

# Private railways in Switzerland - Supplement : the BLS Shipping Fleet

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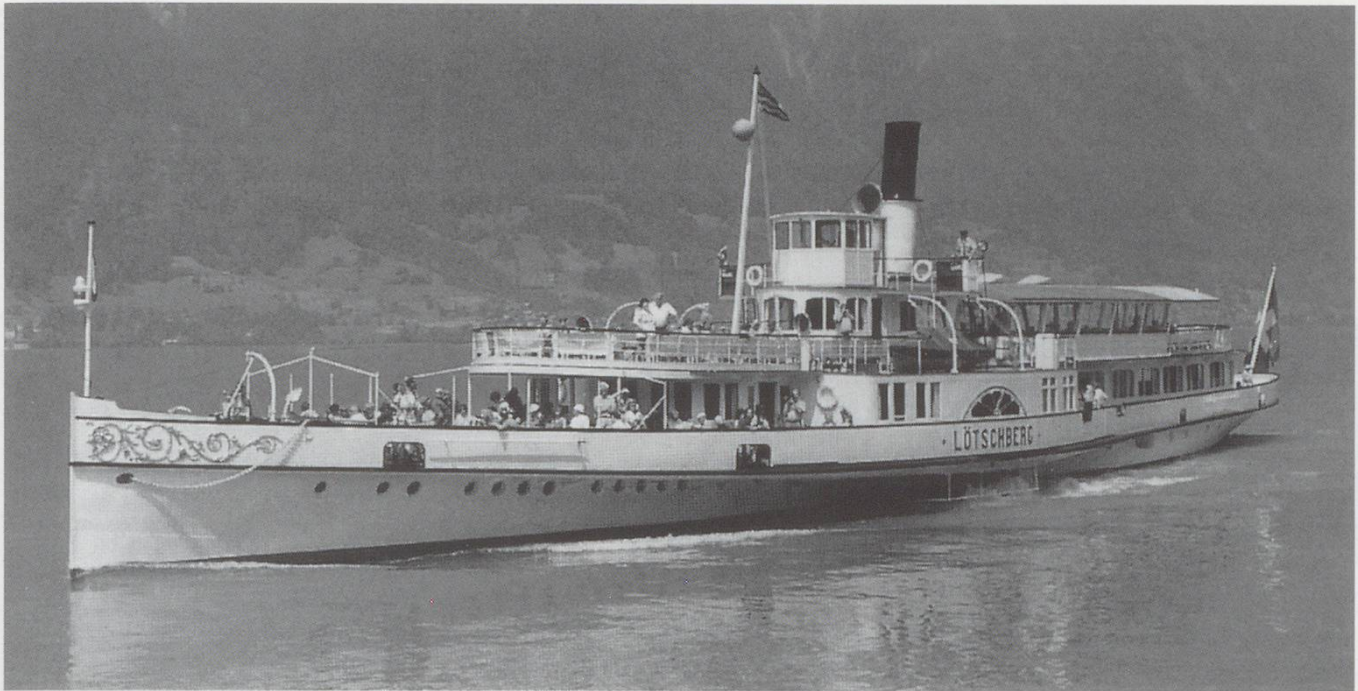
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The BLS Lake Brienz Steamer "Lötschberg."

Photo: [BLS] Hardy-Randall collection

## Private Railways in Switzerland - Supplement

### The BLS Shipping Fleet

by Giles Della Gana

The following article is an amended, updated and hopefully improved version of one first published in the March 1987 issue of 'Swiss Express'. It is offered here as a supplement to Brian Hemming's series of railway histories.

Up until the 1830s there were only paths and rough tracks around the shores of the Thunersee. In fact it was considered quite an adventure to travel into the Berner Oberland! The lake provided the main means of transportation, goods were carried by boats of between 10 and 30 tonnes capacity, manned by a crew of two to four and powered by oar or sail. Vessels known as 'Postships' provided a crack passenger service - rowing boats with three or four oarsmen, ran to a published timetable. In good weather they could make Neuhaus from Thun in four hours. 'Marketships' were private boats, which, as their name suggests took the local people to market. After 1805, when tourism began, a new type of boat made its appearance. These were small rowing boats, covered with a bright awning and fitted with a table for books, maps and food.

