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Autor: Stone, Bryan
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BLM No. 23 pushes a wagon on its return from Murren to Grütschalp. ALL PHOTOS: Bryan Stone

News from Grütschalp

Alas, the old funicular cable railway from Lauterbrunnen to Grütschalp is no more. Its erratic rails, reflecting its erratic foundation, gradually slipping down the slope, were finally too far gone to save. There is now that rare thing, a single car téléphérique, which delivers you more quickly to the station at Grütschalp. There is also, up at 1486m, the surprisingly big, snow-proof, workshop of the 4.3km Bergbahn Lauterbrunnen Murren (BLM), housing old wooden-bodied No.11, newer Nos.21, 22 and 23 and, since May 2010, a gleaming new No 31. Bought from the Aare-Seeland Mobil group (their No.102 of 1965) it was a commuter railcar formerly in use between Solothurn, Niederbipp and Langenthal. In March it was hauled to the BOB workshop in Zweisimmen for adaptation, above all to the 525 v dc supply of the BLM. Of course what was a bargain in Langenthal was a headache to get up to Grütschalp, because its predecessors had always been hauled up and down the funicular. No.31

had to come up the hard way negotiating a height difference of 691m where there were no proper roads. Off its bogies, it first rode a low-loader trailer through the 2 km tunnel (built by the Swiss Army), also regularly used by the 18-seater Isenflüh Postauto. Leaving the tunnel it was transferred by mobile crane to a two-bogie all-wheeled-powered platform, (normally used for transporting cables up mountains), for the winding tracks on the steep mountainside. First to Isenflüh (one of my secret tips for lonely walking), and then along the terrace road to Winteregg, the middle station on the BLM. The transfer took some 12 hours, and bogies and railcar were hauled back on rail from Winteregg to Grütschalp. No 31 is in the workshop as I write, to enter service in December with the winter timetable. A curiosity was that despite gleaming BLM brown and cream, when I found it on July 2nd it still displayed its ASM destination panels, on one side Langenthal, on the other Bannwil. Look on the map to find where those are! If this is a success, it

will relieve the desperate state of the BLM which must soon take Nos. 21-23 out of service for overhaul; and another ASM reserve unit is also being thought about. Swiss minor railways are never boring.

Coming back

Earlier this year the Swiss press and TV flocked to a children's playground in the Kleinhüningen harbour district of Basel. The reason was that the old 0-6-0T shunting loco No 8551 was finally going to steam again. One of a series of nine engines built by SLM in 1894 for the Nordostbahn, she served the SBB until 1935 before being sold to the Swiss Shipping Co of Basel. After shunting the harbour and warehouses until 1963 No 8551 was put on a plinth by the Seaman's Home. Forty-five years later she is surprisingly robust and complete, and has now been taken to Brugg where the Bahnpark Foundation will see her restored. Another of this series, No. 8554 currently on a plinth on the north side of Dietikon station, is also about to be restored for use on the historic Seetalbahn.



No. 8551 on its plinth in 1965.

Bern HB is 150 years old

The original incarnation of Bern's Huptbahnhof opened on May 1st 1860 some three years after the Schweizerische Centralbahn (SCB) line from Herzogenbuchsee reached a temporary station at Wylerfeld on the

other side of the Aare from the city. The delayed entrance into the city proper resulted from the need to construct a steel bridge over the river's deep gorge. The SCB was building up its network with lines opening from Olten to Biel via Herzogenbuchsee in 1857 (closed in 1992 between there and Solothurn and, since 2002, swallowed up by the Solothurn branch of the new high speed line) and from Basel to Olten in 1858. Bern was to be on a branch from Herzogenbuchsee, and a further branch was to run from Wylerfeld to Thun (opened in 1858) to connect with the steamers. The 1850 national rail plan of Stephenson and Swinburne had recommended this, as the terrain on the west side of Bern was seen to be difficult, so there was no objection to building the first Bern HB as a four platform terminus at the side of the Heiliggeistkirche. However with the line to Fribourg opening in mid-1860 its trains were reversing in and out of the station from the start, an embarrassment which lasted until 1891. Today the church still stands, but that first station alongside does not.

