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Meiringen Fire Mystery

Bryan Stone



Sherlock Holmes and the Brünig Railway, October 1891

Oldest surviving ex Brünig railway locomotive: Jura-Simplon HG 3/3 no 909 (now at Blonay-Chamby museum). Seen in Interlaken at the Steam Festival 2010.

All photos: Bryan Stone

Meiringen in the Bernese Oberland has often suffered from natural disasters. The Alpbach, falling from Hasliberg, has regularly flooded the town, and fierce Föhn storms, coming down the Haslital from the Grimsel, have turned harmless fires into destructive conflagrations. That is why the only old houses are up by the church. When however, Meiringen was almost completely destroyed by a catastrophic Föhn fire that started around 08.00 on 25th October 1891, a new source of help appeared to be at hand. Journals reported

at the time that the railway had brought local fire brigades in haste. The story is not quite so simple as the reports suggested. What was this railway? Why was it built? How was it involved? This is part of our story which starts with the fire, apparently both a fierce and quick one that was at its height by 10.30 and had gradually died-down by the afternoon, as there was little left to burn. Some 183 buildings were destroyed, only the station, the Hotel 'Wilden Mann' and some buildings in the vicinity survived. Thankfully only one person was reported as dying (a bed-ridden 80y/old), but the fire made 854 people homeless and the ruins of the town took several days to 'damp down'. This work was assisted by the fire brigades from surrounding communities, that the local newspapers noted had rushed to the town's assistance by train.

The Brünigbahn (now the Zentralbahn - ZB) was all still new, opened from Alpnachstad to Brienz on 6th June 1888 connecting with steamers at both ends. The extension between Luzern and Alpnachstad opened on 1st June 1889. It was a metre-gauge mountain railway, with 1 in 8 gradients on four separate rack sections, totalling 9 km. The locomotives and cars were built to operate both on the rack and adhesion sections. Speeds on the rack were low, The classic notice of fire danger in Föhn regions.



a maximum 13 kph; speeds on the level, were at first 20 kph. Trains were light, 38 tonnes or three cars, with one engine. Heavier trains were banked on the rack. The overall journey time from Alpnachstad to Brienz was some 4 ½ hours. This mixed adhesion and rack railway on a through route was new, still on trial and costly. The workshop was as today at Meiringen, still a terminal station for the ZB where trains reverse. Locomotives were changed here; a non-rack locomotive was used on the 12.3 km to Brienz, where 45 kp/h was allowed.

The choice of route involving Meiringen had both strategic and practical grounds. The rack section Meiringen – Brünig-Hasliberg, 5.4 km long, was difficult and costly to engineer, but the direct route Brienz – Brünig-Hasliberg, the route of the twice-daily Brienz – Alpnachstad Postal Coach and of today's road, was even worse. The strategic reason was however historic; Meiringen was a hub of the Brünig/Grimsel trade, primarily for goods, but also for people. Many accounts, such as by Goethe, Byron, Tolstoy and Conan Doyle, illustrate its importance. In the 19th C, the mule trail Grindelwald – Meiringen through the Reichenbach valley, via Grosse Scheidegg and Rosenlauri, was a main thoroughfare. The historic hotel in Rosenlauri was rebuilt in 1907 at the height of demand. Two proposals, both mercifully unsuccessful from a 21stC viewpoint, were made to build rack railways over this route. The Brünig railway had however a different background, reflecting 30 years of Bernese frustrations.

Bern, in 1848 the newly chosen Federal Capital, wanted a Grimsel railway linking it to Italy. The first plan came from an English/German/Italian/Swiss team published in 1852, for an international transalpine route. In 1864 Bern formed a Grimsel Railway Committee to support a Bern – Meiringen connection via Thun and the lakes, and over the Grimsel. These projects failed, partly because Italy and Germany were not yet unified, and Tessin/Ticino had to be included. Routes by Lukmanier, Splügen and Septimer, as well as the Gotthard passes, appealed more widely to investors. The Lukmanier route, via Chur, attracted an English company planning a direct link to Britain's Indian and Australian possessions via a Mediterranean port. It even obtained a Federal concession, but here too the political complications prevailed. By 1865 however, the Gotthard route through Luzern and Bellinzona became the favourite. Jakob Stämpfli, the very wise railway politician in Bern who, unlike the bankers of Zürich, wanted a Swiss National Railway, saw that Bern would have to give up its Grimsel ambitions. For the moment Escher-Wyss in Zürich would prevail. Bern joined the Gotthard project, and financed a direct route to Luzern through Langnau. Oberland tourists wanted a regional railway, from Thun to Interlaken also over the Brünig. The first section of this was the desperately needed Bödelibahn, a 7 km standard gauge connection between the steamers at Därligen on the Thunersee, and the Brienzersee, opened in 1872.

