

Official opening of the Swiss National Tourist Office

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OFFICIAL OPENING

of the

SWISS NATIONAL TOURIST OFFICE AND OFFICIAL AGENCY OF THE SWISS FEDERAL RAILWAYS

on APRIL 7th, 1949 at 458/9, STRAND, W.C.2.

Well over two hundred guests attended the official opening of the new offices of the Swiss National Tourist Office and Official Agency of the Swiss Federal Railways, at 458/9, Strand, Trafalgar Square, W.C.2, which was celebrated with a Cocktail Party, very generously offered by the Management.

Amongst the numerous distinguished *invités* were the Swiss Minister, Monsieur Henry de Torrenté and members of the Legation Staff, Presidents of Swiss Societies in London and prominent members of the Swiss Colony, high officials of the Ministry of Transport and of the Railway Executive, Directors and Managers of English and Foreign Travel and Tourist Organisations, Railways, Air and Transport Companies, representatives of the English and Swiss Press, British members of the Swiss Alpine Club, members of the Ski Club of Great Britain, Anglo-Swiss Society, British Broadcasting Corporation, etc., etc.

A delegation from Switzerland including the following Gentlemen were also present: National Councillor, Dr. A. Meili, President of the Swiss National Tourist Office Zurich, Dr. E. Cottier, Director of the Swiss Federal Traffic Office, Berne, S. Bittel, Managing Director of the Swiss National Tourist Office, Zurich, Dr. W. Fischer, Commercial Manager Swiss Federal Railways, Berne, and Mr. Leo Meisser, Hotelier, Klosters.

Although it is not the custom in this country to deliver speeches at cocktail parties, this function per-

haps warranted a few words being spoken on this auspicious occasion.

Dr. A. Meili, National Councillor, who was introduced by Mr. O. Ernst, London Manager, gave a short and very happy address, extending a hearty welcome to the guests.

In his introduction he voiced his admiration for the great services the British Empire had rendered both to humanity and democracy during the fateful war years, services, he said, which will never be forgotten.

He thanked especially the Managers of Travel, Tourist and Transport organisations, members of the English and Swiss Press and Presidents of Swiss Societies for their helpful and loyal collaboration.

Dr. Meili expressed the wish, that this collaboration and the pleasant relations, which have been so much appreciated, will always be maintained.

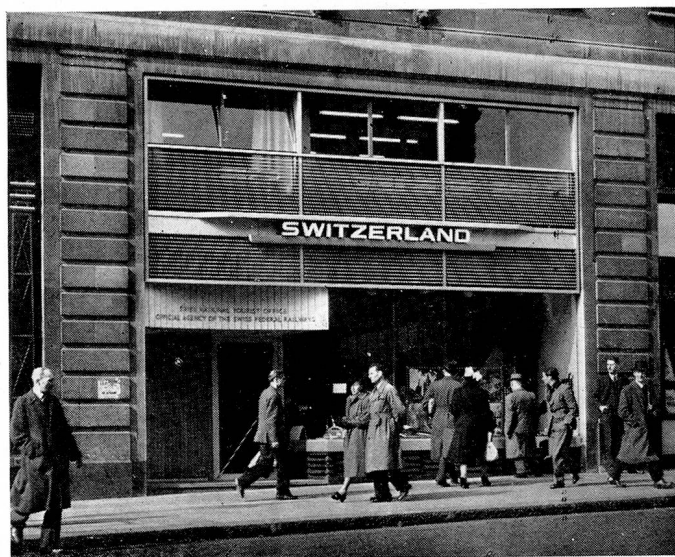


Photo by Henning.

FRONT VIEW.

