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Bahnhof. - La Gare

Tracing a Ticket

Malcolm Bulpitt



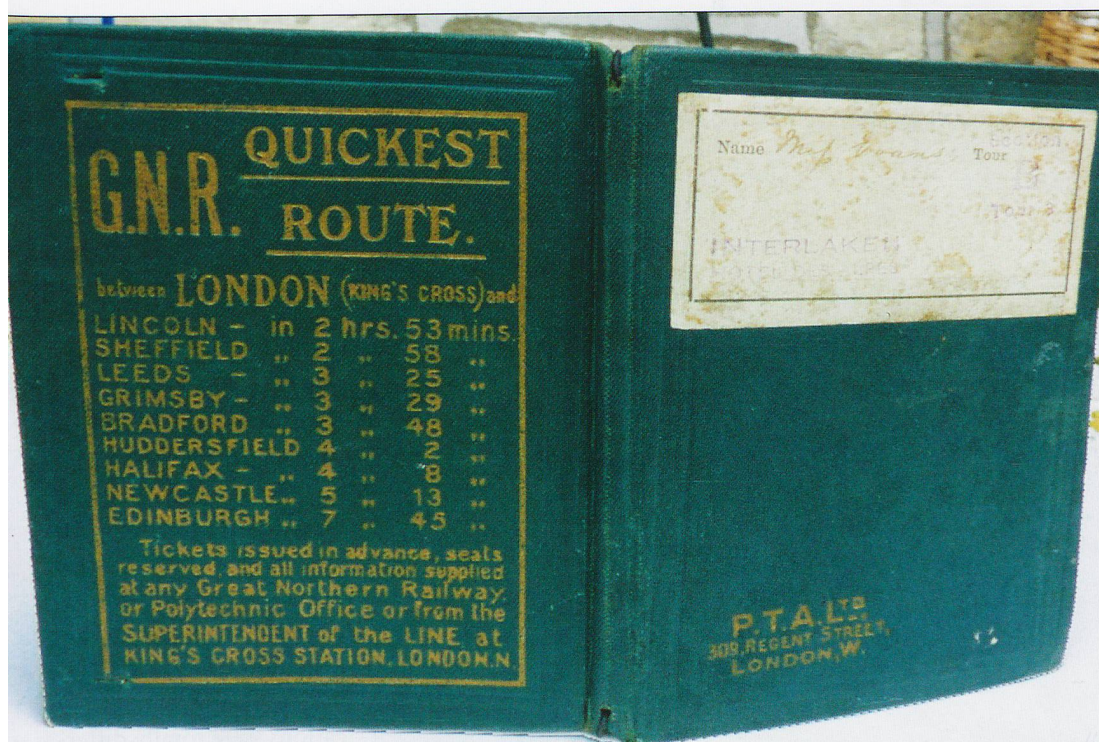
Part 1 of a puzzle left to us by Peter Hobbs

In the spring of 2016 Bob Medland, the Helvetia Philatelic Society's Librarian, passed on to me a booklet containing tickets for travel to and in Switzerland that was issued in 1914. Peter Hobbs, the former Editor of the Philatelic Society's monthly 'Newsletter', had given the ticket book to Bob along with a lot of other material. Peter was quite ill at the time and hoped that his colleague would find good homes for these items from his extensive collection of Swiss Philately and associated documents. Sadly Peter died a short while later. Although I am not a philatelist Bob, knowing my involvement in Switzerland and its railways, considered that I might have an interest in the 100 year old plus ticket book. I accepted the document, and sent a donation to Peter's nominated charity with the promise that I would investigate its provenance and write up my findings should they prove to be of interest. They were!

The small (5" x 4") ticket book comprised a dark green card cover embossed with "P.T.A. Ltd., 309, Regent Street, London, W." on the front and an embossed advert for the Great Northern Railway on the rear. Loosely-bound inside were a series of paper tickets/coupons, and a number of stubs where some of these had been used. A now very faded paper sticker had been attached to the front of the Ticket Book that indicated it had been issued to "Maj. Evans" and was for use on "Section B, Tour 3" and also indicated accommodation as being at "Interlaken Hotel des Alpes". The PTA was the Polytechnic Touring Association. This was