In the 1830s' two gentlemen found themselves viewing a project for a road along

the southern shore of the Thunersee with some dismay! They were the brothers John Jakob and Friedrich Knechtenhofer, owners of the pension 'Bellevue' that lay on the northern side of the lake at Thun. Fearing that their establishment would be by-passed they obtained a steam powered vessel from Cave of Paris which was brought to the lake in sections by cart. Named BELLEVUE her maiden voyage took place on 31<sup>st</sup> July 1835. The following year she carried some 24,000 passengers, with the poor travelling free. Three sailing a day were made between Thun and Neuhaus during a season that lasted from 15<sup>th</sup> May until 15<sup>th</sup> October. The journey took 1 hour 15 minutes whereas the best time by rowing boat had been 4 hours. However in case the passengers found even this much improved timing tedious the BELLEVUE was equipped with a barrel-organ. Though this instrument is now preserved in the Castle Museum, Thun, the rest of the vessel was not not so fortunate. After being transferred to the Brienersee and renamed FAULHORN in 1843, she returned to the Thunersee as a dumb-barge from 1859 until sinking in a storm off Oberhofen on 2nd. April 1864.



Interlaken West: BLS MS Stadt Bern in the channel.

Photo: Paul Russenberger

In 1839 a second Thunersee navigation company was established, but did not get any ships built before joining with the original operators together with a company that had been established on the Brienersee, to form the Vereinigte Dampfschiffgesellschaft für den Thuner- und Brienersee (VTB) in 1842. A new vessel, the NIESEN (I) was introduced in 1843, followed by the STADT THUN (I) in 1858 and the STADT BERN (I) in 1861. Further details of individual vessels are set out in an accompanying table. The opening of a line from Bern to Thun by the Schweizerische Centralbahn provided a great stimulus to traffic. The ships BEATUS (I), BUBENBURG (I) and HELVETIA (II) being introduced to deal with the increasing number of passengers.

When, in 1872, the Bodelibahn (BB) reached Darligen, the Thunersee provided its link with the rest of the railway system. The BB operated two steam-powered rail-ferrys, TRAJEKTSHIFF 1 which served throughout the life of the service, 1873 to 1895, and TRAJEKTSHIFF 2 which operated from 1886

until 1895. These ferrys became superfluous with the opening of the Thunerseebahn (TSB) between Thun and Darligen in 1893. TRAJEKTSHIFF 2 was sold to the Schiffahrtsgesellschaft des Vierwaldstättersee, being passed to a sand and gravel company in 1930. Following a period of disuse it was rebuilt, the rails being removed, in 1964 and was reported as still being at work in 1972. From 1872 until 1892 passenger vessels had also been calling at Darligen rather than Neuhaus in order to connect with BB trains. In 1892 vessels gained direct access to Interlaken by way of a 2.75 km canal built at a cost of CHF 2.3 million.

On 1st. January 1912 the VTB amalgamated with the TSB. Exactly one year later the TSB amalgamated with the BLS and thus the Lötschberg company acquired its shipping fleet. Unfortunately at this time it was more of a liability than an asset. Traffic was hit by World War I and a new canal had to be built at Thun to bring the ships closer to the railway station where previously they had docked on the river Aare. The first motor



*BLS DS Blumlisalp departing from Faulensee on Lake Thun.*

*Photo: Paul Russenberger*

vessel, the ISELTWALD (I) appeared on the Brienersee in 1918, to be followed by the GUNTEN and MORGARTEN, during the 1920s on the Thunersee, for a winter service to Beatenbucht. 1935 saw the introduction of a larger motor-vessel, the NIESEN (II) to provide improved communication with the right-hand bank.

After an increase in tourist traffic during the 1930s, World War II brought another drop, though not as bad as during the previous conflict. In fact two vessels were acquired in 1940, the OBERHOFEN and THUN. Despite these additions, after the war the BLS company found itself with an outdated and uneconomic fleet. The company therefore embarked on the modernisation programme that replaced most of the old paddle steamers with the series of motor vessels.

