

Zeitschrift: Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal
Herausgeber: Swiss Railways Society
Band: - (2013)
Heft: 113

Artikel: New rails for old : we report on a local success story and the reinstatement of a closed line
Autor: Sargerson, Jason / Stone, Bryan / Gatehouse, Don
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-854178>

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NEW RAILS FOR OLD



We report on a local success story and the reinstatement of a closed line

Be4/4 No.104 (exBTI) approaches Solothurn Bf, March 2010. Photo: Jakob Jäger

There is a group of metre-gauge lines, electrified at 1,200V dc and today grouped under the Aare-Seeland-mobil (ASm) banner, serving Solothurn, Niederbipp, Langenthal and St Urban. It was not always so; the Langenthal-Jura-Bahn (LJB) was opened on 26th October 1907 for some 15km from Langenthal via Niederbipp to Oensingen. The line ran in an attractive roadside setting, but it was seen in the area as only the second best when a standard gauge line had been hoped for. The section from Niederbipp to Oensingen called at Oensingen (SBB) Bahnhof, giving connections via the standard gauge Oensingen-Balstal-Bahn (OeBB) to Balsthal, and then continued for 1.5km to Oensingen 'Endhalt' which was in the village street by the Schulhaus. Business on this last section was modest, and in 1925 an expert wrote, *"Where else in the world is there another line of this style, where this section of line had trains running on four successive fine Sundays, without a single passenger?"* He recommended suppressing the 1.5km from Oensingen Bahnhof to Endhalt and this took place in May 1928, only 21 years after it opened. By this time the late coming Solothurn-Niederbipp Bahn (SNB) had opened its on-road and roadside metre-gauge line, between the two named towns in 1918, and its trains then ran along the LJB route into Oensingen. Traffic was rather better between Niederbipp and Oensingen SBB (a factory near Oensingen helped generate business) and the trains were well

used, but revenue from season holders was not enough to pay the urgent renewals that were required. By WW2 the track was deteriorating, and the 2km Niederbipp – Oensingen section was parallel to the SBB line, so the 'National Emergency' led to its closure in May 1943. The heavily worn lightweight rails were quickly recovered for urgent use elsewhere.

In the late 1940s and 1950s falling traffic meant times were hard for the SNB and LJB who merged as the Oberaargau Jura Bahn (OBJ), improvised, and gradually wore out. Closure was regularly discussed and buses were waiting to take over. However, the effects of intermittent bad weather postponed the almost inevitable as the trains were more Be 4/8 No 114 at Langenthal.

Photo: Jason Sargerson





ABOVE: Asm Be 4/8 3-car units 114 'Saturn' & 111 'Jupiter' meet at Niederbipp working the R453 16:52 Langenthal-Solothurn and R454 16:48 Solothurn-Langenthal, respectively. On the left is the Bus 60 service that provided the link to Oensingen Bahnhof via Niederbipp Industrie. Photo: Don Gatehouse

renamed as the Regional Verkehr Oberaargau (RVO) later becoming the Oberaargau Solothurn Seeland Transport, when it merged with other transport operations in the area, then adopting the ASm name. Part of the group is the isolated



metre-gauge Beil-Täuffelen-Ins (BTI) line from where units No.103/4, which moved to work between Solothurn and Langenthal, originated. Today what was the run-down OJB has been transformed under the ASm into a busy commuter line, and an essential transport link, although its rural southern extremity between St. Urban Ziegelei and Melchnau was also closed some years ago (see *Swiss Express* 111). It has six new high-performance railcars received from Stadler between 2008 and 2011. These are Be4/8 articulated 3-car units known as the STAR Class (Schmalspur Triebzug für Attraktiven Regionalverkehr) – they are actually named after Planets! They can run at 80 KPH, a speed that will be fully exploited to maintain the new timetable embracing the Oensingen extension. Some of their predecessors were 50-years old, although two have been sold and refurbished to run on the Mürren line above Lauterbrunnen. Two more, Nos.101 and 302 are hauling gravel trains on the ASm's former BTI line in Ins, whilst Nos. 301 and 303 have now been sold to the MOB, where they carry numbers 1006/7, and one will probably become the Montreux shunter.




