

**Zeitschrift:** Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal  
**Herausgeber:** Swiss Railways Society  
**Band:** - (2010)  
**Heft:** 101

**Artikel:** Switzerland's first main line  
**Autor:** Stone, Bryan  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-854398>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

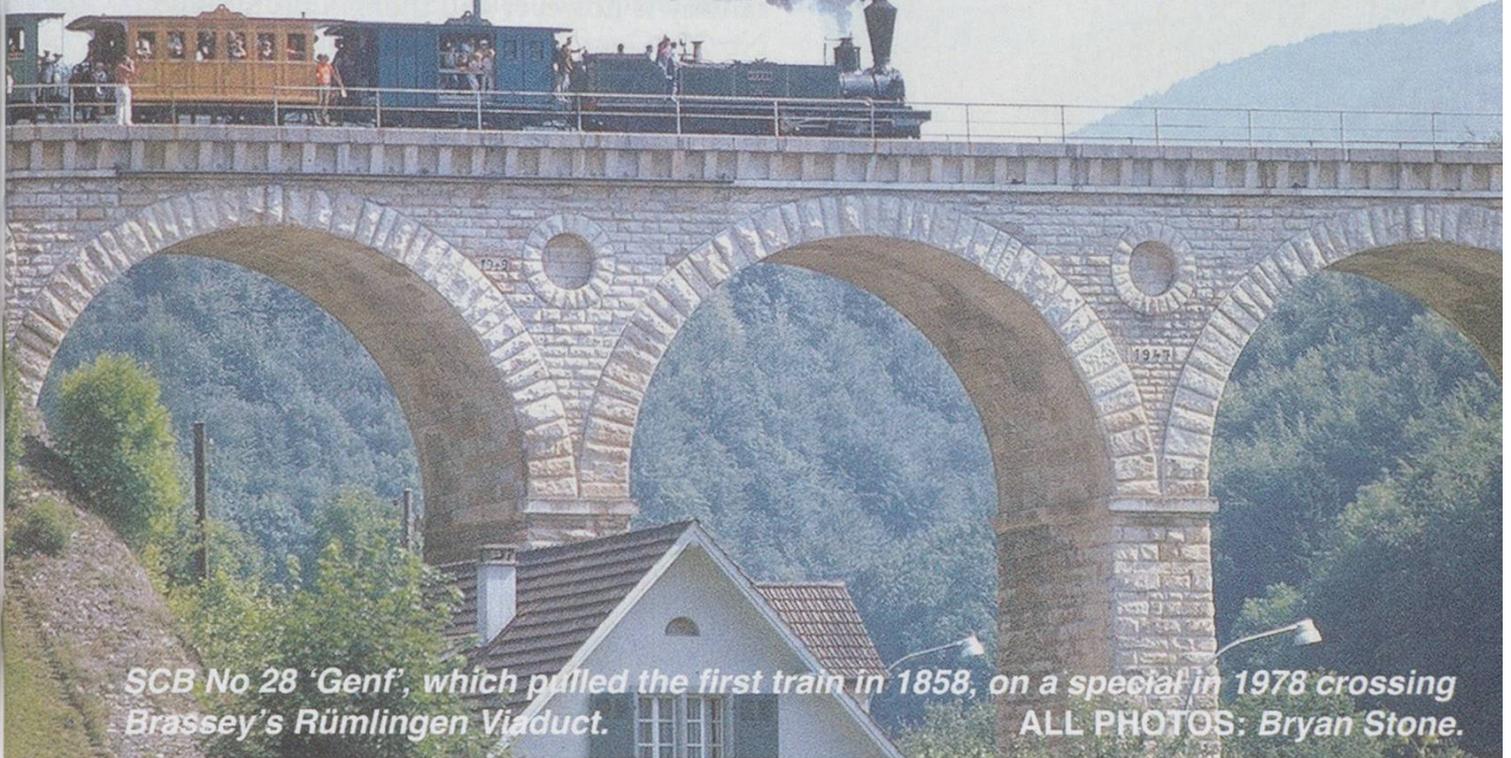
The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 18.03.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# SWITZERLAND'S FIRST MAIN LINE

Bryan Stone



SCB No 28 'Genf', which pulled the first train in 1858, on a special in 1978 crossing Brassey's Rümlingen Viaduct. ALL PHOTOS: Bryan Stone.

