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ABOVE: Overall view of the layout.

PHOTOS: Tony Bagwell

LEFT: Harrods, all dressed up.



Going to Switzerland by train these days is easy. At London's St Pancras Station you just get a Eurostar to Paris and then a TGV across France. Between 26th March and the 23rd April this year there was another even quicker way to reach Switzerland by rail from St Pancras. Getting a Piccadilly Line train to Knightsbridge, and exiting onto Brompton Road where Harrods was hosting a Switzerland-in-London event.

A large number of Swiss organisations had come-together to promote their country and many of its individual products within this famous department store. Included amongst them was the Switzerland Travel Centre (STC), part of the SBB, which is a good friend of the SRS. All the display windows along the front of the store were to have a Swiss theme and to help promote rail travel to and around Switzerland the STC asked the SRS if we could organise a fully automatic model railway that could operate during store opening hours over the entire event. One brave member, Ray Williams from Derbyshire, offered his HOM "Bärental" RhB-based layout and it resided in the key curved window on the corner of Brompton Road and Hans Crescent adjacent to the entrance to the Underground station. The installation of window displays at Harrods is done overnight - however Ray and his wife Marg hadn't expected to be up until 4.00 am on the night it was put in place! As continuous running was required the layout was reduced to having just one train operating. With no experience of such a marathon Ray hadn't any idea how long the engine would run before stalling so he agreed to travel to London on a weekly basis to service the layout. Additionally, a couple of members of Harrods staff were keen to be involved and they were appropriately trained to sort-out any glitches. It worked-out that the principal BEMO engine in use, hauling a rake of Glacier Express coaches, would run a real 40 km during the four weeks.

In addition to "Bärental" the STC then enquired if the SRS could organise another layout for the event's final three days. This was to be prominently located partly in a window and partly on the main floor of the store in a display area used for short periods by all of the many participating Swiss organisations. The STC thought that having a railway there for Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Saturday would help draw-in the holiday crowds to whom they could give information about Swiss holidays and rail travel. The layout chosen was Glyn Jones' well known "Maloja", another RhB-based HOM model that many members will have seen at our AGMs and other exhibitions. Glyn and Pam brought the layout down on the Wednesday and spent some 4 hours setting it up after the store closed at 8pm, before retiring to a hotel organised by the STC.

They were back in the store at 9am on Thursday to get everything ready for the 10am opening and were joined by your Editor who had offered to help-out with operating "Maloja". Being close to a main door it was seen by many thousands of people many of whom we spoke to. With an annual turnover of £1billion Harrods is very successful. However we did not realise how much a part of the London tourist circuit a visit to it was with over 30 tour buses a day scheduled - plus ordinary visitors. Some 25% of store footfall is people "just looking", especially at the highly ornamented Food Halls. As most of these are from overseas we finished-up talking Swiss railways and railway modelling to people originating from most European countries as well as from places as diverse as Japan and Venezuela. Perhaps some of the most interested visitors were those from Switzerland itself! We were also pleased to see quite a few SRS members (including Joint President Alan Pike) who called-in and gave us moral support during our long days in the public eye. We are not sure how many holidays the STC displays and special offers (such as 2nd to 1st Class upgrades on Swiss Passes) will have influenced, or if the SRS will have recruited any new members, but being in Switzerland, London, SW1 was an interesting experience for all concerned. ☑