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The End of the Line

Part 1 of Bryan Stone's look at the closing of railways in Switzerland



The viaduct in Basel which was, until 1901, the Alsace-Lorraine main line, then replaced by the more southerly loop line from St Johann to Basel SNCF. The gauntletted (or interlaced) track of the BLT underneath is not without interest. PHOTOS: Bryan Stone

I am sure that there are many readers who once thought this never happened in Switzerland, but recent times may have taught otherwise! It is true that there was never a '*Plan Freycinet*' (the 'coordination' in France in the late 1930s), nor a Beeching Plan (the 'rationalization' of British Railways in the 1960s). Closures there were, however, and they will continue and have taken various forms.

In the first half century or so of railways in Switzerland, from 1844 to nationalization on Jan 1 1902, they were usually local, often because a more permanent one replaced a historic alignment. So for example in 1844 the very first line entered Basel from Strasbourg but in 1860 it was realigned into the new SBB station. Its route was along the streets which are now Spalen and Steinenring, over a beautiful viaduct that is still standing, but in May 1901 it was again rebuilt completely on 4km of new railway further south. A link line built in 1856 between Bussigny and Morges was closed in 1866, lifted in 1879 and re-laid in 1971 as a main line connection for Biel – Genève trains. The route between Zürich HB and Oerlikon has been variously changed; first opened in 1856, it was replaced by the Wipkinger viaduct in 1894, now rendered idle by the Zürich Durchmesserlinie line opened last year. The line from Biel to Nidau opened in 1858 was a link to the ships for the south via the Bieler See, but two years later in 1860 the railway was itself extended from Biel southwards and Nidau's moment passed by. In Basel, the entry of the Baden State Railway from the north in 1855 was at first to Riehenring, and today's street plan still marks the curve where the line continued towards Waldshut. The new Basel Bad

Bahnhof in 1913 resulted in a straight alignment and the demise of another short section of line. A closure in 1888 between Convers and Le Creux resulted from finally building a direct link into La Chaux de Fonds from the Biel/Sonceboz line. When it was first built in 1874 it was aligned into Convers on the route from Neuchâtel with trains needing to reverse. Over 120 years on the old alignment is still quite visible at both ends.

An interesting closure case has disappeared almost without trace. The first line of the SCB, opened in 1857 from Olten to



Le Creux. The station closed in 1888 but still maintained near La Chaux de Fonds.

Bern, ran into Bern Wylerfeld, on the east bank of the Aare gorge, as there was no bridge and in 1859 the SCB's line to Thun was built from a junction at Wylerfeld. In the meantime, the first bridge at Bern allowed the line to be extended from Wylerfeld to the original Bern HB in November 1858. Finally in 1912 there was a complete realignment from Münsingen to Ostermündigen, via Wankdorf where the junction is today. The direct line south from Wylerfeld has disappeared, except at Ostermündigen where sidings with a facing

connection to Thun follow the old alignment to the NNW. Last of all, the Lorraine Bridge in Bern was opened in 1941 and the old route from Wylerfeld to Bern HB became a road alignment.

I like the situation between Sissach and Gelterkindern, not far from my home in Basel Land. Sissach was on the route recommended for the Basel to Olten main line in the report commissioned in 1850 by the Confederation that was drawn up by Robert Stephenson and Henry Swinburne. This, the first Swiss main line, was built as the Hauenstein Line and it still carries local trains via Läufelfingen and the original tunnel under the Jura. Nearby Gelterkindern, missing-out from being on this new line encouraged a roadside electric tramway to be built from Sissach. Opened in 1891 it was electrified from the start. However the line often had to resort to a steam engine as its pioneering electricity supply, generated in a local stream, 'lacked perfection' and the service was less than reliable. In 1915 the 1 in 37 gradients of Stephenson's old line were bypassed by a Hauenstein base tunnel on a new route that served Gelterkindern allowing the tramway to be closed in 1916 - to general relief! A small section was recently restored in the middle of Gelterkindern, where its bridge abutments were found, and the station building still stands.

