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Different Times (continued)

Reader Alan Blackburn, a member of the Model Railway Club, shares his recollections of Swiss Railways in the 1950s.

1921 built Ce2/2 No 164 is in Bankverein on the then Line 5 from St. Louis Grenze to Bruderholz. This route disappeared in April 1968. The car lasted over four years longer being withdrawn in October 1972. All Photos: Bryan Stone, except where shown

Working for BR in the 1950s was not a very happy period. Our salary levels were low but one bright spot was our free passes that enabled us to travel the length and breadth of Europe. A number of us had discovered Belgium, Holland, Germany and, of course, Switzerland. Here were railways with money to invest and traffic to match, especially Switzerland. It was very inspiring to see that the railway really did have a future.

Our journeys invariably began with a long, slow and uncomfortable overnight journey across Northern France to Basel. At Basel one found civilisation as we knew it. Coffee and something to eat in that wonderful buffet. On the station the signal bells rang and six-coupled electric shunting engines dashed about. Each would be decorated with two or three shunting staff in "cowboy hats" and, if it was raining, umbrellas. It was all very exotic, as was the loose shunting of coaches complete with passengers.

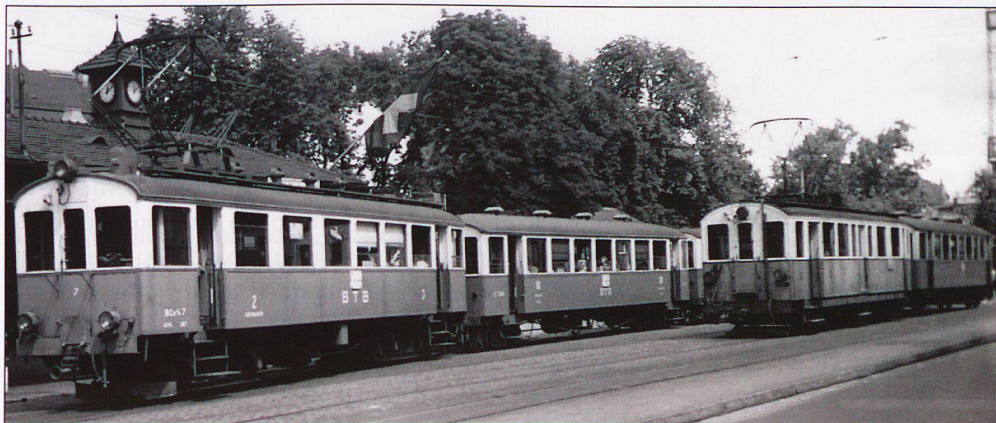
Having taken all this in we would then wander down the hill to inspect the Birsigthalbahn. There we would find one or two of the motor coaches standing and emitting that strange Swiss electric "hum". Possibly they would have one or two covered goods wagons in tow.

Up in the town the modern Swiss Standard trams went about their business attached to four-wheel trailers, the conductors making their way through the cars by way of end doors (*presumably, Alan is referring to the earlier four-wheeled cars as Swiss Standards did not have end doors – Ed*). All of course painted in a familiar Southern green. One could also see the yellow-painted Birseckbahn cars (Basel-Dornach) negotiating an incredibly sharp curve around their terminus, truly a sight to be seen.

Just down the road one could in those days look down on Basel "loco". All the electric locos were probably there but what interested us especially were the steam engines

of which Basel probably had a larger allocation than any other shed in the country. There one could see the little 0-6-0WTs

This is the 1950s scene that Alan remembers well. Heuwaage when it was the terminus of the Birsigthalbahn. The motor car on the left is 1923 built BCe 4/4 No 7 now preserved by Tramclub, Basel. It was not withdrawn from service until 1984, latterly operating vintage journeys to Rodersdorf.



(E3/3 Tigerli). More interesting were the bigger 0-8-0Ts rebuilt from 2-8-0 tender engines (the E4/4s). Then there were the strange 2-6-2Ts that had one tank larger than the other (Eb3/5 'Habersack'). King of the pecking order were

the big 2-10-0s (C5/6). There were always one or two of these about and they could be found at work in the docks working trains to and from MuttENZ marshalling yard. There were also some brown-painted diesel shunters but one rarely saw them at work.



We often went from Basel to Bern – another very interesting place. In those days the platforms were covered by corrugated iron awnings, the noise from the rain was not to be forgotten. In the street outside one found the terminus of the Bern-Solothurn Bahn. At this time it was not unusual to see milk churns being unloaded onto road vehicles surrounded by the capital's road traffic. In later years the line boasted buffet cars.

