

Zeitschrift: Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal
Herausgeber: Swiss Railways Society
Band: - (2008)
Heft: 94

Artikel: BEX - the last town tram?
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-854616>

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BEX – THE LAST TOWN TRAM?

Kälti



The view of Bex Market Place from the boulangerie. Be 2/3 No 16 pauses on its journey.

In 1998 I determined to track down the four metre gauge lines operated by Transports Publics Chablais (TPC), three radiating from Aigle and the fourth from Bex. I had already found services to Leysin replaced by buses due to construction work near the line, but on arrival at Bex, too, there was no sign of any flanged-wheel vehicle. The dreaded bustitution had again reared its ugly head.

As well as riding the full length of the BVB to Villars and La Bretaye, I wanted to sample the Bex town tram service which I

reckoned was the last surviving in traditional form anywhere in Switzerland. However, only a few days before my visit work had begun on riverbank strengthening and the link between the CFF Station and the BVB at Pont Neuf was maintained by a midi-bus in BVB livery. I duly caught the bus to the train and travelled the full length of the line, but the little blue tram used on the local service was tucked safely away in the depot at Bévieux.

The next year I found the yard was again bereft of any rail vehicle and before long my worst fears were confirmed when the midi-bus arrived. I was told the riverbank works were “going well” and it would reopen a few days after I returned to the UK! However, during the Pentecost holiday I passed Bex on the main line and spied a red and yellow BVB train standing in the yard. The significance of this did not strike me immediately but I alighted at

This lorry driver was oblivious to the fact that rail services had resumed and had parked across the tracks - but beat a hasty retreat when the tram driver blew the whistle.



Aigle and retraced my steps. The BVB driver told me that they had reinstated the rail tracks in time for the holiday weekend – so although it was getting late I rode through the town as far as Pont Neuf. I discovered that the tram would resume the next day – the last day of my holiday.

Early next morning I was back at Bex and found a very smart blue tram waiting for myself and one other passenger; apparently the driver had spent the year of the service suspension helping to restore the vehicle (built in 1948), hence its ex-works condition. I hopped aboard and travelled through the town to Bévioux, where I was allowed an extended stop to take photos. On the return I was invited to stand by the driver with whom I conversed in my rather poor French. As we travelled along the word “siffle” came into the conversation frequently; I discovered I was inadvertently standing on the pedal which worked the whistle!

Alighting at the Place du Marché I took elevenses sitting at a table outside a boulangerie from which I could take photos of the tram and the longer BVB trains as they squeezed past the traffic.

How lucky it was that I happened to pass through Bex on that Monday and was thus able to ride on the little tram, because with the timetable change on the 14th December 2002 the local service was withdrawn altogether. No doubt during the year's suspension regular passengers had found other ways of travelling, or had retimed their journeys so they could use the “main line” BVB trains.

Subsequently M Gischig, président of BVB-Promotion (www.bvb-promotion.ch or via a link on www.tpc.ch) has told me that the tram itself is still stabled at Bévioux dépôt and from late March until Christmas it is used to work one return journey, leaving the dépôt at 07.00 for Bex SBB and returning at 07.16. So early birds can still catch the tram!

The BVB had a bus connection to Pont Neuf at the north of the town while riverbank engineering works dictated the suspension of rail services.



A tight squeeze as BVB Be 2/3 No 16 approaches the Place du Marché.



BVB tram Be 2/3 No 16 waits for passengers outside Bex station.



Car, cycle and tram all want right of way at Bex Market Place.

