

Odd man out : Ron Smith recounts the story of BLS De 4/5 No.796

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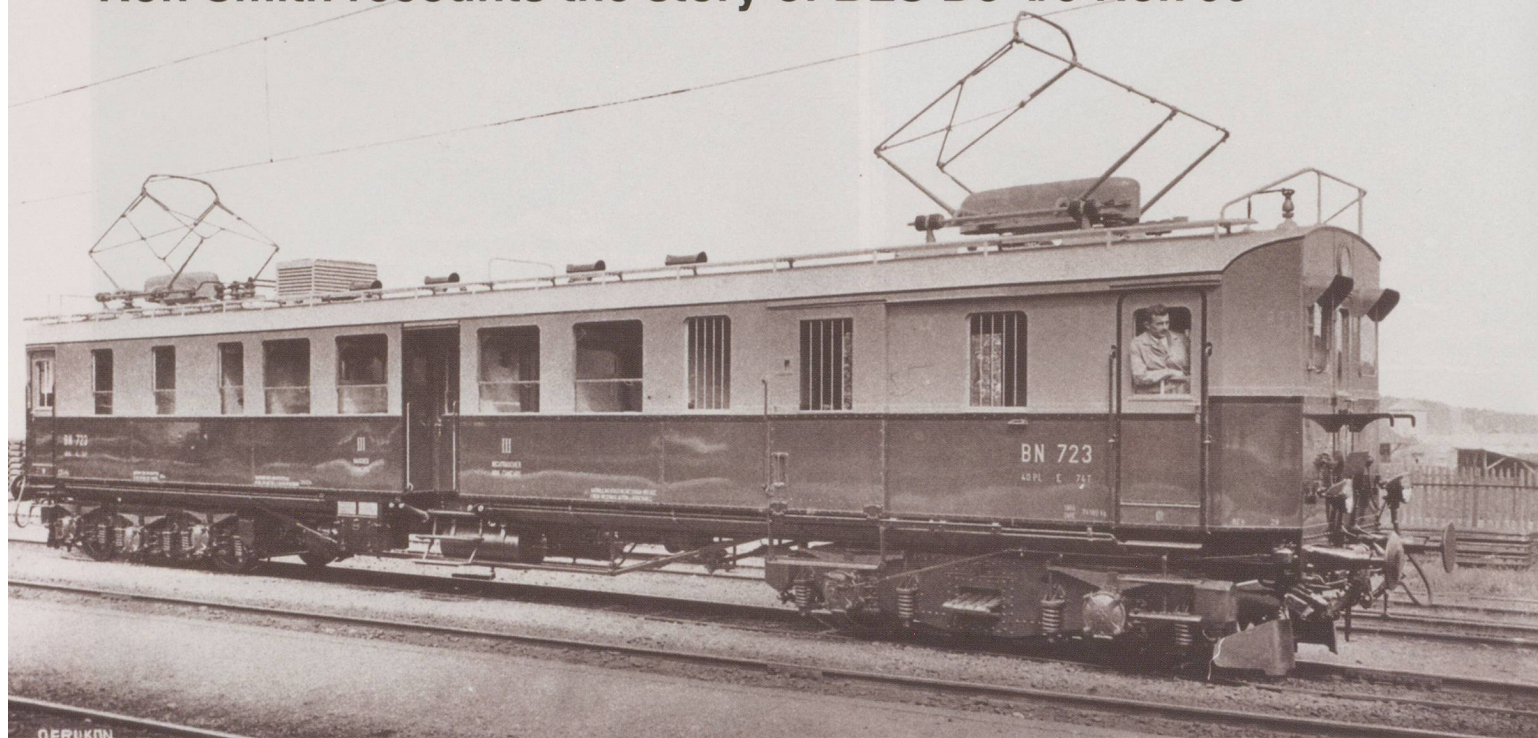
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Odd Man Out

