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Mike's layouts are well known and much liked for several reasons. First and foremost they entertain; so many layouts forget this at exhibitions. The public, including me, like to see something moving all the time. Secondly they work; the trains go where they should, the crossing gates rise and bells ring. Thirdly Mike and his team keep a sense of proportion and humour; they actually look as though they are enjoying it. Fourthly there is always something to see; hikers, bodies under cars, little cameos that hold your attention. Lastly Mike has a go. I have always liked the imagination behind the layouts he creates, trains and locos that if they don't exist ought to. Great stuff and it will be sadly missed. Mind you *San Giacomo* is on the circuit now, so there will still be loads to enjoy.

"Via Mala" has retired. Sunday 28th October 2001 at Colchester saw the last exhibition appearance of a layout that has given much pleasure to its viewers, operators and owner, Mike Polglaze.

During its lifetime, the layout has attended rather a lot of exhibitions. Mike has kept tabs on the numbers, although I have lost count of the number of exhibitions in which I have been an operator.

Several things I will always remember, though. One is the sheer pleasure of driving trains up and down the not-inconsiderable gradients (and you really had to drive – no opening the controller and let 'em run on this layout). Another is the huge variety of appreciative comments from exhibition visitors, comments well deserved, as Mike was forever dreaming up more details and set pieces to attract and hold people's attention. Perhaps most significant has been the tremendous good humour, both when things went right and when they didn't.

Probably the most commonly asked question has been if the trains pick up off the overhead. Behind the layout was a set of answers to various questions. This particular question was number 1, 3, 5 and 7, with answers that developed from polite to..... well, the last answer was not so polite.

During its life, "Via Mala" has won several "best of show" awards. There is a host of differences between the "best layout" as determined

by professionals and that voted for by the visitors to the exhibition. This is inevitable, as the professionals are looking for technical excellence, whereas the viewers are more concerned with whether the layout looks good. It was a mark of just how good was "Via Mala" that the public at Colchester voted it the layout they liked best. This was despite the venerable lady showing distinct signs of her age – temperamental just wasn't a strong enough word for some of the tricks she played on us.

Mike has always been a strong supporter of the Swiss Railways Society, and has encouraged interested visitors to join. I wonder how many of our members have joined after seeing "Via Mala"? The Society owes much of its strength to the interest engendered by layouts such as this.

"Via Mala" has now gone into well-deserved retirement. I shall miss it. I shall miss making the "Wegerhaus" shunt, a challenge at the best of times. I shall miss leaving a few vehicles in the station to confound the next operators. Most of all, I shall miss the illusion of reality that was possible by coasting down the grade towards a red signal, then easing off on the brakes when the signal cleared. Thankfully, the layout will not be broken up, but is going to Mike's son in Germany, who intends to incorporate it into his own layout.

Thank you, Mike, for so much.

JOHN JESSON

AND NOW A WORD FROM OUR SPONSOR



THE VERY LAST TRAIN - Driven by Mike, the oldest loco - 610 'Via Mala' hauling the oldest stock and shown at the bottom of the spiral entering the last tunnel for the last time.

Photo: John Jesson

Via Mala was planned in 1986 (which included a visit to the gorge), was built in 1987 and did its first exhibition at Kidlington in January 1988. Little did I think that in January 1998 it would celebrate its 10th birthday at the same venue. The figures that follow include its final exhibition at Colchester on 27/28 October 2001.

Between 1988 and 2001 it has crossed the Channel 14 times, 2 crossings per trip, and all being well, make its 15th in December when it goes to its retirement home in Germany, where my son, David, will take it over and give it a permanent home. David actually designed the layout during his spare time with the Royal Engineers at Chatham; he then got a posting to Germany, leaving Dad to build the thing! He

had to wait until January 1993 to operate the layout at an exhibition. Where else but Kidlington!

The longest trip it has done was in March 2001 when it went to Neumunster, North Germany, a round trip of 1402 miles. Its shortest trip was 1/4 a mile each way to our village fete in 1989! The present layout is not how it was built. The original had two sets of hidden sidings one above the other and no linking line, in other words an end to end. What a pain that was. This was all changed by mid 1989 in time for its appearance at IMREX 89, when the spiral and present hidden sidings were built and the length reduced by 6"

Other changes that have been made over the years include all the points being converted

to John Jesson hand built ones. It was at Bristol in 1991 that we had trouble with the new curved point at Wegerhaus, leading into the dairy, and JJ was seen making a "brass rubbing" of it and a couple of weeks later a beautiful hand built curved point arrived. That was the start and gradually over the years all have been converted. During 1991 Pat Butler completely rewired the front boards, which included building a new control panel. Then in 1993 he did the same for the hidden sidings.

Over the years, like the RhB, stock has changed from green to red, fortunately David models the green period, so I have had a ready home for spare "grünloks" and stock. Via Mala did its first trip to the continent in October 1996, to Bochum, and that was the start of the continental runs. The highlight, for me was taking it to Dortmund in 1998.

Over the years a lot of people have helped me in many ways, mainly as operators and to all of them, they know who they are, may I say

thank you very much as without your help Via Mala, would not have been what it became.

So what are the statistics?

Exhibitions	83
No of days	162
Hours run	11223
Miles travelled	17560
(or, if you prefer,	28259.3km)
Times loaded and unloaded	332
(No wonder I suffer from backache!)	

So that very briefly is a potted history of Via Mala, I trust you can make some sense out of it. For me it has been an experience I would not have missed. It has given me many hours of pleasure, and a few of heartache. I shall miss it but I know it is going to a good home and I shall be able to "play" with it whenever I visit Dave's home. I have had offers to buy it but could not bring myself to selling it to a stranger; I would rather have broken it up.

MIKE POLGLAZE



STRANGE BUT TRUE

Ron Smith took the pictures

The "Dampfibia" sculpture is beside the lake in Küssnacht am Rigi.

The plaque about the Queen's opening the airport station is next to the booking office in Zürich Flughafen subterranean station - not a lot people know that!

