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Preservation in Switzerland - 1

The Chemin de fer Musée Blonay-Chamby by Christopher Rosindale

This former CEV line is located on the wooded hillside above the northern shore of Lake Geneva in South Western Switzerland. Upon the line's closure in 1966, it was taken over by a preservation society and reopened two years later as a railway museum. From then on, the line has thrived and in 1998 it celebrated 30 years in preservation.

A History of the Line

The 8.6 km railway between Vevey and Chamby was opened in October 1902, followed two years later by a 7.4 km long branch from St Léger to Châtel St Denis on the (later) GFM's line between Palezieux and Bulle. Finally in 1911, a rack line was opened from Blonay 4.9 km to the viewpoint on the summit of the Les Pléides. By the 1960's the lines of the CEV were struggling to survive, causing the company to rationalise the network, retaining and modernising the Vevey to Les Pléides route and closing the Blonay-Chamby and St Léger-Châtel St Denis sections due to the losses that these lines were running up. The Blonay-Chamby section was closed first, in 1966.

Preservation

The announcement of the Blonay-Chamby's closure resulted in the swift formation of a

preservation group, backed by the Lucerne Transport Museum. This was an entirely new concept to Switzerland (although by that time well-established in Britain). The way between Blonay and Chamby, although still workable, was derelict and overgrown and in need of a great deal of work to make good the years of decline. The 45m long tunnel near Cornaux was in a very poor state of repair, as was the 79m long curved masonry viaduct across the Baye de Clarens. Both required extensive renovation or repair work to make them usable again. However, volunteers set to with a will, and just over two years after the last CEV train had passed over the tracks, the permanent way was once more opened for through running.

Although the route had run with electric traction since its opening, the preservationists decided from the outset to include steam locomotives at the museum (despite initial worries regarding fire risk in the surrounding woodland). Stock collecting began even before the line was operational and has continued until (at the present time) the museum has reached capacity, with locomotives from France, Germany, Italy and Spain as well as from within Switzerland itself. The presence of catenary (electrified at 900 volts d.c) has permitted the acquisition of trams (from cities like Bern, Lausanne, Zurich, Geneva) as



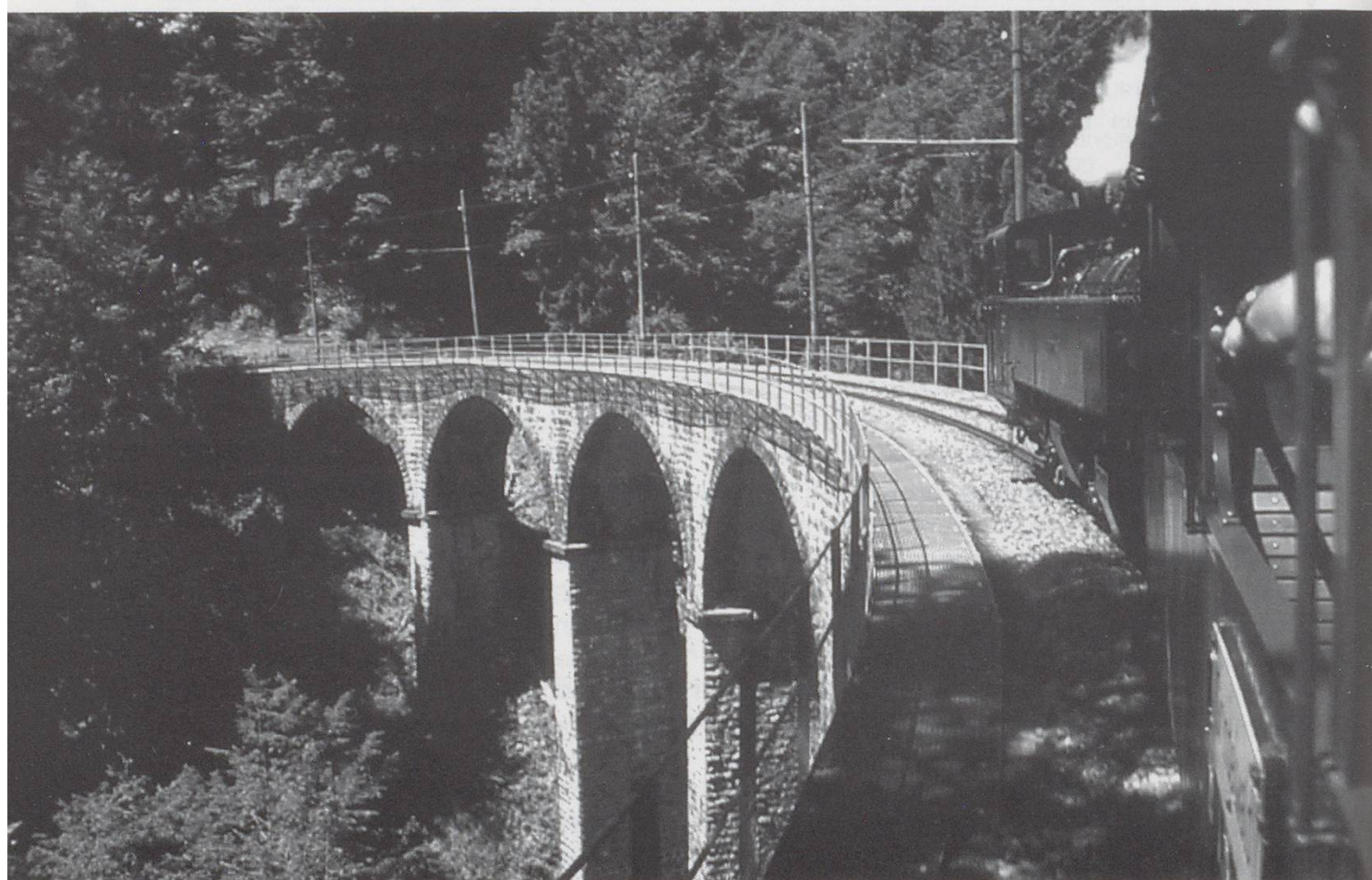
Previous page: Electric trams No.28 (ex Lausanne) and No. 52 (ex Bern) at Chaulin Depot.

