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FAREWELL TO THE BROWNIES



Ae4/4 257 brings up the rear of the 'Golden Pass Panoramic' push-pull set as it heads down the valley from Boltigen forming RX2369 Zweisimmen 12h21 - Interlaken Ost 13h24.

ALL PHOTOS IN THIS ARTICLE: GORDON WISEMAN

Many aspects of Swiss railways have changed quite considerably over the last five years. Two specific occurrences are significantly changing the Swiss railway scene: the 'merger mania' and the 'railcar revolution' which have seen many Swiss railways replace their stock with modern 'modular' designs such as the Stadler GTW series. These changes appear to have manifested two schools of thought in the enthusiast arena. One is that the modern trains and merged railways have destroyed the unique character of Swiss railways, the other is that you can never stand in the way of modernisation at any point in history and thus the merged railways and new stock are just as interesting as 'the old stuff'.

I'm afraid I stand firmly in the former camp, and have been chastised amicably in some quarters for this stance. I'm sorry, but I used to like the VBZ meeting the FO at Brig, and the Brünig meeting the LSE, and the old

green SGA railcars meeting with the red Appenzeller Bahn at Appenzell. The Zentralbahn, Matterhorn Gotthardbahn et al just don't do it for me in the same way.

The irony of what I've said so far is that a railway that I knew as 'boring' in the 1970s (comparatively modern stock running in a 'main line' style) actually became, in the last few years, one of the more characterful railways in Switzerland, not least because of its unusual brown and cream livery. I rediscovered the BOB by dint of booking an unusual holiday chalet through Interhome. A pleasant but not amazing brochure picture masked the fact that this chalet is 10 metres (yes 10 metres) from Zweilütschinen station. The brochure's '100 meters' appeared to be the minimum default distance that the Interhome database could cope with!

Suffice to say that living with BOB day and night was enlightening. However, since our

stay at Easter 2003, the whole working practice of the BOB had changed, and the BLS Ae4/4 have passed out of regular use. The following writings therefore must stand as a memorial to two iconic aspects of Swiss railways, and two of the three brown liveried railways. The first is a recollection of living on the BOB 24 hours a day, the second is the story of chasing the remaining Ae4/4, Ae8/8 and Re4/4 BLS 'Brownie' locos in 2003 and 2004.

In 2005, the Ae4/4 have been withdrawn, the Re4/4 are the only brown Bo-Bos still in use, and their use on passenger is declining. They no longer run the Bern–Neuchâtel, but have at least taken on the former duties of the Ae4/4s on the Interlaken–Zweisimmen trains, in turn a clue that they are now the threatened species...

Living with BOB – Easter 2004

In 2004 I booked a chalet in the Berner Oberland, but closer to the 'Brits' usual holiday

territory. The chalet turned out to be less than 30 yards from the tracks of the Berner Oberland-Bahn. My wife only just accepted this as a reasonable place to spend a week's holiday, but in fact it was quite amusing, and although the view from the main windows was of the concrete BOB workshops, it was not unduly overpowering, as the station road and railway tracks come in between.

Staying so close to the HQ of the Berner Oberland-Bahn at Zweilütschinen allowed me a unique opportunity to observe BOB operations at close hand.

Often dismissed as boring, due to its regular interval operations, I came to the conclusion that BOB operations are 'samey' but far from boring. First of all, despite not being a loco hauled service, the BOB traction units (ABDeh4/4 or ABDeh 4/4) act very much like locos, and despite the presence of driving trailers, many trains are formed in 'loco and coaches' style. Indeed one day I was there, all of

BOB 303, one of the 1949 units which were delivered at the time of electrification arrives at Zweilütschinen with a Lauterbrunnen - Interlaken portion. 06/04/04





BOB 307 at Zweilütschinen preparing a rake of older stock, including a centre-entrance SBB Brunig coach and 'first-generation' modern coaches, to cope with the mid-day peak traffic flow. This was just a few days before more modern accident-victim stock was returned to the railway following rebuilding, so was a very timely photograph.

the 1986 built BDt driving trailers were parked out of use. When compared with what is now happening on SBB (ICN EMUs, intercity with Re460 at the back or in the middle), the BOB is almost more like loco haulage.

