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Lost Lines near Zürich

Malcolm Bulpitt looks at two long forgotten rural tramways



UOe in Oetwil, 1944 - photo H.U. Würsten - Wikimedia / Zürich State Archive.

Zürich is Switzerland's largest city but it is very easy to leave behind for its quiet hinterland. Take the Forchbahn (FB) from outside Stadelhofen station and in 35 minutes you can be in the small town of Esslingen on the edge of the rural Zürich Oberland. The FB reached here in 1912 as a rural tramway and connected with the Electrostrassenbahn Uster-Oetwil (Uster-Oetwil Bahn - UOe) that had arrived three years earlier in 1909 en-route between the two communities in its title. The UOe then went on to connect

with the Wetzikon-Meilen-Bahn (WMB) that linked those two towns - over 30km of now forgotten tramways.

Even today this quiet area feels a long way from the commercial bustle of Zürich, but at the end of the 19th C the local residents considered that they were being bypassed by the spread of that most modern form of communication – the railway. The first main line from Zürich to south-eastern Switzerland had reached Uster and Wetzikon in 1856, and by 1859 was completed through to Rapperswil and on to Chur. The small towns and villages south of the line, and north of the Zürichsee, saw many railway proposals come and go between 1870 and 1890 and it was not until 1899 that Kantonal permits were issued for two metre-gauge tramways. One, the WMB, to run from 22.5km for Wetzikon to Meilen

WMB CFe4/4 negotiates the narrow streets of Grunigen, 1946 - Wikimedia / Zürich State Archive.





UOe CFe2_2 No.3 in Uster with mixed train to Oetwil, 1946 - Wikimedia / Zürich State Archive.

via Oetwil, and another, the UOe, running 10.5km from Uster south to Esslingen and on through Oetwil am See (the Zürichsee is actually 5km distant and 130m lower!), to a junction with the WMB at Langholz 0.5km south of Oetwil. The WMB was first off the mark and was in operation by 1903 running from Meilen Schiffstation, to Meilen SBB and then climbing on a serpentine route up the slopes above the lake to reach the rural road junction at Langholz, the nearest it got to Oetwil. The WMB then continued north through the narrow streets of Grüningen, with its historic Schloss, to Wetzikon and another connection with the SBB, finally terminating in the community of Kempton 2.4km further on. However, doubts still remained about the viability of the UOe and approval was not finally agreed until 1905. Even then finance was an issue and only after Kanton Zürich agreed to find 1/3 of the costs was construction started in May 1908, leading to the opening of the line on 25th May 1909.



UOe CFe 2/2 No.3 waits at Langholz, 1946 - Wikimedia / Zürich State Archive.

The UOe commenced in the forecourt of Uster station and ran through the centre of the town, before following local roads through Riedkon and Mönchaltorf to Esslingen and its connection to the FB. South of here it reached Oetwil am See then ran to its WMB connection at the rural road junction of Langholz. The line was electrified from the beginning at 800V dc. Rolling stock, based at a very basic depot south of Uster, consisted of three 18-seat, CFe2/2 four-wheel railcars Nos.1-3 and three 24-seat four-wheel trailers. These were

supplied by Bautzen and sufficed for the life of the line. There were also two covered wagons and three open wagons.

Due to the rural nature of the area UOe services were sparse with some 8 return trips/day. The peak flow recorded in 1919 was only 140,000 passengers/annum. By the mid-1920s bus competition had started to undermine even this low number and as early as 1932 it was suggested that buses should operate the service that was carrying just some 1000 passengers/week. In 1934 Driver Only Operation was brought in and in a further effort to cut costs the management of the line was transferred to the WMB. Eventually in 1943 the UOe Board agreed closure, but local opposition thwarted this as passenger numbers had doubled during the Swiss National Emergency (WW2). By 1946 the WMB, and some local standard-gauge lines in the area, were also in a desperate financial state and closure was put to a Kantonal referendum that year. This agreed the measure on a 60/40 vote. The end for the UOe finally came on the 1st October 1949.



Oetwil am See today - Google.

