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A MONDAY MORNING AT SPIEZ

By Brian Macdermott

Like many Swiss railway enthusiasts, I visited the Rail-In 88 Exhibition at Interlaken. However, that was not the highlight of my 1988 holiday in the area. Some months previously, I had written to the Public Relations Manager of the BLS asking if it would be possible for me to visit the facilities at Spiez station. An appointment was made for 9.00 a.m. on Monday 22nd August to meet Herr Bürki, the Assistant Station Master.

Spiez is an important junction station. It has five 'through' platforms (Tracks 1-5) and a bay platform (Track 6); two signal panels; a loco depot; and freight and passenger stock sidings.

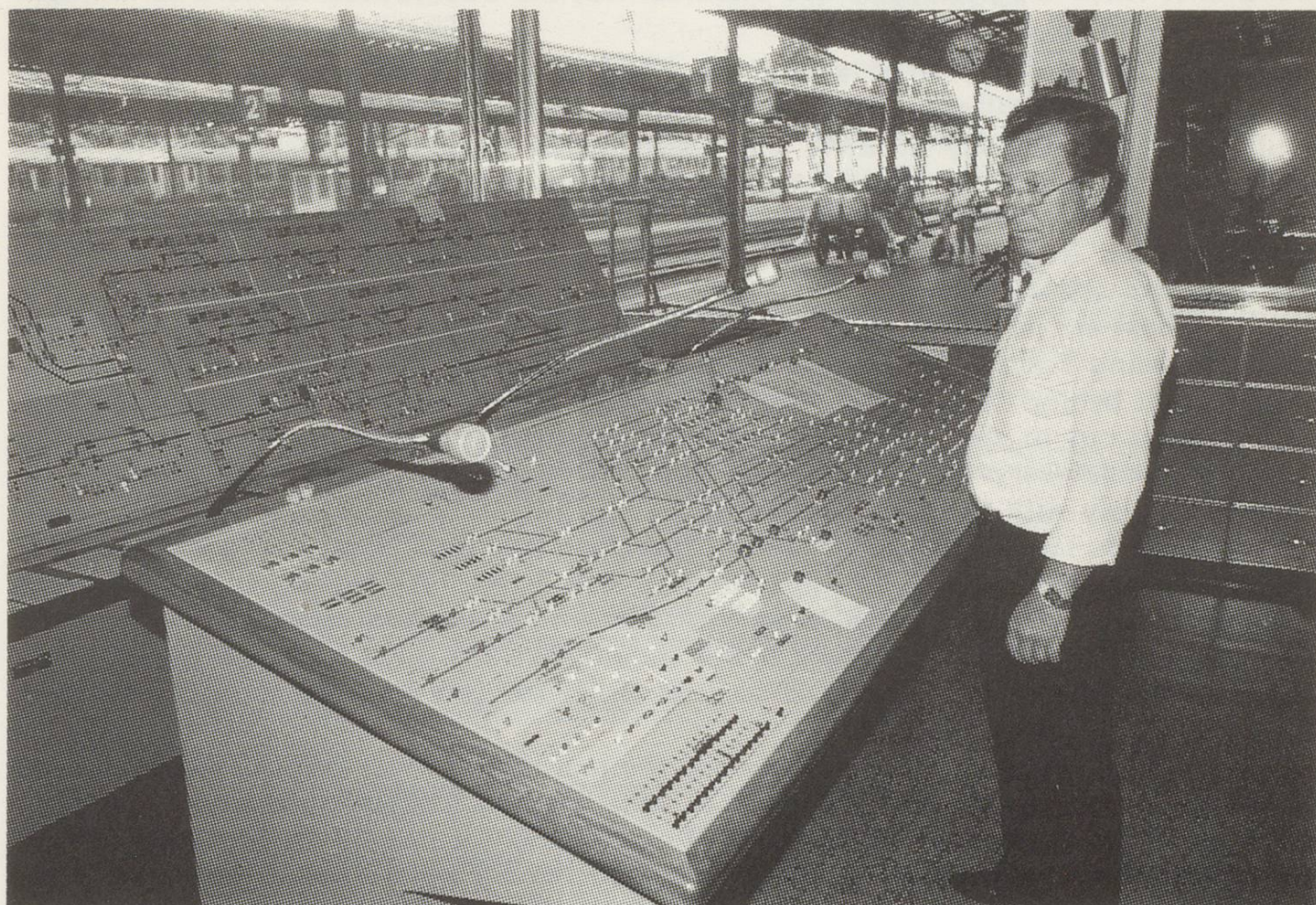
The station has a regular interval timetable. The details in the accompanying table show a typical hour - at 10.30 a.m. and 12.03 p.m. trains leave for Frutigen and Zweisimmen simultaneously. Tracks 1 and 2 are used by trains to and from Interlaken respectively; Tracks 3 and 4 are used by trains to and from Brig and Italy as well as by Frutigen locals; and Tracks 5 and 6 are used by Zweisimmen trains. A wide variety of rolling stock passes through, including German and Italian sleeping cars as well as diverse examples of freight stock. If all goes well, we may soon see narrow gauge trains working through from the MOB at Montreux via Zweisimmen, Spiez and Interlaken and on up the Brünig line to Lucerne.



