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THE SEETALBAHN

Bryan Stone traces the history of a line which has survived against all the odds.



A motor luggage van with train at Mosen in 1987.

Photo: Stephen Sainsbury

Many Swiss railways are remarkable. Some are spectacular; some steep; some scenic; and some simply very busy. The Seetalbahn is none of these things. However, it is the only SBB line which is (still) mostly a roadside light railway, its life hanging by a thread for many years, whilst it had an unenviable record of murderous accidents at its hundreds of level crossings. But perhaps the most remarkable features are that it might never have been built, and that when it was, it was built by an English finance company, with its board in London, and only taken into the SBB in 1922.

The Seetalbahn currently runs from Lenzburg in Kanton Aargau to Emmenbrücke north of Luzern. Between 1895 and 1984 it had a 4 km extension north to Wildegg, whilst a 3 km branch from Beinwil-am-See to Menziken was built privately in 1887, and absorbed in 1906 when it was extended by 4.9 km to Beromünster. This branch passed to the Wynental-und Suhrentalbahn (WSB, now the AAR) in 1995 and was finally closed and lifted in 2000 with the exception of the section between Reinach Mitte and Menziken which is still operated by the AAR. Of the Seetalbahn's full length of 54.2km only 40.7km remain - that they exist at all is remarkable.

Its history goes back to fear in Lenzburg in the mid-19thC that they were missing out on the transport revolution, and that new trade with Italy would come with a through rail route. The Swiss Centralbahn (SCB), built in 1858 from Basel to Luzern as part of Robert Stephenson's 1850 rail strategy report to the Confederation with its planned crossroads in Olten, preferred an alignment through Menznau

to Luzern, where steamers made the link to Flüelen for the Gotthard pass. This was a defeat for the Lenzburgers, who already in 1851 had declared "...the connection of the Aare valley should take no other route than the Hallwil Lake Valley". There had been more at stake. Potential connections to Zürich from Waldshut (where the first rail Rhein crossing from Germany was opened in 1856), and a planned line from Basel via the Bözberg all threatened the SCB investment on the direct Basel - Olten line, so the SCB went ahead to link Olten to Luzern via Zofingen. Meantime the 1858 Olten-Brugg Nordostbahn (NOB) line would go through Wildegg bypassing Lenzburg, where defeat sat badly as they still had no railway. An 'Aargauer Westbahn' project came and died and it was only in 1874 that the Nationalbahn route between Rapperswil, Lenzburg and Wohlen opened - and at once went bankrupt. However, in 1874 a serious plan emerged. This was for a new CHF6.1m Seetalbahn, planned as a mainline from Aarau to Luzern; it would be independent of NOB and SCB, its consortium included the Bernese-Jura-Bahn as builder and operator. Then everything melted in the heat of the financial crisis of the 1870s, which brought railway building throughout Switzerland to a stop.

The German/Swiss/Italian treaties of 1869 to 1871 (following 20-years of wrangling) that secured political and financial agreement on the Gotthard as the main transalpine route, along with its approaching opening in 1882, led to renewed interest in Lenzburg. At this point Theo Lutz of the original Seetal Committee succeeded in obtaining financial support in London for a route for transit traffic between

Waldshut and Schaffhausen in the north and the Gotthard in the south, via Lenzburg and Hallwil. In May 1881 the "Lake Valley Railway of Switzerland" was registered in London, with a capital of £150,000 (CHF3.75m), land for the route was to be provided free, whilst each affected Commune would give CHF300,000. An English contractor, Jackson and Co, would build the railway on the Kantonal highway along the Seetal, for which the railway would pay rental and maintenance. This was Lutz's idea and was a very odd arrangement. The company was chaired by the Hon. Ashley Ponsonby, long-time MP for Cirencester, a Captain of Grenadier Guards and deputy Lord Lieutenant of Gloucestershire. Other British Directors were Messrs Atkey and Edenborough along with a Col. Macnamara and a J. M. Stanford who was listed as a Director of the Bedford and Northampton Railway. The National Provincial Bank in London joined the Aargauer Kreditanstalt as financiers. The concession was granted and building started in April 1882. Work was completed remarkably rapidly and it opened throughout between Lenzburg and Emmenbrücke in October 1883 using four steam locomotives (E3/3 No 3 'Beinwil' is still operational), three passenger coaches, two luggage vans and 32 freight wagons.