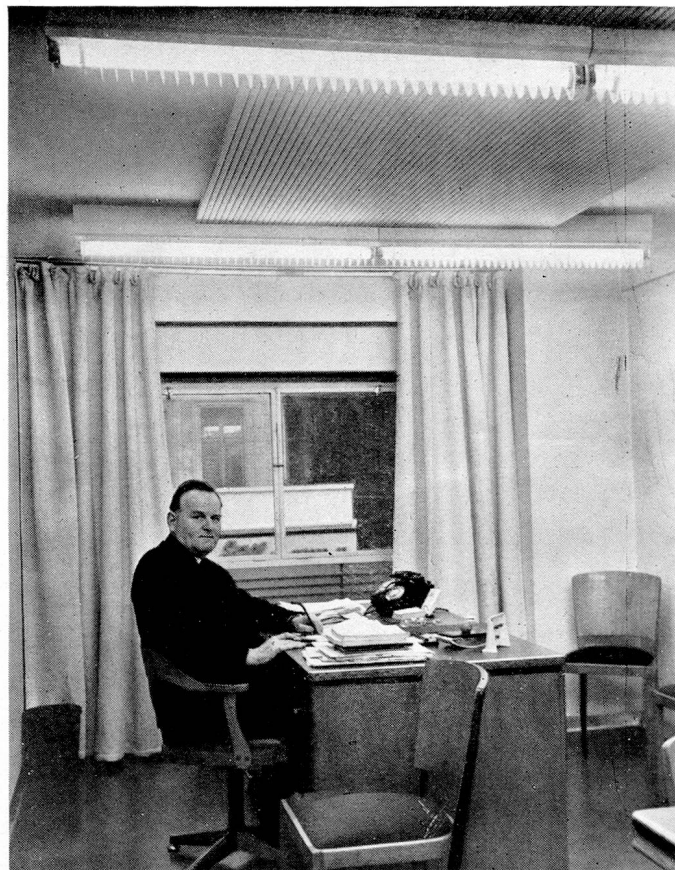


Photo by Henning. Mr. O. ERNST, Manager.

Amidst much enthusiasm the speaker then declared the offices of the National Tourist Office and Official Agency of the Swiss Federal Railways, as opened.

We are happy to publish herewith a report from the pen of our collaborator, Mrs. Cicely Williams, who, apart from a little sketch about the former offices in Regent Street, is giving a vivid description of the new luxurious premises.

For nearly half a century passers-by in Lower Regent Street have paused to admire the window of the London office of the Swiss Federal Railways with its gay posters and attractive carved models. Perhaps it looked rather small, this office, flanked by the more palatial buildings of the big shipping companies and the Travel Offices of some of the great European powers, but a vast tourist business was administered there and the public office was always thronged with potential travellers. Behind the public office were the desks of the secretariat; on the first floor films and lantern slides were dealt with; in the basement were the storage and packing departments. If the office was small it was certainly compact.

It was a cheerful, friendly place too — no one was ever too tired to be pleasant and helpful, and the big stands filled with exciting pamphlets were a never-failing source of joy. In the late nineteen-twenties two school-girls, on their first unaccompanied visit to London, stood by one of these stands, unaware that the literature was free. They were busy calculating how much pocket-money they had left after fares and lunches had been paid for, when a voice addressed them.

“Can I do anything for you young ladies?”

A certain amount of confusion ensued, followed by many apologies and explanations. Nevertheless a little later two excited young women hurried into the street, each carrying a large packet of pamphlets, their new friend remarking as they went — “If ever there is anything you want just ask for me — my name is Ernst.”

Mr. Ernst probably did not realise that he would still be honouring that promise twenty years later, but the story is typical of the kindness and friendliness of that little office.

Between the wars business flourished exceedingly but with the approaching Munich crisis things became very slack in 1938 and in September, 1939, those few who had ventured to the Alps came hurrying home as the storm burst over Europe. But even during those first few hectic weeks of war the office of the Federal Railways remained as always—unhustled and reliable. The Staff, with their gas-masks beside them, worked on patiently—everyone's unused tickets were accepted; everyone's money was refunded. When at last everything was settled practically the whole of the Staff returned to Switzerland for the General Mobilisation. Mr. Ernst, with one colleague, remained in charge; the public office was reduced to half its former size; the first floor was taken over, appropriately enough, by the Red Cross; the basement became an air-raid shelter.