Ron Smith recounts the story of BLS De 4/5 No.796



Back in 1958, Metropolitan Vickers produced the Co-Bo batch of Crossley engined locomotives for British Rail. I never saw one, which is not surprising as their brief blaze of glory was on the London to Glasgow overnight fast freight, but they were so unreliable that they ended up at Barrow-in-Furness to be close to the manufacturer. I have seen many photographs of them, and wondered at the odd wheel arrangement, looking very much like a British compromise, and probably unique in the world. All other locos that I have ever seen have equal bogies. Then, on the 21st of July 1987, we were driving with some Swiss friends near Interlaken, when I spotted an unusual machine heading a short freight train, parked in a loop with pantograph down. We stopped the car and I went back to photograph it, this was the BLS De4/5 No.796 on one of its last duties. I was surprised to see that it had a A1A-Bo wheel arrangement – this needed investigating - and as far as I have been able to find out, this small batch of motor passenger/parcels vehicles together with the Co-Bos of BR, are the only ones in the world with a-symmetrical bogies...

unless a reader knows of any more?

The original vehicles were built for service on the newly electrified (in 1927) line from Bern Bümpliz Nord to Neuchâtel of the eponymous BN Railway. In February 1928 six machines were ordered with this odd A1A – Bo wheel arrangement. They were classified as CFe 4/5. They were designed to have two third class passenger compartments, one smoking, one not, with a total of 40 seats, plus a baggage space of 10 sq.m. The power equipment was thus at one end, which needed an extra unpowered axle in the centre of the bogie to carry the weight. Of the six ordered, Nos.721 to 725 were for the BN, and one more, No.786 was ordered for the BLS. They were delivered between May and July 1929; they weighed 74t (of which 60t were available for adhesion); at 50kph they produced 1440PS; and had a top speed of 90kph. Originally they had a wooden body. Cabs were at both ends, with provision only for the driver to stand.

On 23.9.1941 the BLS one was involved in an accident with a SBB Ae 3/6 near Kiesen, severely damaging the wooden bodywork. It was converted by SIG to become a


purely baggage motor-car, with a steel body giving a luggage space of 21sq.m, becoming Fe 4/5 786. It resumed work in 1943. Meanwhile, sister machines Nos.721 – 725 expanded their sphere of operations to

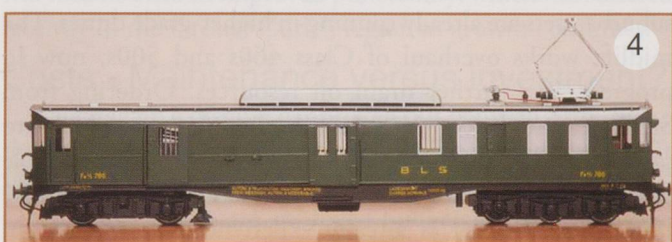
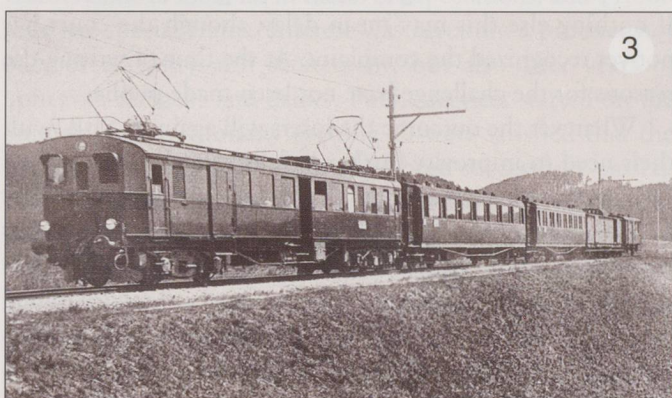
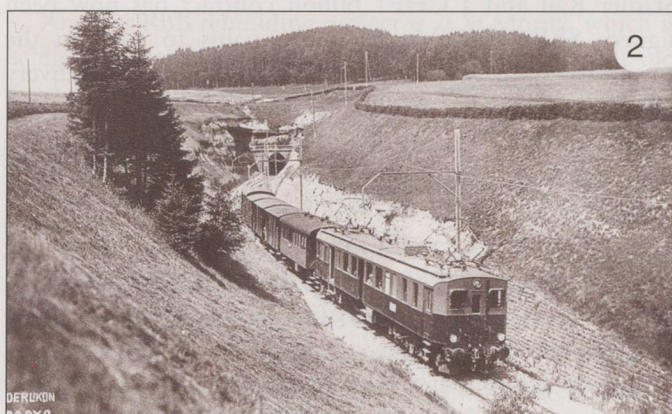
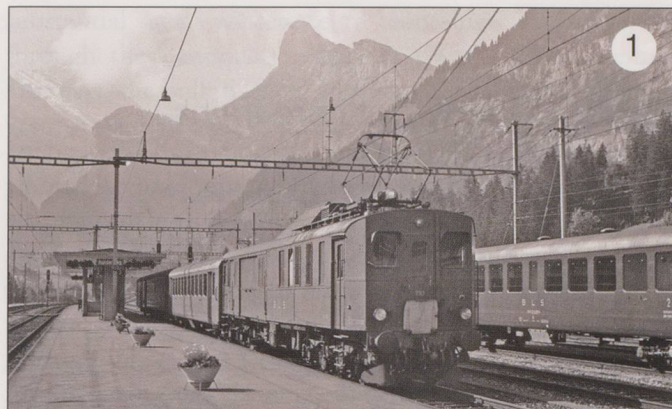
ABOVE: BN No.723 when it was new. *Photo: MFO / Collection Bernhard Studer*
LEFT: No. 796 at Biasca in March this year.

