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SWISS RAILWAY BUILDINGS

Christopher Lacey



Goschenen freight shed. How much would it cost to dismantle this wooden building and re-assemble elsewhere?

PHOTOS: Christopher Lacey

Within Britain, considerable interest is shown in the preservation of vernacular buildings with museums, such as the Weald and Downland in West Sussex, established in order to promote further interest in the subject. As many readers will have observed during their travels in Switzerland, many regional variations in architecture are found within the country and the excellent Ballenberg Open-Air Museum fulfils a similar role to that of the Sussex museum, holding examples of traditional Swiss domestic and agricultural buildings (www.ballenberg.ch). Buildings, however, also derive from an industrial origin with those of a railway background falling into this category. In Britain some of those structures, which would otherwise have disappeared at the end of their operational lives, have been saved and have a 'second life' at one of the many preserved railways.

My interest in the buildings of Swiss railways stems from the 2005 Yverdon Works Open Day, where part of a structure in the complex was seen to have been constructed from wooden planks recovered from scrapped freight wagons, with many of the planks still displaying the evidence of their former identities. In the present climate, any form of re-cycling is to be commended and SBB have taken this process further with their On-Line shop selling holdalls manufactured from canvas wagon sheets (www.cffshop.ch). In addition to rolling stock, it appears this re-cycling policy has recently (September 2006) spread to real estate, with advertisements at some stations (Moutier, Spiez) providing details of buildings now available for letting after they have been declared surplus to requirements.

Some buildings are clearly of more

intrinsic value than others. The on-station buffet, complete with a regular clientele, or the freight shed offering easy road/rail interchange, is much more likely to attract interest than the water tower, engine shed or signal box. Although these latter possess interesting characteristics in their own right, they usually suffer from problems concerning accessibility and future use. How many people would choose to live in a converted signal box, next to a busy main line when there are so many other more attractive locations available within the country? In addition, the overall cost and effort required in preserving even a simple railway hut for use at another location might be deemed excessive when similar sheds may be purchased at the local garden centre. It is therefore probable that many such buildings, which are still a fairly common sight throughout the Swiss rail network, will disappear before their value has been fully appreciated, or before they have been documented and recorded, and almost certainly before any preservation group can secure either a suitable site on which to rebuild or sufficient funding and volunteer interest to realise the project.

Regular visitors to Switzerland will be aware of the continuing programme of improvements being carried out across the rail network, under the Rail 2000 banner. These works, although satisfying the indigenous population, the politicians and perhaps looking to a myriad of future European legislation, are themselves also helping to speed this process of change and many will probably have observed



Moutier. The disused depot and water tower. What future do such buildings have?

Moutier. There are two signal boxes at this location. This is the north box, where the lines to Basel and Solothurn diverge.





Regional examples of railway huts:

TOP: Yverdon in the south-east

BOTTOM: Rorschach in the north-east.



changes at their favourite location. The proposed remodelling of Interlaken Ost Station, for example, will lead to the demise of a number of railway related buildings in order to enhance operating efficiency within the station area. However, the outlook is not all doom and gloom; one project that may well save a variety of buildings is the proposed 'Locorama' museum at Romanshorn, a collection to be based at the disused six road engine shed. This project will also incorporate the 'Romanshorn II' Signal box, dating from 1912 and reputed to be one of the oldest in Europe (*Today's Railways Europe 127 - P60*). But just how many

museums need to be established and how many buildings need to be saved? In a similar way to Cantonal variations of style and construction that exist between domestic and agricultural buildings, so the same is true of industrial buildings, with different railway companies constructing buildings in their own distinctive style. The freight shed, a feature found at most railway stations, is one particular type of building that may illustrate both regional and constructional differences.

Although the Swiss Museum of Transport in Lucerne holds much material concerning the development of electrification and rolling stock within the country, it has less coverage of railway buildings. Is the Ballenberg Open-Air Museum the right place to display buildings from a railway context, or could the SBB depot at Erstfeld, suggested as the location for the Gotthard heritage museum, widen its remit and include a collection? Such a scheme might however keep the visitors coming, combining a ride on the Gotthard route with a

series of exhibitions focusing on the development of the station and associated railway infrastructure. Alternatively, a photographic collection could perhaps provide the answer, with examples of the different styles and types of buildings found within the various railway companies' operating area being collated in order to form a lasting pictorial record, which might later incorporate the ground plans and dimensions of the featured buildings.

What is almost certain is that any future preservation schemes that involve railway buildings will depend largely upon limited finances, whether land is available on which the buildings can be rebuilt and ultimately whether such schemes can attract enough public interest. Whilst SBB Historic has a good collection of locomotives and rolling stock, does it also have a policy concerning railway buildings? Additionally, Society members are probably aware of many other railway related buildings that could be of considerable architectural interest and it would certainly be valuable to know what personal views, either photographic or otherwise, members may hold on the subject of railway buildings and their preservation.



Interlaken Ost. This building will probably disappear in any future development.

Romanshorn II signal box. It is hoped to incorporate this building in the future 'Locorama' museum.

