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Autor: Yellowlees, John
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Swiss expertise worldwide

In the September 2018 edition of *Swiss Express* we published a short item by Andrew Wood in which he highlighted two examples of Swiss transport engineering being used in other locations, in that case Wellington, NZ, and Dubrovnik in Croatia. We were interested in learning whether members know of any more. Here John Yellowlees describes an Abt railway on the other side of the world.



Queenstown station.

THE WILDERNESS WEST COAST RAILWAY IN TASMANIA

Tasmania sadly saw its last mainline passenger train in 1978. It may therefore come as a surprise to find in the forests of the island's wild west coast, a 34.5km heritage railway that exemplifies the finest of Swiss railway technology.

The Abt system

Swiss engineer Dr Roman Abt invented the world's most popular rack system, used for the first time in 1873 on the Harzbahn in Germany. Having worked for Niklaus Riggenbach on a central rack rail similar to a ladder that was expensive to maintain, he became determined to develop a better mechanism and devised one with a third rail of solid bars and vertical teeth. Abt set up a business that soon outstripped the success of his former boss, with success also in Japan, Spain, on the Transandino between Chile and Argentina and in Brazil.

A mining railway

The railway was the only way to get copper from the mine at Queenstown, where the Mount Lyell Mining Co began operations in 1892. It officially opened in 1897, and in 1899 was extended from Teepookana to Regatta Point at Strahan.

Because of the gradients, tonnages were always limited. The gauge is 3 ft 6 in (1,067 mm), and the steepest gradient is 1 in 15 (6.67%).

Decline and revival

Operation ceased in 1963 due to increasing maintenance costs and improvement of road access. Rolling-stock was dispersed, and on removal of rails the formation from Regatta Point came to be used by road vehicles, but was unsuitable for vehicle access above Teepookana.

In the 1990s, after the demise of the mining operations,



The turntable at Dubbil Barril.

and the downgrading of dam-building following protests, local people campaigned for the restoration of the Abt Railway as a tourist attraction, which was made possible through the allocation of \$20 million from the Federal Government, with further funding from the State Government and private investment.

The restored railway was reopened by Prime Minister John Howard in 2003. After a private operator pulled out, it passed in 2014 into the hands of the Abt Railway Ministerial Corporation.

The Railway today

At Queenstown where the landscape remains scarred by mining, the new terminus is on the site of the original station yard, and is graced by a magnificent overall roof. The station at Regatta Point has been renovated.

Three of the five former Mount Lyell Mining and Railway Company locomotives (1, 3 and 5) are in operational condition. These were built by Dubs & Co in their Glasgow Locomotive Works in 1896, and have been rebuilt by the railway, which also has two diesel locomotives. Passenger carriages were newly-built in 2002, providing comfort for year-round operation.

From Queenstown, trains call at Lynchford where you can try your hand at gold-panning, and run on the rack-section up to the summit at Rinadeena where tastings of wild honey and whisky are available, then down along the King River Gorge to the end of the rack at Dubbil Barril where visitors can walk in the forest and see the locomotive turned on the turntable. Both the full route and journeys as far as Dubbil Barril are on offer from the Strahan end. There is commentary throughout which tells the story of the railway's Irish pioneers, and passengers have a choice of drinks and snacks for purchase or inclusive catering. 