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Oensingen-Balsthal-Bahn

Mario Gavazzi recounts
how one man worked
to save a railway



TOP: The last RBe 4/4 operating in regular service was OeBB No.205 seen at Thalbrücke, 13/02/15. RIGHT: Heinz Kamber. All Photos: Mario Gavazzi

That this short 4km long standard gauge branch line is still in operation is perhaps down to the hard work and determination of one man, Heinz Kamber, who retired in 2016. Herr Kamber joined the Oensingen-Balsthal-Bahn (OeBB) in 1991 as the Station Master at Balsthal following a 21-year career with SBB, where he started as a junior clerk on an apprenticeship scheme. At the OeBB he took on not just the responsibility for the ticket counter and running Balsthal station, but also for the passenger and freight operations on the whole line. This also included an annual visit of the two special trains run by the Swiss National Circus Knie that have previously featured in *Swiss Express*. By 1997 Herr Kamber had been asked to take on the role of interim Chairman of this small company, moving to the permanent post in 1999, when he organized a successful 100th anniversary celebration.

In 2001 Canton Solothurn proposed to withdraw the operating subsidy from the line in favour of a substitute bus service. Working with the Managing Board and the staff he managed to find a solution that at least kept two morning and evening, Monday to Friday peak hour services, plus the freight traffic and some 'nostalgic' trains. Sadly this reorganisation of operations required the loss of some staff. Some years later SBB revised the timetable for the Olten-Biel line resulting in Oensingen being served by two trains an hour in each direction. This change was the catalyst for Herr Kamber and the OeBB to stage a renaissance in its services as approval was given for a daily regular interval service to be introduced between 05.30 and 20.00 that has proved very successful, and currently runs half-hourly taking 8 minutes for the trip. Buses replace the trains after 20.00. The importance of Oensingen as an interchange has recently been enhanced with the extension to there from Niederbipp of the metre-gauge ASm, as well as the stopping of an hourly ICN service between Genève and Zürich Flughafen. The OeBB is also busy with freight as it

serves a number of industrial sidings en route.

In addition to restoring the passenger rail service, under his direction Heinz Kamber has also co-ordinated the total revision of the permanent way along the line and overseen a total refit of the old building and associated infrastructure at Balsthal station into a local transport interchange with new stops for the four regional PostAuto services using it. Apart from running the OeBB, with his experience and plus his political and industry contacts, he had become a valuable member of the Swiss railway community. It is thanks to Heinz Kamber, and all his staff, that new solutions could be found to keep this local railway serving the community. His comment on retiring was that "... the Oensingen-Balsthal-Bahn has a future, but everybody working there has the duty to identify themselves for the railway company...", for although he 'saved' the railway it is down to all the team to continue his work. Siegfried Flury, another former SBB employee, is the company's new Chairman and he will continue the renovation of the OeBB infrastructure, especially its stations. 

OeBB operations at Oensingen with ASm service on right, 15/10/15.

