of the Schaffhausen model railway club. He explained that he was giving a talk on the Brown-Boveri gas-turbine that operated in Switzerland and asked if I could get any information on 18000, adding that he hoped he would see me next year, as Schaffhausen will be hosting the 2003 conference. Fortunately I have been able to cull some notes from Kevin Robertson's book and Colour-Rail have sold me a slide, both of which have been sent with best wishes from the Society for his talk.

Sunday began at a more gentlemanly hour. Soon after nine o'clock we were rolling southeastwards for Frutigen and a visit to the Lötschberg Base Tunnel. Buses picked us up at Frutigen for the short drive to the workings near Blausee-Mitholz.

The first thing that impressed me was how well the site is concealed. I had seen it from the train many times but had no inkling of how far back it went. Accommodation is provided for the tunnellers, as well as the facilities for storing and disposing of the spoil. We had a DVD presentation, were shown the exhibition, which included the inevitable Alptransit maps and such statistics as "the volume of stone to be excavated is the equivalent of removing the top 400 metres of the Matterhorn", took lunch and then donned yellow



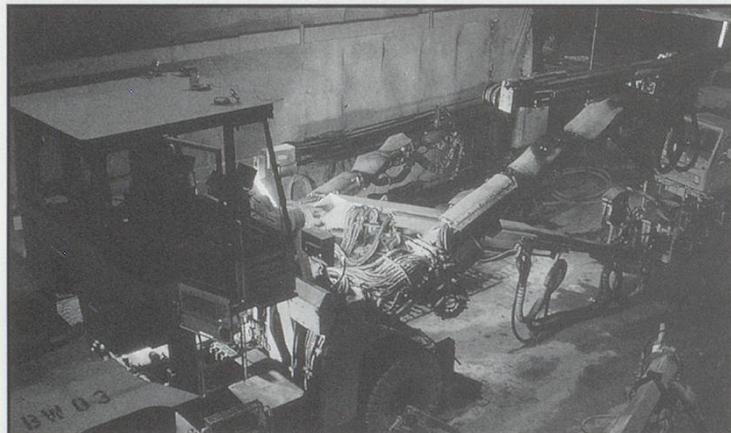
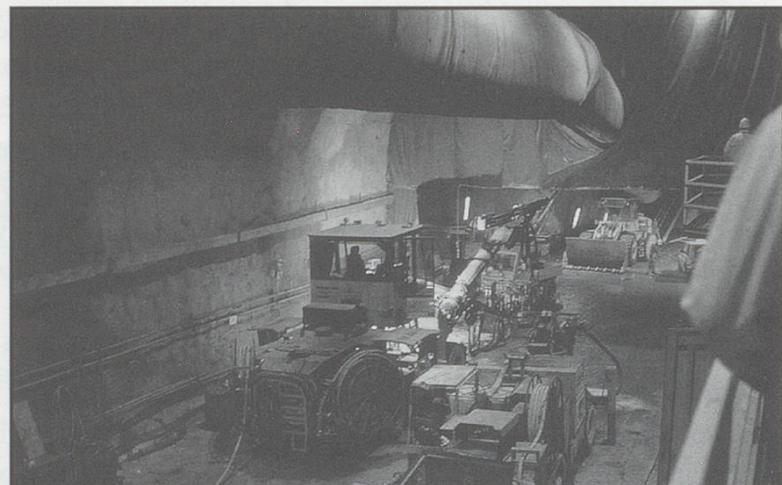


above what will become the northbound track. There has been some experimental tunnelling to test the procedure for lining and finishing the running tunnels, so the second stop was at a section of such a tunnel.

What surprised me was the quality of the air in the workings. Massive amounts are continually supplied – I have forgotten the statistic – and the conditions must be a good deal more pleasant than those endured by the builders of the original tunnel. That

anoraks, Wellington boots and hard hats for a journey underground by mini-bus.

While not quite on the scale of the Channel Tunnel, it is definitely not a case of a single heading in each direction. There is a veritable warren of access routes and we were taken to a huge cavern where we looked down on equipment undergoing maintenance and walked to the end to stand



PICTURES BY PAUL RUSSENBERGER

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PREVIOUS PAGE:

Train on the first reverse climbing the northern ramp from Frutigen to Kandersteg.

THIS PAGE - ABOVE:

Equipment in the underground maintenance workshop described.

THIS PAGE - RIGHT:

The experimental sections of tunnel which will never be used.

said, I am somewhat of a claustrophobic and have the greatest admiration for those who make a living from working on the construction of such a tour de force of civil engineering.

It will come as no surprise that I was relieved to emerge into the fresh Alpine air, even if it meant the end of a most interesting and privileged visit.