Inevitably there was a huge gap between expectations and reality. The British Prospectus read "That the Seetalbahn met a long-felt need, and would win a share of the transit to be expected on the new Gotthard route". It claimed the line ran through one of the most attractive Swiss regions, prompting a growth in tourism, whilst international passengers would avoid the SCB's Hauenstein Tunnel in favour of the Seetal. The reality however was different. The small tank engines (only 26t and with a max. speed of 36kph), just three coaches, and a slow meandering uphill-and-down-dale single track route on the public highway through the villages with the most awkward access to the main line in Lenzburg, and even more in Emmenbrücke, where the junction faced north, not south to Luzern, meant that the Seetal would never be other than a local branch line. It started with four trains daily each-way, with through coaches to Luzern, and became increasingly part of community life and economy in an attractive but unspectacular part of the Swiss plateau where (even now) British and other tourists were few. There were never to be any international freight trains. Within a few years the company, which after 12 months made a modest profit that never exceeded 5%, was sold at a loss to a local committee. Local traffic grew fast and in 1895 the extension to Wildegg (and the Zürich main line) through the centre of Lenzburg itself, opened. Electrification by Brown Boveri at 5,500V/25Hz came in 1911, and traffic rose from 164,000 passengers in 1884, to 425,000 in 1900, to nearly a million

in 1921. The railway had boosted the local economy and attracted local industry, to which Hochdorf bears witness today. In 1922 the railway was bought for CHF5.8m by the Confederation and given to the SBB, which re-electricified at its own 15kV in 1930. The highway maintenance reverted to the Kantons, although by then most of the alignment was on the adjacent grass verge.

The Seetalbahn was difficult to work; sharp curves; ruling gradients of 1 in 28 (1 in 26 on the abandoned Beromünster section); limited clearances; and weak foundations (there were no major works, though a 628m tunnel adorns the new southern end) have always dictated operational needs. When the SBB re-electricified the line it replaced the original rolling stock, and it settled down to decades of De 4/4 rail motor coach operation and light, open-platform passenger cars, although heavier railcars did work at times. They all carried garish yellow stripes to try to improve visibility. One custom-built innovation of 1926 was the De 6/6 'mini-crocodiles' Nos.15301 – 15303 used to haul freight and passenger trains until withdrawn in 1983. No.15301 survives at Balsthal. The Beromünster section had some freight traffic that later required regular use of Ae6/6 locomotives. Substantial freight is still worked out of Hochdorf, where in late 2011 an Ee3/3 was stationed, with two daily freights to Emmenbrücke scheduled.



Seetalbahn De6/6 No. 15301 Crocodile on exhibition at Balsthal in September 1995.

Photo: Ron Smth

At the northern end of the line the Lenzburg – Wildegg extension was deep in a ravine, and again on a 1 in 30 grade. On it was located the huge factory of Hero, long Switzerland's main producer of canned fruit and vegetables, jams etc. This was served by rail into this century with some workings needing to be double-headed. Sadly this connection has now been lifted (a new road has taken part of the alignment where the Lenzburg Stadt Bahnhof used to be), along with the rest of the line to Wildegg which went earlier. Until this line was closed in 1984 passenger train operations in Lenzburg were complicated. Most services from Emmenbrücke first ran up to the forecourt of the main SBB station, then reversed back to the junction at Lenzburg Spitzkehre, before renewing their northbound journey through Lenzburg Stadt, then diving



TOP: Ae6/6 no 11504 on 2-coach local to Beinwil at Lenzburg SBB in August 1994.
Photo: Ron Smith