Though this process resulted in a group of superb ships there was a reluctance to do away with paddle steamers entirely. The LÖTSCHBERG was kept in service on the Brienersee and the BLUMLISALP was laid-up in 1971, her name passing to a new motor

ship. After years of discussion the BLUMLISALP was restored and returned to work special services in 1992, an activity underwritten by the Canton of Bern and actually approved by a local referendum. In 1996 the BLS introduced the BERNER OBERLAND, a vessel whose ultra-modern - almost futuristic- lines provide a striking contrast not only to the paddlers but with the rest of the fleet as well. They have come a very long way from rowing boats.

#### **Publications Consulted:-**

##### **Books:**

Flottenparade Thuner -und Brienersee - BLS  
Paddle-Steamers Switzerland - Anton Raber &  
Robert Horlacher  
Schiffahrt auf den Schweizer Seen - Anton  
Raber

##### **Periodicals:**

Railway Magazine - July 1972  
VST Revue - May 1985

Vessel Name & Type		Dates		Builder		Dimensions			Dk.	Cap.	Notes
		In	Out	Hull	Eng.	Disp.	Lght.	Wid.			
<b>Thunersee</b>											
BELLEVUE	PS	1835	1843	CA	NK	NK	34	4	1	NK	1
HELVETIA (I)	PS	1843	1855	EW	EW	NK	NK	NK	1	NK	2
NIESEN (I)	PS	1843	1890	EW	EW	NK	36.6	4.2	1	300	3
STADT THUN (I)	PS	1856	1924	EW	EW	133	47.2	4.8	1	300	4
STADT BERN (I)	PS	1861	1956	EW	EW	137	47.2	5.1	1	450	5
BEATUS (I)	PS	1871	1964	EW	EW	208	54.9	6.1	1.5	800	6
TRAJEKTSCHIFF 1	PS	1873	1895	EW	EW	NK	40	6.7	1	5	7
BUBENBERG (I)	PS	1874	1962	EW	EW	210	54.9	6.1	1.5	800	8
TRAJEKTSCHIFF 2	PS	1886	1895	EW	EW	NK	43	6.7	1	5	9
HELVETIA (II)	PS	1889	*	EW	EW	169.5	47	5.6	1.5	500	
		1911	1959	NK	NK	195.2	51.1	6.1	2	750	10
NEPTUN	SS	1901	1914	KI	KI	15	12.8	2.8	1	12	11
KYBURG	SS	1901	*	SU	SU	53	25.8	4.5	1	120	
		NK	*	BL	GM	56	28.8	4.5	1	200	12
BLUMLISALP (I)	PS	1906	*	EW	EW	294	58	6.8	2	1000	13
GUNTEN	MV	1920	*	HI	GM	15.1	16.7	3.1	1	60	14
MORGARTEN	MV	1929	1949	HI	DE	15.3	16	3.1	1	60	15
NIESEN (II)	MV	1935	*	EW	MB	31.7	24	4.1	1	155	
OBERHOFEN	MV	1940	*	EW	GM	35.2	24	4.1	1	155	16
SPIEZ (II)	MV	1940	*	EW	MB	91.2	37	5.3	2	400	17
JUNGFRAU	MV	1954	*	BW	MW	223	46	8.2	2	900	18
STADT BERN (II)	MV	1956	*	BW	MW	226	48	8.2	2	1000	19
NIEDERHORN	MV	1959	*	BW	GM	146	42	7.4	2	600	
BUBENBERG (II)	MV	1962	*	BW	MW	246.3	48.5	8.2	3	1100	
BEATUS (II)	MV	1963	*	SW	MB	183.5	45	7.5	2	700	
STADT THUN (II)	MV	1971	*	SW	MW	297.3	52	8.8	3	1200	20
STOCKHORN	MV	1974	*	SW	GM	90	35.7	7	2	250	
BERNER OBERLAND	MV	1996	*	MS	NK	440	57	12	3	1000	
<b>Brienzersee</b>											
GIESSBACH (I)	PS	1839	1843	EW	EW	NK	NK	NK	1	NK	21
FAULHORN	PS	1843	1857	CA	NK	NK	34	4	1	NK	22
GIESSBACH (II)	PS	1859	1956	EW	EW	108	45.2	4.5	1	250	23
OBERLAND	PS	1870	1925	SU	SU	156	42	6	2	300	24
BRENZ (I)	PS	1871	1956	EW	EW	197.5	51.8	6.1	2	500	25
INTERLAKEN (I)	PS	1875	1950	EW	EW	89.6	39.5	4.2	1	150	26
JUNGFRAU	PS	1898	1940	EW	EW	220	51	5.9	2	500	
MERKUR	SS	1901	1918	EW	BT	40	23.3	5.6	1	40	27
LOTSCHBERG	PS	1914	*	EW	EW	249	53.5	6.8	2	1000	
ISELTWALD (I)	MV	1918	1969	HI	DE	16.6	18.2	3.6	1	90	28
HARDER	MV	1949	*	HI	DE	15.3	17.2	3.7	1	60	29
ROTHORN	MV	1950	*	HB	SU	93.1	39	6.1	1.5	400	
INTERLAKEN (II)	MV	1956	*	BW	SU	138	42	7.7	2	550	
ISELTWALD (II)	MV	1969	*	SW	GM	74	33.6	6.7	2	250	
BRIENZ (II)	MV	1981	*	BW	NK	NK	NK	NK	3	1000	



