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Autor: [s.n.]
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gradients in Switzerland are generally given as per mille (‰) rather than per cent (%). This is a concept unfamiliar to many British readers, so much so that it is not even particularly straightforward finding the symbol on the computer. In essence, though, it is a very simple idea as it gives the height 'rise' in metres over a 1km 'run'. So, for example, 0.5% gradient (where a line climbs 5m over 1000m) is shown as 5‰. The advantage is the elimination of the leading zero and the decimal point, making sighting less prone to error.

There are no UK style railway gradient posts in Switzerland. Instead, boards giving an indication of gradient change are be attached to electrification masts, etc., facing oncoming trains. They are not very conspicuous to the casual observer and are rarely photographed. The boards are shaped to point up or

down as appropriate and carry two numbers. The bold number nearer the pointer indicates the gradient per mille (‰), whilst the second number, displayed in smaller digits, shows the length of the gradient in metres. 



A representation of the gradient board at Mühlenen. The line is shown to rise at 8‰ for 470 m.



A representation of the gradient board at Le Brassus station. The line falls at 14‰ for 379 m

Oldest Station Building?

Some follow-up from our members

Photos: David Noel Collection




Soller station front. The house as was, but changed to become the station with the booking office, etc. inside.

As he did when he raised the question of asymmetric bogies in a recent edition of *Swiss Express* our regular correspondent Ron Smith has again opened up a whole new can of worms with his article on the station building at Grafenort on the Zentralbahn, formerly the Luzern Stans Engelberg Bahn (LSE). Ron noted that the building used as the station was originally built in 1690 by the enormous monastery in Engelberg as a 'Herrenhaus' to be used as a summer retreat for the monks.

First off the mark to challenge this was Geoffrey Bryson who noted that his 1993 edition of *'The Guinness Book of Railway Facts and Feats'*, listed Cuautla, south of Mexico City, as having the world's oldest railway station. The Mexican station was originally built as a convent in 1657 until it was secularized in 1812, then becoming a station when the railway was opened in 1860. In its original use the building was catering for the needs of New World Catholic women for 33 years, before Old World Swiss Catholic men could go to Grafenort on holiday! It also had seen 38 years of use as a station before the LSE's predecessor the Stans Engelberg Bahn opened its facility in the Herrenhaus in 1898.



Soller station platform. Back of the house now the station with one platform. The veranda is now a cafe.

Whilst your editor was digesting this information along came David Noel (and others) informing him that the station building at Soller on Majorca was originally built as a grand town house, probably for a wealthy merchant, in 1616. One side of the building serves as the station for the line from Palma, whilst the other side is the departure point for the historic tram to Port Soller. Apart from having a booking office and other facilities inside, the building also serves as a café that apparently is a peaceful and shady retreat once the trains depart. So we now have pushed back the oldest station building by 74 years. Does anyone out there know of an older building? 

Appears not to have changed much since becoming a station. The tram in front goes to Port Soller.

