

# A railway history of Switzerland. Part 2, The Schweizerische Centralbahn

Autor(en): **Della Gana, Giles**

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## THE SCHWEIZERISCHE CENTRALBAHN

by Giles Della Gana

The Schweizerische Centralbahn (SCB) was formed provisionally in Basel on 26 August 1852 to build a group of lines radiating from Olten; one north to Basel itself, one eastward to Baden to join the "Spanisch-Brodli-Bahn", one southwards to Lucerne and one to the west to Solothurn and Bern. These lines formed an important part of Stephenson's plan of 1850. The cost was put at SFr 50 million, 22 million came from banks in Basel and Paris and the balance from the Cantons, towns and private interests. Cantonal concessions were granted by the end of 1852, apart from Aargau, which was not given for another year and then only to Aarau, as the section from there to Baden went to the Nordostbahn (NOB). The company was formally constituted on 4 February 1853, construction work beginning the following July.

The Basel-Liestal section of railway was opened on 19 December 1854, the first in Switzerland since the Zurich-Baden line. This was extended to Sissach on 1 June 1855. Aarau via Olten to Emmenbrücke, just short of Lucerne, opened on 9 June 1856. The following year saw the opening of several sections, Aarburg-Herzogenbuchsee-Biel/Bienne on 16 March, Sissach-Laufelfingen on 1 May, Herzogenbuchsee-Biel/Bienne on 1 June and Herzogenbuchsee to Bern (Wilerfeld) on 16 June. The SCB opened to Bern proper on 15 November 1858, extending from Wilerfeld to Thun on 1 July 1859.

The contract for the most difficult work on the system, the Hauenstein Tunnel went, along with that for bridges over the River Birs, to Thomas Brassey at a price of SFr 4.25 million. The tunnelling was carried out under the supervision of the German engineer, Wilhelm Pressel, who was later to work on the Brenner line. Construction was delayed by a serious accident on 28 May 1857 when an access shaft collapsed with great loss of life. The section through the tunnel from Laufelfingen to Olten was finally opened on 1 May 1858, the same day as the link to the NOB station in Aarau.

With the extension of the line from Emmenbrücke into Lucerne itself, on 1 June 1859, the SCB acquired two paddle-steamers. The names of the Escher, Wyss built *Stadt Basel* and *Stadt Mailand* suggesting their use on Lake Lucerne as one of the various links in the chain of communication across the Gotthard, from Basel to Northern Italy. With the opening of the Gotthardbahn these vessels became redundant and so they finished up with the DGV fleet.

In 1872 the SCB, NOB and the Canton of Aargau joined forces to promote the Aargauische Sudbahn (ASB) as an approach line for the Gotthard. It was worked by the SCB, being opened in the following stages, Rapperswil-Wohlen, 23 June 1874; Wohlen-Muri, 1 June 1875; Muri-Rotkreuz 1 December 1881 and Rotkreuz-Immensee and Brugg-Hendschiken both 1 June 1882.

Another joint venture with the Nordostbahn was the Botzbergbahn (BoB) opened between Pratteln and Brugg on 2 August 1875. This line, shortening the distance between Basel and Zurich, was worked by the NOB.

The SCB was obliged to buy the Olten-Solothurn-Busswil Gaubahn, which it opened together with a Solothurn-Biberist branch on 4 December 1876, as a defence against the encroachments of the Schweizerische Nationalbahn (SNB). (The Solothurn-Biberist section passed to the Emmenthalbahn on 21 November 1883)

Except for the period of competition with the SNB (to be covered in a separate article) the SCB gave very good financial results, especially after the opening of the Gotthardbahn, with dividends of up to 9% being paid.

