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Breakfast in Basel

Bryan Stone investigates Queen Victoria's secret journey




During the 'Golden Age' of rail travel many people's first experience of Switzerland was an early morning breakfast with good Swiss coffee on Basel Station, and this was the case for Queen Victoria when she made a little-known visit in the summer of 1868. At this time she was still in severe depression after Albert, the Prince Consort, had died from typhoid in 1861, and had almost become a recluse. In addition to her self-imposed state of mourning the 1860s were a troubled time in Britain with short-lived political administrations and the strain had been telling on her. In 1865 she had written that she "... longed to spend four weeks in some completely quiet part of Switzerland where she could refuse all visitors ...". Her knowledge of Switzerland had probably come from Albert who had visited the country in 1837. On her visit the Queen travelled, nominally incognito to avoid diplomatic obligations, as the 'Duchess of Kent' along with four of her children, the oldest Princess Louise (20) styling herself 'Lady Louise Kent', at times. Also in the party were her physician, her maids and household servants, and John Brown her loyal ghillie and companion from Balmoral, who apparently was quite obnoxious to the Swiss on numerous occasions.

The Queen and her party travelled from Osborne House, on the Isle of Wight, by the Royal Yacht "Victoria and Albert" to Cherbourg, from where she travelled to Paris making a stop to be greeted by Empress Eugenie. France's Emperor Napoleon III had loaned Victoria his royal saloon train for her journey, although the use of this perhaps rather spoiled the disguise! An overnight journey via Troyes, the

then direct route of the Chemin de Fer de l'Est, brought her on 7th August to Basel continuing, after breakfast at Basel station, via Sissach, Läuelfingen and Olten to Luzern. Once there she stayed in the Pension Wallace on the Gütsch (the ridge to the west of the Old Town), where she lived in relative simplicity for what was to be a most beneficial month's holiday. She recalls in her diary that the overnight journey from Paris was "badly disturbed", but no doubt this was more than made up for by the breakfast brought to her saloon at 7am by the proprietor of the Basel station buffet. This had a sequel, as the local Basler 'Nachrichten' newspaper found out that the breakfast for a royal party of some thirty people had cost over CHF20 per head – a massive sum in 1868. Basel coffee was always something special! Legend says that when asked whether eggs were so rare in Basel, he replied that eggs were not, but that Queens were!

Also in her diary Victoria describes the "beautiful green" of the morning journey over the old Hauenstein railway between Basel and Olten, Switzerland's first main line that was opened only 10 years before and which traversed the 2.5km Hauenstein Tunnel built by the English contractor Thomas Brassey. During her stay the Queen and her entourage made several excursions to what would subsequently become popular tourist destinations. Around Luzern they visited the Rigi and Pilatus and a particular expedition was made to the Teufelsbrücke in the Schollenen Gorge to see the scene that Turner had painted in 1802. At the Furka Pass, the Royal Party took over a small inn for three days, much to the irritation of other travellers, one of whom later complained

to the Berne newspaper 'Der Bund'. Other less strenuous expeditions took her to Engelberg where she visited the monastery and was received by the Abbot. The Queen and Princess Louise sketched and painted as they went, with Victoria painting both the Rigi and Pilatus. This was something that she had rarely done since the death of Albert, so perhaps Switzerland had started to improve her state of melancholy. The royal entourage made preparations to return home in September and again travelling by rail via Paris they reached London on the 11th. A few days later Queen Victoria left for Scotland and Balmoral, where she noted in her diary that she found the skyline of her "... ain dear hieland home ..." to be distinctly flat!

Although her trip was supposedly secret at the time it has subsequently been recorded by a number of royal historians, and it is of course noted in the pages of the Queen's diary, and in Foreign Office documents of the time. Books that describe it include 'Queen Victoria in Switzerland' by Peter Arengo-Jones (Robert Hale, 1995); 'Victoria RI' by Elizabeth Longford (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964); 'Gladstone' by Roy Jenkins (Macmillan, 1995). 



Postscript: By a remarkable chance, one of the equerry saloons of Napoleon III's Royal Train, which Queen Victoria used in 1868, has survived. It is now exhibited in the French National Railway Museum at Mulhouse, and was photographed there by Bryan Stone.

Times Past Thirty nine years after Queen Victoria's Swiss visit the paddle steamer 'La Suisse' departs from Genève at the height of the Edwardian tourist boom. The ship was launched in 1875 as the 'Mont Blanc' and renamed in 1893. In 1910 she became the 'Evian' to allow the name to be used on the current ship.

Postcard from the collection of Paul Jenkins

