

Ostermundigen : part of the mystery of railways in Bern

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal**

Band (Jahr): - **(2016)**

Heft 126

PDF erstellt am: **21.06.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-854029>

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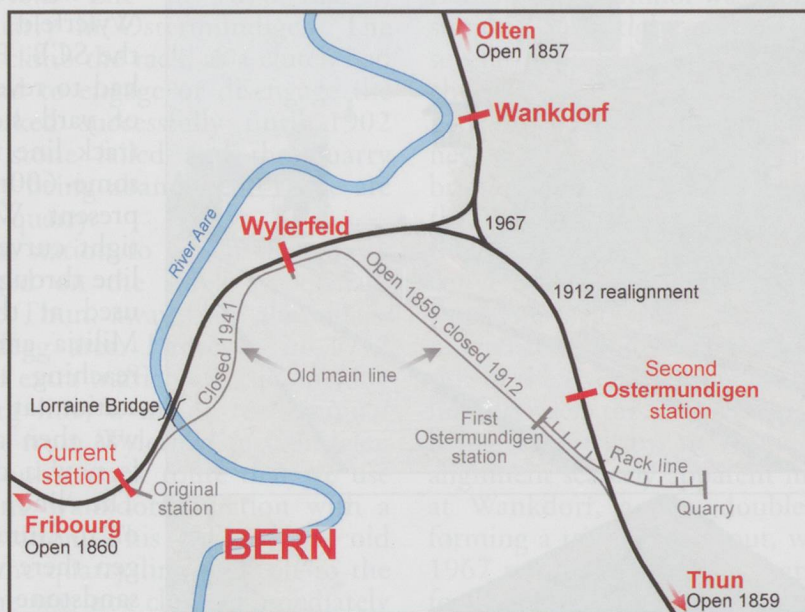
OSTERMUNDIGEN

s'Murmeli

Part of the mystery of railways in Bern

The first railway to reach Bern was built by the Swiss Central Railway (Schweizer-Centralbahn, SCB) in 1857. Although today's railway runs, logically, from Olten through Bern to Fribourg and Lausanne, this was not the intention in 1857. Robert Stephenson's master plan for a Swiss rail network, a study commissioned by the new Confederation in 1850, saw Olten as the natural crossroads. He suggested

first, a line from Basel to Olten and a connection to Zürich in the east, and then lines Olten to Luzern connecting with the steamers to Flüelen and coaches on the Gotthard pass. Finally, a line from Olten to Bern, with an extension to Thun for the Oberland steamers that were already catering for a fast-growing tourism industry. Genève was indeed in the plan, but Stephenson proposed that the main route from Olten should be from Herzogenbuchsee (on the Olten – Bern line) to Solothurn and Biel, with steamer connection on the Bielersee. The later line from Bern to Lausanne via Fribourg was thus very controversial. Stephenson was wary of the many ravines to be crossed in a thinly populated area. So Bern, the newly adopted Federal capital, was a stop on the way from Basel to Thun.



Map kindly produced by Cathy Hickey.

The Olten - Herzogenbuchsee line, and on to Biel was opened in early 1857, while Herzogenbuchsee – Bern Wylerfeld opened in mid-June that year. Bern Wylerfeld to Thun followed in July 1859. All lines were built with a single track, and it was only in 1896 that the last section of the Olten to Bern route (from Herzogenbuchsee to Zollikofen) was doubled.

Wylerfeld was not, of course, in

Bern. The sinuous course of the Aare ravine in Bern meant that the line entered along a great ridge to the present Wankdorf station, and then, high above the river, stopped. Wylerfeld was a temporary terminus, and trains would have stopped there to return. The line to Thun required reversal in Bern, not in Wylerfeld however, because in November 1858 the great Aare ravine in Bern was bridged, mercifully with double track. Now reversal was in Bern's Hauptbahnhof, the new terminal station that was located alongside the Church that is still standing on the corner of the Bahnhofplatz. Intense political debate about a direct line to Lausanne, which would put Bern on the country's main axis to Genève, was in the meantime resolved and a first section from Bern to Balliswil (again stopping at a ravine, that had

Ostermundigen Road Sign.

Photos, unless noted: s'Murmeli

View along the old line at Ostermundigen.





to be crossed to reach Fribourg) opened in July 1860. Now there was another problem, as Fribourg trains had to stop and reverse to get into the first Bern station.

I will leave them there, because Wylerfeld continued to occupy the SCB. Freight trains for Thun had to reverse, so there was a set of yard sidings, and the single track line to Thun branched off some 600m to the west of the present Wankdorf junction. A tight curve to the south led the line through open country, much used at the time by the Bern Militia and Swiss Army, before reaching the only intermediate station at Ostermundigen. This was then a small village, but it is now a dense suburb of Bern. The line then carried straight on to Gümliigen. In Ostermundigen there was a most productive sandstone quarry, Switzerland's biggest, east of the new railway, and approached up a steep hill. Many monumental Berner buildings are of Ostermundigen stone, and the new railway invited a connection so that more stone, much sought after, could be exported further afield. Here we meet another name: Niklaus Riggenschach.

