

# Meiringen meanderings

Objekttyp: **Group**

Zeitschrift: **Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal**

Band (Jahr): - **(2009)**

Heft 98

PDF erstellt am: **29.04.2024**

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# MEIRINGEN MEANDERINGS



*The Engsee. PHOTO: Glyn Jones*

Meiringen, east of Lake Brienz and on the headwaters of the River Aare, is a delightful small town whose main claim to fame is fictional – its link with Sherlock Holmes. However it does make a good base for Swiss transport enthusiasts as it is located where the Zentralbahn starts to make its rack assisted climb over the Brunig Pass. In these three articles SRS members look at other transport to and from this quiet resort.

## **Ron Smith looks at the MEIRINGEN INNERTKIRCHEN BAHN**



Although it is only 4.8km long the Meiringen Innertkirchen Bahn (MIB) is an interesting railway. It is the operating name of the transport arm of the Kraftwerken Oberhasli AG (KWO) which gives the clue to its origins. Between Meiringen and

Innertkirchen the River Aare has forced its way through the local geology via the Aareschlucht – a very narrow crack in the mountain that has a footpath through it, part in tunnel, part on ledges overhanging the raging torrent. This is well worth a visit. The river provides a source of hydro electric power, and this is what the KWO

*The new MIB Be 4/4 No.8 at Meiringen. PHOTO: Ron Smith*



exploits, being founded in 1923 for this purpose.

In autumn 1924 a railway was proposed from Meiringen to Innertkirchen and on to Guttannen, but this never came about. However, this proposal laid the foundations for the current railway that was opened on 1st August 1926 (Swiss National Day). It was subsequently used to bring the plant and machinery for the Kraftwerk from the Brünig line, so an end on connection with the SBB was made at Meiringen, by crossing the road adjacent to the goods shed. While construction work was going on, the MIB hired Rhätische Bahn (RhB) Mallet G 2/2 + 2/3 locos No.19 "Maloja" and No.20 "Chiavenna", both built in 1896. These worked all traffic until 1934 when they were withdrawn, with No.19 being scrapped in 1940 and No.20 in 1937.

It was not until 1931 that the first passenger vehicles arrived, in the form of a battery railcar with 12 seats. This primitive little machine, affectionately known as "Trudi", was eventually downgraded to being a tractor, and then withdrawn and preserved in Bruchhausen Vilsen, Germany. "Trudi" was followed in 1939 and 1949 by two more battery railcars, BDa 2/2 numbers 4 and 5, each with 22 seats. These worked for 40 years, operating in tandem for hauling goods wagons. For particularly heavy loads,



TOP: MIB tram No.6 waits at Meiringen. 11/9/94

MIDDLE: MIB Tram No.7 at Innertkirchen.

2/9/91

BOTTOM: MIB No.7 waits at Meiringen dwarfed by standard gauge wagon.

PHOTOS: Kälti





TOP: Driver's view of line about to enter the Aareschlucht tunnel from Meiringen.

PHOTO: Tony Bagwell

MIDDLE: MIB Be 4/4 No.8 at Aareschlucht West.

PHOTO: Ron Smith

BOTTOM: Waiting at Innertkirchen.

PHOTO: Tony Bagwell

a steam tank engine from the Brünig provided the traction. This must have been interesting for the crews as they worked through the 1.5km Kirchet-Tunnel beside the Aareschlucht! However, the tunnel loading gauge is generous enough to take standard gauge wagons on transporter bogies. Battery railcar No.5 (subsequently classified CFa 2/2) was plinthed at Innertkirchen, while No.4 went to the Verkehrshaus at Luzern.

It was not until 1946 that the MIB gained the status of a public railway, when the Bundesrat gave a concession through to 2026. Part of the conditions was that the railway must be modernised including electrification and track renewal with heavier rails. Eventually the metre gauge line was electrified at 1200v with overhead catenary, and the upgraded operation commenced on November 1st 1977. To find suitable motive power, the MIB searched for second hand vehicles, and amazingly bought three trams (built by Fuchs of Heidelberg in 1952) from the Oberrheinischen Eisenbahngesellschaft in Mannheim, Germany. In May 1976 these were shipped to the

SBB workshop in Meiringen; one was scrapped for spares, two were thoroughly overhauled, fitted with 34 seats, then classified Bem 4/4 and numbered 6 and 7. They were the first in Switzerland to operate



from either diesel or electric power. The auxiliary diesel engine was fitted to provide power over the short section at Meiringen, where the SBB runs at 11,000v.

The antique Mannheim trams were a marvel to travel on with their wooden bodies, black and white enamel signs and flickering light bulbs. Towards the end of their life the MIB hired a single unit from the BOB, for example ABDeh 4/4 No.301 of 1949, which also worked the freight traffic. This unit worked on the line from 1988 to 1996, until a new railcar arrived from Stadler/ABB - Be 4/4 No.8. The reserve vehicle is now Be 4/4 No.74 of the Vereinige Bern Worb Bahn dating from 1961. This now carries MIB No.9.

The new 1996 railcar arrived in a smart red livery, but has since been repainted blue and become covered in advertising, for which roof-level boards were added. Today trains run every half an hour at peak times between the MIB's own station in Meiringen and Alpbach, Aareschlucht West (for walkers to access that end of the Schlucht), Aareschlucht Ost, Unterwasser, Innertkirchen Post (the village centre) and Innertkirchen MIB, which is the works depot of the KWO. The MIB is an interesting anachronism of a railway, and it is an experience to ride on it.

