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The Swiss Railways Society Archive and You.

David Stevenson

At the 2018 AGM in Derby I stood down as Company Secretary. Together with David Stowell and Malcolm Job we had successfully established SRS as a Company Limited By Guarantee and I wanted a change. I had been Secretary for 10 years and towards the end of that time I had suggested establishing an archive mainly of Swiss-based material, particularly photographs. We had had quite a few Board discussions about this, not least questioning why it was necessary. Towards the end of the discussions I asked one committee member whether he had a collection of photographs he cherished; of course, he had one - we all have. What was he going to do with them when he sadly "popped his clogs"? Presumably they would be slung in a skip and that would be that, is that what he wanted? Of course, it wasn't. From then on the idea of a proper archive began to take shape.

At one time in the past we did have an archive and an archivist, and I think it is fair to say that the committee, myself included, did not back this properly, as none of us really understood what was meant and it appeared to be a random collection of various things including archivist photographs. The (member) did do a lot of useful work, particularly in terms of making available old editions of *Swiss Express* where we did not have the original files, just the printed edition. Eventually he became frustrated by our real lack of understanding and gave it up. Since then things have changed, particularly for myself.

A couple of years ago I began volunteering at one of the country's major transport archives, the Kithead Trust. We have a huge collection of "stuff" based on the Midland Red and National Bus Company files, which were rescued from the offices by people who knew the value of them. Whilst the trust is primarily a bus archive there is also a substantial collection of railway material and continental material, including a large number of Swiss Kursbuchs dating back many years. From here the germ of an idea began to take shape. I began to understand what an archive really was, why it was there, and most importantly how to sort and store material properly for the future.

So why now and what's it all about? The short answer is why not now, and to preserve the heritage of members for if we delay we risk losing material that merits retention. I now know quite a bit on how to do it; I have access to the correct materials at a reasonable cost and most importantly I want to do it. We all have substantial collections of various things, photographs; documents; postcards; books; artefacts, etc. One of the obvious questions is whether we need more books. We still have a

library, but it has not been publicised regularly and no-one uses it, or indeed had used it before it was handed over for safe-keeping to an outside organisation. Archiving though, in its widest sense, is not just about preserving everything; it also encompasses the orderly disposal of a person's collection to the benefit of the member, the archive, his estate and future generations. I have set a process in train, whereby a member's collection can be disposed of without resorting to a skip. It's a big job and will take a lot of time and effort but it is worth it. Even if it looks as though a particular document might never be read again, if it is destroyed then a future researcher or future generations cannot read it.

The process of doing this starts with you, the member. Look at what you have, decide what you would like to do with it and then actually make firm plans. You may want to reduce your collection during your lifetime, either by donation to the archive or by selling it, which the Society archive will help you to do for a small commission. The same principle applies following your passing away. Many families have to remove stuff at very short notice and more often than not this is the sort of material that ends up in a skip, which none of us want.

One point needs to be made very clear, the archive and the Swiss Railways Society will not purchase material outright, we will only take donations OR will sell on your behalf any of your material to the benefit of your estate or you personally. We will, however, collect UK-based material at short notice if required at no cost to you. (In practice, this means me until further notice!) Things will develop over the next few years but you can be assured that your collection will be treated with respect, with care and with due regard to your wishes. Material will be made available to anyone who wants to use it for research and will be preserved for future generations to the best of our ability. All members will have access to the records of what we have.

Finally, we do have material already in the form of donated photographs from a member in the USA and a UK-based member for which we are hugely grateful, in other words we do have an archive, it is already actively in development.

If you have any questions, if you have any concerns, or most importantly if you would like to donate, please get in touch with me.

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