

Members' letters

Objektyp: **Group**

Zeitschrift: **Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal**

Band (Jahr): - **(2008)**

Heft 96

PDF erstellt am: **21.07.2024**

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when we rode the line a few summers ago we were almost alone on the train, both out and back, so perhaps the review may be necessary.

● Green Signals.

The Swiss Federal Transport Office has announced that after one year in operation the second level of ETCS - which involves signals being read from the driver's cab - would be gradually introduced across the normal network of tracks in a simplified form by 2017. The cost is estimated at CHF370 million. ETCS was introduced in 2006 on the high-speed stretch of track between Mattstetten and Rothrist on the busy Bern to Zurich, Basel and Lucerne routes. In 2007 it was also introduced in the new Lötschberg rail tunnel. At a news conference in Bern, the operators of the ETCS track (SBB and BLS) said the system had proved its value in terms of capacity and stability over more than ten million kilometres travelled. Switzerland has been a pioneer in the ETCS, which is considered essential for future pan-European rail connections.

● Lotschberg base tunnel wins award.

On 30th September 2008, the BLS Alptransit SA was awarded the Brunel prize for the exceptional architecture of the visible parts of the works. The Brunel prize was created ten years ago by the Watford Group, and is awarded after an

international, independent and specialist jury consider works of merit for design and architecture in railway infrastructure projects. The tunnel won the first prize in the award category "Technical and environmental infrastructure construction". The award crowns their success in bringing the project in on time, on budget, and seeing trains running. The visible parts of the construction are the portals at Frutigen and Raron, and the bridges over the Rhône. These works were judged to harmonise with the high-speed train dynamics, and the European vocation of the line. The sustainability of the construction, and the way that the open air sections have been carefully designed to blend in with the environment and allow "renaturations", or rehabilitation of the landscape, helped the BLS gain the award.

Photos of the award-winning works are available at www.blsalptransit.ch under the heading "medias".

● OC no more.

The Orbe-Chavornay railway ceased to exist as a separate company in June 2008. It had been part of the TRAVYS management and operating organisation for some 5-years but it now has been completely folded into that organisation. There is now the distinct possibility that the passenger service on this very short standard gauge branch will be replaced by a bus service.

MEMBERS' LETTERS

From Michael Feaver – Tunbridge Wells, Kent.

Serendipity. My wife and I had stayed at the Hotel Bellevue, Wengen, back in 1963 and this year we thought it was time to go back there. While I cannot say that I remembered the Hotel, the 'Vue' was as 'Belle' as ever – right up the Lauterbrunnen Valley to the lovely Breithorn at its head. What was totally unexpected was that the Hotel boasts a superb outdoor model railway. Running on Tuesday afternoon and Thursday evening it is largely based on the Rhätian Railway with all the loops between Filisur, Bergun and Preda, and going down from Poschiavo. Two very realistic Bernina Expresses, together with three trains from two German lines unknown to me, make their way around this amazing circuit. I would highly recommend it to all other members.

P.S. Many thanks to John Morgan for his tip about changing at Thun for Zürich – it worked perfectly!

From Peter Rothschild – Walmer, Kent

It will surely be a pleasure for the editor of *Swiss Express* to learn that the advertisement for the Hotel de la Paix in Interlaken resulted in what was an enjoyable stay for my wife and myself.

The weather which, as we understand was miserable in Kent, was absolutely glorious in Switzerland. That was supplemented by really excellent service from the hotel, run by the Etterli family, and, as some members may know, Gillian Etterli is English. Nothing was too much trouble, and my vegetarian "peculiarities" were catered for in every way. Several other SRS members were also staying at the hotel at the same time and I trust that they enjoyed it as much as we did.

From Andy McMillan – By email.

RhB's Albula & Bernina lines have just been given World Heritage Status by UNESCO – I wonder if the RhB deserves it? In awarding this honour to the RhB part of the UNESCO statement noted "It constitutes an outstanding technical, architectural and environmental ensemble and embodies architectural and civil engineering achievements, in harmony with the landscapes through which they pass."

It is that last sentence which makes me think "Hmmm". This worry is especially in respect of the Bernina line. The recent re-modelling of Tirano station, along with the lengthening of many of the Bernina loops to increase capacity for the longer trains which increasing tourism demands, is understandable. However the replacement of all the wooden poles, which have been a signature of the RhB mountain lines for a hundred years with steel ones, and of historic stone bridges and viaducts with modern concrete and steel ones is less understandable – and a retrograde step aesthetically speaking. If equipment is genuinely life-expired one may accept that it is much cheaper to use modern alternatives, but perhaps keeping the historic ambience in photographs taken from outside the trains is as important as the views seen from inside them.

However, in my view it is the replacement of historic stone station buildings with modern ones which is the most distressing recent aspect and one which seems to me to show an absurd wish by the RhB to be "a modern, full-size, railway" rather than an acceptance that in a great many respects, the Bernina is what the UK calls a "Heritage Railway". By this I mean it was built as a tourist railway and it has always relied upon tourists for its continued existence. True, it does not have free "volunteer labour" to help with its cost structure but to aggressively "modernize" the Bernina, with its century old railcars, buildings and infrastructure would not only be to lose a bit of valuable history but, by decreasing the difference between it and other more commercial railways, it is surely in danger of losing much of its appeal as a tourist attraction. What the RhB seem to have forgotten in their major rebuilding programme on the Bernina is that it is at their stations and their structures where most people interface with the line and take their photographs that spread the fame of their line around the world. They are the gateways and icons of the heritage railway.