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## **Glyn Jones rides a MAGICAL POSTAUTO TOUR**

Many SRS Members will know that Meiringen's PostAuto Station, situated at the rear of the Zentralbahn Station, is the start of many memorable PostAuto journeys

over the Susten & Grimsel passes. There is another route that starts here that is mostly unknown to foreigners and we were recommended to do it, but only on a clear day. It is to Engstlenalp and the Engstlensee – where is that you ask? It is situated at 1850m and is reached by a left hand turn off the Susten pass road between Innertkirchen and Gadmen.

The four trips a day (in high summer only) take 50 minutes and are subject to the Alpine Ticket supplement if you are using a Swiss discount pass. We arrived for the 10:45 departure from Meiringen. There was a large queue for the bus but we were the only “Brits” and most people seemed to have through tickets from various parts of Switzerland. There was some discussion between the drivers as to if a second bus would be required but there was just enough room. Is it only in Switzerland that a relief bus is there waiting just in case? The service is, I believe, operated by Autoverkehr Grindelwald (AVG).

The bus turned off the Susten pass route onto a narrow mountain road and there was much sounding of the PostAuto's characteristic horn. The road eventually becomes a private toll road, maintained to a

*Engstlenalp.*

PHOTO: Glyn Jones







It is a short walk to the Engstlensee which is a favourite with fishermen; rowing boats can be hired from the Hotel. The one thing that strikes you apart from the tranquillity is the total lack of seats – no mod-cons for tourists here, if you want to rest it is the grass or nothing, and the lake is totally clear. You could see the fish swimming around

*Engstlensee.*

PHOTO: Glyn Jones

very high standard – no pot holes here, and there are views back to the Schreckhorn and Wetterhorn above Grindelwald. The valley widened and we arrived at Engstlenalp, a totally unspoilt Alpine community with the ring of cow bells from the 400 cattle on the high alpine summer pastures. Although the bus was full, and most of the passengers were not dressed as serious walkers, they soon dispersed and tranquillity returned. Here also is the Hotel Engstlenalp, where we had our lunch, but it is also a proper hotel which is open from May to October and also during the winter period when the road has been cleared of snow.

*Hotel Engstlenalp.*

PHOTO: Glyn Jones



although the anglers didn't seem to be having much luck. A path from here leads to the Joch pass at 2209m. There are chair lifts ascending and descending both sides of the pass for the journey to the Trübsee. In the distance you can see Titlis above Engelberg and its revolving cable cars.

It was only when researching this article on our return to the UK that I discovered that on the path from the hotel to the lake you pass a tall rock with a large pine tree standing next to it. The radiation emitted at this point is equivalent to the energy emitted by the pyramids at Giza. At 27 micro X-rays per hour, the natural radioactivity of the region is the same as the Himalayas and compasses will not function

here for some inexplicable reason. It is looked upon as a magical place by the Swiss – we agreed with this but for a different reason!

The waitress at the Hotel was intrigued to have English customers and wanted to know where we came from and all about us – when did that last happen to you in Switzerland? When it became time to leave a



relief bus had been sent and this was in the AVG livery and could only take passengers who had pre-paid tickets – presumably the driver (who wore a jacket proclaiming him as “The Singing Driver”) could not collect cash. We chose the “proper” PostAuto and alighted at Innetkirchen where, after a walk around the village, we caught the Meiringen Innetkirchen Bahn (MIB) for our return to Meiringen. It was the first time we had travelled on the MIB and the 16:02 service was well patronised.

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## **Kalti takes a POST-HORN GALLOP PAST GROSSE SCHEIDIGG**

“You MUST try the bus ride from Grindelwald to Meiringen” said the guide on one of our first Swiss holidays. As a railway enthusiast I had my doubts, but we had hardly left Grindelwald and Grosse Scheidegg and the glacier behind when I realised this would be a bus journey like no other.

As we took gradients and hairpin bends at what seemed like breakneck speed, our admiration for the driver of our bright yellow Autoverkehr Grindelwald (AVG) bus increased by the kilometre. The road, perhaps better described

as a single track, beat a path through wild and craggy countryside, the post-horn being sounded regularly on blind corners. At one time we pulled in to let a lady driving a car pass – and she was left in no doubt that she should have not been using that stretch of road at a time reserved for the buses. Soon after that another bright yellow bus appeared, going in the opposite direction, and presumably an extra working as it had no passengers. Somehow that driver managed to squeeze past us and I swear his offside wheels must have been hanging over the edge of a sheer precipice!

After our long journey we turned a corner and were suddenly back in habitation at Schwarzwaldalp, where we had been warned we would need to change vehicles. The joint timetable run by AVG and the PTT PostAuto service which operates the onward journey to Meiringen allowed a long enough break to have a quick drink at the

*Postbuses at Meiringen, 2/9/1991. PHOTO: Kälti*







rustic café here.

On our way down in the bus to the Meiringen valley we noticed a sign to the Trummelbach Falls and, remembering the tales of Sherlock Holmes, realised that this was where the detective was believed to have fallen to his death – but of course we all know better! So, on arrival at the destination I checked in the Post Office and found a bus would shortly leave for the return journey and if we alighted at Zwirgi we could walk down past the falls. Before the descent we paused to take in the glorious panoramic view over Meiringen and, after carefully avoiding a repetition of Holmes' escapade, we took a step back in time and invested CHF3.40 to catch the car of the Reichenbachfallbahn down to the valley floor. Sadly we had to walk from the bottom station of the funicular to the town centre as the former tramway is no more than a memory, having closed in 1956.

TOP & MIDDLE: *En route to Grosse Scheidegg showing the magnificent country traversed by the PTT and AVG buses.*

*Passengers arriving at Schwarzwaldalp for PTT Postbus to Meiringen, 2/9/1991.*

PHOTOS: Kälti