Splügen Pass
– a journey made by Peter Keating in September 2015

MAIN PHOTO: The PostAuto at Soglio.
INSET PHOTOS: The bus to the pass and an Italian train at Chiavenna.
All photos: Peter Keating

Staying in Filisur and looking for a slightly different day using your Swiss Pass? Leave Filisur on the 09.02 service to St Moritz arriving at 09.55. At St Moritz transfer to the 10.21 PostAuto for Chiavenna and travel over the Maloja Pass alighting at Promontogno Posta at 11.20. Here transfer to the 11.22 local PostAuto to travel up through the sweet chestnut forests to Soglio (1,090m) a very old, small, but interesting mountainside village arriving at 11.34. The village sits on a sunny south facing mountain terrace overlooking the Val Bregaglia. After a look around return down to Promontogno on the 12.22 service arriving at 12.34, before continuing on the 13.22 PostAuto to Chiavenna which is just over the Italian Border, arriving here at 13.51. Chiavenna would make a suitable lunch stop, but you will need some Euros to eat or drink here. It would also be wise to carry your passport as you are passing through Italy, although it probably will not be required. From here take the Italian SPTS operated 14.40 PostAuto over the 2115m high Splügen Pass back into Switzerland and Splügen village where you arrive at 16.30. A Swiss PostAuto at 16.51 takes you on to Thusis arriving at 17.25 in time to connect with the 17.30 train back to Filisur, where you arrive at 18.00. A long, but potentially very enjoyable, day. A word of warning though, these schedules only work between mid-June and mid-October. The service over the Splügen Pass only operates three times daily in the summer and the pass is normally shut to all traffic during the winter.

MODELLING NEWS

Sta. Maria – Part 2
Martin Fisher continues his article on the construction of his RhB layout.

Track

I put track on trimmed cork sheet underlay to raise it slightly from the surrounding 'land'. I use Peco track and have never found any difficulty in doing so other than one point (pun intended), which I will describe in a moment. Obviously, one needs to ensure rails abut nicely at joints and that there are no nasty kinks, but that is no big deal especially if you are working to a sensible design that does not seek to 'bend the geometry'. All but the simplest Swiss stations seem to use double-slips and although I try to design-out complicated point-work I found I had to use a double-slip at Sta. Maria. Wiring it in proved difficult; by trial-and-error I achieved a workable solution but I'm not sure how I got there.

Wiring

The digital age has largely passed me by and I remain faithful to simple on-off switches in my layouts. While it would have been feasible to divide the track into fewer electrical sections, I prefer to have a separate section for any location where it might be necessary to isolate a loco while another is on the move. The platform roads at Sta. Maria are split in such a way that a loco can move onto the rear of an arrival even though the inbound loco may still be in position. One controller provides power to the locos, the other works the point motors. The control panel is beneath Sta. Maria, for obvious reasons, so some lengthy wires had to be run round from Valcava. On the control panel, switches are grouped for track sections (numbered) or points (lettered), a track diagram showing the relevant locations. Fiddle yard tracks are energised/isolated by switches there. Strictly, the layout should be signalled but I have to admit I find model signalling a bit pretentious. There are some signals on the layout but they were only placed as an afterthought, are not wired-in and are there simply for scenic effect. The Chairman (and several others) will be horrified!

Scenery

There were many elements to this. The first bit I did was to paint the sides of the rails in any new sections of track so that they became 'rusty'. Ballast, much of it recovered from successive layouts over the years, was sprinkled around the track, carefully spray-glued with a 50/50 mix of white glue and water and, once set, then checked to ensure all point blades went 'home' correctly and that no stray bits had stuck to the inner sides of running rails.

The principle I follow is to work from the back of a layout to the front although on "Sta. Maria" I did this in suitable sections. I began with the back-scene, using hardboard or stout card as the backing, supplemented by thinner card in corners where I needed to avoid awkward angles. The backing was fixed to various off-cuts of wood that would help to act as the base for scenery rising above the railway. I had to resort to short-cuts for the back-scenes. Commercial back-scenes, suitably trimmed, were used; so too, pictures from old calendars. It was surprising how many calendar views could be used, at least in part. Inevitably there were some problems with different shades of blue sky, mountainsides not lining up and so on. Most cases were hidden later behind model trees.

Rocks were mostly pieces of cork retailed for the purpose. Gentler slopes were based on a lattice of strips of cereal packets; the vertical pieces were secured top and bottom by glue or pins, the crosspieces loosely inter-laced. Bits of old newspaper, up to three pieces thick, were pasted over the lattice. Once dry, I glued pieces of proprietary grass roll over the newspaper. Streams or ponds were created by painting a variety of suitable colours onto the newspaper and then applying several coats of varnish. I tried to capture something of both Alpine grassland and woodland. You can probably never have too many trees, but they need to be grouped sensibly and ideally small ones should be at the back to help create an illusion of distance. A layout only really comes alive with people and animals, hopefully placed in life-like situations. And, this being 'Switzerland', there has to be at least one Post Bus connecting with the train.

Having done the scenery beyond the railway, I then bit the bullet and did the catenary. This is another bodge, albeit a very expensive one. People know that current is coming from the rails, yet a loco with a pantograph looks mildly absurd without wires above it. But I do not have the skill or patience to do the job properly so there are short cuts, which will be evident to many of you from David Stevenson's excellent photos. Again, the aim has been to create an illusion. In the stations, platforms went in before the catenary and were then covered over temporarily with bits of paper while the overhead wires were being fixed in place. Once the catenary was done, scenery along the near edge of the layout could follow.

Plastic kits from Faller, Kibri, etc. are excellent but inevitably scratch-building is required if basing a layout on a real place. As mentioned earlier, I had to try to mimic the station building at Scuol-Tarasp. Having taken various pictures I could prepare platform-side and end elevations on paper, which retained the overall proportion of the original and nearly all its doors and windows. I did not have the space to do the roadside frontage (the real building has a couple of protrusions there) so the back wall of the model is blank. I used artists' mounting board for the main walls, a base and an artificial 'roof' to complete the box once the walls were finished. The arrangement of doors and windows was drawn onto the board and then cut carefully with a sharp Stanley knife. Strips of card were glued on to represent windowsills etc. Where windows needed to be recessed, a suitable design was drawn on thin card and shaped accordingly. The window areas were painted black but slits were made in the sides of the mini-assemblies so that proprietary model glazing could be slotted in over the black background. The mini-assemblies were then stuck to the wall-backs. Humbrol paint was applied to the outsides of walls so that these resembled the colour scheme at Scuol-Tarasp. Medium-weight card was used to form the roof; strips of thin card were then laid in place to represent tiling and painted. Station names were drawn on in house-style and overprinted in biro (the light background helping here). A few commercial adverts, etc. were added. All done on a cheap-and-cheerful basis but, hopefully, the end result is reasonably life-like.

Stock

I have largely remained faithful to the 'green era' although there are exceptions with two red locos and some freight stock. No place for Ge4/4IIIs or "Allegras" though.

The future

The fiddle yard is to be re-positioned – over the "white goods" depicted in plan view in the diagram. This will allow another four feet or so of main line and a siding to provide additional freight traffic. ✚

Part 1 was in September's magazine.