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My first trip to Switzerland by John Atkinson

I meant to write this rather sooner after arriving home so that it might be more topical. It would certainly be a complete contrast to the very informative and knowledgeable items that appear in *Swiss Express* but at least the intervening period has enabled me to do a little research and be slightly more specific than simply writing about green, red, blue, and brown engines.

In October last year I knew virtually nothing of Switzerland or its railways. I knew where Basel was in relation to the rest of the country and that the Simplon and Gotthard were on the way south to Italy but that was about it. I had read a little about the BLS as a result of being fascinated by the brown electric loco depicted on a postcard sent to me by Peter Jiggins some time ago so I probably knew more about this line than all the others in Switzerland put together but even then, that didn't amount to much.

Around the middle of October, my wife and two daughters decided that they would like to visit Switzerland. (I had received a small windfall and they thought they would help me spend it. They succeeded.) Local travel agents were horrendously expensive and no use to me and the admittedly vague ideas I had in mind. At the same time, I was frantically boning up on Swiss

subjects in *Eisenbahn Mag*, *Eisenbahn Kurier* and back issues of *Swiss Express*, picking the brains of fellow members of the GRS who were also in the SRS, notably Garth Ponsonby, and studying maps. Eventually, I thought of Ffestiniog Travel. Within 48 hours they had it sorted and phoned me. Their suggestion was Heathrow to Genf (or, if you prefer, Genève), Swiss passes for my wife and myself, which also covered our daughters (13 and 15), and half board in Brig at the Hotel Alpina. 'Brig', I thought, 'that's on the BLS; that'll do'. So it was that we touched down at around 11.00h on Saturday 25 October.

My wife and daughters had a heavy case each in addition to their hand luggage. My case was even heavier, being expandable and containing mostly what they couldn't get in theirs. In addition, I had my camera bag and, after much thought, had also brought along my heavy 1987-vintage video camera. We staggered to the Brig-bound 'Geneva Airport Express', bouncing a recalcitrant luggage trolley from wall to wall. Our train consisted of green Re4/4^{II} 11335 and a motley collection of EWIs in SBB and various BLS liveries; a couple were lettered BN and GBS. I gained the impression on my first Swiss journey that stations of any size, certainly those at which

we stopped, had their own connecting narrow-gauge system or tramway. I baled out somewhere and hurriedly took my first photo of a Swiss train. (With luck, someone will some day tell me where it was.) On the approaches to Brig, assisted by the sight of a distant descending red 460, I managed to spot the BLS line long before the large letters on the hillside came into view but in doing so, completely missed the BVZ on the other side of our train.