But the standard gauge Bödelibahn remained isolated. Bern – Meiringen - Luzern – Gotthard was no longer a theme. Bern's Luzern line was sold on bankruptcy to a new private railway company the Jura-Bern-Luzern, JBL. Then came a new impulse. The Prussian occupation of Alsace in 1870, closed off



Two pictures of the timetable of 1891 (valid in the fire year) which show the railway only open in summer.

French access to Basel and on to the rest of Switzerland. Bern supported a new French railway project, from Belfort through Delle to Bern, later the basis of the Lötschberg railway (today's BLS). The main flow of British tourists (the majority of visitors to the area at the time) would for 40 years take this route to Bern and Thun. With other ambitions forgotten, the JBL built the Brünig railway, opened from Brienz in 1888 as a narrow-gauge mountain railway from the Brienzersee to Luzern, using the new rack technology, for booming local tourism. The railway had come to Meiringen, after over 30 years of failed hopes and jealousies, on the wave of tourism which made Interlaken famous.

So the railway in Meiringen is almost a historical accident. In Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes story 'The Final Problem',



The Hotel du Sauvage, which was the Hotel Engländerhof in Conan Doyle's story, where Holmes and Watson stayed, earlier in the year of the fire.

set in 1891, the year of the conflagration that laid waste to the town, a real mystery is that he makes no reference to the train. I always found it curious, that in this story Holmes and Watson walk the Gemmi Pass from Leuk to Kandersteg, not an easy crossing in early May. From there the normal route, also in winter, was to Spiez and then steamers to Interlaken and Brienz. After 1872 the steamer from Thun and Spiez to Därligen connected with the Bödelibahn to Interlaken Ost (then called Zollbrücke), at today's Hotel du Lac. From there a steamer would have brought Holmes and Watson to Brienz, an 1¼ hour journey, but this is ignored in the story. As always with Sherlock Holmes, the explanation is elementary. Conan Doyle didn't know; he had only travelled by the Brunig and Reichenbach passes, and his local knowledge was very shaky. However, Holmes and Watson could not take the train from Brienz in May as at the time it only ran from July to September. They would hire a carriage. They stayed at today's Hotel du Sauvage (Conan Doyle's 'Engländerhof' in 'The Final Problem'). This was the best Meiringen hotel, serving the Rosenlauri and Grimsel guests. The next day the hotelier Steiler suggested they hike to Rosenlauri. His advice to see the Reichenbach falls is at the heart of the story. But that leads from one mystery to another. As noted the Brünigbahn ran in summer (July to September), with only three trains a day each way. There was



as yet no winter tourism. Winter operations, October – June, began in 1903, when the SBB was formed and hence included the Brünigbahn in the national network. At first the railway only carried 1st and 2nd Class passengers at high fares that reflected its market, and its costly operation. It was not for locals, who also had to wait until 1903 for wooden seats and 3rd Class coaches.


A report in the 'Schweiz. Feuerwehr-Zeitung' (the Swiss Fire Brigade's Newspaper) about the fire in question has the fire brigades from Canton Obwalden, probably Sarnen, Lüngern, Sachseln and Giswil, taking 'the regular train'. However, the timetable shows that on 25th October the line was already closed for the winter. To bring pumps and other equipment a baggage car (one was normally in the train), was needed, as was at least one flat car for their fire appliances, whilst their horses would need a specialist boxcar. All this suggests a 'special', called together in haste, with an engine specially steamed up, to run on the normally closed railway. We may allow that perhaps closure was not complete, and that the line was open to freight trains until the first heavy snowfall. There were six small rack-equipped engines available at this time for the mountain section; one may well have been at Giswil where there was a depot. Others were at Luzern and Meiringen. Even when all was arranged, it would be a slow business. But of course, there was nothing better and we will imagine that the railway, with its own interests in Meiringen, did all it could to accommodate the fire brigades, but absolute speed could not have been too high.