A journey on the ASm line is
MIDDLE: Units 104 & 103 cross and reverse at Neiderbipp, March 2010. Photo: Jakob Jäger
BOTTOM: A colourful display of flags at Oensingen for the reopening, October 2012
Photo: Bryan Stone

interesting as it has sections of street running and passes through attractive countryside with views of the River Aare, which it crosses twice. The basic half-hourly service starts outside Solothurn station in Luzernstrasse. It crosses the River Aare, takes the middle of Rotistrasse with good views of the Cathedral of St Ursus, as it skirts the eastern side of the old city passing the Baseltor. It then joins the north side of Baselstrasse, as it heads out through the eastern suburbs of Solothurn. The route then runs through a string of small communities in the narrow strip of countryside that lies between the southern ridge of the Jura to its left and the Aare. It passes the depot at Wiedlisbach and the town of Oberbipp, with its ASm-served industry, to reach Niederbipp in 25 minutes. Until Dec. 2012 trains crossed with the opposite service from Langenthal at the ASm's island platform, and both trains reversed. Passing under the parallel main SBB line the route heads for Langenthal, running through farmland and mature woodland before leaving the main road to serve Bannwil. A broad sweep of the line near the River Aare takes us back across the river and past the castle at Aarwangen Schloss. A section of street running through Aarwangen follows, the train climbing through the streets with traffic squeezing past on both sides, or often coming to a halt. Eventually leaving the road the service passes through the wooded outskirts of Langenthal reaching the depot, joining the line coming in from St Urban and then arriving at Langenthal SBB.

Langenthal has seen a lot of industrial development in recent years some of which is served by the ASm. However, there has been considerable commercial and residential development along the main road and rail corridor along the base of the Jura in the area of Niederbipp and Oensingen. New industries along the route now employ over 1,000 people. This led to what would have been seen some 60 years ago as a most remarkable happening for in 2008 a decision was taken to reinstate the metre-gauge line to Oensingen SBB, now a regional transport hub served by SBB ICN trains between Genève – Zürich as well as local services, trains on the OeBB and local buses. Work was quickly put in hand to construct a single track alongside the SBB to an interchange platform at Oensingen. This was a new alignment for the metre-gauge, rather than a reconstruction, as the original line was alongside the cantonal highway. There is also a new stopping place at 'ASm Haltestelle Industrie' just outside Neiderbipp. A public inauguration was held on the 20th Oct. 2012 with an all-day shuttle on the new line. In Niederbipp there were the usual festivities, speeches, band, and food and drink, and the Oensingen-Balsthal Bahn joined in with a steam shuttle service with its saloons and E3/3 engines 1 and 2. It was all totally free, and supported by crowds of local people and visitors. It was also a day of glorious Jura autumn weather.

TOP: Be 4/8 No 114 at Solothurn Bhf. Photo: Jason Sargerson
MIDDLE: Be4/8 No.111 'Merkur' enters Langenthal.

Photo: Bryan Stone
BOTTOM: OeBB No 2 passes Klus between Oensingen & Balsthal on reopening day. Photo: Bryan Stone

From the 9th December the former reversal at Niederbipp disappeared and the two-bay platforms have been completely removed. The Oensingen train now calls at SBB's Platform 1 on 3-rail track. The timetable shows half-hourly trains, leaving Solothurn at xx.16 and xx.46, Oensingen arr. xx.41 and xx.11, dep xx.43 and xx.11, and taking up in Niederbipp paths to and from Langenthal. No more sets or train crew are needed, and close connections are made at Oensingen with the SBB hourly expresses to Zürich. This, and the regional economic potential between Solothurn, Oensingen, and Langenthal, means that the project which cost CHF20m is expected to be a profitable investment, and a valuable part of regional development policy. 

This article was compiled from information supplied by Jason Sargerson, Bryan Stone, Don Gatehouse and Jakob Jäger.

