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The BTB in the front line

Bryan Stone

BLT Be4 8 No.245 and Be4 6 No.114 (the last of the 1971 BTB stock) at Leymen.

All photos: Bryan

The Birsigtalbahn (BTB) was a meter-gauge local railway first opened in 1887 from Basel to Therwil, in Basel-Land, and extended in 1889 from Therwil to Flüh in Canton Solothurn. It was steam operated, developed a lively commuter and leisure traffic and was electrified in 1905. Ambitions rose, and in 1910 it was extended by 3.8km to Rodersdorf, Canton Solothurn. It might have gone further, but time ran out and WWI intervened. Now, this simple description conceals its most unusual feature, still present today when the humble “Blue Train” of the BTB has long been absorbed (since 1974) into a regional tram and bus system run by Basel-Land Transport (BLT). The BLTs are the yellow trams sharing tracks in Basel with the BVB’s green ones, as they operate the TNW (Tarifverbund Nordwestschweiz) Line 10, the old BTB line, to Rodersdorf.

So what is so special? This is frontier country. The BTB’s valley forms the border between today’s France and Switzerland. So a little history will help. Under Napoleon France occupied the whole region, until liberation in 1815. Today’s border makes some curious doglegs, which result from the far-off Congress of Vienna which then sorted Europe out. One of these loops enclosed for France the Landskron fortress, 200m higher on a hill overlooking the valley. But there was more. Prussia invaded France in 1870, and at the end of the war the region of Alsace, which borders here on Switzerland, became Prussian. A railway to Rodersdorf, which could not climb behind the Landskron’s hill would have to go along the valley floor through the village of Leimen, which was now in Prussia. In 1909 this was no problem; the concession

for the 2.95km from Flüh to the next Swiss border was established by the Royal Prussian Railway Administration of Alsace and Lorraine in Strasbourg; the line was quickly built. A condition of the Prussian concession was however, that a suitable station house should be built for Leimen, with rooms for customs facilities for both passengers and freight. This was an unaccustomed luxury for the BTB, but that house still stands today, beautifully restored. In the valley, where both sides spoke similar German allemanic dialects and links were close, the 1815 border left some farmers with land on ‘the other side’. Alsace did not see itself as Prussian, but daily life arranged itself around Leimen and the trains ran through. These were the last years when passports were not needed for travel. My Baedeker of 1913 recommends British travellers to visit the valley, but never even mentions the border.

War in August 1914 was a total surprise to most in the area and the BTB was at once in the front line. Switzerland had in fact been warned that the Germans might use Swiss territory to invade France, so the border in Flüh was immediately closed and barricaded, the overhead wire switched off, and military guards were posted. Throughout the Jura from Basel to Bonfol (where the trenches stood for 3 years) the border was fully defended by Swiss militia. The BTB still had to carry troops from Basel to Flüh, but could not run further. Equally however, much needed employees were mobilised as soldiers. There was in fact no fighting in the valley itself, though battles a few kilometres to the north shook windows and raised alarms. Swiss trenches were dug north

of Flüh and can still be traced on the ground. Then came a remarkable moment. On March 26th 1915, with the German trenches stable near Belfort, and Leimen quiet, a deal was struck that the BTB could be re-opened. A neutral Swiss light railway would run through Germany. Its usefulness was reduced by the requirements that no Swiss soldiers could travel, and that German soldiers would accompany the trains through Alsace. We may imagine that only those who must, would use the service. Walking over the hill (i.e. in Switzerland) from Rodersdorf to Flüh was also a good choice. The BTB's revenue was modest.

Conditions were difficult enough but the BTB, which had paid a 6% dividend in 1913, was now caught by inflation, the military, disruption and even the edge of a general strike in 1918, which closed it completely for two days. The cost of living in Switzerland had doubled in 4 years. Country people were, in the main, very poor; at least BTB employees had a regular income - there were 50 full-time and 16 casual employees at this time. Smuggling was, despite the threatened penalties and army guards, a useful bonus. Foodstuffs were desperately short in Alsace, as so were those short cigars the Swiss call "stumpies". Wagonloads of them arrived in Flüh for which there was surely no local need, but the goods still disappeared. Prosperous locals aroused suspicion, but it helped that farmers with land on both sides could usually pass freely. In 1918 it was all over and Alsace reverted to being French territory. The soldiers went away, the trains resumed, and even the pilgrims to the great monastery of Mariastein, above Flüh, came back. The railway was in a poor state as repairs had inevitably been neglected.