Around 1840, the wealthy British, already accustomed to railways at home, faced long, dusty journeys by carriage to Switzerland, taking over a week from Calais to Basel.

As related in September's *Swiss Express* the first railway on Swiss territory (with three of its twelve engines built in Manchester) opened from Strasbourg to St Louis in September 1841 and on to Basel St Johann in June 1844. It was not until December 1845 that the Basel government allowed the railway into the walled city. The wall was extended around the station, with a gate, closed at night, as shown in contemporary engravings. In 1846 Charles Dickens took the steamboat to Strasbourg from Belgium, continuing by train to Basel, lodging in the 'Three Kings', before hiring carriages to Lausanne. In 1852 new routes reached Strasbourg from Paris, and from the Palatinate in Germany, with the direct line from Paris not reaching Basel (via Mulhouse) until 1858. Basel was however still the end of the line. What happened then is a little-known story but one with a strong British element.

The new Swiss Confederation's 1848 constitution foresaw private railways in a national plan. In Britain Robert Stephenson

was already well known as a leading railway engineer, therefore the Confederation engaged him and his contemporary Swinburne, to report by August 1850 on a suitable Swiss network. Swinburne, already in Basel in June 1850, and Stephenson in Genève, proposed lines from Basel to Luzern; Romanshorn and Zürich; to Biel; a branch to Bern and Thun; and connections to Genève. I have a copy of their report. This network would be realised, but there are oddities. Bern was on a branch to Thun whilst Genève was to be reached via Biel utilising a steamer. Stephenson's line from Olten to Solothurn, closed for some years, subsequently became today's high-speed line to Solothurn.

Basel to Olten came first with the Swiss Central Railway (SCB) formed in February 1853 building a short line to Liestal that opened in December 1854. However, going on to Olten via Sissach involved a mountain crossing. Stephenson suggested traction using water-powered winding gear, whilst at Läfelfingen he planned the world's then longest tunnel, the 2,495 m long 'Hauenstein'.

In the registers of Basel's 'Three Kings Hotel' the names of Thomas Brassey, and assistants Burnet and Johns, appear six times



*A footplate view in Oct 2009 on the DLM 2-10-0 No 52 8055, entering Brassey's 2,4 km Hauenstein Tunnel (now reduced to single track)*

between February and June 1854. Brassey, the leading British railway contractor (employing some 10,000 workers at times) who was also working in France in 1854, wanted this job. His proposal abandoned the winding gear, and suggested 18.2 km of double track railway climbing high above the valley floor on a 1 in 41 gradient. He was awarded the contract in July 1854, for completion in August 1856 – this, however, was not to be. There were major differences resulting in the works being delayed, then on May 28 1857 a vertical tunnel shaft caught fire, and 63 workers were asphyxiated. A monument in Trimbach churchyard, below the south portal of the tunnel, lists their names including three British.

They were not the only ones to die. The parish register of Läuelfingen at the north portal lists many more, including several English names, who died carrying out Brassey's contract. Meanwhile, for workpeople's families, the Basel St. Chrischona Mission provided an English language school and church services in Läuelfingen. In 1856 over 40 English children attended Missionary Lehmann's little school. The registers record English baptisms (rarely) and funerals (more frequently). 'Fell from the Viaduct' (at Rümelingen, below Läuelfingen) was a frequent obituary.

The line opened 2 years late in May 1858. Financially it was a disaster and the SCB held Brassey responsible for the fire and the delay. On a contract of CHF4.6 m, he paid CHF2m damages. Interestingly in

various biographies of him this project is scarcely mentioned, though SBB Historic in Bern has the SCB records. His mountain railway is however still there. So is SCB No 28 'Genf', an 'Engerth' 0-4-6T, built in 1858 by Kessler and which hauled the first that year. Housed normally in the Luzern Transport Museum, she is in working order and ran again in summer 2009.

Queen Victoria, travelling over the line in 1868 to her convalescent holiday in Luzern, enthused on the greenness of the valley. It carried the Swiss mainline traffic to the Bernese Oberland and, with the Gotthard's opening 1882, to Italy. It was slow and costly to operate so in 1916 the 8,134m Hauenstein Base Tunnel and connecting line opened. Avoiding the climb, and allowing higher speeds, this is still in use today. However the old line was not closed but was singled, then electrified in 1953, and so today carries the hourly 'S-Bahn' from Sissach to Olten. Occasionally, when the base tunnel is closed, it blossoms into a main line for diversions. I have been over it in Pendolini, TEEs, etc at various times. The most dramatic trips were with occasional steam trains once with 'Genf', and recently with 52 8055, a rebuilt DR 'Kriegslok', testing for future tourist potential.