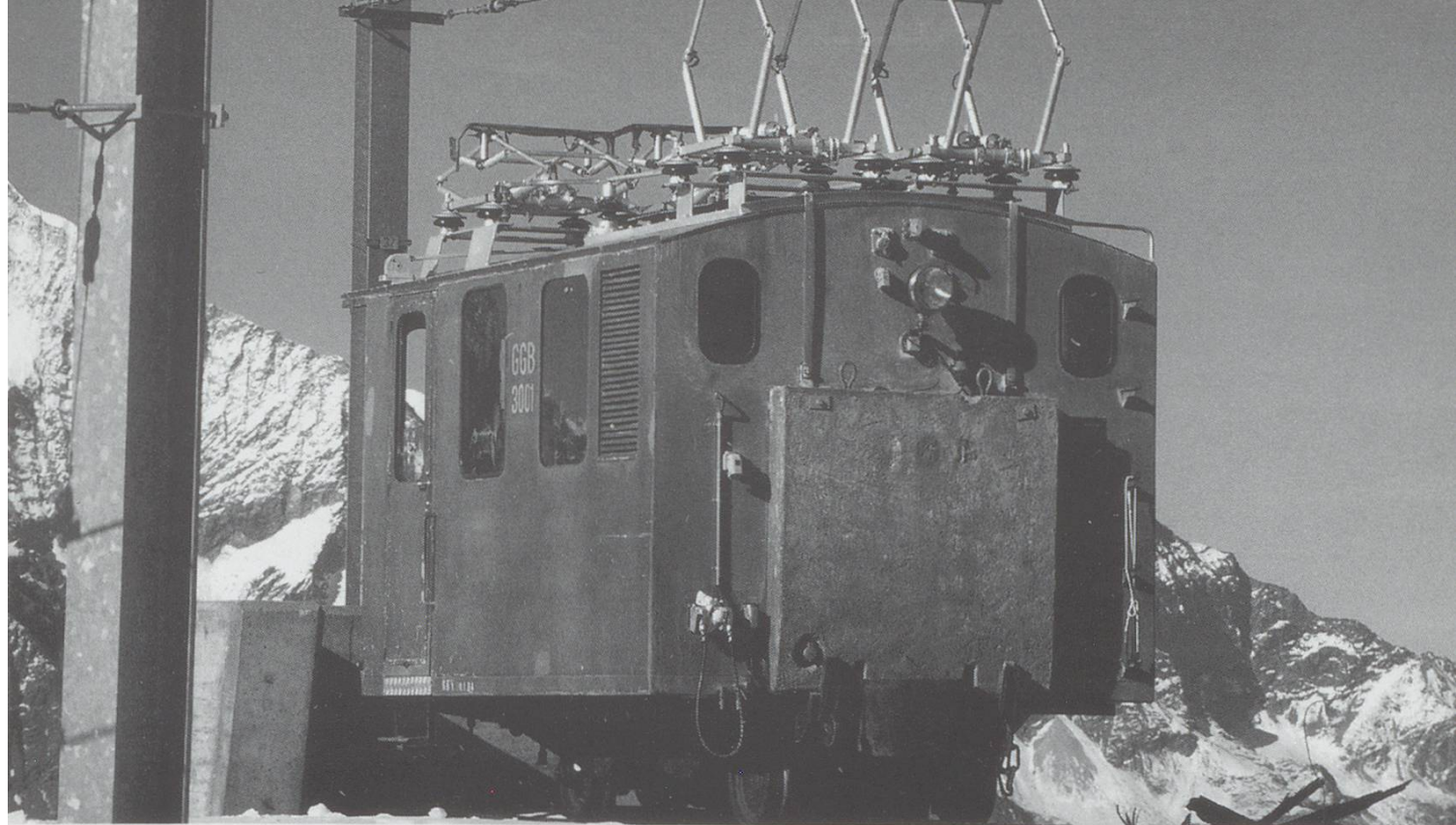
We duly arrived, my family keen to locate our hotel, while I tried not to think about what I might miss while we did so and to work out how long it would be before I could get back to the station. We dumped our luggage at the Hotel Alpina and, having made sure my family knew how to find me, I took off alone. The sun was out (we had brilliant weather for the whole week) though the shadows were longer than I would have liked.

BLS Re4/4s and 465s were duly photographed at the depot and station and I saw the first of several 460s in advertising liveries. I have mixed feelings about these liveries. They certainly introduce variety and some seem aesthetically pleasing, particularly those with a single base colour and an appropriate slogan; for example, the green 460 074, 'Who has the most trailers?'. A certain amount of thought also seems to have gone into 460 022 (TCS) with its red bands on the lower cab sides. Some other liveries look plain daft to me. One loco showed a cow chasing a dog and another, advertising a Zürich insurance company, depicted flustered hens and a cockerel looking pleased with himself. (It can only be conjectured what the firm is prepared to insure one against.) Still, if there's money in it, I suppose 'Who pays the piper ...'. I have recently read that SLM originally intended to use a 460 to mark their 125th Anniversary but it was too expensive. The BLS then agreed to relax their no-advertising rule as an exception; hence 465 001. The TSR livery on 460 015 looked reasonable and I managed to get a decent shot of this before my family turned up at about 15.30h to ask what we were going to do next, it being too late in the day to go any distance.