The WMB was a much more substantial operation. It too was electrified from the beginning, but unlike its companion line this was at 750V dc. It opened with a fleet of three 36-seat CFe4/4 bogie railcars Nos.1-3 and four smaller Ce2/2 18-seat railcars Nos.11-14, all supplied by SIG/MFO. Another Ce2/2 seating 24 No.15, was acquired in 1909. From the opening of the line there were also two small loco/baggage vans Fe2/2 Nos.31-32. There were also three 12-seat coaches and a selection of freight vehicles. The rolling stock was based at a depot outside Grüningen, and they all sufficed for the



WMB Ce2/2 No.14 at Mühleholzli with the Zurichsee beyond, 1946 - Wikimedia / Zürich State Archive.



WMB Ce 2/2 No.11 in Grüt. 1946.
Wikimedia / Zürich State Archive.

traffic on offer and lasted for the life of the line. In 1920, the busiest year of operation, the WMB carried over 532,000 passengers, but traffic increasingly moved to buses (and some to private cars) during the 1920s and 30s. Like the UOe there was a revival in use during the difficult years of the 1940s, when petrol was severely rationed resulting in over 360,000 passengers in 1945, but despite this the writing was on the wall for the operation. The rolling stock was life-expired and due to lack of investment the permanent way was in a very poor condition. The first closures on the route occurred in the 1930s, with the section from Meilen SBB to the Schiffstation closing in October 1931 and the northward extension from Wetzikon to Kempten going in May 1939. The end finally came in May 1950 when the remainder of the line closed in accordance with the result of the 1946 Kantonal Referendum and VZO buses took over the services.



WMB Ce2/2 No. 11 and wagon L51 with members of the Glarner Chörli. 1920. Photo: Ernst B. Leutwiler Collection

At the end, the majority of the worn-out rolling stock of both operations was destined for the scrap yard. However WMB Nos. 2 and 3 went on to work on the Iserlohner Kreisbahn and Nos. 11 and 14 went to the Düren Bahn, both in Germany. Two of the UOe open wagons went to the Trogenerbahn, where the underframe of one (with a new aluminum body) was still in use up to 2011. Sixty seven-years-on little now remains in the area to remember the UOe and WMB. The UOe's Uster depot forms the basis of a wholesaler's depot, the small goods shed at Mönchaltorf is still in situ as is another small building at Langholz, now on



WMB Ce2/2 No. 11 and wagon L51 with members of the WMB CFe4/4 No.2 and VZO bus at Meilen. 1949. Perhaps an official photo for the change-over to bus operation.

Photo: Ernst B. Leutwiler Collection

the edge of an expanded Oetwil. Many WMB station buildings survive as homes or in other uses. At Grüningen it is the basis for a small bus station, whilst the Depot is much expanded and in use by the VZO as a garage and technical centre. In pride of place here is preserved Trogenerbahn BDe4/4 No.23, masquerading as WMB CFe 4/4 No.2. The two were identical and as the 'real' No.2 was scrapped after service in Germany the VZO brought-in TB No.23 as an exhibit to show what once was in the area. Unless they know of this vehicle it is probable that few people in the area are aware that the Electrostrassenbahn Uster-Oetwil and the Wetzikon-Meilen-Bahn once existed and served their now prosperous communities. 



WMB CFe4/4 and coach C22 at Bahnhof Wetzikon. 1940.

Photo: Ernst B. Leutwiler Collection

Author's Note. In some of the photos from the Zürich State Archive saloon car ZH26301 often appears. This is probably the photographer's car that had been parked. On close inspection there is no driver to be seen in it. Given the blanket restrictions on private motorised travel at the time it is therefore possible that an employee of the Kanton was sent out to record the whole length of both lines on the run-up to the 1946 referendum. The car is using equipment that allows it to run on gas produced (in Switzerland) from wood or peat as the petrol rationing, that was introduced in May 1940, was still in operation until October 1946. Some 14,000 of the 20,000 vehicles, mostly in use with official bodies, which were allowed to operate during the latter part of the National Emergency (WW2) were so equipped.