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The Brunnen Cement Works Railway

Adrian Foster

Nos. 1 and 2 at the loading point.

It was Geoff, of course, yet again who put the idea into my head. I have known Geoff for about thirty-five years now. We have a couple of things in common – 16mm scale garden railways and narrow gauge industrial railways, although I suppose those two go together anyway. We have visited numerous of these latter systems together in Britain over the years and one memorable trip a few years ago to the peat railways of Northern Germany. After seven visits to Austria in ten years I decided to find out what Switzerland had to offer and as he knew I was going there for the first time, he sort of innocently suggested as he does, that, as I had never been there, I should try and get to Brunnen Cement Works to have a look at their 750mm gauge system.

So it was April 2003; I was staying in Luzern for the week and, having consulted the SBB website before I went, I found that I could leave Luzern at 07.35 and be at Zürich at 08.25. A couple of hours there to photograph a few trams and then the 10.35 to Zug where I changed again and caught the 11.07 to Brunnen arriving at 11.36. Yes, I suppose Luzern to Zug was simpler but, never having been to Zürich before, I wanted to have a look at the city and I do have an interest in trams as well. This all went according to plan, naturally, it's Switzerland, and I exited Brunnen Bahnhof in bright sunshine. A ten minute walk along Schwyzerstrasse from the station in a North Easterly direction and suddenly there they were, 750mm gauge tracks crossing the road. The works was to the left of the road, so I headed away from the works in the opposite direction following the track. After half a mile or so I arrived at the loading point. Here, a conveyor brought limestone from the distant quarry where it was loaded into wagons for transport to the works. Standing under the loading hoppers were two trains each headed by an orange liveried 4WDH Diema locomotive. These were Nos.1 and 2, respectively Diemas Nos.5146 and 5147 of 1991, both of type DFL 150/2. Behind each locomotive was a rake of five Mulhauser tipping wagons and at the opposite end of the wagons to the loco was a Diema 4-wheel cab unit with controls, rather akin to a narrow gauge DVT, so trains appeared to be push-pull worked. This was confirmed after watching operations for a couple of hours with each train taking about 15 minutes for the round trip between loading point, works and return. The line ran for around a mile to the main works, first along a minor road under the Brunnen By-pass and then around the backs of houses and across Schwyzerstrasse, controlled by traffic lights, under the SBB main line and to a tipping dock just inside the works.

The tipping point at main works.

Photos: Adrian Foster

Within the works there was evidence of former standard gauge sidings – these had been worked previously by a couple of Tm2/2 Breuer Lokomotoren – and under a loading bay I found a third loco at the end of a narrow gauge siding – 4wDH Diema No.4525 of 1982. The loco was in orange livery and in good condition but appeared not to be used. I went back again in June 2006, this time based in Hergiswil for the week and had my partner with me; suffice to say she had a pleasant boat trip around the Vierwaldstättersee whilst I visited the works again, this time with a digital camera. The photographs accompanying this article were taken on this occasion, rather than using scanned negatives from my previous visit. Nos.1 and 2 were still working trains, but the old Diema by now was off the track under a loading bay for lorries.

It seems I was just in time. The works ceased production a couple of years after this in 2008, as it was the smallest of four such works in Switzerland with a comparatively low annual production of only 170,000t of cement. It was not viable to justify a major investment in the works. The 72,000 sq.m. site was purchased in 2009 by the Schwyzer Kantonalbank, and in spring 2011 they announced that the area was to be redeveloped with apartments, offices, shops, restaurants and recreational activities with consent for the development given in that October. The first phase of the new construction began in 2014 with the demolition of some buildings, although three of the existing industrial buildings were to be remodelled, in addition to two new commercial buildings being added. The five buildings were to be arranged as a central element and named Karl Hürlimann-platz after the founder of the works. Apartments were to be provided in the second phase. One of the existing storage buildings has apparently already been converted into a go-kart track.

Information on the three diesel locomotives is harder to come by. It would appear that certainly the two modern Diema locomotives were sold to Tafag AG, a dealer in Arth-Goldau in about April 2009, as was perhaps the older Diema. The newer locomotives were sold from there to the Zillertalbahn in Austria, arriving in April 2013. No.1 has since been repainted into a red livery and become D1 in the Zillertalbahn fleet, this being done in time for an Open Day that 17th July. However at that time No.2 was in as-received condition in the workshops and is apparently being used as a source of spares. The two cab units also went to the Zillertalbahn but as no use was found for them they were scrapped. If any members have any further information about the locos please pass it on via the Editor. 