Recently I attended the inauguration of 20m of 'new railway' in Nightingale Wood at nearby Gelterkinden. This too is relevant. Sissach, key to the old Hauenstein operation, was 3km from Gelterkinden, then a market village of some importance. That was a long way, so the Sissach-Gelterkinden-Bahn, an electrified roadside metre-gauge line, was built in 1891 to bridge the gap - see P7. The building of the new base tunnel gave

*The restored track of the Sissach – Gelterkinden-Bahn SGB, 1891-1916. A historic marker of its route and bridge into Gelterkinden village (inaugurated 10/2009.)*



Gelterkinden its own mainline station, so the SGB was closed in 1916. It was one of Switzerland's first real electric railways, so it should not be forgotten, although practically nothing remains today. Erich Buser, whose book (out of print) is legendary did not forget it and cherished some relics; and the old station is now a café. Subsequently, this summer a short stretch of rails were re-laid in the village centre as a historic marker. This being Switzerland it was 'opened' with speeches and a glass of white wine, and handshakes all round. I was invited, and told them that the SRS would be properly informed - so here you are. So now ride the S9, Sissach to Olten, and look for the many signs of Brassey's original work.



Today's S9 Sissach-Olten, Class 560, in the bay platform at Sissach, 10/2009.

*Author's note. This article draws on my own research for various purposes in the Cantonal Archive of Basel-Land, the University Library in Basel-Stadt, the SBB-Historic archive in Bern, and the Basel Mission (now Mission 21) in Basel.*

Imagine if you will, it is 1995 and you live in a village in Vaud, a substantially rural region of Switzerland. During the day, in school term time, there are reasonable bus services to your dentist, supermarket or office, albeit with a long walk to your nearest bus stop. But off-peak, services are not so good and there are threats of cutbacks as national legislation dictates that buses need a minimum number of passengers on each run to justify the need for that service.

Cue the introduction of **PubliCar**, an on-demand taxi-bus service for rural areas offering door-to-door shared transport with no pre-defined routes or timetables, typically running from 06.30 until 20.00 (later on Friday and Saturday nights). Funded by the Canton, bookings are made via a free-phone number. Initial resistance from local taxi firms is overcome by clear differences in services offered. **PubliCar** operates on a zone-by-zone basis with specific hours of operation. Passengers are not guaranteed a direct route, because vehicles divert to pick up other passengers, and they might travel at a slightly later or earlier time than they wish, to fit in with others; sharing taxi-buses result in fewer vehicles on the road, lower emissions and less congestion. In fact many local taxi operators have benefited from the success of the bookable on-demand services as families give up second

## **PUBLICAR**

### Lynn Sloman outlines the start of a Swiss transport initiative



One of the PubliCar Vaud fleet waiting at Cossonay Gare in September 2008 to collect pre-booked passengers.

PHOTO: Malcolm Bulpitt.

cars, sometimes choosing a regular taxi instead of using a **PubliCar**.

Jump forward ten years and the pilot scheme has expanded (\*) to 260 towns and villages with a total population of 350,000 – a little smaller than an English county like Cumbria. Technical difficulties with automated booking (matching journeys to ensure those all travelling in the same direction at the same time are taken in the same vehicle) have been

overcome with a bespoke system, and passenger numbers have started to increase. Now in an average year, **PubliCar Vaud** provides about 110,000 passenger trips. In some places **PubliCar** has replaced poorly-used conventional bus services while elsewhere PubliCar has demonstrated sufficient demand for buses to be reintroduced. Residents now view the service as part of the public transport network for their area, providing links with traditional transport services as well as schools hospitals and shops.

*\* Editor's Note. These figures refer to the 15 PubliCar schemes now operating across Switzerland.*

Lynn Sloman is the vice-chair of the UK Commission for Integrated Transport and a partner at consultancy Transport for Quality of Life. This article has been abstracted from her *Viewpoint* column in *Local Transport Today* with the permission of the author and editor.