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Autor: Gatehouse, Don
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All Change on the Waldenburgerbahn

Don Gatehouse



A Waldenburgerbahn services arriving at Bad Bubendorf.

All photos: Don Gatehouse

This single-track light rail line in Canton Basel-Landschaft runs from Platform 4 at Liestal SBB station to the community of Waldenburg. The Waldenburgerbahn (WB) is unique, as it has been the only passenger carrying 750mm-gauge conventional railway in Switzerland, where narrow-gauge lines are normally either metre-gauge or 800mm-gauge. The line was opened in November 1880 and was steam operated until the route was electrified at 1.5 kV DC in October 1953 when the first motor coaches were introduced. Between 1985 and 1993 a fleet of seven new Class BDe 4/4 (Nos.11-17) motor coaches were delivered, together with 10 Bt driving trailer coaches (Nos.111-120), to provide enhanced passenger capacity and replace the 1953 stock. WB line services (R19) have operated under the Tarifverbund Nordwestschweiz (TNW) common fare

network and provide a regular half-hourly service throughout the day, with additional peak hour services. With typical Swiss efficiency, WB services have provided timely connections at Liestal railway station for SBB services to and from Basel, Luzern via Olten, Bern and Zurich.

For most of its route the WB is in the form of a single-track roadside electric tramway serving eleven intermediate stops, including six passing loops, with an overall journey time of 24 minutes. In addition to the regular passenger services, steam-hauled tourist trains have been a seasonal Sunday feature of the route for some years, using the line's restored Class G3/3 0-6-0T locomotive. As reported in SE135, following a final trip between Waldenburg and Talhaus in September 2018, this locomotive and a heritage coach and wagon will in due course be housed in a new purpose-built museum at Talhaus.

The 'unique' WB gauge meant that any programme of rolling stock renewal suitable for the requirements of the 21st C would carry a sizeable initial cost and ongoing maintenance premium, so the opportunity to both modernise and re-gauge the line was clearly the viable option to budget for. As a result, in late 2015, plans were formally approved whereby the 13.1km Waldenburgerbahn would be modernised and converted from 750mm to metre-gauge by 2022. The project would also enable the use of 2650 mm wide stock, compared to the


On a wet day in May 2015, WB driving trailer Bt 120 leads a departure from Waldenburg terminus.



current 2400 mm wide vehicles in use.

In June 2016 the WB was integrated into the Baselland's BLT organisation and in October 2018, it was confirmed that Stadler would supply 10 bidirectional LRVs [light rail vehicles] to operate the line. Each seven-section air-conditioned vehicle will provide 100% low-floor accommodation in its 45m length, and be capable of working in multiple to provide increased capacity at peak times. The formal contract, expected to be signed in April 2019, will schedule deliveries from Stadler's Valencia factory to arrive around end-2021.

The date for the re-gauging work has been determined by a significant change at the Liestal end of the route, where SBB have a major project scheduled for completion in 2022 to enlarge their railway station and provide additional running line capacity. As a consequence, the new WB tracks will need to be re-located from their present alignment. So, while BLT can progress their planned modernisation work along the route during the next couple of years, the actual re-gauging of the line will follow, when an anticipated one-year suspension of train services will be required. This means that the new rolling stock will have to be only 2.4m in width to enable its use on the existing alignment.

If all goes to plan, the WB line will re-open for the travelling public at the December 2022 timetable change, when it will be designated as the BLT Line 19 and a new era of operation will commence. 

1. WB Class BDe 4/4 No.14 'Ramlinsburg' heads along Hauptstrasse in Oberdorf.
2. WB power car No.15 'Bubendorf' approaches Oberdorf BL Winkelweg.
3. Passengers prepare to join a service at Liestal Altmarkt.
4. WB BDe 4/4 No.14 'Ramlinsburg' heads away from Liestal SBB station with a Waldenburg service in May 2014.

