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NOSTALGIA UNDER THE WIRES

Michael Farr



Chillon Castle provides a familiar backdrop for trolleybus 17 and trailer 53.

PHOTOS: Michael Farr

Early last September passengers waiting at stops along the VMCV trolleybus route 201 from Vevey to Montreux and Villeneuve were surprised to see 1950s vintage trolleybus No 17 gliding along and towing trailer No 53. From time to time it would stop, some young people would alight and hand out leaflets to passers-by.

Number 17 was one of 18 Berna/ACMV/SAAS Bresonnaz trolleybuses delivered between 1957 and 1958 to replace the trams along the “Swiss Riviera”. On withdrawal from the VMCV fleet in 1995 the bus and its trailer were sent to the Transportation Museum of Bologna, Italy, but in 2007, thanks to a British benefactor, they returned to Switzerland to be placed in the care of RetroBus, the Lausanne organisation which looks after more than 100 vehicles, mostly trolleybuses. In July 2011 RetroBus had been given the go-ahead to develop a 2000m² building at Moudon which will accommodate 56 vehicles. Whenever a scheduled trolleybus on route 201 needed to pass, No 53’s driver pulled-up at a safe place, and lowered the trolley poles so the service bus could overtake. Our drivers, RetroBus President Henri-David Philippe and Treasurer Thomas Chappuis, handled the two vehicle convoy superbly as it glided along almost silently with an excellent turn of speed.

On the first two weekends in September permission was given to run the pair under the wires in between normal services. The reason was to publicise the Clara Haskil Concours International de Piano which is held in Vevey every

other year. The competition, launched in 1963, commemorates a famous Swiss pianist of Romanian origins whose admirers included Einstein, Churchill and Charlie Chaplin – a neighbour of Clara’s after she moved to Vevey in 1942. Sadly she died in 1960 after a fall at a Brussels railway station where she had gone to perform in a concert. Although an international event, the organisers were keen to increase the involvement of local people and thought that running a vintage trolleybus carrying advertisements and whose crew handed out leaflets would attract the locals.

This was a very special occasion for Guy Marriott who had been responsible for the two vehicles’ repatriation from Bologna to Switzerland. He had fond memories from his childhood of travelling on these trolleybuses and when the Museum at Bologna decided these two vehicles did not fit in with the rest of their collection, stepped in to ensure they did not head for the scrapyards. The weekends were very special for RetroBus as well because they gave them the opportunity to prove to the VMCV authorities that they could operate professionally and safely, and without interfering with the frequent service of modern trolleybuses on the 201 route. RetroBus already have permission from TL to operate from time to time under the wires in Lausanne.

Guy had very kindly invited me to meet him at the VMCV Clarend Depôt (after I had taken the 214 bus down from Fontanivent), to join him and his wife Liz on their first ride along its original route in “his” trolleybus. The initial run

had been undertaken with the bus on its own but by the time I arrived they had coupled onto the 1966-vintage trailer No 53 built by Rochat and Moser at Vevey. After dodging the traffic to take the essential photos, we set off in the direction of Vevey. We paused on the approach to the Vevey Funi trolleybus terminus so Guy could take photos of the assemblage arriving because here there is room for only one vehicle and a service bus was hot on our heels.

On our return journey we paused again at the stop which carries the name of Clara Haskil where the competition leaflet exhorted everyone to take a photo; we did not let them down

before we headed for Chillon! While taking pictures here with the familiar outline of the castle as a backdrop, passengers on tour coaches took a great interest in the vintage vehicle. When the service bus appeared on the horizon we left the admirers and travelled as fast as allowed to Villeneuve, pulling in just beyond the terminus, the trolley poles were lowered and the service bus smoothly overtook us. The journey back to Montreux resumed and I alighted there to catch more modern transport to our apartment – after undoubtedly the most memorable Sunday morning journey I have enjoyed in Switzerland. 



LEFT: VMCV trolleybus 17 and trailer 53 ready to leave Clarens Dépôt on Sunday 11 September 2011.



RIGHT: The convoy pauses near the Vevey Funi terminus.



BELOW: The vehicles park near the Villeneuve terminus to allow a trolleybus on the 201 service to pass.



ABOVE: 17 and 53 call at the Vevey trolleybus stop named after Clara Haskil, the famous Swiss pianist.