

Zeitschrift: Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal
Herausgeber: Swiss Railways Society
Band: - (2018)
Heft: 136

Artikel: September steam in the Jura
Autor: Stone, Bryan
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-853775>

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September Steam in the Jura

Bryan Stone




TOP: No.5819 in the Delémont depot. LEFT: No.5819 at Laufen. RIGHT: The villain of the piece, No.8485, sulking in Delémont shed.

We hear little of the Historische Eisenbahn Gesellschaft (HEG) - the Historical Railway Association of Switzerland. This is a pity as the HEG have existed since 1985, are very active, and are now part of SBB-Historic. Their purpose was always to rescue and restore historical rail equipment, and they had acquired a valuable collection of some twenty seven rolling stock items, mostly very old, kept at their main depot at the Roundhouse in Delémont, Canton Jura. They have restored several to running order and periodically run trains with these. Others are restored to original condition, or undergoing cosmetic restoration for preservation. Some years ago the collection was made over to SBB Historic in Brugg, but the working reality of the club remains, with on-going restoration of the valuable items in liaison with SBB Historic. The Delémont Roundhouse, a protected building, also contains many small treasures privately rescued from closed stations and along the lineside, which would grace many museums.

A HEG Open Day in Delémont is always a treat. On 22nd September there was more. A steam train was advertised from Delémont to Laufen and back, with the newly restored E3/3 'Tigerli' No.8485. This engine was built in 1908 by SLM Winterthur, one of 83 built after Nationalisation to meet an acute shortage of shunting engines. It served SBB until 1965, then spent some years at the Emser-Werke (GR), before being stored. The HEG have worked on it for eight years. Its certification for public operation was secured, but then came the hot, dry summer of 2018. The trial runs had to wait until mid-September when it was discovered that one

injector was not working correctly. Those who knew such things of old will know that injectors, invented in France in the 1850s, assure the feed of fresh water to the boiler, two being mounted by law for safety. They are simple but delicate, can be reliable for years, but can also fail unpredictably and stubbornly; and the engine is then a failure.

So the inaugural trip was in danger. But SBB Historic came to the rescue at short notice, steamed up Eb3/5 No.5819 at Brugg depot, and sent it to Delémont. No.5819 is a 2-6-2T, built for secondary lines in 1916 by SLM, and was one of 34 in its class. These were efficient, uncomplicated, tank engines built like the E3/3s to keep the young SBB going when the former private companies had left it with an inadequate inheritance and a fast growing business. Some worked the last steam passenger lines, Oberratt-Niederweningen and Bellinzona-Luino, up to 1960. No.5819 lasted until 1965, then being stored for preservation.

We thus enjoyed a trip to Laufen and back on the wooden seats of C5906, a two-axle third-class coach built by the Schweizerische Central Bahn SCB in 1897 - and reminiscent of riding in a 1980s British 'Pacer'! We enjoyed the perfect measured exhaust beats of No.5819, especially on the 1 in 100 gradient returning to Delémont, en-route crossing with Inter-City Class 500 units, amazing their passengers. Back in Delémont, we toured the Roundhouse with its treasures (and a 'shamefaced' No.8485) and enjoyed lunch with the HEG, all on a glorious sunny September day. It is planned that No.8485, after repairs estimated at CHF4,000, will be out next spring. 

All photos: Bryan Stone