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YVERDON – STE-CROIX



Ron Smith explores the history and operations of one of Switzerland's small railways that quietly and efficiently undertake their business

YSteC Unit No. 2000 at Yverdon 27.10.11.

Photo: Ron Smith

Yverdon-les-Bains is an interesting town dating back to the 5thC BC, when the Celts settled on the shore of the southern end of the Lac de Neuchâtel. Geographically it is at the crossing of the trade routes and river systems of the Rhine, Aare and Rhone. The Romans established thermal baths here, and the historic town centre contains many medieval buildings. Today it is a bustling, busy town; an important stop on the main line from Biel/Bienne to Geneva or Lausanne and is home to a SBB workshop adjacent to the station. Up in the Jura above Yverdon (434m) is the town of Ste Croix (1066m), once the world centre of expertise in music boxes and automats and the home of many highly skilled craftsmen. This industry's decline in importance can be seen in the reduction of its population from 7,000 in 1955 to 4,600 in 2011. Linking the towns together is a 24.2km long metre-gauge railway that leaves from a bay platform at the SBB station that forms the simple terminus of the line.

Ste-Croix was late to be connected by rail to the outside world. It was only on the 17th November 1893 that the Chemin de fer Yverdon – Ste-Croix (YSteC) opened, using three Mallet tank engines classified G2x2/2, to haul trains up the almost continuous gradient, with a maximum steepness of 4.4% (1 in 24), from the edge of Yverdon. The locos used wood as fuel for running downhill (locally grown and therefore cheap) and coal (imported and hence expensive) when climbing the hill - very effective and economic! In 1893 the journey took 102min. but by 1913 this was down to 64min. In 1945 the line was electrified at 15,000V 16 2/3Hz

substantially reducing the journey time, which today is 36min. At one stage the line was under threat of closure, however the location of the 2002 National Exposition in the area was a catalyst for saving it. The railway was modernised, two new Be2/6 Stadler GTW units (2nd Class only) were introduced in 2001, No.2000 "L'Arnon" and No.2001 "La Thiéle". An additional driving trailer for peak hour strengthening was built in a similar style by Stadler in 2007. New rail and catenary was installed, whilst all stations enroute except Baulmes became unstaffed request halts with the services becoming one-man operated. There are two Be4/4ll units, No.1 "Yverdon-les-Bains" and No.2 'Baulmes' dating from 1981. The line was incorporated into Travys (Transports Vallée de Joux – Yverdon-les-Bains – Ste-Croix SA) in 2000, which also operates the Le Pont - Le Brassus and Orbe – Chavornay standard gauge lines. Travys also operates five bus services within the town of Yverdon, plus services from there to Vallorbe and Chamblon L'Auberson and a local route from Ste. Croix.

The regular hourly service is planned to be extended to half-hourly at some time between 2013 and 2016. In this popular cycling area Travys has enterprisingly opened a cycle hire facility (including electric ones), at Ste. Croix station, and bicycles are carried free on the YSteC. They keep a two-axle van at Yverdon that is attached to the GTW service train if there is a large quantity of cycles to carry. There is also the kitchen/restaurant car 'La Traverse', a former Rhätian Bahn vehicle dating from 1913 and rebuilt into its present form in 2002. This can be hired, or it is attached to a service train,



taken to Trois Villes station, and left in the loop for customers to enjoy their meal whilst viewing the fantastic panorama from there. This area is called the "Balcon du Jura" as it overlooks the whole region as far as the Alps. Travys also offer combined bus / train / ski tickets. Often prominently positioned in the two-track bay at Yverdon is the 1950-built "Crocodile" Ge 4/4 No.21 with a line of Rollbocke which are used for the freight traffic. Weekly a standard-gauge bogie flat carrying three rubbish containers, is brought down from Ste.Croix for onward transport to Lausanne for incinerating, and an empty wagon returns. These can load up to 80t and be hauled at the rear of a GTW service train. The containers fit the compactor-equipped refuse lorry that makes optimum use of their capacity. Other freight traffic, normally hauled by No.21, includes timber and sugar beet in the season.

On an October 2011 trip our GTW unit set off running parallel to the SBB line, crossed a river bridge over the La Thielle before passing on the left the 4-road YSteC Dépôt where eight people maintain the fleet, as well as undertaking repairs and modernisation. We then arrived at Yverdon William-Barbey (1.2km), a simple, modern, single platform halt which serves the northern end of the town and is named after the man who financed the line. Born in 1842 in Genthod, close to Genève, he went on to university there becoming a botanist who travelled widely. As a strict Sunday observance man it was a condition of his financing the line, that no trains run on Sundays for 25 years so it was not until 1918, four years after his death, that the first Sunday trains ran. The next station La Brinaz (1.8km) quickly follows, and then Valeyres-sous-Montagny (2.9km) with its classic station building. This section runs alongside a road and has innumerable level crossings. The next station is



TOP: YSteC Cycle Van and suitably painted Croc at Yverdon in September 2008.
 Photo: Jakob Jäger
 MIDDLE: YSteC Unit 2000 at Vuitboeuf where a change to a bus was needed.
 Photo: Ron Smith
 BOTTOM: A YSteC Bus at Yverdon in September 2008.
 Photo: Jakob Jäger



A goods van at Ste Croix 1.