founded and owned by Regent Street Polytechnic (RSP) to "...provide affordable travel opportunities for their students" and also for "... the Middle Classes.". Even so the trips on offer were probably beyond the reach of most people when a basic two-week PTA Swiss holiday cost some £10/person. In 1914 the average wage of a well-educated and experienced clerk in the City of London was less than £2/week, a skilled craftsman earned some £1.50/week and a manual labourer less than £1/week. The PTA's first organized party left for Switzerland in 1886, and by 1895 it was offering inclusive holidays using its own chalets at the Seeburg complex near Luzern for £5/week and later also began to use the Hotel Seeburg. Ownership of the Seeburg complex was linked to the Hogg family, who were also the founders of the RSP. A planned follow-up article will explore these links in more detail. RSP (now Westminster University) made the PTA into a private company in 1911, and in the 1920s this became Poly Tours. Later a merger turned it into LunnPoly, and Thompson Holidays absorbed that organisation in its turn. The Hotel des Alpes in Interlaken appears from photographs of that era to be one of the many massive hotels put up in the resort during the latter part of the C19th. Like other similar edifices it is now no more. Records show that in the 1900s the PTA was sending over 5,000 visitors a year to Switzerland, around 50% of its total clientele, with Norway being its second most popular destination.

Inside the ticket book the ticket/coupon section was in two parts. The first page of the first part – English on one side, German on the other – was apparently a pre-printed standard format special ticket issued for "Journeys of



is assumed that this was done in London prior to departure on, or shortly after, 17th July. From this we can deduce that PTA's agent in Basel probably did the punched validation on the SBB/CFF coupon when the group reached there on the 24th July. Several portions of the multi-page coupon collection had been removed (presumably on the outward trip), but the two remaining coupons show the two alternative routes that the holder could use to return to Britain.

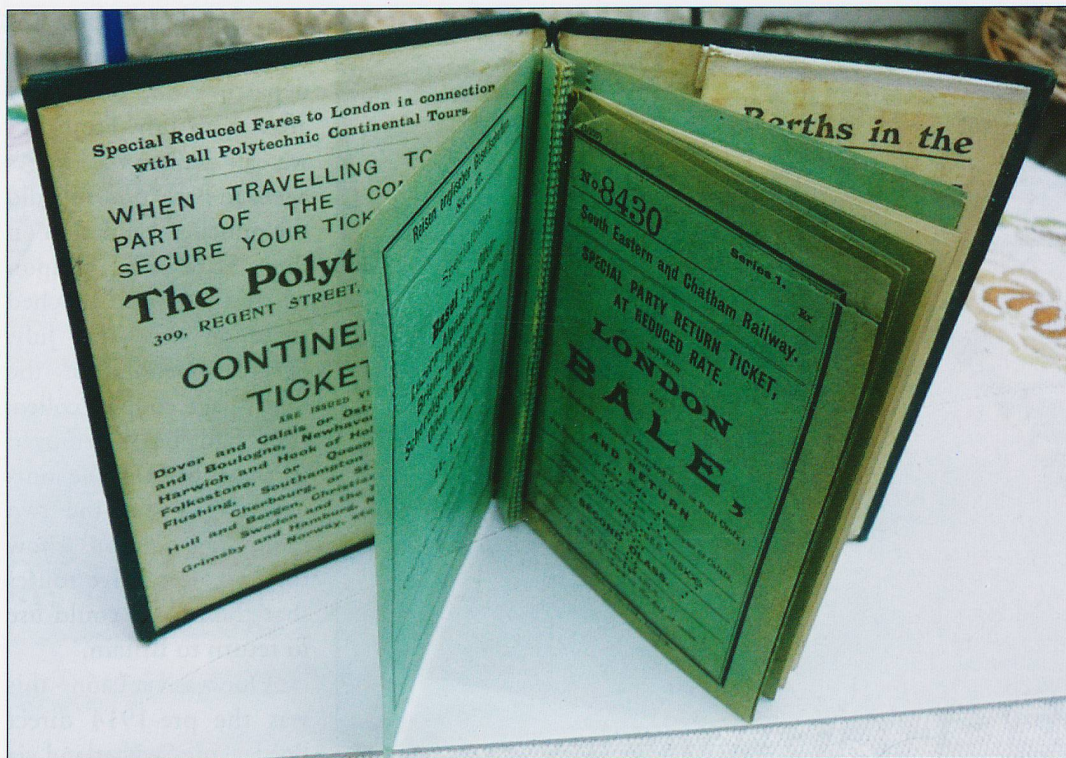
One was via Laon - this was the pre-1914 direct line leaving Switzerland via