In 1889-1891 the tight curve under the hill, the Grosse Schanze, which dictates the railway geography in Bern was laid out with through platforms. The Terminus station was cut back to serve as a passenger building resulting in today's long walk from trains to city and trams becoming a permanent reality. The 1891 station building burned down in 1930, and passenger access was now principally on the east side. But more was going on; with the steel bridge over the Aare placed in 1941 by a new Lorraine-Brücke, the great 4-track viaduct in use today, and considerable re-alignment northwards making it difficult to identify the old route through Wylerfeld. Bern HB, however, was still left behind by events. New lines and traffic growth made further renewal inevitable. This was done between 1957 and 1974.

Regrettably, as for Euston in London, this was the golden age of modernism, concrete and set-squares. The result is, for the historic city of Bern, aesthetically thankless, although some years ago it was worked over to look more user-friendly. It still takes 5-10 minutes from tram to train, underground in semi-darkness. The last big stage was to bring the narrow gauge suburban lines of the VBW and RBS from their street terminus by the Heiliggeistkirche and the Kornhaus, into an underground station located at 90° to the SBB tracks. At busy times that adds again to the happy crowds! Recently a new overbridge has been built at the west end of the station giving direct street and tram access, and easing many commuters' daily lives. Today rebuilding is again in the air. Congestion, ugliness and inconvenience are obvious, and user forecasts point to further substantial growth. Bern HB is 150 years old - but it's not done yet.

SBB-DB Partnership in Intercity passenger traffic

In July, SBB and DB signed an agreement in Basel to create a new joint company for Swiss/German passenger traffic, with SBB holding 60% of the capital and DB 40%. The aim is to increase the 12,500 daily passenger trips on cross-border IC services to 20,000 by 2018. The 50% share of Zürich/Basel to Paris travel that SNCF has achieved with the introduction of its TGV services, is seen as an example to aim for. The present services, although generally popular, are seen as insufficient as they mainly depend upon DB's 12 ETCS equipped, 25 year old, Class 401 ICEs which are insufficient to meet all needs and are subject to availability worries. Currently there are some 25 train-pairs daily between Basel and Karlsruhe, this is planned to increase to

32, whilst Zürich-München train-pairs will increase from 4 to 7 as DB completes the electrification of this route by 2016. The Zürich – Stuttgart route, now run by improvised Swiss and German train-sets, which cannot keep to the published timings, is proposed to have seven daily train-pairs. The agreement sees DB improving its infrastructure to lift capacity and line speeds and SBB launching a CHF1,000m tender for new high speed train-sets to be in service from 2014. The new company has also announced that it will introduce a single quality and performance management of the whole group of services as well as improving the marketing, information and ticketing of the cross-border services (the lack of which is a subject of ongoing public criticism). For example Swiss in the know take the tram to Basel Badischer Bhf., (the DB station) where the range of offers is much wider and more attractive than may be offered at Basel SBB. It all seems very far removed from the long caravans of Swiss, German, Belgian, Dutch, Italian and French coaches in all shapes, colours and sizes, plus Wagon-Lits restaurant and sleeper cars, which used to wind gently up and down the Gotthard, leaning into each curve at 80 km/h. Gone too are the nightly adventures in Basel SBB when 3 pilots were busy with several 16-car trains, each with various origins and destinations, all to be sorted out around midnight. There were also long waits at Basel Badischer Bhf. while engines were changed, customs and immigration came through, wheels were tapped and brakes were tested. Schengen is upon us; interoperability coming on steadily; SBB/DB are now talking of 2.5 hours from Basel to Frankfurt; 3.5 hours Zürich to München; and also of the impact in 2016 of the Gotthard base tunnel saving another hour south to Lugano and Italy.