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SONLOUP CENTENARY

Michael Farr



Sonloup - car approaching top station 03/04/2005 - PHOTO: Michael Farr

Just over one hundred years ago in December 1910 the short funicular that runs from near the MOB station at Les Avants up to the terrace at Sonloup (LAS) entered service. A committee of people associated with local railways, as well as residents of Les Avants, decided to celebrate the anniversary last September and chose a Belle Époque theme. As usual with Swiss celebrations they pulled out all the stops; many wore period costume; there was period food on offer; dancing took place into the early hours of Friday and Saturday night; and at both 1am and 2am special trains left to take the revellers home to Montreux in the Golden Pass Classic coaches.

In summer the 532m long metre gauge funicular which rises 184m is not very busy, but in winter people use it to go up and then ski or sledge down. At that time of the year vehicles are only allowed on the local road at certain times of day, so it becomes a toboggan run whilst the funicular is the major transport link. Obviously in September they could not use sledges so they borrowed the Trottinettes which you used to be able to hire to coast down from Les Pleiades to Blonay. These scooters proved very popular at Sonloup, although there were some hairy moments on the road for as it was summer the restrictions prohibiting motor traffic were not in force! For the less adventurous the engine house at Sonloup was open for guided tours. The committee, with the support of the Montreux authorities, had prepared a most attractive souvenir booklet which you could pick up free of charge in A5 format at Sonloup - unless like me you had already paid CHF 7 for an up-market A4 version in Les Avants. As some members will know I have more than a passing interest in tickets of the traditional Edmondson card type. It was my lucky day, because not only were they offering a special fare of CHF 1 to ride on the funicular (the price on opening day) but they had Edmondson tickets specially printed for the occasion by Gebrüder Aeschbacher of Worb..

Blessed by good weather the event seemed to be a great success, but sadly the fate of the funicular is a little uncertain because it does not comply with both

Health and Safety and current disability access regulations. Another blow to its viability was the closure in 2008 of the hotel on the terrace. This had previously closed in the 1930s following which it was bought by the association of Swiss railway personnel who sold it in 1989 to the then manager, but apparently it had again ceased to be a viable proposition. Now sold to new owners they hope to develop it as an up-market treatment clinic and are in discussion about retaining public access to the terrace, plus the continuing operation of the funicular. Many organisations have pledged their support, including MVR (responsible for the local railways around Montreux and Vevey) and the municipality of Montreux. Let's hope they succeed. In the whole Montreux area the historical importance of traditional transport operations such as the Sonloup funicular is now being understood. Indeed there are those who hope it may still be possible to re-open the Mont Fleuri funicular from Territet which ceased working in November 1992 following a cable fault. Subsequent attempts to reopen this service (including formation in 1997 of "Pro Funi TMF" group) have so far been unsuccessful. 

LEFT: Funicular cars at the passing loop.

BELLOW: Sonloup Funicular winding gear

