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A VETERAN CLASS DISAPPEARS



Bryan Stone reports on the last days of the Deh4/6 class on the Brünig Line

Still in its green livery, No 914 at Meiringen.

Photo: Tony Bagwell

With the introduction of new Stadler railcar sets on the Zentralbahn and the 2014 timetable, a class finally disappears which has been part of Swiss railway life for generations. The Zentralbahn (ZB) is today's meter-gauge railway from the merger of the SBB's Brünig line between Interlaken Ost and Luzern via Meiringen, and the Luzern-Stans-Engelberg, once from Stansstad to Engelberg and later, after building of the new Autobahn and rail bridge across the Alpnachsee, branching off the Brünig line at Hergiswil. This article is not a history of those lines and the merger, but of the locomotives with which the Brünig was electrified throughout as part of Swiss national policy during WW2.

The Brünigbahn, 74 km long, opened first in 1888 between Brienz and Alpnachstad, requiring reversal in Meiringen, where the workshops are located. Connections at each end were to steamships. In 1889 came extension to Luzern. The Interlaken Ost – Brienz section opened only in 1915. The mountain section between Meiringen and Giswil has four distinct sections, on 125% (1 in 8) grades, equipped with Riggibach rack, some 15 km in total. In the late 1930s it took 15 regular steam engine diagrams to work the line; 31 engines, of which 18 rack-equipped were in use, including provision for banking, duplicate trains and reserves. Services were slow; an express took 3 1/4 hours, the stopping trains over 4 hours. Many trains in busy times were duplicated, as the load limit was 35t, usually 3 cars. Pictures of Brünig-Hasliberg in steam days show two turntables; locomotives were turned at the summit to ensure that the firebox was always downhill, to ensure adequate water level.

For the electrification in a period of acute wartime economy, materials were found to build 16 motorised luggage cars, the new series No.901 – 916, delivered by SLM (mechanical parts) and BBC, SAAS and MFO (electrical parts) between 1941 and 1942. Installed power was 1320hp, all-up weight 54t. The construction included two powered adhesion bogies, and a central two-axle-bogie with inside bearings, in which was mounted a separate rack wheel drive through two motors in the locomotive body, driving two independent rack wheels. The three bogies were coupled lengthwise and at the outer ends carried the GF couplings, so the body was relatively light and did not carry traction loads. In adhesion operation (rack wheels switched out) 250 tonnes could be hauled at 75kph, a respectable performance, which has ensured the survival of the last units until 2013 on the Interlaken – Meiringen section. On the rack 60t were authorized, so that double heading on the mountain section was frequent. The recently demolished little wooden shed in Giswil usually housed the spare banker. The independently-sprung rack wheels allowed easier entry into the rack rail, though still accompanied by a heavy clunk which made first-time passengers look up in alarm. The later and more powerful HGe4/4 Nos.1991 and 1992 had rack wheels on the powered adhesion axles, which led with inevitable unequal wear and varying rail levels, to endless trouble and a relatively short life. The oldest 900s however, built with wartime materials and improvisation, have lasted 72 years.

Once in operation (there were many teething troubles) the Deh4/6 ran all regular services, at first often assisted by the reserve steam power, but became the classic picture of the

Brünig line. Although the D meant a luggage van, this was not usually used as such, as many trains had a baggage car and PTT post sorting capacity. I do not have end-running distances but Schneeberger estimated in 1994 (after 50 years) that they had each run some 3 million km. A first withdrawal was No.915 after a 1990 level crossing collision, while Nos.902 and 909 went in 1994. With the new HGe4/4 the 900s stayed fully in action, as the two new engines, designed for 50 km/h with 120 tonnes on the rack, normally only worked Giswil – Meiringen. With the newer series HGe4/4 II in 1986, these took over the through running, up to late 2013, and the 900s were degraded to assisting and locals, but a new life was in store. In 1991 Nos.905 and 907 were sold to the LSE, becoming their Nos.121 and 122. Six 900s had the rack bogie and its motors removed, which meant linking the adhesion bogies, across the gap, with long stays to transmit traction and compression forces. These engines were now used on Luzern locals to Sachseln and on Meiringen – Brienz, the adhesion lines, while the rack locomotives were later progressively withdrawn. Non-rack engines became Class 110, rack engines Class 120. The LSE engines came back into the fold with the Zentralbahn merger, and took their place in the Class 110 series. And the familiar green paint was gradually replaced by a dramatic red, later with elaborate 'zb' lettering.

A survivor is 914, now again green, and beautifully restored. For the rest, we will no longer, see as I first did in 1969, a green 900 toil up the bank, in heavy rain, to stop at Kaiserstuhl while milk churns, mailbags, and a couple of farmers' wives were discharged, or a gleaming Golden Pass express at Brienz, with its Japanese and Indian guests, behind a 70 year old engine, or watch as the time-old run-round operations at Interlaken Ost occupied two platform lines and extra staff at a busy time, or see a 110 with three cars in Meiringen yard waiting for something newer to break down. But we will remember - for they were remarkable. 

TOP: 110 002 at Interlaken Ost.

Photo: Bryan Stone

MIDDLE: 110 003 at Oberried.

Photo: Bryan Stone

BOTTOM: New ZB FINK unit at Brienz. Photo: Malcolm Bulpitt



Ivan Rodrigues – News from the Switzerland Travel Centre

2014 is the year of the "vistas" in Switzerland, celebrating unique, once-in-a-lifetime sights from the top of some of the highest mountains in Europe! The Swiss Peaks Pass gives you access to 8 of the best panoramas to be found in Switzerland. It is available for 4 or 8 days offering unlimited travel on famous mountains, from the Brienz Rothorn with its steam train to the summit (ask us for details on our new footplate rides!) to the Stanserhorn with its double-decker open topped cable car. Also in 2014 Rhätische Bahn and Pilatus are among some private companies celebrating 125 years of service and there will be many celebratory public events throughout the year, showcasing the best and boldest rail engineering Switzerland has to offer. Contact us if you require more information. Our new brochures are out now! To celebrate the release of our specialist Scenic Rail holiday brochure we have a fantastic special offer; take advantage of a free upgrade to 1st class on any one of our "Classic" packages when travelling in May, September or October. To order a copy of your 2014 brochures email us at railtrade@stc.co.uk or call us on 020 7420 4908. 