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A Swiss Ferry Story

Rob Morrey



ABOVE: Trains crossing at Bischofszell Stadt.

RIGHT: FWB train in the heart of Frauenfeld.

All photos: Rob Morrey

In September 2015 I spent a short break in Friedrichshafen, a small but busy German town on the northern shore of the Bodensee (Lake Constance). My aim was to use it as a base to visit some rail (and bus) byways in the area, using the excellent Tageskarte Euregio Bodenseesystem – see www.euregiokarte.com/en for details – that covers public transport operations in the areas of Germany, Austria and Switzerland that border the lake.

On a beautiful clear morning, I bought my day ticket at the quaintly named DB station of Friedrichshafen Hafen, and boarded the vehicle ferry to Swiss Romanshorn, which left on time at 07.41 with just a handful of passengers for the 41 minute crossing – such precise timing! The approaching Switzerland looked ever more enticing in the sunshine and I stepped onto the quayside with no formalities, as was the case at Friedrichshafen, despite the “migrant crisis” prevailing at the time. A double-deck IC heading for Brig took me to Weinfelden where I was to catch the S5 local – destination St Gallen (Kursbuch 852) – to my first target, the small town



of Bischofszell in Canton Thurgau. This is no ordinary town, far from it, and far from the package tour hordes too! It has two stations a kilometre apart, something that is not unusual in itself, but the 30m height difference between them means that the trains take off along a big horseshoe curve through the intermediate halt of Sitterdorf, while travelling over 3km from Bischofszell Nord to Bischofszell Stadt. I got off at Stadt mainly because it is the higher of the two and therefore offered downhill walking to Nord. The town is a delight and earns its title of ‘Rosenstadt’. There are lovely, quiet gardens and charming old buildings; Basilica, Tower, Castle and a pink(!) Rathaus. It is a true gem, and a ‘secret’ one at that, with few non-Swiss visitors. I then headed for Nord Bahnhof, which is down at river level – Bischofszell is at the confluence of the Thur and Sitter rivers. What an amazing contrast! The station/halt is well concealed on a large industrial site with just a basic platform and shelter. I relish the quirky, and Bischofszell fits that category! And as a bonus the surrounding Canton has 22 craft breweries.

My day continued by train back to Weinfelden, then another IC to Frauenfeld, Thurgau’s cantonal capital, to see the street-running town section of the metre-gauge Frauenfeld-Wil Bahn, which has now toned-down its garish striped livery – thank goodness. Then a scenic bus ride



Bischofszell town centre.

(K. 80.826) down to Steckborn on the Bodensee was followed by a short train ride to Berlingen (K 820). Both these communities are pretty lakeside villages, and on a September Tuesday, very quiet. Finally SBB/Thurbo whizzed me back along the lakeside to Romanshorn for the 15.36 departure back to the Fatherland. A super day out, with barely a tourist in sight – all for a total cost of €24 for a 2-Zone Euregio Tageskarte.

Bischofszell – Real, not Quirky?

Malcolm Bulpitt

As Editor, every year I await an article from Rob Morrey describing one of his excursions with anticipation. He claims to 'relish the quirky' but in fact he chooses to explore what I consider to be the real Switzerland. Bischofszell surely fits that category in my book. It has an attractive medieval centre that grew-up on a hill above the confluence of two of Eastern Switzerland's most significant rivers. These were important trade routes in earlier times, leading to the town becoming a trading centre that once rivalled St Gallen in importance. Today this small town of 5,000 people has its place in Switzerland's economy in many ways. It is the home of two large food-processing organisations. If you frequent MIGROS shops you will probably have bought some of their own-brand products, that originated in the "Bischofszell" plant that Rob walked past to reach the Nord Bahnhof. This MIGROS-owned company also sells many food products under its own label. Also based in the town is "Molkerei Biedermann AG" one of Switzerland's leading suppliers of 'Bio' (organic) dairy products. This company is proud of its 'Eco' credentials and generates most of its electricity from PE Cells on the roof of its building opposite Bischofszell Stadt Bahnhof, whilst all its heating requirements come from a biomass boiler fuelled by locally grown timber. Having lost its paper mill some years ago the former buildings are becoming home to a number of High-Tec organisations, whilst one is now an interesting industrial museum, containing one of the original paper making machines.

The railway he travelled on also has its own unique history. Back in the middle of the 19thC the good citizens of Bischofszell were concerned that their small town would miss out on the railway revolution, as main lines were opened through Weinfelden to Romanshorn to the north, and Wil to St Gallen to the south, both in the 1850s. As the major companies would not connect them to the growing network they formed the Bischofszellbahn to build the 23km line connecting Sulgen on the northern line to Gossau on the southern, and mortgaged one-third of the community's assets to fund the scheme. The line was opened in two stages in



International ferry at Romanshorn.

1876 and remained independent until it was taken into the Schweizerische Nordostbahn in 1885. It then became part of the SBB in the nationalisation of 1902, and was electrified in 1936. Like most Swiss secondary lines it had a fairly basic service of about 10/12 trains a day (including in the 1950s two Gossau- Bischofszell mixed trains) until the national fixed interval timetable came into operation. Now it is a part of the SBB/Thurbo regional operation and it is a link in the St Gallen S-Bahn network with a twice-hourly frequency Mon.-Fri., and hourly at weekends, of trains using locally-built, by Stadler, GTW units. It also sees freight services to the "Bischofszell" food processing plant and to an oil storage facility at Huptwil. Due to its locally funded history the line was built 'on-the-cheap' and this is evident in the serpentine route it takes as it avoided major construction costs. This legacy is still present in weak bridges between Bischofszell Nord and Hauptwil, making it one of the few routes on the SBB system where only locomotives and rolling stock with comparatively light axle loadings can be used.

Rob refers in his article to the town's chosen title of 'Rosenstadt'. There is more to it than having a wonderful display of roses around the community, as during the last week of every June it hosts 'Die Bischofzeller-Rosen und Kulturewoche' an event that attracts garden-lovers and music fans from all over the country. It is apparently the biggest rose display in Switzerland. In 2015 there were some forty-five rose gardens and sponsored displays of roses open to the public, whilst over the week there were over twenty concert performances taking place around the town. These varied from Celtic Folk, through Jazz, Gospel Music, Big Bands and Swiss Traditional to Classical Music concerts. The town also hosted, over the opening and closing weekends of the festival, a rose and specialised food market in its medieval Marktplatz. In 2014 there was also a 'Day of Hats', apparently inspired by Ladies Day at Royal Ascot, when ladies were invited to turn up, which they did, wearing flower inspired/decorated headgear. The 15th Rose and Culture week is happening from 25th June to 3rd July 2016, and the hats will be back with 'Hats and Traditional Music Sunday' on the 26th June. On second thoughts perhaps mixing glamorous designer hats and lederhosen-clad musicians is somewhat quirky – so perhaps you got it right first time Rob! 



Bischofszell's own food company.