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Autor: Coester, Pierre
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BIRSIGTALBAHN

Pierre Coester looks at this international tramway



*In December 1978 BLT Be4/4 9 (from 1958) is at Heuwaage with an unidentified trailer & driving trailer.
ALL PHOTOS: Neil Wheelwright*

Basel is well known for its network of tram routes. Situated where Switzerland meets both France and Germany, several of the lines that serve the city run out to termini at international frontiers, whilst one route crosses into France and serves the Commune of Leymen before regaining Swiss territory at the end of its line. This is the 26km long Line 10 of the BLT/BVB running from Dornach to Rodersdorf - the longest tram line in Switzerland and probably the longest international tram route in the world.

Today's Line 10 started life in 1887 as the metre gauge light railway the Birsigtalbahn (BTB), built by contractors

Pümpin and Herzog, whose first section opened from Basel Heuwaage to Therwil 6.6km distant. The following year the line was extended to the frontier with Alsace at Flüh, a village in Canton Solothurn, some 12.3km from its city terminal. Originally steam operated, the Birsigtalbahn was electrified in 1905 at 750V dc. In 1910 the railway was extended by a further 3.8km to Rodersdorf (SO) with almost 3km of the new route running in Alsace (a part of Germany from 1871 to 1918) where it passed through Leymen. At this time there were a couple of plans to extend the railway considerably further with the aim of eventually reaching Belfort by coupling-up

with one or other narrow gauge lines in Alsace/France. World War 1 ended the plans, whilst during World War 2 through running was not possible.

In 1964 the authorities agreed to modernise the BTB and in 1966 the old rolling stock was replaced with a fleet of six two-car Pendelzüge which, with a spare driving trailer and two new intermediate cars, two 1951 motor coaches and some rebuilt 1926 and 1932 intermediate trailers, could be used to make-up three-car units. At this time the railway was still using its original depot at Oberwil 4.7km from Heuwaage. In 1974 the Birsigtalbahn (BTB) was merged with the Birseckbahn (BEB), the Trambahn Basel - Aesch (TBA) and the Basellandschaftliche Überlandbahn (BÜeB) to form the Baselland Transport AG (BLT). At this time the route became Line 17 but the light blue Birsigtalbahn livery remained until the 1984 modernisation.

Between 1982 and 1984 the line was

totally rebuilt in preparation for it to become an integral operating part of the Basel tram network, although the ownership and running of the line was to remain with the BLT. Overnight on the 28th/29th September 1984 the operating voltage was lowered to the 600V dc of the BVB, the historic Oberwil depot was closed and articulated trams in the yellow and red of the BLT started operating from a new depot and workshop at Hüslimatt some 1km further down the line. This required building turning loops at Heuwaage, Oberwil, Ettingen, Flüh and Rodersdorf.

Initially to link the line into the city-wide system there was only a single line connection at Heuwaage for transferring vehicles. However, in 1986 two connecting tracks were built and by the use of the BVB tracks through the city from Heuwaage to Dreispitz (via Aeschenplatz at that time rather than via the SBB Bahnhof) the old Birsigtalbahn was able to connect with the

BLT Be4/4 15 (dating from 1966) as seen at Fluh in March 1984.





BLT double articulated tram 245 (built 1980) at Heuwaage in March 1991. This is on the double track connection between the BVB network and Birsigalbahn dating from 1986.

BLT's former BEB line to Dornach, and the present-day Line 10 was born on the 25th October. Line 17 did not die though. It now runs from Ettingen through Heuwaage to Wiesenplatz close to the German border in the northern port area of the city.

Apart from a short section between Bottingermühle and Batterieserstrasse the route of Line 10 is double track out to

Ettingen. From here to Rodersdorf it is single track including the section that runs across the border in the Haut-Rhin Département of France. The basic service along the whole length of the line varies between two and three trains an hour, whilst the section down to Ettingen generally has a much denser service that is extended to Flüh during busier times.

This is Basel commuter land and the link through a small corner of France enables the residents of Leymen to travel easily to their nearest big city, albeit one in another country. Also, on the French side of the frontier just to the south of Leymen,



July 2004 - Birsigalbahn Leymen station building and BLT tram 265 disappearing towards Rodersdorf.



In May 1986, BLT articulated tram 238 (built 1980) plus BVB bogie trailer 1416 is at Heuwaage terminal loop. The Terminal loop was in regular use from 1984 to 1986 when double track connections were put in and route 10 extended from Aeschenplatz via Heuwaage to Rodersdorf. The loop still sees use, especially when the city streets are blocked, e.g. during the Fasnacht processions.

is the site of the picturesque ruins of the Château du Landskron that was founded in 1297 and Line 10 gives access to this. Basel itself is a wonderful, historic city and a superb destination for those interested in transport operations, yet many people simply pass through on their way to the more publicised parts of Switzerland. Take time out to stay in this area and to ride the Birsigalbahn into France.

Editor's Note. The scope of Pierre Coester's original article, that included research from several French sources, has kindly been expanded by Neil Wheelwright who acknowledges the 1987 book "BLT Baselland Transport AG – 100 Jahre öffentlicher Regionalverkehr in der Nordwestschweiz" as being an indispensable source of information.

This May 1987 scene shows BLT articulated trams 232+247 near Grosspeterstrasse. Both trams date from 1980. This is on the 'original' route 10, south of Aeschenplatz.

