

Zeitschrift: Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal
Herausgeber: Swiss Railways Society
Band: - (2017)
Heft: 129

Artikel: Through ticket to the Bern bear pits
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-853866>

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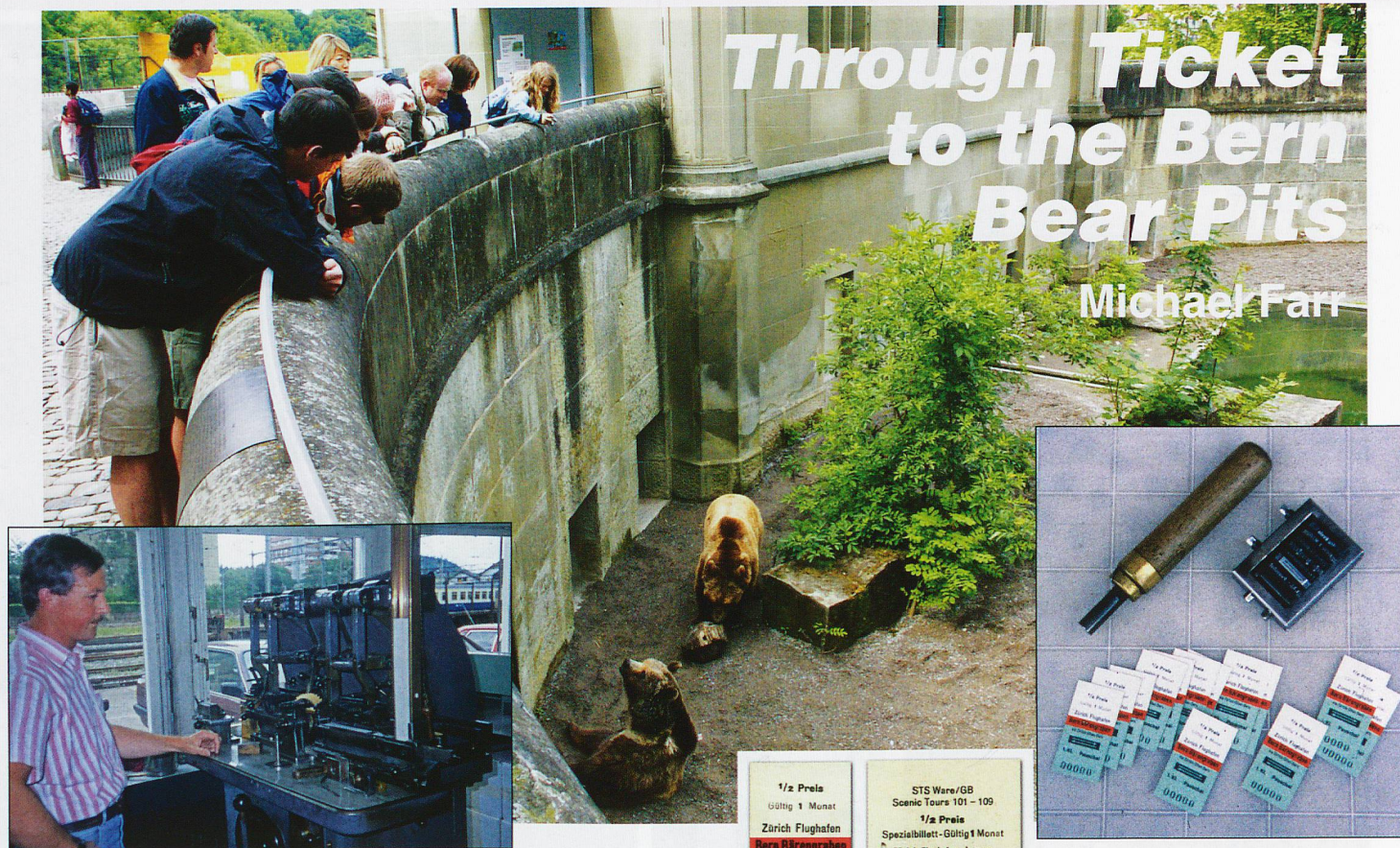
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Through Ticket to the Bern Bear Pits

Michael Farr



The Edmonson printing machine in Bern SBB.

The report in September 2016 *Swiss Express* about the new lift installed to improve access to Bern's new Bear Park reminded me of our visit to the old Bear Pits on our first Swiss holiday in 1990. It was an organised four-centre rail holiday and while at Grindelwald, through the good offices of a colleague in the former Thomas Cook Time Traveller group, I arranged a trip to Bern to visit the SBB ticket printing office. Alighting from our train we were greeted by Frau Staub of the SBB Printing Finance and Control Department, who very kindly took us in her car to the office situated on the outskirts of the city. Conversation was at first limited due to my dismal knowledge of German but Frau Staub was a great help and then one of the printers went to his composing desk and returned with a line of type reading EDMONSON. This gave me the opportunity to break the ice by pulling out a copy of my own slim volume about the ticket pioneer, Thomas Edmondson, stationmaster at Milton on the Newcastle and Carlisle Railway. We then had a discussion in halting "Deutschlish" as to why continental railways left out one of the "Ds" in his name; I later discovered it dated back to an article in a German magazine in the mid-19th century. At the end of the visit I came away with several specimens of type for printing the little symbols used on Swiss card tickets – a bus, a ship, various cable cars/funiculars and the distinctive double arrow symbol designating return tickets. I have subsequently used these on many tickets I have printed in Swiss-style, including some for the SRS. As we drove back to the Hauptbahnhof our hostess asked if we had seen the Bear Pits and when we answered in the negative she kindly took us there before we caught our train.

Even in 1990 computer systems had greatly reduced the number of traditional tickets printed – from 20m to 8m a year, but fast forward seven-years-or-so and I heard Mr Edmondson's wonderful invention had been withdrawn from the final SBB station (Kaiserstuhl on the Brünig line). Fearing the machines



TOP: A general view of the old bear pit. Photo: Tony Bagwell

LEFT: Ticket 0000 is a souvenir ticket printed from the chase shown in the other photo whilst ticket 00053 is one issued for STS rail tour.

ABOVE RIGHT: The tickets with the chase for holding the type and the tool used to lock/unlock the type.

All photos: Michael Farr except where shown

and everything associated with them would be scrapped, I asked if I could have one of the chases (frames) in which the type is set. After a few months a surprisingly heavy package plopped through our letterbox, postmarked Brighton. It had been sent by a staff member from BR International, who had been asked to bring it home when at a European rail operators meeting in Switzerland. Inside was the coveted chase in which they had set type for a return ticket from Zürich Flughafen to Bern Bärengraben. I looked in the timetable for a station called Bärengraben with no luck but my dictionary provided the answer – the Bear Pits! So do I have the only rail ticket for a journey to this destination?

Happily not all the SBB ticket printing machines were scrapped, as two were handed to SBB Historic – one for standard Edmondson cards (as they are now known even in Switzerland) and one for the larger tickets used for 'abonnements' and special trains or events. As SBB Historic was unable to house the machines they have been put in the care of my friend Nicolas Regamey, a long standing volunteer with the Blonay-Chamby Museum Railway. Nicolas has a letterpress printing office in the centre of Lausanne, where he produces high quality traditional general print and also has three ticket machines, the two from SBB and a third he saved from the Vallorbe Iron and Railway Museum, which had been used originally by a printing firm in Aigle. On these he prints tickets not only for the B-C but also for many other preservation projects and commercial transport operators who generally prefer them for special events. 