I had been keeping my eyes open while wandering about the station so, having paused to photograph a northbound freight triple headed by two 465s and a red Re6/6, I suggested we go to Italy as we had not been there before either.

Once I had convinced them that we would be back in time for our evening meal, we boarded the Regionalzug for Domodossola (henceforth, D'la). This consisted of green Re4/4^{II} 11327 and a push-pull rake formed of three EWI seconds, a Leichtstahl first (it had a green roof and looked ex-works but had the old-style logo) and a Steuerwagen that looked like a converted Gepäckwagen; the cab end was plain green. Of course, we weren't at D'la for very long, the light was going fast and not much happened so I did not find it that exciting but it was still worth while. Apart from FS subjects I photographed the train we arrived in returning to Brig, loco pulling, a red Re6/6 no. 11634, and watched a triple-465-headed freight pass north through the far side of the yards. It was going quite quickly so the locos must have been changed somewhere south of the station. The light having gone and my family being less than impressed with D'la and its environs, we returned to Brig in an EC composed of FS stock and hauled by 11634.

Prudence directed that I should allow my family to decide what we should do on the following day (Sunday) so we travelled the BVZ to Zermatt, our faces glued to the windows most of the way, and then up to Gornergrat. Having experienced steam-operated narrow-gauge lines in Poland and East Germany in the 1970s I have to say I found the BVZ to be completely different and began to understand why I have seen so much Bemo stock on layouts at various exhibitions. (In future I shall look at these more closely.) The weather remained brilliant and I found myself walking about on snow and ice at the top of a mountain in my shirtsleeves. We travelled up to Gornergrat in 1993-built Bhe4/8 unit no. 3054 and having reached the summit, in addition to the odd scenic shot and some video, Bhe2/4 no. 3017 and unit no. 3001 were duly photographed. The latter was parked on a level spur at Gornergrat, had four wheels, four panfographs and what looked like a large concrete slab bolted to one end. (Could this have been an 1898-vintage He2/2?) I video'd most of the descent to Zermatt through the front window of Bhe4/8 no. 3042. On the return journey to Brig the possibility of visiting on Monday some waterfalls somewhere or other was discussed by my family. (They would keep picking up tourist leaflets!) I didn't much like the sound of this until I realised where the Trümmelbachfälle were and



how we would have to get there. I agreed, but not too enthusiastically, on condition I could have a day's grace to myself on Tuesday.

On Monday we duly headed up the Lötschbergbahn to Spiez. Our train consisted of what seemed to be a standard IC push-pull EWIV formation: a 460 at the Brig end, an ex-SNCF Gepäckwagen, four firsts and six seconds, the last being a Steuerwagen, heading the train up the hill. Later in the week I noticed on different occasions a fifth first-class coach and from one to four additional seconds added to these IC push-pull rakes on the BLS line. If the train was travelling south to Brig the last of the extra coaches would not necessarily be a Steuerwagen but if travelling north it obviously had to be. This meant that some northbound trains had two Steuerwagen and explained the two or three second-class EWIV, with Steuerwagen facing north, sometimes parked in Brig station. There would sometimes also be a restaurant/buffet car inserted between the first- and second-class sections.

To a certain extent I knew what to expect on the ascent from Brig and was able to tell my family on which side of the train to sit; even so, the view blew my mind. This is certainly the most spectacular standard-gauge line I have been on. In the unlikely event that anyone reading this has not travelled it or has not visited Switzerland yet, I

have to say 'make sure you go to Brig on the BLS'. Knowing what I know now, and on my own, I would have travelled from Genf to Montreux then Zweisimmen–Spiez–Brig, and made a descent first. It reminded me of circling Heathrow before landing. To say that I immensely enjoyed travelling the route I had previously only read about or seen illustrated would be pure litotes and I made up my mind I would have to do it again. At Frutigen I was amazed to see DBAG's 128 001. (I have since realised that most German or Austrian prototypes are tested on the BLS.) I made a mental note of the location of the works at Spiez before we changed there into an emu bound for Interlaken Ost.

