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A short trip on the CJ

Jason Sargerson



The driver changes ends at Combe Tabeillon.

Photos: Jason Sargerson taken on 11th July 2017

One trip I occasionally undertake when staying in Brig is to Combe-Tabellon on the metre-gauge Chemins de Fer du Jura (CJ) in that Canton. This is the isolated station located in dense woodland that is used as a reversing point for trains on the line from Glovelier to La Chaux de Fonds. I visit here because it is a good site in July for woodland butterflies, another one of my interests.


It is a three-hour trip from Brig, via Bern, Biel and Glovelier. The last section of the trip, from Glovelier to

Combe-Tabellon on the CJ, only takes 9-minutes. Last year I was hoping to sample the new Stadler Be 4/4 units that were bought by the CJ in 2016. I was not to be disappointed – the new unit was waiting at Glovelier, coupled to an older trailer coach, making the train look rather incongruous. I took some photos before departure including one of the bright interiors with red upholstery; fold up seats; low floor access; and panoramic non-opening windows. This contrasts with the inside of the older Stadler ABe 2/6 units, with their more substantial seats and opening windows. Externally the new units are a similar design to those that Stadler has been producing since 2010 for other Swiss local railways - BDWM, FW, ZB, etc.

LEFT: Be 4/4 No.653 at Glovelier station.

BELOW: The interior of a Be 4/4.



The run to Combe-Tabellon is very quick, mainly through woodland. At Combe-Tabellon there are numerous walks up into the hills. I always find it a pleasant, quiet place in the middle of summer. This is in contrast to George Behrend, in his 1965 book *Railway Holiday in Switzerland*, who described it as an eerie place where anything could happen. He must have been anticipating the mock hold-ups of the steam excursions staged by the Association La Traction, who are based at Pré-Petitjean three stations along the line, and that were filmed by MITV. All the walkers and cyclists I met were very friendly, and French speakers - of course. I am not sure why the CJ wanted the new Be 4/4 units, as the older ABe 2/6 units are not life expired. I assume the CJ will eventually buy more modern trailers to match the Be 4/4 and possibly introduce three-car trains to cope with increasing passenger demand. 

TOP: Combe Tabellon station showing the trailer end of the train.

RIGHT: ABe 2/6 No.634 waits at Glovelier for its next trip.

BELOW: The interior of an ABe 2/6.



On the rack

Did you know that there are some 140km of active rack railways in public operation in the world? This is an estimate put together by the Brienzer-Rothorn Bahn (BRB). Switzerland has a large share of these. There were more operations, but many have closed. Interestingly one company, the Jungfraubahn Group, operates some 49km, or 35% of the world total. The 7.6 km BRB is 5.4% of the total, whilst many more kilometres are on the MGB and Gornergrat, Rochers de Naye, Rigi, Pilatus, Monte Generoso and other Swiss lines. If the BRB's numbers are correct, it doesn't leave much for Austria, Japan, USA, Brazil, and other countries with lengths of rack-assisted lines. The USA has the Mount Washington Cog Railway in New Hampshire that opened in 1868. Many Swiss think that Nicholas Riggensbach invented rack railways - he did not! The honour goes to Sylvester Marsh who first patented his system in 1861. He designed and built the Mt. Washington line that opened over two-years before Riggensbach's Rigi Bahn. The American line is still the second-steepest rack railway in the world after the Swiss Pilatus line. Riggensbach credited the

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now little-known Marsh as the inspiration for the development of his rack system for which he originally obtained a French patent in 1863. Today the Swiss-designed Abt system is the one used by the majority of rack railways. Although the majority of rack railways are narrow (Metre or 800mm) gauge, a few are standard gauge (Mt Washington is a unique 4' 8" gauge), and in Brazil there is 8km of rack assisted 5' 3" gauge line. In Switzerland the Rheineck Walzenhausen line is an unusual 4' 0" gauge. Although today we associate rack-assisted railways with climbing gradients, in 1812 English engineer John Blenkinsop introduced a locomotive on the Middleton Railway at Leeds in Yorkshire that had a 3' cog wheel mounted on the outside of the engine. This meshed with crude teeth cast into the 'fishbelly' profile of the basic 3' length cast iron track sections. Blenkinsop patented his idea in 1811, so technically was 50 years ahead of Marsh! This was a relatively level coal-hauling tramway and it was soon found that simple traction would do the job so the idea was not developed, especially since the sole cog equipped engine blew-up in 1818 killing the driver! 