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Rigibahnen Update

Ron Smith



Bhe2/4 No.2 of 1937 vintage at Vitznau.

The Rigibahnen (RB) are the two standard gauge rack railways (one the first in Europe) that climb up to the summit of the Rigi above the Vierwaldstättersee, from Vitznau and from Arth Goldau. The organisation runs a comprehensive range of passenger, freight, and vintage (some steam hauled) trains, providing lifeline services to the car free mountain for its hotels, farmers, and inhabitants. It is also very popular with tourists and sports people all the year round. The RB funds all its developments and regular maintenance from its own resources, and is pressing ahead with some ambitious plans. To assist in raising money, apartments are being constructed over the engine sheds in

Unless stated, all photos: Ron Smith – taken on 21st March

Vitznau. In March this year these were well on their way to completion and nearly all were sold. The few remaining will be the luxury ones having spectacular views along the lake.

At Kaltbad, halfway from Vitznau to the summit, where the RB's cable car from Weggis arrives, a new hotel and spa have been developed to complement the existing facilities. The old station was very difficult operationally, as it had just a single track and platform face, plus an adjacent dead end siding for goods traffic. To cross trains here, the uphill service had to reverse down to the double track section and wait on the steep gradient. There is now a new and expanded track layout including a loop that incorporates a new style rack point developed by the RB. To complete the project, work commenced on a new station building this May. It will be mostly glass, prefabricated and assembled on site. This will speed up the construction as, for example, concrete can only be poured in the summer season. Then the internal fitting-out can take place over the winter, with a grand opening in the first quarter of 2015.



On the 26th and 27th April there was an exhibition "Winterthur 750" in the old Sulzer / SLM factory building there, organised by "Swiss Historic", "Dampfzentrum Winterthur" and "Verein Dieselmotoren Winterthur". The Rigibahnen sent number 16 to the exhibition, (she was built there), and on return to Vitznau was ready to start the season again. Photo: Rigibahnen

At Arth Goldau the long running saga of the bridge over the SBB tracks is nearing completion. The bridge, now a historic monument, was raised 1920mm by a set of 6 hydraulic rams. This could only take place during a short period in the middle of each night, as the SBB lines are intensively used. The bridge is now encased in plastic to allow work to be undertaken without the risk of any debris falling on trains or the live catenary below. This is scheduled to finish at the end of 2014. At this time the height will again be adjusted so it is 700mm higher than originally, allowing SBB trains to pass underneath without stress on pantographs and easing a speed restriction. The renovated bridge, with renewed lifts and improved access, will once again form the RB station. Another pressure on this job is that in mid-2015 the SBB line between Arth Goldau and Zug will be closed completely for up to 2 years, to introduce double-track and upgrade the line as part of the new Gotthard Tunnel approach works. The line is built on a shelf of a very unstable mountain and the total closure is due to this difficult terrain that in 1806 caused a landslide where the current town of Arth Goldau is now sited. The closure will put pressure on the route via Immensee, which approaches the junction under the RB bridge, so work must be completed before this can go-ahead. The official opening of the new bridge and station is planned for the 4th to 7th of June 2015, the 140th anniversary of the Arth Rigi Bahn.

Also at Arth Goldau, the Rigibahnen workshops are gradually being upgraded and redeveloped, and a partner company is being sought to construct apartments over them. Other residential developments are also planned here to produce capital to reinvest in the railway. This is needed as a further 3-year, CHF10m, project is to renew 5 substations and rectifiers, part of which will include the capacity to accept electricity generated from regenerative braking on the trains. Krebel is the first location to be worked-on followed by Romiti, Klosterli, Staffel and Vitznau. Regarding the rolling stock, eventually Nos.1,2,3,4 and 18 will have to be replaced as these veterans cannot be converted to regenerative braking, and may even become outdated as safety systems evolve. However, replacements would cost around CHF18 to 20m, so this is a medium term plan, when finance is available. Steam will always continue operating as it is very popular and the locomotives are in good form.

The Weggis to Kaltbad cable car has had its operating licence extended for another 5-years and CHF12m has been set aside for renewing the pylons (the existing concrete ones will be replaced with steel) and new cars that will hold 75 people but be roomier. The buildings will also be refurbished. This means that the cable car will be out of action for 12-months over 2017/2018 with a planned reopening in the summer

TOP: The new flats being built at Vitznau.

BELOW: Work continues on the Rigi bridge at Arth Goldau.

of 2018. Another project of upwards of CHF6m is the complete replacement of the station and café at Rigi Kulm that currently resembles a military bunker - although it can withstand the weather! This will be totally replaced with something far more attractive and suitable, with a larger café, a group meeting room, better catering and a larger shop. Geological surveys and plans are being worked up.

2013 was the best year ever on the Railway, with an after-tax profit of CHF500,000 achieved on a turnover of CHF16.62m, a creditable achievement, especially as passenger numbers (607,000 people) were 2.7% down on 2012 due to poor weather. Revenue per passenger was up and this was also helped by the RB being included in the SwissPass and General Abonnement systems for the first time, the latter making it an even more attractive destination for the Swiss who now account for 85% of passengers. It is always encouraging to see the developments at the RB. Forward looking management, clear focus, imaginative but functional investment in the infrastructure, funded sensibly, and a very down-to-earth approach to what is needed to maintain the Railway for the long term. It is an example to railways everywhere.

Finally – a date for your diary – on the 21st of May 2021 it will be the 150th anniversary of the opening of the Vitznau Rigi Bahn – and it is hoped and planned to bring the vertical-boilered No.7 out from the Verkerhshaus museum in Luzern, and bring her back to operate on the mountain once again. This is definitely something to look forward to! 