English Touring Associations. Series 17" and this had been over-stamped as "No. 6272". The printed route for which it was valid was "Bâle Swiss Railway-Olten-Lucerne-Alpnachstad-Brünig-Brienz-Interlaken-Spiez-Scherzigen-Münsingen-Bern-Olten- Bâle Swiss Railway or vice versa." The ticket was for 2nd Class travel, available for 25 days and noted that there was no free luggage allowance. It was embossed with the logo of the SBB/CFF and validated by "Poly Travel 24 +7 14" this being done using a device that had punched the words/date in small holes in the paper. There were originally nine coupons in this section, eight had been used and the ninth unused coupon was for "Bern to Basel SBB via Olten" (interestingly here the German 'Basel' was used, not the French 'Bâle'). Reading the very small print on the coupon stubs it is possible to see that the eight used sections were for Basel SBB-Luzern über Olten; Luzern-Alpnachstad; Alpnachstad-Brienz über den Brünig; Brienz-Interlaken Ost (Brienzersee od. Oststation); Interlaken (Oststation)-Interlaken(Bahnhof); Interlaken(Bahnhof oder Thunersee)-Spiez; Spiez-Scherzligen; Scherzligen-Bern (über Münsingen). It is worth noting that Interlaken West was known then as Interlaken (Bahnhof) and that Scherzligen was the name given at the time to the ship landing stage and station at Thun.

The second part of the inner ticket/coupon section comprised a 2nd Class "Special Party Return Ticket, at Reduced Rate" issued by the South Eastern and Chatham Railway, available for 25 days, and valid between "London and Bâle". It was a pre-printed standard format special ticket, which had been over-stamped as "No. 8430". It showed that it was available for travel "Via Boulogne or Calais, Paris or Laon and Delle or Petit Croix" and it had been embossed with a version of the SE&CR's seal. This had been validated as "PTA 17 14 7", again done by using a device that had punched the words/date in small holes in the paper. As this punching also had the notation "LD" it


Porrentruy and Delle then via Belfort-Tergnier-Laon-Calais/Boulogne. The alternative route via Paris was longer with change of stations there, but there were through carriages to/from Paris Est. The explanation of why this was the route from Basel into France was the Prussian occupation of Alsace from 1870. This resulted in the French train operators taking the longer route via Delle to avoid Alsace. However, the Swiss were happy to co-operate with the Prussian/German operated Chemins de Fer l'Alsace-Lorraine and the ticket also allowed the holder to travel from Basel via Mulhouse and to cross the border between Alsace and France at Alt- Münsterol/Montreux-Vieux some 14km before Belfort. Here the Prussians had built a substantial Customs and Frontier Police station some of which still remains and has been converted into apartments. Some 3 km further on into France was the station of Petit-Croix. This was not marked as a frontier station, but appeared (like Delle) to be a tariff point and hence was listed on the coupon. Returning from Interlaken via Basel, Alt-Münsterol, Belfort, and onward as previously detailed, would have been possible in normal circumstances (there were also through coaches on this route), but it would have taken longer than via Delle as it involved crossing into and out of what was then another country. The railway route from Delle to Belfort had been closed latterly although it is currently in the throes of reconstruction to give a link to the recently opened LGV Est that runs to the south of Belfort.

The fact that we can trace these routes from Switzerland through to the Channel Ports is due to the presence of the unused coupons in the little booklet, and we can surmise that they were unused because on the 3rd August 1914 Germany had declared war on France. That day German troops moved across the frontier into Belgium as they swept towards the northern French frontier, resulting in Britain, honouring a pledge to defend neutral Belgium, declaring war on Germany on 4th August. At this point all the



time the travellers set off from London on the 17th July key elements of the British Army had already been mobilized and were awaiting instructions at their bases. The railway companies in the south of England had emergency plans in place to cancel normal timetables in order to move troops to embarkation points. It is easy for us in this age of instant access to world news (and Foreign Office Travel Alerts) to ask why go ahead with this probably doomed trip, but news and communications were totally different then. History tells us

frontiers closed, cross border railway services stopped, French railways cancelled almost all non-military trains, and the PTA party was trapped in neutral Switzerland. Over 100 years later we might ask whatever possessed the participants to leave for this trip when the storm clouds were already building-up over Europe and a major confrontation between the Great Powers was almost inevitable. The fuse to the powder keg had been lit on the 28th June with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo. By the

that the majority of the public was in total ignorance of the 'Great Strategic Game' that had been coming to a head in previous months. International politics was not so open to public scrutiny in those days, even to the educated middle classes to whom the PTA was selling holidays. Remember too the ethos of the time - these travellers were "British", citizens of the nation that ruled the world's largest Empire. What disaster could possibly befall them? 

Part 2 will follow in a subsequent magazine.