Above: Former Zell-Todtnau (DB) Mallet No. 105 (built Karlsruhe 1918) at Blonay 18/6/98.

Below: No. 105 crossing the Baye de Clarens viaduct bound for Blonay.

Opposite page: No. 105 passing below Chaulin Depot bound for Chamby.

All Photos: Author





well as several railcars (including former Leuk-Leukerbad no. 10, accompanied by a whole train of stock!). These are accompanied by a large collection of vintage carriages, mostly from within Switzerland but also a few from other countries. Most of these have been superbly restored and are a joy to ride in.

A Description of the Route

The two-mile long journey from Blonay to Chamby begins at the eastern end of Blonay station, next to the small chalet-style BC ticket office. After leaving Blonay the line winds through the houses, mostly on embankment and over several level crossings. Good views are obtained from parts of this stretch, across the lake to France, before the train passes the little halt at Chantemerle. Beyond Chantemerle the train curves through the woods to reach the Baye de Clarens gorge, curving across it on the much the much photographed viaduct. This is in a delightful setting, pale stone against the surrounding trees. Just beyond the viaduct the train passes a small linesmans hut, named 'Vers-Chez-Robert'. This was formerly at Ribaz on the SBB line between Geneva and Brig, and acted as a base for the early volunteers working on the line, prior to 1973 when Chaulin Depot was opened. For a few hundred yards beyond the hut the track is built onto the side of the gorge on retaining walls, before curving sharply to the left and entering the 45m long Comaux tunnel. This short, curved tunnel brings the line out of the gorge and into a meadow. Just beyond the tunnel is the picturesque Comaux halt which, like Chantemerle, consists of a simple

wooden shelter beside the track. This is another popular photographic spot, with the trains climbing uphill away from the tunnel. The line passes through more trees, rounds a left hand curve and heads on a steepening gradient through fields, above which is the depot, linked to the mainline by a spur.

The journey is almost over, for with a final stiff climb through woods the train arrives in the bay platform at Chamby, with the MOB lines to the left.

Recent Developments

Although the preserved line has been a great success (3000 visitors came on the first weekend alone!), regular passenger trains have now returned to the line on Mondays to Fridays. Since the CEV joined the MOB in 1990, the MOB has been working to develop services over the Blonay-Chamby line, resulting firstly in the resumption of Vevey - Chamby services and later in the introduction of Vevey-Montreux through services. At present, the former service is running on weekdays (the line is used at weekends only by the museum's trains).

The museum is open (with trains running) on Saturday afternoons and Sundays from May to October (although the dedicated band of volunteers are active all the year round). This fascinating line and its large historic collection of stock is well worth a visit and its easy access (connecting with the CEV at Blonay, and the MOB at Chamby) make getting to it easy. Come along, and see one of the finest collections of metre gauge rolling stock in the world!