Riggenschach is often claimed as the inventor of rack railways, with the Rigi Bahn opened in May 1871 his memorial, but in fact his contribution was to improve upon the more basic design developed by American Sylvester Marsh. Marsh had opened a rack railway on Mount Washington in New Hampshire in July 1869, using vertical boilered locomotives, surprisingly like those of the later Rigi Bahn. Riggenschach had been the engineer of the SCB, but he subsequently opened his own workshop in Olten to build mountain railways. He was invited to execute the quarry railway that had been proposed in 1865. It would be standard gauge (on account of the SCB connection), 1.4 km long, with



TOP: Disused industrial sidings.

MIDDLE: The SCB section house on Bolligenstrasse.

BOTTOM: Quarry Rack Loco No. 2.

Photo: Wikimedia

a 480m climb at 10% on the rack. The short line was opened in September 1871 five months after the Vitznau Rigi Bahn. Riggenschach's Olten Works built two locomotives, H1/2 No.1 'Gnom' in 1871, this is now restored to working order and in the VHS at Luzern, and H1/2 No.2 'Elfe' in 1876 that is exhibited near the quarry in Ostermundigen. The engines had to stop to climb the rack, as a clutch had to be operated by hand to engage or disengage the rack drive. They worked successfully until 1902 when the quality of stone failed and the quarry was closed, the railway being abandoned. There are visible remains near the quarry.

The Ostermundigen station to which the quarry railway ran was located on the single-track main line from Wylerfeld to Thun, away from the village in the so-called Waldegg area. However, in 1912 with the expectation of extra traffic with the opening of the new Lötschberg line, a major re-alignment took place; the old line from Wylerfeld to Gümligen was replaced by the double track route that we use today, from the present Wankdorf junction with a new Ostermundigen station. This rejoined the old alignment just where the quarry line took off to the east. The old main line was not closed immediately and was still intact at the time of the National Emergency (WW II), when it was used from both ends to move freight in and out of military depots and various industrial sidings. However, it was not signalled through, but operated as a siding. Today at the Wylerfeld end there is no trace of it as the whole area has been completely redeveloped around a motorway connection, and only at the Bolligenstrasse is the original level again present. However, here it becomes more interesting as in the autumn of 2015 a wooden SCB section-house still stood where the line once crossed this road, although the track has gone and Bernmobil's huge new tram depot covers the adjacent ground. From the southern end the remains of the former old line are much more tangible and it can be seen diverging to the west, south of Ostermundigen station. Some 200m west of the road bridge where Bernstrasse goes under the main line there is a level crossing. Here the side road is named Alter- Stationsweg ("Old Station Way"). Walking to the north, along the single line that was once the main line to the Bernese Oberland, the level crossing at Zentweg is still operational. This was the start of the station yard. A small public garden display features an old crane and recalls the quarry railway. The former wooden station building is gone, but the rail yard widens into four largely abandoned sidings that served industrial premises, before again reducing to single track. This continues up to a

substantial security gate into the tram depot, and a reason for the retention of the old main line is that delivery of trams on railcars is still a regular occurrence.

Back at the north end, something else happened. Bern's Hauptbahnhof was rebuilt to become a through station, on a tight curve still apparent today after several rebuilds. The terminal station against the church was abandoned, and its position is today the pedestrian area of the Bahnhofplatz. Until 1941 the new station was still approached by the original 1858 bridge, then on the 31st August the concrete arch of the Lorraine Brücke with its 4-tracks that is in use today, replaced it. The old railway bridge was converted to road traffic, and is still there crossing the Aare below the Bollwerk. However, the level differences required serious realignment on the eastern side of the river, resulting in the 2km. of earlier railway line between the original bridge and Wylerfeld, now being covered by new buildings with the former alignment scarcely apparent in the street layout. Then at Wankdorf, a new double-track east chord line, forming a triangular layout, was opened on 21st May 1967 resulting, after 107 years, in removing the need for through freights for Thun and the Lötschberg to reverse in the old Wylerfeld yard. This, and industrial redevelopment on the south side of the old line, sealed the fate of the original Thun junction. Incidentally it is occasionally possible to traverse the east chord at Wankdorf on very occasional excursion or relief passenger trains heading to the Lötschberg or Berner Oberland. Also some night trains to Italy used it too, but they are no more. Your writer last went round it in 1975.

There is, however, a last tantalising relic. Between Wankdorf and the elevated section of the SBB line into Bern, where the original temporary Wylerfeld terminus must have been, there is on the east side of an over bridge, another typical wooden SCB section house. It is almost a ruin, but unmistakeable. It must date from 1857 and seems to have survived everything since. +



The end of the old line at Tram Depot gate.