MIDDLE: Re 4/4ⁱⁱ 11176 at Hitzkirch in 1987.
Photo: Stephen Sainsbury


BOTTOM: RABE 520 009 enters Beinwil station in August 2011.
Photo: Bryan Stone

under the main line before serving Niederlenz and terminating at Wildegg. The southbound trips reversed the procedure. At one time the first northbound and last southbound train of the day ran from and to Beromünster. However, by the latter half of the 20th century railway operations through Lenzburg had changed due to the introduction of the Taktfahrplan in preparation for which the Heitersberg Tunnel line had been built in 1975. Together with changes around the junctions by Othmarsingen, this now meant that the main line trains no longer took the Brugg – Olten line via Wildegg, but took the new fast line direct from Zürich through Heitersberg Tunnel, and then Lenzburg, Aarau and Olten. The result is the Lenzburg we see today, with six main-line platforms and organized bedlam. Wildegg was no longer on a main line so the Seetalbahn northern extension became redundant, resulting in the withdrawal of passenger services and simplification of the working.

However, the Seetalbahn was also a public menace. With semaphore signals, but at least into the 1980s still without absolute block, it was one long succession of some 500 mostly unguarded level crossings, the majority of which just served farms, private drives, etc. It was estimated in 1990 that half the SBB's level crossing accidents occurred on this one section of the network. In the 1980s this was nearly the line's undoing, together with it being badly run down. Local papers used the name 'Kundenmetzger' (customer butcher) and from around 1950 its closure was noisily demanded, but it continued to operate. Then, over a period of years, the realization dawned in both Luzern and Aargau that if it was upgraded and reconstructed it could be an asset so in 1992 CHF200m was made available by the Confederation, along with Kantonal support, for total renewal. Firstly CHF80m was used for a new

line from Waldibrücke to Hübeli north of Emmenbrücke on the line from Olten, a section which eliminated 40 level crossings and simplified the working allowing trains to enter Emmenbrücke facing Luzern. The layout in Hochdorf was also completely re-aligned. Earlier the line through the

community of Ermensee had been diverted around the eastern side of the village. North from Hitzkirch to Lenzburg, the loading gauge was deliberately reduced from 5m to 3.8m resulting in freight being barred. Seventeen new RABe2/8 Class 520 GTW units, which are 35cm narrower than Stadler's standard product due to having to run alongside road traffic, were specially built for the Seetal and introduced in 2001/2. They are named after locations on the route and have two doors per coach unlike the normal GTWs. By 2009 there were only 85 crossings left, then in 2011 a new 1.5km section behind Boniswil village eliminated a further 24 of them.

A journey on the Seetalbahn is now easy; a half-hour interval timetable (watch out north of Beinwil where there are 25/35 min intervals); comfortable trains; just occasional fearsome whistling in village streets, and a long view of the Hallwilersee on the east side and the Baldeggersee on the west side. There is some local industry in Hochdorf and all the way you have villages, farmhouses, rural and local life. Today the whole journey from Lenzburg, starting at the new platform outside the station, which is the first giveaway that this may be different, to Luzern takes only 82 minutes. There is nothing to see of the former lines to Wildegg and Menznau and even in Beinwil the old junction is hard to find. From an English financial adventure to a Luzern S-Bahn it has been a long road. Now the Seetalbahn, even with its roadside running, is still with us, and no-one would have it otherwise. But there is a very active 'Friends of the Seetalbahn' society which looks after 0-6-0T No 3 'Beinwil', runs her several times a year, and has a shed in Hochdorf. 



TOP: Seetalbahn 1666 at Mosen in 1987.

Photo: Stephen Sainsbury

MIDDLE: Driver's view taken during a cab ride from Luzern to Lenzburg in August 1994.

Photo: Ron Smith

RIGHT: Seetalbahn 1666 in 1987.

Photo: Stephen Sainsbury

BOTTOM LEFT: 520 004 at Beinwil.

Photo Bryan Stone

BOTTOM RIGHT: Driver's view taken during a cab ride from Luzern to Lenzburg in August 1994.

Photo: Ron Smith