Photo: Ron Smith

Essert-sous-Champvent (5.5km) the location of the first crossing loop. Here the train starts its climb up into the woods on a 3.3% (1 in 33) gradient, heading to Vuiteboeuf (8.5km) with its closed station building - although the upstairs is occupied. On this trip we had to detrain and take a Travys bus to Ste. Croix, as track replacement work further up had closed the line. The train continued to the next station, Baulmes (11.5km) before terminating. The bus journey was interesting as we passed a wonderful, attractive, church, then attacked the climb into the Jura proper, traversing some ten hairpin bends where the driver had to slow, ensure there was no downward traffic, then swing-out to make the turn. I couldn't imagine how the railway could surmount this fierce gradient.

However on a normal trip the train leaves Baulmes, with its crossing loop, a fan of sidings holding a draisine and works wagons, plus a shed and ramp for freight, and after a 4% (1 in 25) climb loops through 180° to gain height to arrive at Six-Fontaines (14.4km), a very attractive flower bedecked

station, with a loop and sidings. Here the steepest part of the climb commences as the line runs on a ledge in the hillside, with vast views on the right, and encounters the first tunnel on the route before arriving at Trois-Villes (19.3km). On this wooded stretch the railwaymen often meet chamois, lynx, wild boar, and roe deer. They say that the Chamois are intelligent and if encountered in one of the short tunnels, it crouches down and lets the train go past, but the roe deer are silly and zig zag wildly all over the place and the train sometimes has to stop. The climb continues through four more tunnels then the line suddenly levels out to a clear plateau, and rolls over a level crossing into the attractive station of Ste-Croix with its offices, shops, freight shed, loading ramp and sidings.

At Ste-Croix the town centre is uphill from the station, and en-route is the CIMA (Centre International de la Mécanique d'Art) museum opened in 1985 in a converted factory where music boxes were made. The museum celebrates the first music box that was invented here in 1796. Inside there is the most wonderful collection of intricate music boxes, of all sizes, many in beautifully carved wooden cases. The mechanisms are hand made, and the variety and beauty of these is inspiring. Then there are the automats. These are miniature people (although as large as children) that perform. One that fascinated me was a regency style lady sitting at a table. When the button is pressed, she starts to write (holding an ordinary ball point pen when I was there!). While writing, her chest rises and falls with breathing, her head moves side to side following the pen; her eyelids open and close with blinking; the head rises and falls, and she is writing "à pierrot" then, when she has finished, the head turns, stoops, the hand moves, and she goes back to place the accent

Ste Croix gare 27.10.11.

Photo: Ron Smith





acute over the 'a'. The sheer variety is fascinating. Over the stairway is the angel. This is another automat that moves, flies, turns, and is life size. During my visit a master craftsman and inventor Mario Wüthrich was leading a class of schoolchildren, who were all making his 'Swiss Brain Clocks'. This concept is difficult to describe (see

TOP LEFT: The "angel" over the museum stairway.

Photo: Ron Smith

ABOVE: One of the automatons in the museum .

Photo: Ron Smith

LEFT: A Reuge musical box in the museum. *Photo:* Ron Smith

www.les-contes-du-temps.ch), but these brightly coloured clocks really make you think! As well as a café and gift shop, music box manufacturer Reuge has a shop of their own in this fascinating museum, where I was so taken with all the exhibits that they had to throw me out at the 5pm closing time! Leaving I explored the small town that seems to have more than its fair share of activities and museums, as well as being a good centre to explore the region from. After a pleasant meal in a café near the station (where locals were eating and drinking - always a good sign), I took the evening train back to Yverdon. As we rounded the curve onto the ledge of the mountain the valley below was lost in a milky white dense mist. The sun gradually faded away as we sank into the dark and cold - a fitting way to end a trip on this line in an interesting corner of Switzerland. 

Swiss Tip Good ideas and information about Switzerland from travellers.

Want an amazing overview of Zürich? Go for a coffee and a croissant (CHF7.00) in the Cloud Bistro at the top of the Prime Tower at 126m above the ground. The building is adjacent to Hardebrücke Bahnhof. The views of the railway into Zürich's Hauptbahnhof, etc are spectacular. It is well worth spending an hour at the top just watching all the train movements with a nice cup of coffee. 

Thinking of riding the Italian trains from Mals/Malles in the South Tyrol? Do not attempt to use the ticket-issuing machines in the wooden room halfway along the platform. Although English is available on them they are not user-friendly or intuitive, and they do not issue change just tickets with a credit on for future use! There is a perfectly good, staffed ticket office in a new building about a hundred yards further on. Should you choose to ignore this advice, do not take the instruction to validate your ticket before travelling, to mean 'put it in the slot' in the front of the machine (which is for credit and debit cards), as this will destroy the information coded into the ticket and stop it being validated in the on-train ticket machines! Don't you just love Italy! 