Further closures up to the 1930s took various forms. Some

short duplicated links or wholly uneconomic sections were closed during 1914-18 as coal was in short supply during WW1. Although Switzerland was not involved in the conflict it supplies previously came from either France or Germany. Some lines simply lost their justification, or hopes were never realized. Others, usually lightly constructed local roadside lines or tramways, simply wore out and there were few passengers and no money for renewals. However, if readers care, to take the old road from Interlaken West via Neuhaus and through the cliffs to Sigriswil towards Thun, they should look up at the tunnel roofs. Here there still hang a few of the fixtures and insulators for the 'Rechtsufrige Thunerseebahn', the 'railway of the right bank of lake Thun'. The car park at Interlaken West was the terminus and the line ran, precariously as it seemed, on the dirt road (far from modern standards) above the lake. Opened in June 1914, the section from Beatshöhle to Interlaken was closed in December 1939 at the start of WW2 – Switzerland's National Emergency – never to reopen. The remainder of the line closed in 1958, a decade when several other local tramways or roadside railways gave up the struggle. An example of one of these was the short 'Talbahn' section of the Arth Rigi Bahn that closed from Arth Goldau to Arth am See in 1959. 

Lost and Found

If you've ever lost anything while travelling through Switzerland and never seen it again, the chances are that it finished up at '*Fundsachenverkauf*' in Zürich. This is the store that buys lost property in bulk from a diverse range of organisations including Zürich Airport, the Postal Service, bus companies and railway operators such as SBB. Each month the store at Albisstrasse 54, CH-8038 Zürich Wollishofen, receives upwards of 8,000 items that the store buys-in by the pallet load, accepting a lot of junk along with more saleable items. There is little resale value for the 600+ pairs of spectacles that turn up each month, but the dross is balanced by the good things that people abandon, especially on SBB's rail network that supplies two-thirds of the items arriving at '*Fundsachenverkauf*'. The provisions of Switzerland's Transport Acts require railways, etc. to keep items below CHF50 in value for one month and more expensive ones for three months. At the end of these periods the goods can be disposed of, but with over 100,000 items a year being left on SBB's trains alone this too was becoming a major problem. Although many items are claimed and restored to their owners, some 10 years ago SBB decided to put the task of disposing of the unclaimed items out to tender. This resulted in the formation of the company that now runs '*Fundsachenverkauf*', and it subsequently expanded to help other organisations solve similar problems. Along with spectacles the most common items left on trains are mobile phones, keys, hats, handbags, briefcases, and even wallets and purses. Also designer clothing, sunglasses, laptops, bikes, and even musical



Die Beobachter

PHOTOS: Heidi Marriott

instruments regularly turn up. More unusual items left on trains have included a prison uniform, a prosthetic leg, an urn with ashes in it, a ring that was found to contain poison, and even a set of chimney sweep's brushes. After three months, people who have lost their belongings occasionally appeal to the store, and sometimes they are lucky to find their belongings there. If they can identify an item that has been sold they can also get the sum of money. Entering '*Fundsachenverkauf*' is like entering a latter-day Aladdin's cave where customers can browse through a maze of odds and ends. Bicycles hang from the ceiling, gloves are clipped to clothes pegs, and there are racks of both commonplace and much rarer items. Not on open display are the more expensive items such as Rolex watches, expensive jewellery, and valuable violins and other musical instruments. The company employs eighteen people, and at the store there are technicians who work on some of the incoming items. All of the laptops and electronics have their memories wiped, before being restored for sale, and things such as broken jewellery are fixed. '*Fundsachenverkauf*' also recycles items, creating new and unique pieces from broken rings, single earrings, scrap gold and pendants. Some of the lost property is put up for sale at auction, whilst other more valuable items are sold on-line. Many other things are also given to charities. The shop is open Monday-Friday 10.00-19.00, Saturday 10.00-1600, and can be reached on Zürich's Tram Route 7; the Morgental stop is outside the shop. It is only 7-minutes walk from SBB's Wollishofen station. More details (in German) on www.fundsachenverkauf.ch. 