We missed the connection at Interlaken Ost and had 50 minutes or so to spare. My family went off to look at some boats. I stayed to do a little videoing and get a nice shot of the Brunig line's 101 965. On their return my younger daughter asked me why all the trains were called Bob and I explained that BOB were the initials of the railway company. Fortunately, she didn't ask me at the time what they stood for. We duly left in a chocolate and cream metre-gauge emu for Lauterbrunnen. I must confess that my memory of this journey is a little hazy. On the way I noticed some very narrow-gauge tracks and some curious four-wheeled locomotives. I think this must have been the Wengernalpenbahn. Having reached our destination by train we had to get a bus to get to the



was still spectacular.

On Tuesday 28th I took off on my own for Zürich. At Frutigen I looked out for 128 001 and it was still there, on one of the freight lines, a Meßwagen between it and a 465. I also looked out for Spiez Works and saw the roofs of all manner of unidentifiable and exotic (to me) locos, including the unmistakable rounded ends of an Ae6/8. The train duly reversed at Berne and then it was off over the Aare bridge I have seen on so many videos. During the course of the journey I glimpsed through the window several green Re4/4^I (in the Berne area), red and green Ae6/6, with and without the chrome whiskers, and the oddest-looking (to me) electric Triebwagen(s). At Zürich I video'd almost everything that moved and photographed everything that didn't from the end of one of the longer platforms. I saw no Ae6/6 here but, as one would expect, plenty of Re6/6 including the prototype 11601. Everything was new to me so I shall not bore members by recounting everything but restrict my observations to what struck me as slightly unusual and possibly worth recording. I was surprised to see a number of SBB coaches still in orange Eurofima livery, including a restaurant car, and some RIC coaches still in green; a fair number of EW I and II still carried the old logo. Then there was an Re4/4^{II} in Swiss Express livery, travelling light, and a similarly liveried train of EW III stock, with Steuerwagen, arrived headed by a green Re4/4^{II}.

Previous page & above: Gornegrat Bahn old and new He2/2 and Bhe 4/8 3053. Photos: Author

I also saw for the first time the FS dual-current Nei-tech 'Cisalpino' emus. Then there was the two-tone grey, ex-TEE, six-car emu, two-tone mauve and grey restaurant/buffet cars that seemed to be converted EW III stock and the silver 460 Jubiläumslok that played havoc with my video's light meter. (I think this loco has now been re-liveried.)

I must have stood on this platform for several hours and eventually began to notice the wind. The comfort of an EW IV seemed appealing so I decided to return to Brig and break my journey. Bern seemed not to be too easy as a photographic location and was in shadow; I pressed on to Spiez. By the time I left the train, with an hour to the next IC, the light had gone so I wandered up to the new footbridge, watched the trains for a bit and bethought myself. Having thunk, I made for the depot, found what I assumed to be the general office and introduced myself in my unique version of German to an extremely attractive and quite charming young lady. (I did not at the time have the entrée of SRS membership.) She asked me to wait while she made a phone call and then said that a driver would come and take me on a conducted tour round the works. After what seemed like ages but was probably a couple of minutes he arrived and off we went.