Then came WWII. After the first alarm and Swiss mobilisation in 1939, nothing at first happened. However, the German invasion of Belgium, Holland and BLT Be6/10 No.164 at Flüh. The green hill behind the Swiss building is France and was enemy territory in both wars.



BLT Be6/10 No.157 leaving France as it approaches Flüh. France in May 1940 changed things abruptly. On June 3rd 1940 the French ordered the BTB to stop running through Leimen. A PostAuto was instituted, over the hill between Rodersdorf and Flüh. On June 22nd the BTB started again, but the Alsace population was already in flight; indeed, some local Swiss farmers tried, despite the closed frontier, to care for livestock left behind. The German military occupation was in place by July 1st and from then on no further informal actions were possible. The German Army units along the frontier were reinforced by SS Officers, with a barracks in St Louis just outside Basel. Some cross-border contact was necessary, but was strictly supervised. The BTB



snowplough was bolted to the rails in Flüh. Yet desperation still showed ways and means; in Rodersdorf 319 refugees were recorded in 1943. The Germans brought forced labour from Poland to work the land in Alsace, and these found nearby Switzerland tempting.

In the war years the BTB was very busy, as petrol, tyres and spares for road vehicles were scarce. Basel City discovered that the valley could supply much-needed foodstuffs, and for the hard-pressed farmers a handcart of vegetables sold on the street in the city could also help their meagre budget. The BTB minute book for 1944 notes that on late summer weekdays, up to four additional (and not timetabled) early morning freight trains ran from the valley stations into the city, carrying farm hand carts of fruit and vegetables. The farmers' wives had to load up, drag the cart before dawn to the goods depot of the village station, pay and load it into a goods van, ride with it to town and then wheel it to the market, or to a residential street. Once sold out, they came home to the farm and the family. Equally in demand was, for city dwellers, a day away from the struggle out in the country. Older people have told me with tears in their eyes, what it meant to have a day out on the "Blue Train" at that time. The BTB needed the receipts, for all was more expensive, when it could be found at all. Electric railways need copper wire, insulators and switchgear, as well as rails and brake blocks. The BTB had just seven rail motor coaches, of which six were 40 years old. How they kept going was an unexplained wonder.

But finally Alsace was liberated, and on November 20th 1944 the mayor of Leimen announced that the Germans had gone away. The frontier was opened to agricultural traffic, mostly relief cargo, on April 26th 1945. The BTB had first to renew the catenary and support masts that had been removed by the German army. Fortunately the rails were still there. The trains to Rodersdorf started cautiously, with five trains on April 30th. From early June the 'normal' timetable was



TOP: Leymen Station and Custom House. The freight customs shed was accessed from Switzerland by the double doors and exited to France at the other side of the building.

ABOVE: Leymen station building is preserved but it is now unmanned.

operated, though without a stop in Leimen, as there was no civil authority, only liberation forces, and no customs facility. This came in July 1945, as remnants of the civil population slowly came back.

That then, is not the whole story, but an insight into how the BTB lived with its lot of being a frontline railway in two world wars. It is very far away from today's gleaming yellow trams every few minutes. But the trams still stop in Leymen (the French spelling) and today, due to the EU and Schengen, once again no-one looks at your passport. Thankfully normality prevails. +

+ **Swiss Tip:** Good ideas and information about Switzerland from travellers.

Following on from a previous magazine's *Swiss Tip* regarding the good value meals available in Co-Op, their Restaurant near Interlaken Ost Station is open 7-days/week and 10% discount vouchers can be collected from the Information Centre next to the Station. Co-Op's serve yourself fixed price plate, including the hot buffet, is especially good value (just ensure you know what 'horse' is in German or French, if you don't fancy it)! Some of the larger Migros and Co-Op restaurants also provide free tap water to have with your meal. +

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