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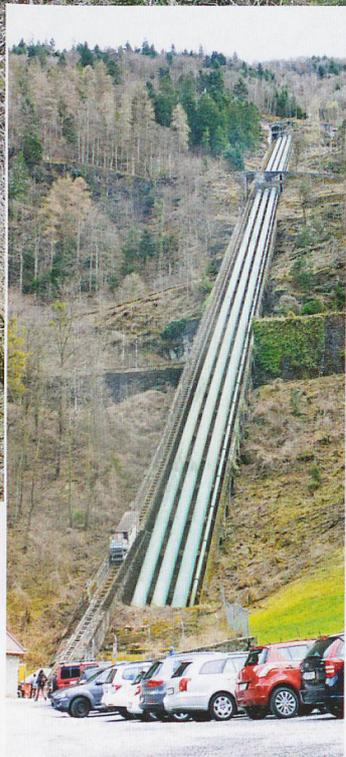
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Emergency Funicular

Ernst Leutwiler reports on how a disused funicular came to the rescue of a village.



ABOVE: Just above the valley station next to the 3 pressure pipes leading to the Power Station.

LEFT: The reinstated Bristen Bahn from Amsteg.

RIGHT: Valley station with 'Bristen-Express'. The Basel volunteers slept in the red camper van.

PHOTOS: Ernst B. Leutwiler



As trains on the 'old' Gotthard route climb south along the valley of the Reuss from Flüelen they pass the village of Amsteg located at the mouth of the Madeanertal that comes in from the east. Two kilometres and two hundred metres higher up this side valley is the village of Bristen served by PostAuto Line 407 that climbs up to this community via a series of zig-zags on a steeply graded road. On the evening of Sunday 5th March, following heavy rain, a part of this road slipped away down onto the valley floor leaving Bristen, and the scattered farms further up the valley, cut-off. Fortunately no-one was injured by the event but over 450 people found themselves isolated with the only useable link being a steep, slippery, footpath that further rain rendered almost impassable.

Local emergency planning teams kicked into gear and various options were considered to reconnect Bristen to the rest of Canton Uri, and Switzerland. The Swiss Army immediately brought in helicopters to airlift emergency supplies and evacuate those residents who needed to be elsewhere. These flights were also supplemented by those of commercial operators brought in to help. The thought of building an emergency road was considered and abandoned with the decision being taken that engineering resources should be concentrated on reconstructing the existing infrastructure. The best emergency option to reconnect the village was seen to be to re-activate the former, almost one hundred-year-old works funicular of the Amsteg Power Station. This was closed down in 2003 after safety concerns

following a similar landslide incident. After thorough inspections by specialists; track clearing; some small repairs; braking tests, etc. a provisional cantonal operating license was issued. A volunteer group from the Basel area offered to train the new local operators, whilst a meadow by the valley station was converted to a 100-space car parking area. By 16.00 on the 12th March the refurbished funicular was operating. Bristen had rejoined the world.

From the top station of the emergency funicular there was a forest track that linked into Bristen and along this two small buses supplied by hotels in the village completed the link for passengers and goods. The buses were driven by members of the Civil Guard, and like the car on the funicular they seated 20 people, hence giving a seamless connection. Travel on both the funicular and the bus was free to local residents. With the new service in operation all helicopter flights ceased, other than for authorised emergencies, and a ban also had to be put in place to prohibit private drones being used in the area to photograph the emergency transport arrangements.

This 'new' railway quickly developed into a tourist magnet, but this only lasted for a month as thanks to herculean work by the construction companies the old road to the village was partially re-opened on the 13th April. However, the funicular route was scheduled to continue for a further four weeks on a part-time basis, as the finishing touches to the road resulted in temporary closures. Then the old funicular will again 'go back to a deep sleep'. 