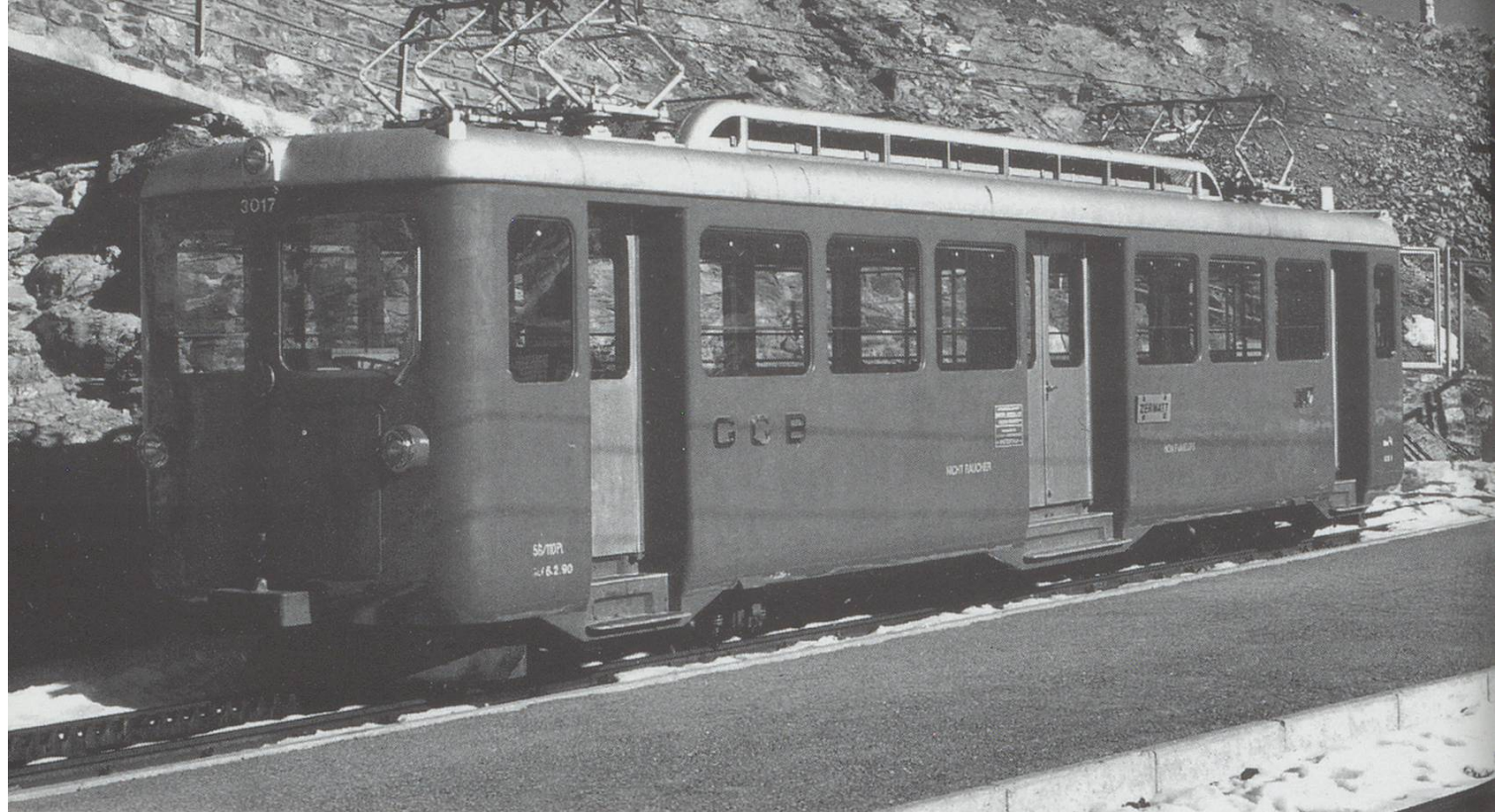
Above: RBe4/4 1401 used as staff shuttle at Brig station.

I was almost beside myself. In the works I photographed, with the aid of flash, Ce4/6 no. 307 and Ce4/4 no. 316; outside, again with flash, Ae8/8 no. 275, Ae4/4 no. 252 and, at the far end against the buffer stops, the famous no. 205. I think there were other Ae4/4s but did not note any numbers. I do not converse very often in German and it usually makes me perspire. (My excitement was such that I would probably have been incoherent in English.) What with checking my cameras and flashgun, keeping an eye on my watch and trying to take it all in I had to ask my guide to slow down a bit as I was having problems understanding what he was saying. He smiled and said that I was using 'proper' German (?) and they usually didn't speak it round here. I had to laugh and commented that where I come from we don't usually speak proper English either. I prepared to take my leave and put my gear away and then came the most remarkable thing of all; Ce4/4 no. 313 arrived on shed 'in steam'. I did not have the presence of mind to ask where it might have been or what it might have been doing so if anyone would care to hazard a guess With the aid of flash on full power and 800ASA film I managed a couple of very passable shots.