The Swiss authorities performed a real service in maintaining that tiny office in the centre of war-torn London — a little treasury of past joys and future hopes. A government chauffeuse, the school-girl of twelve years before, drove up Lower Regent Street every day. Windows and ceilings may have been



Photo by Henning.

“COSY CORNER” — Public Office.



Photo by Henning.

PUBLIC OFFICE

blitzed at home, enemy bombers might be roaring overhead as she went about her job, but if the "Federal Railways" was standing then life could go on! And, impossible as it seemed at the time, as Switzerland herself stood unharmed in the troubled sea of Europe, so did the London office of the Swiss Federal Railways remain unscathed — the only undamaged building in that area!

But peace came at last and within a week there were enquiries concerning travel to Switzerland. When the travel ban was relaxed in 1946 the office was besieged. Londoners had become used to queues but nowhere was the queue so long as in Lower Regent Street. The Staff were overworked and cramped for space — the first floor offices were still unavailable — but they carried on undaunted.

And then the great moment came — Mr. Ernst, the Manager of the office, was asked from Zurich to find fresh accommodation, an onerous task indeed in a city that had lost so many buildings. The months went by, but diligent search and enquiry were rewarded at last; the War Office were vacating their Printing Department at Golden Cross House in the Strand; the position was obviously ideal; negotiations were successful and the premises were secured. At last the plans for the new Swiss National Tourist Office could be drawn up. Building licences and permits for materials were obtained after much labour, and the work went forward.

Nothing could be a better example of international co-operation than this great office. The entire building was planned in Zurich and executed in London. The Planning Architect was a Swiss — Mr. A. Roth; the Executive Architects were British — T. B. Bennett &

Son. All the furniture was brought from Switzerland and the fittings were made in England — the result is extraordinary harmonious.

The hurrying crowds leaving Charing Cross Station are greeted to-day by the one word "Switzerland," gleaming in steel lettering from the other side of the Strand, and below this caption is a wide and magnificent display window with a background of slim wooden pillars. Even a London fog could hardly dim the brightness of the pictures and posters which decorate this window and hold the attention of all who pass.

Inside is the Information and Reception office, decorated with pictures reminiscent of those that so refresh the traveller arriving at the main station at Basle. Nine clerks, ready to deal with any enquiry, sit behind the big counter, on which are spread large maps to assist the traveller; along the walls behind them are shelves filled with pamphlets describing every town and village in Switzerland. At one end of this counter is the Cashier's desk and behind it are an ingenious series of pigeon-holes, connecting with the Ticket Office. The client asks for his ticket and produces the money; the ticket appears through the pigeon-hole and is handed over by the Cashier. There is a telephone kiosk in this Reception Office and also a cosy recess fitted with red leather chairs and a settee, and a delightful glass case displaying Swiss wood-carvings which will make any unavoidable waiting a real pleasure.

Still on the ground floor, and behind the Information Office, is the Ticket Office where the little books of tickets, so familiar to tourists in the past, are compiled before being despatched through the pigeon-holes

to the Cashier. There can be few agencies where tickets are made up and despatched with such speed and efficiency. There is one more department on this floor and that is the Section which deals entirely with representatives of the Travel Agencies, for whom there is a special entrance in Duncannon Street.

Upstairs to the bright and airy first floor where a Receptionist sits in her glass cubicle. Here, overlooking the Strand, is the Manager's Office. No longer need Mr. Ernst work amid the clatter of a dozen typewriters — instead there are double doors, a spacious desk and a wide window.

Also overlooking the Strand is the Correspondence Office and next to it is the well-lighted Typing Pool, where the Manager's Secretary also has her desk. Behind a glass partition is the Chief Clerk's office and beyond that it the Mail Order Ticket Office, where there is a remarkable tube or "shute" up which the tickets reach the Mail Order Section from the Ticket Office. Then there is the office of the Head of the Propaganda Department and, connecting with it, the Propaganda Department itself concerned, among other things, with the fascinating folders which bring a preview of Switzerland to so many people.