We have another problem with the brigades from the western end of the Brienzersee. These were from Matten, Unterseen, Interlaken (all part of today's 'Greater Interlaken'), Bönigen, and the villages on the right (i.e. north) bank of the lake. These had no railway, as the Brienz-Interlaken section was not opened until 1915. The report says that they took the land route, that is the then still rough road on the north bank – there was none on the south bank. At this time there were three paddle-steamers on the lake operating, even in winter, a regular local service to the villages. The journey time to Brienz was around 75 minutes, not much longer than today. One of the ships might well have been in steam at Interlaken Zollbrücke.

Could they have loaded pumps, teams of horses and other equipment onto a steamer, even if the schedule had allowed, or did they, as was done with livestock, tow them on a barge? If they came by road it was a three-hour 16km trip. Again, the report says that the brigades took the regular train from Brienz to Meiringen; this however could only have been a 'special' from Brienz, if indeed one could have been made ready. It would certainly save another 12 km gallop. After all, helping with the aftermath of the fire, the remains of which they could see issuing smoke ahead of them, was going to be a long hard job. As we have noted most of the community had already burned in the first few hours, when only the village brigade was

The Meiringen station layout as it was from steam days up to a few years ago.

available to deal with it.

Although the 'new' railway is reported as having assisted in helping to save part of Meiringen, there would have been very little to actually 'save' when the rail-born assistance eventually did arrive. The other brigades obviously provided both moral and physical support to their worn-out colleagues, and as well as damping-down they probably were able to assist with much post-event salvage, but the time-lines indicate that they were not in the category of what we today refer to as 'first responders'. A few years later, with completed rail links and year-round operations, the nearby brigades could well have used the railway to help save some of the town's infrastructure. In October 1891 they obviously did their best to come to the aid of their colleagues by using the 'new' railway, but perhaps the glowing write-ups about the use of the improving transport system was more an indication of what could be done than what may have actually taken place. 

TOP: This little engine, named 'Ticino', built by Jünger in Germany in 1889, and used for construction works in Ticino for many years, was displayed at the Brienz Steam Days on July 1st, 2018. It was virtually unknown, as it was privately stored for over 40 years, and is now in working order.

BOTTOM: Former Brünig loco G3/4 208 which was itself burned in the Interlaken depot fire in Nov. 2012, and is back in operation this year. Picture at Brienz, July 1st, 2018.



Top Tip - Eating out on a budget

Switzerland is expensive! Yes it can be, but you can eat during the day quite well for a few francs if you're canny. The large stores often have good deals in their self service restaurants, particularly the Coop and Migros supermarkets.

For breakfast, Coop do a hot drink, two bread rolls or croissants, butter and jam from CHF 5.95 and if you want to share you can add an extra drink. Migros do a similarly priced offer. For lunch these two stores do slightly differing price options. Coop charge by the plate size, CHF 9.95 buying you a medium plate (sufficient for most, particularly if you're good at "loading"), slightly more for a larger size plate and they change their menus daily. Migros, on the other hand, charge by weighing your plate and contents at the till and prices work out just marginally dearer. BUT be aware that the Swiss like to eat at 12 noon and what can appear an empty cafeteria just before noon can soon become very busy just after.



Inside the Coop at Bern.

Breakfast.

However they do keep serving for quite a while so you always eat try after the noon rush.

After you've walked down your lunch, and you want a 'top-up' later in the afternoon, both stores usually do an afternoon (after 2pm) offer. Coop's is best as you have a choice of a large range of cakes and desserts plus any hot drink for CHF 4.95. In Migros, for the same price, you also get a hot drink, but only their choice of dessert. Manor stores also do similar meal offers at times.

These prices are based on 2018 and the offers may vary through the year, but they are worth trying. The other advantage can be that some of these stores are close to the main stations. Coop in Bern is 2 minutes from the escalator out and their store in Interlaken is directly opposite Ost station – and it opens on Sundays. If you fancy a stop at a different station, try the Coop at Eyholz between Brig and Visp, but there's also a Migros just outside the station at Brig.

Happy eating. 

Tony Bagwell

Afternoon break.