Interlaken West: BLS MS Bubenbergr going astern in the channel.

Photo: Paul Russenberger

### Notes for Table [opposite]:

- 01 - To Brienzler as FAULHORN 1843-57.
- 02 - Ex GIESSBACH (I) 1839-43 Brienzler - SCHIFF MATTI 1843-46.
- 03 - Rebuilt 1879.
- 04 - Rebuilt 1898.
- 05 - Rebuilt 1910 to 1.5 decks.
- 06 - Rebuilt 1907 to 2 decks.
- 07 - To Lake Como, capacity shown as number of wagons.
- 08 - Rebuilt 1909 to 2 decks
- 09 - To Vierwaldstattersee, capacity shown as number of wagons.
- 10 - Extensive rebuild.
- 11 - On Zurichsee from 1894 as EMIL.
- 12 - Major rebuild, re-engined with diesel in 1952. SPIEZ (I) 1901-92.
- 13 - Restored to operating condition after being laid-up 1971-92.
- 14 - On Vierwaldstattersee from 1910 as ASTRA.
- 15 - Built 1923, to Brienzlersee as HARDER.
- 16 - Ex ENTE, built 1939.
- 17 - Rebuilt 1965. THUN 1940-92.
- 18 - Rebuilt 1963 with 3 decks. Displacement to 235.9 tonnes.
- 19 - Rebuilt 1964 with 3 decks. Displacement to 236.6 tonnes.
- 20 - BLUMLISALP (II) 1971-92.
- 21 - To Thuner as SCHIFFMATTI 1843-46. HELVETIA (I) 1846-55.
- 22 - Ex BELLEVUE on Thuner 1853-43. As dumb-barge 1859-64.
- 23 - Rebuilt 1886, 1900 & 1918. Displacement inc to 122.1 tonnes.
- 24 - Rebuilt 1901.
- 25 - Rebuilt 1902 & 1907/9.
- 26 - Rebuilt 1885, 1906 & 1917.
- 27 - Vierwaldstattersee, BRUNIG (II) 1919-29. Capacity in tonnes.
- 28 - Ex MARS on Vierwaldstattersee 1911-18.
- 29 - Ex MORGARTEN on Thunersee 1929-49

#### Key:

- BL - Bern Lotschberg Simplon.
  - BT - Bchtold & Cie, Steckborn.
  - BW - Bodan-Werft, Kressbronn.
  - CA - Cave, Paris.
  - DE - Deutz.
  - EW - Escher, Wyss, Zurich.
  - GM - General Motors, Biel/Bienne.
  - HB - Herbosch, Antwerp.
  - HI - Hitzler, Hamburg.
  - KI - King & Cie, Wollischofen/Zurich
  - MB - Mercedes-Benz.
  - MS - Meiderichi Schiffswert, Duisburg.
  - MW - Motorenwerke Mannheim.
  - NK - Not known to author.
  - SW - Schiffswerft Linz An Der Donau.
  - SU - Gebruder Sulzer, Winterthur.
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- Cap - Cargo/Passenger/Wagon capacity
  - Eng - Engine
  - Dck - Number of decks
  - Disp - Displacement
  - Lght - Length
  - Wid - Width