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Mr Barbey's private railway: the Yverdon-Ste-Croix



s'Murmeli traces the history of the YSteC that is now part of Travys

Two versions of passenger stock used on the line at Yverdon-Les-Bains.

All photos: s'Murmeli

“Once upon a time ...” so begin fairy tales - and it may have seemed so in 1893 in the small town of Ste.-Croix, in the Jura of Canton Vaud. After the prosperity of lace and watch making, a new industry of musical boxes had sprung up. But again, recession set in for a town of 6,000 people, as big then as Yverdon down on Lake Neuchâtel, and connected by post coaches to there, and to Pontarlier in France. Ste.-Croix was alarmed. Thoughts of a railway were not new, but the geograph of the site was intimidating; the town at an altitude of 1066m is 630m above Yverdon, and in a direct line only 12km away, but there is no direct way. Mountains and a precipitous ravine dictate

the conditions. And times were hard. But the line was surveyed and planned metre-gauge, with a long detour, five tunnels and a steep descent, and a federal concession was obtained. The route is 24.16km long, just double the straight-line distance and the ruling grade is 44°/‰, about 1 in 23.

The fairy tale prince turned out to be William Barbey, born 1842 in Genthod on Le Léman, who studied in nearby Genève and in Paris before joining a trading company in New York; the anglicised name William comes from there. From 1869 he lived with his wife in the castle at Valeyres. He was politically active as a Cantonal councillor, a member of an evangelical free church, who set his own standards in public

life in education, agriculture and trade. More than wealthy, this son of Canton Vaud offered to finance the entire line, stations, rolling stock, but at his own conditions. The offer was gratefully accepted by the villages and towns concerned. Barbey purchased almost the entire share capital, of CHF2,300,000. So the line was built. The first of Barbey's conditions was that there should be no Sunday trains for 25 years. And indeed, there were not, the railway obtaining

Ge4/4 No 21 painted in the famous Croc livery at Yverdon-les-Bains.



a legal exemption from the concession's usual obligations. On the opening of the YStsC in November 1893 Barbey gave a monumental party for builders, population and dignitaries. It rained torrentially, but a choir of 200 adults and 800 children sang an especially composed Cantata. He was made an honorary citizen of Ste.-Croix, and had a street named after him in Yverdon. There is also a suburban halt 'Yverdon-William-Barbey' on the line's approach to the town, just by the railway's workshop.

After realisation of 'his' railway of which he held all but a few shares, these latter in the hands of the Canton and the local communes, Barbey continued as President of the Company (Chairman of the Board). In 1913 after twenty years in the post he resigned, and was made 'Honorary President'. However, he died on 18th November 1914 aged 72. Following his death, his shares were now progressively redeemed from his estate out of on-going profits, the last in a block of CHF250,000 in 1935 and 1936. The Board had also decided that at the end of the conflict that was engulfing Europe (WW1), and with Barbey's 25 years prohibitio expiring in 1918, the railway would introduce Sunday trains. However, the absence of Sunday trains at this time had become meaningless, as the acute coal shortage, due to the war, meant that in most of the country a very reduced timetable without Sunday trains became the rule. Otherwise the YStC was not badly off; there had been few tourists to lose; the local economy was strong and the Swiss Army was mobilised to defend the frontier with France so troops and their equipment became regular users of the line. Dividends were regularly paid in this period and in 1919, after the war had finished, the long-awaited Sunday service commenced.

The YStC started business with 8 passenger cars, 3 post and brake vans, and 20 freight cars. All had automatic vacuum brakes. There were three small E4/4 0-4-4-0 Mallet compound tank engines, supplied by the Société Alsacienne, SACM at Grafenstaden which, soon inadequate for the growing traffic, were sold in 1921. They ran three daily trains (except Sunday), taking 1 hour 42 minutes uphill, and 1 h 17 minutes down. Freight, very little at first, was attached as needed. By 1911

A new Stadler Abe 8/12 unit waits at Ste-Croix to return back down the line.



Transporter bogies in the siding at Yverdon.

a bigger engine was needed; SLM in Winterthur supplied a substantial E2/2 0-4-0T, No.4, which became everyone's favourite. This engine was sold to Greece in 1948, and was for a long time on a pedestal at Volos. Is it still? The next 'strengthening' was in 1920 when three SLM Mallets, redundant after electrification of the RhB, E4/5 2-4-4-0T Nos. 26, 27 & 28, were bought, and proved wholly effective. Two lasted until 1964 after resale in 1947 to Spain. Finally another Mallet was bought in 1928, E6/6 No.5 a 0-6-6-0T, built in 1917 by Henschel for the German Army and in WWI service at Verdun. This engine was strong, but heavy on track and fuel, and little used. The YStC was pleased to dispose of it in 1941 to the Swiss Army for its base at Montbovon. Further resale sent it to Ethiopia, where it disappeared.