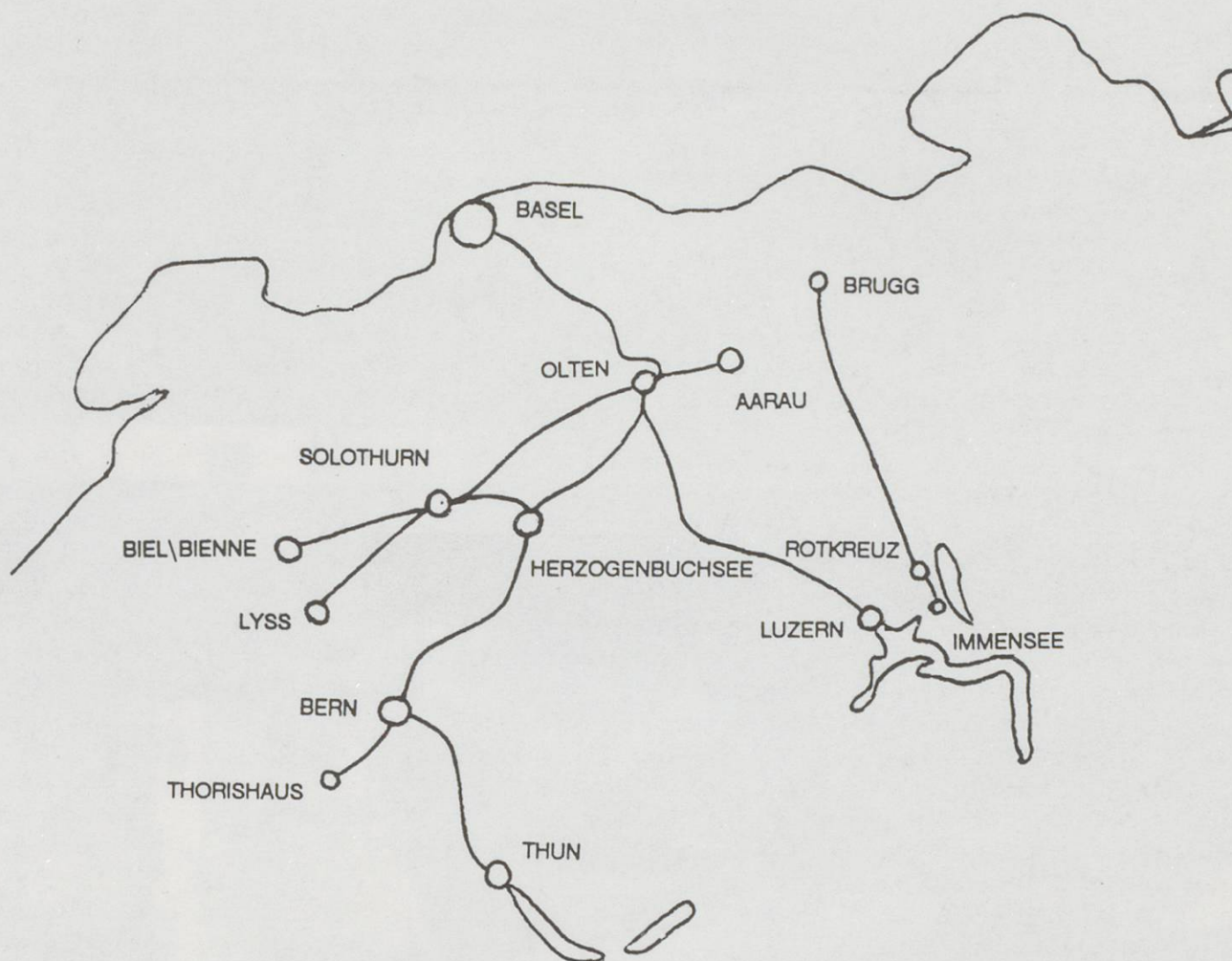
There was an attempted purchase by the state in 1890-1 but this was defeated by a national referendum. However the SCB eventually passed to the Confederation under a purchase agreement on 1 January 1901 but the company continued to work the system on behalf of the state for a further year ☐



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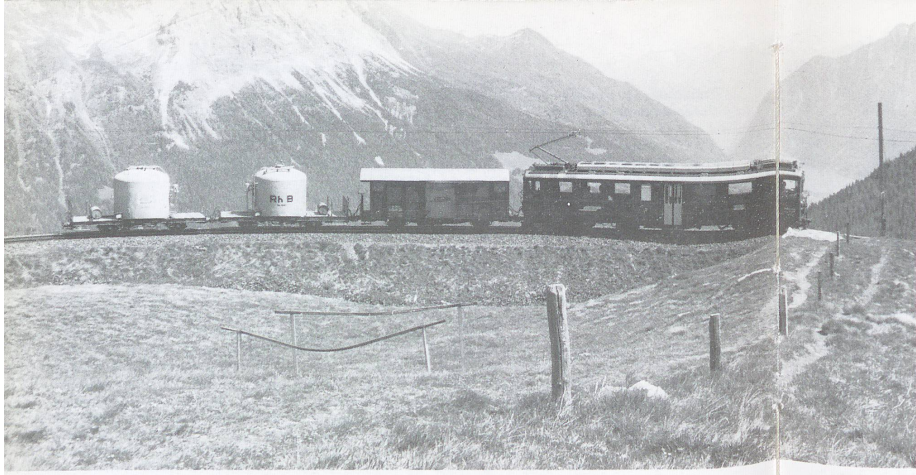


The Schweizerische Centralbahn (Swiss Central Railway) as at 1901

## LUCERNE REOPENING

Exactly twenty years to the minute when the clock on the old Lucern station was stopped in the disastrous fire of 5 February 1971, the magnificent new station was officially reopened at 09:03 on 5 February 1991. As many members will know, most of the work was completed some six months ago and many of us have had the pleasure of using the new facilities. Whatever one's opinion may be of modern architecture, there is no doubt that the glass wall throws ample light on the trains ☐





**RHB GALLERY**  
photos by Peter Over

*Top left: ABe4/4 No.44 begins the descent to Poschiavo from Alp Grun with 14:40 mixed from St.Moritz on 3 June 1988.  
Bottom left: At Poschiavo on 7 June 1988 a pair of ABe4/4s and Gem4/4, under diesel power, depart with the 14:58 Tirano-Chur Bernina Express, passing Ge2/2 en route.  
Top Right: ABe4/4 No.503 crosses the River Inn bridge at Samedan on 8 June 1988 en route to Pontresina.*