Contrary to what I expected, and due to the legacy of the accident last August, the regular trains had at least one of the pre-1989 power cars, often both segments were so formed. Many people will know that the traditional BOB routine is for Interlaken – Lauterbrunnen and Interlaken – Grindelwald trains (each a power unit plus five or six coaches) to run coupled together as far as Zweilütschinen. This remains the case for most of the day, but later in the evening, trains can reduce down to just the two power cars, one for each destination. There are also a number of unadvertised workings after about six in the evening, including a regular Grindelwald – Zweilütschinen only, to get stock back to the depot. Furthermore, some trains now run separately, for no apparent rea-

son (other than perhaps the shunter, who splits the train at Zweilütschinen, finishing his/her shift. For example when we arrived back from our Andermatt trip the 19h35 Interlaken-Lauterbrunnen/Grindelwald, actually ran as two separate sets, with the Grindelwald leaving first with a departure time 'brought forward' to 19h30.

I expected to see some freight working, but did not for whatever reason. However, on the Tuesday (April 6), all sorts of interesting things happened. For a start ex CJ 604 (built 1953) was out and about. It is still painted in full CJ livery. Both 302 and 303 (built 1949) came out to play. First 302 appeared outside the works and did some shunting. Then, 303 went into regular service on the main services (right). At the same time, all the most recent power cars seemed to be out of service. Coaches in use all week included a good few of the centre entrance type, one centre entrance coach in 'SBB Brünig' red (top right), and even an open

platform coach. Coaches are in three liveries – ‘old’ brown with ‘BOB’ lettering, more recent brown/mustard with Berner Oberland Bahn lettering and those in the new blue/yellow scheme.

Decline of the BLS brown Bo-Bos

Conscious of the historical importance of the BLS Ae4/4 electric locos (the first high-voltage ac locomotives to drive to modern Bo-Bo bogies, delivered in 1944), I was determined to book our annual Easter Swiss chalet break for 2003 close to the current sphere of action of the remaining locos, imminently threatened with extinction. Slightly worried when we booked the chalet that the ‘ordinary’ valley view from the brochure picture of a chalet listed as Oberwil-in Simmental was not ‘spectacular enough’, I was nevertheless hoping that the chalet would be close to the Spiez - Zweisimmen Simmental (SEZ) section of the

BLS. This is the line on which the remaining Ae4/4s were said to be working fairly regularly.

We need not have worried, the chalet was lovely, on its own and surrounded by ‘model railway grass mat’ Swiss pastureland, with a view down the Simmental to the 3000m Niesen mountain. The closest buildings were at least 500m away, and all bar one were working farms. The day we arrived the weather was on the turn to high-pressure conditions, and it remained so for the whole week, with temperatures (even at 850 metres) rising as high as 23°C! Because of the sudden change in weather, the ‘local’ cows were being turned out to pasture literally for the first time this year, and they were making the most of their freedom by running up and down the field, bells clanging superbly!

So, what about the railway? Well, a clearer brochure picture would have saved all my advance ‘worry’ about the chalet’s position

Ex-CJ 604 on test alongside a rake of older stock about to depart for Interlaken with a 1985 motor car in tow.



relative to the railway as it is actually in the picture but not identifiable in the brochure! The SEZ indeed runs up the valley side opposite, almost on the same level as the chalet, and photographable! Even the Weissenburg viaduct pictured in the Wagner album *Die SBB Heute* was part of the view. At the same time, the noise of the main road is completely masked as it is in a deep wooded gorge well below railway level. The only noise to break the tranquillity at the chalet turned out to be the trains, farm tractors and cowbells.

Of six days we spent the majority of four 'in residence'; after all every single train which passed by could be viewed without rising from my sunlounger! It was easy to track the passenger diagrams. In the event the Ae4/4 situation was better than that reported to me during the weeks preceding our visit. Two of the three *RegioExpress* (RX) diagrams were loco

hauled push-pull entrusted to 257 and 258 all week. The third RX diagram, and all the *Regio* stoppers were 3-car RBDe 565 units (RBDe 4/4 73x + AB + ABt). I have since learned that immediately after my visit, one of these trains gained the newly outshopped low floor coach conversion.

One of the RX diagrams is the "Golden Pass Panoramic" brown liveried (a bit dour in my view) rake. The second set is EWI in standard blue. Both sets' driving trailers are flat-cabbed conversions from older coaches. Even when at the chalet, I was able to escape to nearby lineside spots (right) when the loco hauled trains were due.