Photo: Ron Smith



include the Gurbental, the Simmental, and up to Schwarzenburg. Between 1941 and 1944 the five BN machines were similarly converted at the BLS workshops at Bonigen, with parts supplied by SIG, and BBC who supplied new electric motors. These were subsequently fitted to No.786. After rebuilding, all the machines appeared in green livery. In 1945 they were all renumbered to Fe 4/5 Nos.791 – 796. They continued to operate until 1957/59 when they received modernisation to their equipment to keep them running for the foreseeable future. In 1963 they were renumbered to become De4/5 Nos.791 – 796. From 1968 they found a new role. The BN versions, with driving trailers Nos.900 – 902 at the other end of a rake of flat wagons, powered the car shuttles through the Lötschberg Tunnel, and this proved to be their final role. BLS No.796 was relegated to light freight duties. In 1968 No.791 had an accident in Blausee – Mitholz station. It was evaluated as uneconomical to repair, and was scrapped in 1969. From 1st January 1970, the remaining BN examples were transferred to the BLS then, in December 1971, the transformer in No.795 burst. It was decided it was not economical to repair and the unit was scrapped in February 1972. The remaining machines were withdrawn, but the BLS number No.796 carried on. In 1987, (see photo) it was still performing useful work on light goods trains around Interlaken. It carried on with such services until December 1989.

In 1994 it went from the BLS to VVT (Vapeur Val de Travers) at St. Sulpice, Canton Neuchâtel. This is a purely steam line, and they only used No.796 for heating their trains, and no work was done on the bodywork, although a team of two mechanics from the BLS kept it in good mechanical condition. In 1997 it was exchanged for two badly needed coaches, with Classic Rail, who have it today. It languished at Le Locle until early 2014 when it was checked over and then moved through the Gotthard down to Biasca, in Ticino. As space at the depot there is at a premium, No.796 is sitting outside, with a tarpaulin over most of the roof. It is neglected for several reasons. As it is no longer anything like its original condition, it is not attractive to the Verkehrshaus, who have more exhibits than they can display anyway. Unlike the SBB the BLS have not been as active in saving their historic vehicles, and again, do not see that it is significant in the evolution of their motive power. This is unfortunate as No.796 represents an interesting type of vehicle, designed to operate economically on lightly loaded services, and is well worthy of preservation, and even eventual restoration to running condition, as it is powerful enough to pull several coaches. It is in need of quite a bit of work, and is deteriorating, but hopefully this oddity will be restored and will run again, after all, there surely cannot be too many machines around with an interestingly odd wheel arrangement - can there? 



1. De 4/5 793 at Kandersteg, 22 September 1977.

Photo: Bernhard Studer

2. 726 between Bern and Neuchâtel in the 1920s.

Photo: MFO / Collection Bernhard Studer

3. De 4/5 with an express train Bern – Paris, between Bern and Neuchâtel in the 1920s.

Photo: MFO / Collection Bernhard Studer

4. Armin Schmutz sent us these images of his model made by Metrop, may be 30 years ago, in brass HO and is no longer available.