

The Martigny - Châtelard railway : a brief introduction

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THE MARTIGNY – CHÂTELARD RAILWAY

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

By A.J. Pike

The class 319 of the Thames Link service are not only the electric units to use the overhead contact wire and the third rail during their point to point journeys. As is so often the case, the Swiss got there first. On the 20th August 1906 a metre gauge line was opened between Martigny, in the Rhône Valley to Le Châtelard Frontier, the French frontier. This was extended on the 2nd July 1908 to Vallorcine on the PLM system, later the SNCF. Until 1931, it ran through the town of Martigny but, on the 1st March of that year, a direct line was built from the CFF station at Martigny for 0.63 kilometres to La Batiâz which provided a better connection with the main line.

As far as Vernayaz, 3.99 kilometres from Martigny, the railcars on this roadside line draw their 800v DC traction current from the overhead line. At Vernayaz, lies the main depot which houses not only the modern rolling stock but also some splendid specimens dating from the opening of the line which are used on special trains and occasionally on work trains. The yard is electrified on the overhead system but in the small curving station, one has the first sight of the third rail raised much higher above the sleeper level than in Britain. Here, too, the Strubb system begins as the train enters a tunnel and begins to climb sharply.



ABDeh4/4. No. 7 and Bt at Vernayaz Workshops

Photo: A. Pike

It is perhaps surprising that a mountain railway which receives its fair share of snow in winter should choose the third rail. Maybe money was saved on tunnelling because the height of the bore could be reduced. No doubt, more knowledgeable members of the society can provide the answer.

After some time the line emerges on a ledge part way up the mountainside with an impressive view to the right down the Rhône Valley to St. Maurice. If one is travelling on the CFF down the Rhône Valley in the direction of Brig and looks out of the right hand side, the site of the line is proclaimed in large letters just near this point.

Climbing yet more and turning now towards the French frontier, the train arrives at the neat timbered station of Les Marecottes, 8.85 kilometres from the start. This little town is a popular holiday resort but one needs to be good in wind and limb as, in common with most of the other villages along the valley, it clings to the precipitous mountainside.

From hereon, one is recommended to sit on the left hand side of the train to get the best views. The most important intermediate village on the line is Finhaut with a picturesque station which gives good views down the valley. It is worthwhile making a pause here, not only for refreshment and to enjoy the view, but also to watch the trains crossing.

From Finhaut, at a height of 1224 metres, the line runs on a narrow ledge and after passing through several short tunnels, descend to Châtelard-Gietroz at 1126 metres above sea level. This is the site of one of the older power stations and under cover, on the right, one may sometimes see some of the older rolling stock stored. It is also notable for a remarkable funicular about which I might write a note on some other occasion. It is the only one I know of which employs a large block of concrete to prevent the cars from becoming airborne.



ABDeh4/4 No. 8 at Vernayaz station.

Photo: A. Pike

Just 2.8 kilometres inside France, the Martigny-Châtelard makes an end on junction with the SNCF system which is also metre gauge and uses the third rail for current supply. This is an equally fascinating line but perhaps I should leave it to our colleagues in the SNCF society to write about that.

I have not visited the railway for some four years but a note in the *Eisenbahn Amateur* says that, on the stretch between Salvan and Tretien, the concrete bases for an overhead line have been installed for operation in 1987 so the third rail may be on the way out. There have also been meetings between both staff and management of the SNCF and the MC with a view to substantial improvements on the through route between St. Gervais, the railhead for the SNCF standard gauge system, and Martigny to improve services and assure the future of the line which they call "Metro des Alpes".