One of our excursions was to Interlaken. The friendly ticket clerk-cum station master at Boltigen (the only booked intermediate stop for the RX's) issued us a Boltigen – Interlaken return, valid via train or lake, for a lot less than

BLS Ae 4/4 pushing a standard push-pull set, whilst also towing 'binliner' container wagons, downhill from Zweisimmen to Spiez, at Reichenbach. April 2003





BLS178 shuttles to and fro topping and tailing with a diesel shunter on Base Tunnel shuttle works trains.

the cost of individual train and boat tickets, and purchased by 'foreign' credit card in a few minutes. Waiting for the train we witnessed a very amusing exodus of national service youths from the small military compound adjoining Boltigen station car park. All the cars in the car park which were mostly 'boy racer' models turned out to be not commuters' but belonging to these young squaddies, and from most cantons. They raced off in all directions to go home to their corner of Switzerland! The non-car owners crowded onto the station platform, but luckily they boarded the eastbound Regio EMU preceding our RX. In another very 'Swiss' scene, a select few, speaking French, were left waiting for a Zweisimmen-bound Regio to get them back to French speaking territory! We took the 1210 RX2369 Goldenpass Panoramic to Spiez with 257. Proof that the ticket does not distinguish between modes was that on rising to alight at Spiez, the gripper said "no-no this train goes to Interlaken". We responded "but we're going via the boat"! We had MV *Niederhorn* from Spiez to Interlaken,

and after some shopping, boarded a 565 unit back to Spiez. Annoyingly, the single track on the Interlaken branch is overstretched at tea time on the day before the Easter holiday weekend, with Goldenpass, locals and an ICE from Kiel all vying for the same track. This caused our train to be late, so I missed the chance to photograph the only other surviving Ae4/4 (251), technically in reserve, which was the 'surprise' haulage of rush hour extra 1655 (M-F) Bern – Interlaken Ost, which our local crossed at Leissigen. I also 'missed' Re4/4 182 on EC3 from Amsterdam, which I should have been able to photo at Spiez. We returned to Boltigen on the blue push-pull set with 258, train RX 2386.

There was no sign that week of Be 4/4 762. This was slightly disappointing, as I had quite fancied seeing a 1953 single unit in original green. 762 had been reported as working one of the RX diagrams prior to my visit. The loco is always at the Zweisimmen end of the hauled trains on the SEZ section. Some Ae4/4 services (e.g. RX 2383 on April 17) convey a couple of

binliner wagons in pushme-pullyou mode.

A freight also runs once a day with an Re4/4^{II}. I was away from the line on Monday getting an errant motorcar fixed, but it definitely ran on Tues – Thurs. It runs uphill c.0815, downhill c.1130. The picture below shows the freight train as viewed from the chalet, with Weissenburg viaduct to the right. Sadly, one thing I did notice was that, as has been normal with Swiss locos nearing withdrawal, the Ae4/4 are losing raised numerals on cab fronts, in favour of white-painted figures.

On Wednesday April 16 we spent the whole afternoon photographing and lazing in the hot sunshine at Tellenburg, near Frutigen. This is the well-known ruined castle overlooking the Kanderviadukt where the sun is 'right' all afternoon and you can see almost all the way up to Kandersteg. It takes a very long time for a train seen in the far distance near Kandersteg to reach you – ample time to set up several cameras! Thankfully amidst the now-standard

fare of Re460 on EWIV stock (mostly in the new 'majority-white' livery), there was still some 'Brown' action.

BLS178 was shuttling to and fro top and tail with a diesel shunter on base tunnel shuttle works trains. A couple of heavy freights had Re4/4 power, double-headed and single banked. One of the new Re485s ran north, and a Cargo livery Re460 on a northbound IC. Re4/4^{II} 11153 was on IC 828. As the sun began to cool, and we were preparing to leave a green Ae6/6 went south on a tunnel lining segments train. The oldest BLS unit working was one ABDe 4/8 set operating the Spiez – Reichenbach shuttle; the remainder of the local service is bus due to the base tunnel works. Several of these sets are dumped with other stuff at Heustrich-Emdthal station.

Although the BLS 'main line' is no longer a procession of traditional brown BLS locos, the hourly Bern – Neuchâtel express services are currently diagrammed for Re4/4 locos.

A BLS Re4/4 banking a heavy container train away from the camera uphill towards Kandersteg. The train locos (2 BLS Re465s) are hidden round the bend. Schloss Tellenburg, April 2003