Can one imagine the outcry if, on the Albula line, the stone viaducts which have been such iconic photographic features over the last hundred years were replaced by concrete structures such as those on other parts of the RhB? No doubt engineering and accountancy arguments could be put forward to explain the need for doing so but what of the RhB's image often generated by images of its structures seen in magazines and holiday brochures? Will they demolish their trademark Landwasser Viaduct when that needs serious rebuilding, too? Surely it is time the senior management of the RhB gave some thought to retaining their long-established image of "quaint charm" which I contend has been the real base upon which their tourist traffic has grown; comfortable seats and modern high-windowed coaches are not the major consideration of the scenic tourist. Yes, the scenery is a vital part of "taking a trip over the mountains" but that can be seen from a coach or PostAuto; the important point for the RhB is that it is the integration of the railway within the landscape which is so unique and the tourist wants to experience that landscape intimately -- otherwise they may as well stay at home and watch it on a DVD.

For example the replacement of the original timber building at Alp Grüm was inevitable given the increasing popularity of that station over the years as a lunch-stop; the fact that it was replaced with perhaps one of the ugliest stone buildings in Switzerland, with neither the charm of the vernacular nor the finesse of the architect, was unfortunate. However the loss of Bernina Suot station building and even the stone transformer house at Cadera – such being one of the more inspired buildings of the RhB – seems to me to verge on the criminal. One just cannot imagine concrete blocks or steel and glass "bus-stops" ever appearing attractive to any future generation. Another hundred years may prove me wrong but it is the tourists of the present who pay the bills and keep the line open or there will not be a future for it. With many Heritage Railways in the UK trying to recapture the spirit of a bygone age by building replicas of long-lost "line-style" buildings it must surely be folly for the RhB to replace genuine original historic structures with basic modern structures. In an area of Switzerland where tourism is an economic keystone it is unfortunate that the powers that be do not seem to understand their market!

I was recently pleased to note the excellent and sympathetic refurbishment of Val Pila viaduct; so perhaps wiser heads are now prevailing. With the awarding of World Heritage Status I trust that Celerina, and the other fine buildings which remain, should be safe for a few more years. Let us hope that in due course Bernina Suot can be rebuilt in a new, appropriate location in a style entirely sympathetic with the unique original. Then I really will believe that the Swiss have begun to understand what the word "heritage" actually means...

From Stephen du Bois – By email.

A word of warning to members. To get to Zermatt/Saas Fee or the Goms I have on numerous occasions flown to Milan Malpensa and then caught the EC train from Gallarate with a change at Brig. Although the local bus times from the airport to the station are infrequent it has up until now been a good "back door" way into this part of Switzerland.

Not any more! Leaving aside the appalling baggage reclaim at Malpensa (over an hour on both trips this winter), and the refusal of the taxi drivers to take us to the station (large ski bag so according to them we needed a minibus which would have to be ordered from Milan!!), by the time we got to Gallarate, we had missed the intended train by 10 minutes. I then discover that the EC service is now every 2 hours. To cut a very long story short we finally made it to Saas Fee (first trip) at 9pm having landed on time at 1pm - eight hours for what should have been a relatively short journey. The second trip to Zermatt was almost as bad but we had a lucky connection at Brig which got us to Zermatt before 9pm. I cannot understand why the EC service has been reduced as both journeys were well patronised. We also, very unusually, had some problems with an officious Swiss ticket inspector on the return journey. He insisted that we had to pay a supplement to be on the EC train despite me having Swiss Transfer tickets which were valid to Domodossola and separate Italian tickets for the rest of the journey. Having refused to pay as the tickets were valid on the way out we had to change trains at Domodossola and catch a waiting Italian express - quite a pleasant journey as it turned out.

Mrs du Bois has point blank refused to ever set foot inside Gallarate station again so regardless of cost it's Zurich/Geneva next year!

From Don Gatehouse – By email.

Sidetracks item – Accident closes line, 23rd May 2008. I noted with interest the report in Issue 95 under Sidetracks concerning the closure of the Geneva-Lausanne line near Morges on Friday, 23rd May. I was at Nyon on the morning in question and with the benefit of full sun; I was looking forward to a productive session at the line side. During the blockage, platforms 2 and 3 at Nyon were occupied by Trains ICN519 and IC2519 respectively from shortly after 0800 until 1025, when locomotive No. 460 010-2 was allowed to proceed east with the IC service. During the closure period, the only activity seen was the use of Re4/4s 11111 and 11114 on push-pull RE shuttles that were used to provide a couple of return trips to the west of Morges. Once the flow of trains recommenced there was considerable activity for several hours as passenger services gradually recovered from the major disruption caused. Naturally, my photographic plans for the day had to be somewhat revised but I did manage to capture after the resumption of operations a combined Postal working with Re4/4 No. 11285 with a single van coupled with sister loco No. 11180 with 3 Postal containers heading east from Geneva to Lausanne. A combined Postal working with such a consist must be very rare, I assume, or does someone know otherwise?



A strange combination of locos with a van between on a postal train.

PHOTO: Don Gatehouse