There were of course the Bern trams in their delightful cream and green livery. Across the town one found the terminus of the Bern to Worb line (Kornhausplatz). Not quite in the middle of the street but again likely to be



conveying milk churns in its motor cars. One day we were standing on the public area of Worb station as close as we could get to the adjacent workshops when we were approached by a gentleman in a brown dust jacket, who asked us in English (how is it the Swiss always know we are English?) whether we would like to see what he had in the works. Of course we said yes and were conducted around with everything explained. The railway at that time handled a lot of freight on transporter wagons and the gentleman was obviously very proud of a motor luggage locomotive that he was rebuilding.

Learning of our interest in the smaller railways he gave us his card and suggested that if we were to call at a certain office in Bern they would give us a book of some interest. This we did. Yes, they knew all about us and here was the book. I still have it. It lists every rail vehicle, tram, bus and trolley bus existing in Switzerland at the time, together with all their dimensions, brake arrangements and draw gear etc. The purpose of the book was to facilitate the borrowing of stock by those in need.

Luzern was of course of interest. A paddle steamer ride took one to the Stansstad Engelberg Bahn. One day at Engelberg we found ourselves on the last train which was full to capacity. No problem. Simply attach all the goods vans in the station and load them up with the station seats! Much of the overcrowding was caused by Italian construction workers building something in the mountains. I shall never forget the journey back to Luzern, the sun setting across the lake and the Italians bursting into song like a trained choir.

As an aside a fellow MRC member, the late Barry Harper, wanted to build a model of one of the SEB's motor cars. He wrote to them and in due course received a drawing and a swatch with the colours painted on it. Would he please take great care of the drawing as it was the only one they had!

Another experience of singing passengers took place on a journey from Bern to Interlaken. The train had a fair



1. Here BCe 4/4 No 7 is calling at Therwil with a youthful Bryan Stone on the right.

2. Alan also sought out the Birseckbahn with its yellow liveried vehicles. Here 1916 built Be 2/4 No 11 is seen on the single-track section at Arlesheim circa 1967. This car was withdrawn in 1972.


Photo: Hans-Peter Bärtschi ©ETH-Zürich

3. At Bahnhofplatz Swiss Standard 415 has arrived on Line 4 and changed to Line 1 for Voltaplatz and Mustermesse. These two lines were joined from 1951 to 1986. This car was one of the first batch of Swiss Standards delivered to Basel in 1948 and 1949. It was withdrawn in May 1997.

string on, the latest lightweight bogie stock at the front and two or three old four and six wheeled cars at the back. We of course elected to ride in these, something the guard did not appreciate when coming back to check tickets. However luckily he remembered we were there when the train reached Thun. He came back to tell us that the train was terminating there due to a line blockage and we were to continue our journey by boat. Well we all got on the boat and some passengers began to sing. All very jolly until the captain came on the public address system and requested that the singing stop. Apparently a passenger had complained that this was not an excursion steamer but a "line journey", i.e. a normal booked sailing.

In due course we pulled up at a very light landing stage at the bottom of someone's garden. We all trooped up the side of the garden, across the road, jumped a ditch and climbed into a three car EMU. To say the train was overcrowded was to say the least of it. We found ourselves behind the driver's cab, in the company of what I thought at the time were nuns but I have since been told they were probably nurses in uniform. The driver had to gain entry to his cab through a side window. He was obviously very fit. No Waterloo man would have done that!

Swiss Railways are still very interesting but much has changed. So much current stock is very similar and there are sound walls to spoil the view. Perhaps modern enthusiasts do not realise what they have missed.

(Postscript: Sadly, Alan Blackburn passed away in May not long after submitting this article. Alan was not an SRS member, although he was in the society's earlier days. He was a prominent MRC member, accomplished modeller and latterly Chairman of the Isle of Wight Steam Railway. - Editor) 



4. C5/6 No 2953 at Basel Loco. King of the pecking order in Alan's view.

5. Another Basel Loco scene. E4/4 No 8901 (rebuilt from C4/5 No 2601) was a type that caught Alan's attention as did the diesel shunters. To the left is Em 3/3 heavy diesel shunter 18840 built 1963.

6. Alan and his friends often went to Bern and were well received on the Vereinigte Bern-Worb-Bahnen which at that time started from stations at Kornhausplatz (via Worblental) and Kirchenfeld (via Gümligen). The former station is seen here in

VBW days.

7. VBW BDe 4/4 No 39 at Worb Dorf station from where Alan and his friends were invited to visit the workshops. Built in 1919, No 39 had seats for only 16 passengers.

8. A real 1950s scene at Interlaken West. 1913 vintage BLS Be 5/7 No 152 is entering the station. On their introduction this 13-strong class were said to be the world's most powerful electric locomotives. On the left can be seen SEZ (Spiez - Erlenbach - Zweisimmen) Ce 4/6 No 307 built 1920.