And now down two floors to the basement — but not to the conventional dark and dusty cellar. Here is a well-lighted store-house, and storage room for

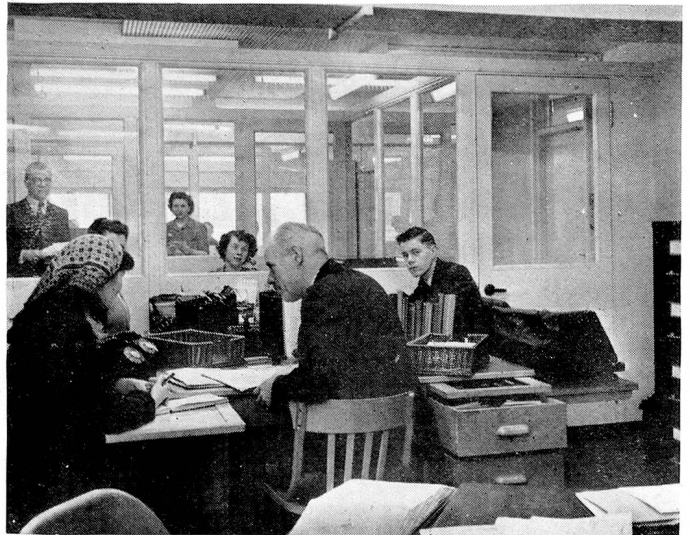


Photo by Henning. **ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICES.**
(1st Floor.)

paper; there is also the forwarding department and the archives of the office. And here too is the goods lift, which has its entrance in the Strand behind the main doors of the office. But best of all is the Exhibition Room and Cinema where the latest travel and propaganda films sent from Zurich will be shown to Travel Agencies' Staff and other people professionally interested in Tourist Traffic to Switzerland.

It is difficult not to feel a little nostalgic for the old homely office in Lower Regent Street that has stood for so much in good times and in bad. But even the best things have their day and give place to those that are still better. Here, in the heart of London, one has already arrived in Switzerland — only the magic tickets are needed to take one farther afield. Outside is the unceasing roar of the traffic in the Strand but inside the Swiss National Tourist Office is a world of sun and snow, of streams and lakes and alpine flowers. It is a magnificent office, worthy of Switzerland and the part she is destined to play in European travel and world affairs."

On the following day, a second Cocktail Party, numbering nearly two hundred guests was held, this time the visitors were the employees from Travel, Tourist and Transport Companies, who are in direct contact with the public.

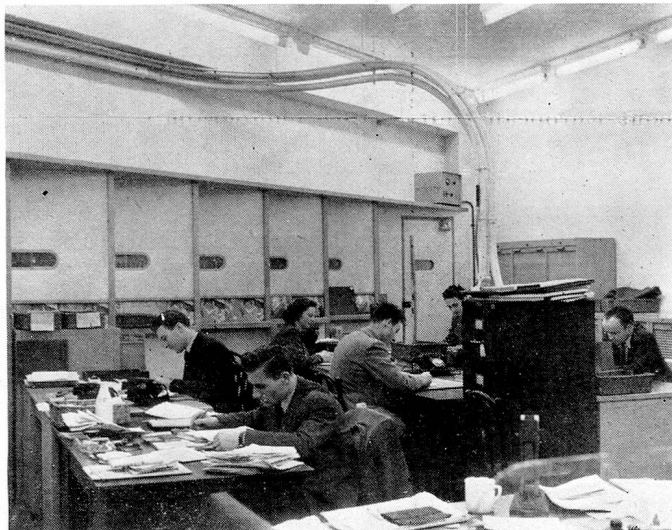


Photo by Henning. **TICKET DEPARTMENT.**

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