During this period the YStC was financially stable and could continue to re-lay track and make improvements. However in 1943, with a decision that steam operation was no longer economically sustainable, electrification was





The connecting bus to Buttes waits outside Ste-Croix station.


decided upon. The YStEC had no debts but the capital outlay for this change was beyond it. Grants of CHF400,000 came from public funds, and a loan of CHF1,200,000 was secured from the Confederation and Canton Vaud. A new share issue of CHF2,880,000 was made, taken up mainly by the public administration. Electrification of the line to the Swiss standard of 15kV 16.7Hz was then completed in 1945, and journey time fell below an hour.

Today's journey time is now 37 minutes as the fleet of modern units make light work of the climbs. Most services are worked by three Abe8/12 three-car units supplied by Stadler in 2015/6 as part of a larger batch of units purchased by TRAVYS for its component lines. There are also two Stadler Be2/6 GTW units dating from 2000/1 to cope with the heavy traffic that the line now carries. There is still an original 1945-built Be4/4 motor-car (No.5) in the fleet along with No.1, the last remaining Be4/4 of the 1981 batch of units. These are now only seen on special workings or moving freight. However, a remarkable vehicle is (at the time of writing) usually to be found around Yverdon station yard. This is Ge4/4 No.21, a two-bogie centre cab locomotive, called by all the 'Crocodile', which has a stylised image of the eponymous creature painted on each side. The company built this in 1950, with parts supplied by industry, to handle the principal freight traffic of cut timber on standard gauge wagons, carried on narrow gauge trucks. In the season, sugar beet was similarly worked, but 2016 appears have been the last season for this traffic, due to a SBB decision to 'streamline' the handling of this commodity. For No.21 to handle such train-loads on narrow gauge trucks on the railway's 1 in 23 grades was an interesting exercise in braking! Sadly this veteran may not last much longer, given a recent decision to stop all freight traffic on the line.

Most visitors to the line will change at Yverdon from the Lausanne – Biel main line, and walk round the corner to the bay platforms of the YStEC, now marketed under the regional name of TRAVYS. The service is generally half-hourly – but check. Here waits the narrow-gauge train, while other stock is stabled and No.21 waits for a call. The journey runs first north, parallel to the SBB/CFF line, then turning west after the depot. Climbing through villages, farming land and woods at around 1 in 30, it reaches Vuiteboeuf (8.5km)

A point lever and winter essential broom at Ste-Croix.

almost at the foot of the Covatannaz ravine, up which the line must soon climb. Here the alignment turns southwest, climbing at 1 in 48, to reach the main village, Baulmes (11.5km). Still climbing south-westwards, one is caught out by a sharp 180° turn to the right where, at the halt Six-Fontaines, with a handsome rustic timber chalet, the real climb up the wall of the Jura begins. For the next 9km the climb is 44°/°, 1 in 23, and on a ledge in the cliff face. The Rapielles de Baulmes are a sheer (and unstable) mountain wall; on a good day the spectacular view ranges from Lac de Neuchâtel to the Alps. Then the climb swings into the Covatannaz ravine and climbs on in dense woods. The writer has seen many places, and can only think of the narrow gauge in Colorado to compare with this. At the top, the train emerges on an open pasture, round a corner and directly into Ste.-Croix's handsome original station. Here there are sidings, the snowplough (often in use), and a goods shed.

Ste.-Croix is a quiet place; Mr Barbey's railway, now modern and well-used, did not prevent the population falling to some 4,500 by 1950. It is still known as the centre of a once famous musical box industry, not just playthings but the beautiful varnished cabinets once in every prosperous European home. The museum is therefore well worthwhile. There is a Café de la Gare, and you may also take the thrice-daily PostAuto from here to Buttes in the Val de Travers, from where an hourly train through the Val de Travers delivers you at Neuchâtel on the main line. The hills around here are hauntingly lonely places. The French border is only 4km from Ste.-Croix (at one location the PostAuto runs alongside it), and in the wars the hills were alive with smuggling and refugees. In tiny villages watchmaking still thrives – La Côte-aux-Fées (pop.450) is where world-famous brand Piaget was founded, and still has premises. Winter is dreadful, cold, windy and with deep snow. A Swiss low of -40C has been recorded nearby. It is a Switzerland which few visitors see. 

s'Murmeli (The Marmot in Swiss-German) is a Swiss Railwayman.