Spiez station from the signal tower.

Photo: B. Macdermott

My host, Herr Bürki, has been a railwayman for 40 years - 35 of those have been spent at Spiez. Most Swiss railwaymen are fairly smart, but Herr Bürki is smart with a capital 'S' — I felt quite outdressed in my 'tourist gear'! To my delight, his English was excellent, a useful asset when, at the moment we set foot on the platform, an American bombarded him with questions about a bag she had left on a train. Seconds later, more questions — this time from a German speaking lady. Herr Bürki took all this in his stride.



Signalman Zeller at the Spiez station control panel.

Photo: B. Macdermott

As can be seen from the accompanying table, there is a lull in traffic between $\frac{1}{4}$ past the hour and $\frac{1}{4}$ to the next hour. Opportunity is taken here to do some shunting — usually performed by the station's resident shunter Ee3/3 No. 401, nicknamed "Lisely". There are no hand-operated points at Spiez. They are all controlled from one of the two signal panels. The shunting signal panel is set high up in a tower at the Thun end of the station and is worked in consultation with the station panel. During peak hours of shunting, the panel has two operators; at normal times just one operator; and at slack times the panel is switched out and all movements are controlled from the Superintendent's panel on Track 1.

Whilst I was up in the tower, "Lisely's" Driver performed some very accurate shunting which was a pleasure to observe. I was most surprised to see her fly-shunt a tanker and a wagon full of wood chippings, with the Shunters aboard, from one side of the main line across to the other at about 30 mph. This would not, I'm sure, be permitted in England, but Herr Bürki assured me that this manoeuvre was quite regular and in order here. For her 45 years, "Lisely" is extremely nippy having been fitted with Thyristor control — she makes our British Class 08s look positively tortoise-like!

Back down in the Superintendent's signal panel (Track 1) there is a graphic timetable. The timetable is updated daily with red lines drawn on to show additional trains, and yellow lines to show cancellations.

Interlaken to Spiez locals (as opposed to through trains) normally arrive on Track 1. However, today, some men were engaged on track work, so Train No. 3710 came in on Track 2. The track work was in conjunction with the doubling of the Interlaken-bound line. When the passengers had disembarked, the train moved forward to its usual siding (G6).

Train IC819 (Basel-Brig) arrived on Track 4 at 10.55 a.m. behind SBB Ae6/6 No. 11481 "Romont" with ten coaches and two postal vans. There had been a points failure earlier in the day at Bern and consequently most trains were suffering slight delays. The rear postal van was detached and was to be sent to Zweisimmen on an early evening train. Train 4615 from Zweisimmen was also running slightly late and arrived on Track 6 behind BLS Re4/4 No. 191 with three coaches and a van at 10.58 a.m. This train connects with IC819.

Our next arrival was at 11.00 a.m. on Track 1 with SBB Re4/4II No. 11251 and ten coaches forming Train 1716, Bern-Interlaken. Shortly after, the unit in siding G6 moved forward right behind the Interlaken train – another sight unusual to British eyes. As Herr Bürki pointed out to me, the same arrival/siding/departure procedure is followed by the Interlaken locals every time. Everyone knows the procedure and the operation can be carried out safely with the minimum delay.

10.02 a.m. saw the arrival of IC718 (Interlaken-Bern) on Track 2. The eight coaches headed by SBB Re4/4II No. 11189 with BLS Re4/4 No. 170. Making connection with this was Train No. 2315, BLS RBD4/4 No. 729 with two coaches attached, arriving from Zweisimmen at 11.04 a.m. on Track 3. She should have arrived at 10.57 a.m. – no doubt the Signaller put her on Track 3 so that the passengers had a swift cross-platform connection.

Meanwhile, "Lisely" had moved onto the rear of this train and IC718 started out towards Bern. She didn't travel very far, as someone had spotted an open door and the train was brought to a stand for a couple of minutes right across the station throat. When the train had cleared the section, "Lisely" hauled the complete Train 2315 out of Track 3, whereupon the RBD4 set went into Track 5 and the two coaches were shunted to the sidings.

By now, the rain had started to fall as Freight Train No. 61362 came in from Interlaken. This was hauled by BLS ae6/8 No. 207 and an old loco on its way back from the Exhibition, EZB No. 307. Apart from the load of general freight, there were two low-loaders. One carried RhB loco No. 632, the other BAM Be No. 11.

Finally, I would like to extend my grateful thanks to Herr Barben of the BLS in Bern, Herr Bürki and the staff at Spiez for a memorable Monday morning.



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