I eventually reluctantly took my leave, legged it back to the station and collapsed into an EWIV, tired, dirty, hungry, thirsty and with arms aching from schlepping cameras about but content that I had seen and photographed much more than I had

hoped for or even knew existed. I prepared for the descent in darkness to Brig and in a moment of euphoric magnanimity decided that on the following day I would let my family decide what we should do. Over dinner that evening I discovered that they had picked up a leaflet at Brig station about the BLS Erlebnis Pfad. I didn't have a clue what this was all about but soon found out. Keeping my fingers crossed and my mouth shut, except to agree, it was decided that tomorrow (Wednesday) we would go to Kandersteg and go for a walk.

Far more informative material on these Pfade has appeared in *Swiss Express* already than I can contribute so I'll confine myself to recounting that we left Kandersteg station, crossed under the line, turned right and set off on our merry way to Blausee Mitholz. When we arrived there five hours later we weren't quite so merry. Having rested for a bit at the station and worked out which way the trains were going, off we went again towards Frutigen. As far as I am concerned the best bit was from the steel staircase, then down alongside the line to Kandergrund. By then, another three hours had elapsed and it was almost dusk so we headed for Kandergrund church and caught a bus to Frutigen. The walk itself was a bit like the Curate's coconut, hairy in parts. You would have to



Above: Bhe 2/4 3017 at Gornergrat.

Photo: Author

be pretty unlucky to hurtle to a certain death but it's easy enough to slip and sprain an ankle and there are more convenient places to do it. Two days after we undertook this jaunt the Pfad was closed for the winter and I look back on it much as I did on demob from National Service; I'm glad I did it but there is no way I am doing it again. (I might try Frutigen–Kandergrund and the south ramp seems tempting but first I have to get back to Switzerland!)

On Thursday 30th I went off on my own again to use my cameras on the line I had travelled the previous day. Before leaving Brig I took a number of shots including RBe4/4 no. 1401. I have since read (*Swiss Express*, June 1995, p. 16), that this unit was one of six adapted for operating the Luzern–Lenzburg line. I don't remember seeing it move but I'm sure it was in use from a short bay at the north end of the station and not simply dumped there. From my photo, the pantograph end seems to be plain red but the other end is half red and half yellow, with an orange band across the lower yellow half. Then there was a quaint-looking orange BLS service loco with the number 31. According to EK Themen no. 17, *BLS Teil 2*, this is one of two locos (the other being 32) classified Te2/3 and rebuilt from two 1925-vintage CFe 2/6 Triebwagen numbered 784–5. I decided to head for Frutigen and try a shot of 128 001, if it was still there, so off I went back up that hill again.

As the train arrived at Frutigen I was relieved to see 128 001, attached to its Meßwagen and a 465, still in the same place that I had seen it on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. I made my way down the subway to the island platform, strolled to my location and put down my bags. As I did so it left. By the time I had got my camera out and a telephoto fitted, it had all but disappeared into the distance. English or German being quite inappropriate, I cursed heartily in Arabic. (I didn't waste my time in the army; Arabic curses sound very impressive.) Frutigen was shrouded in a damp mist and not far from being foggy so I resolved to return to Kandersteg, which had been bathed in sunshine on my way up. Feeling better, I photographed a red BLS four-wheeled Traktor numbered Tem 225 046-2 parked at a loading bay and two 465s double heading a north-bound freight. A few minutes before my train was due I started to put my gear away. As I did so, 128 001 and its ensemble returned and parked in exactly the same spot it had left from. (That Arabic is powerful stuff.) I took my shots and spent the rest of the day in the sunshine at Kandersteg.

(To be continued)