

# The Wetterhornbahn

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# THE WETTERHORN-BAHN

David Carpenter



German engineer Wilhelm Feldman, who had held the post of Master Builder to the Prussian Government, was no stranger to innovative projects, as he was involved in the building of Wuppertal's unique Schwebebahn that opened in 1901. At the beginning of the 20th Century there was a developing interest in the construction of passenger-carrying aerial cableways to gain access to mountain locations that could not be reached by rail. Several projects were being developed across Europe at the same time, with Herr Feldman becoming involved with the proposal to build one on the Wetterhorn (3701 m) near Grindelwald.

In his book *'Railway Wonders of the World'*, published by Cassell & Co. in 1914, author Frederick Talbot noted:

*"This engineer evolved an entirely new system, so far as its details were concerned, wherein unassailable security was ensured. He adopted two ropes to form a track, one being placed above the other. There are two tracks, each carrying a car, and as the latter are connected together by the hoisting rope, one ascends while the other descends, thereby securing a certain measure of counterbalancing, as is adopted on the incline railway. By disposing the two ropes, forming a single track, one above the other, and by using a four-wheeled travelling truck having two wheels on each rope, increased stability of the suspended cars, especially in high winds, was obtained. Although this ingenious engineer did not live to see his idea carried into practical application, yet his plans were prepared so completely that they were easy to fulfill. The contract was undertaken by Messrs. Von de Roll, of the Fonderie de Berne, who have made a speciality of mountain railway engineering in all its varied branches."*

It was originally intended to reach the summit of the Wetterhorn in four stages, but only the first stage to Enge (1677 m) was ever built, with work starting in 1905. The route followed the course of the Upper Grindelwald Glacier (Oberer Gletscher) and opened to the public on 27th July 1908, as the first of its kind in Switzerland, and one of the first in the world. It was a conventional cable car system with two cabins, but was unusual by today's standards in that the cable passed through the top edge of the cabin. The line had the capacity to take 110 passengers per hour and initially it proved very popular. However, the system only operated until 1915 as the First World War put an end to the tourist traffic it relied upon. The tourists did not return in sufficient numbers after the war and following several years of disuse much of the workings were taken down during the 1930s.

Some eighty years after it was dismantled a surprising amount of the Wetterhornbahn still remains. One of the original cabins, complete with dummy passenger, now stands outside the Hotel Wetterhorn on the road from Grindelwald up to Grosse Scheidegg. Although the cabin itself is original the mechanism that connected the cabin to the cable was constructed more recently by apprentices. It is based on the original, that is in the Verkehrshaus museum in Luzern.

The remains of the base station, together with an information board that briefly explains the significance of the site, can be found about a 10-minute walk from the Hotel Wetterhorn. The top station building still survives and was renovated to some extent in the 1990s to prevent further






LEFT: The remains of the old steps to the glacier.  
ABOVE: An original Wetterhorn cable car with a forlorn passenger.

RIGHT: The remains of Wetterhornbahn base station.

All photos: David Carpenter

decay. In Grindelwald the museum near the church contains a display on this pioneering project, including a model showing how it worked. Admission is included in the Swiss Pass, but its opening times are restricted so check with the tourist office to save a potentially wasted journey. An illustrated booklet on the Wetterhornbahn (in German only) can be purchased from the kiosk in the car park opposite the Hotel Wetterhorn.

Sadly I see no chance of Switzerland's (and one of the world's) first passenger carrying cable car operations ever being revived. However, a thought occurs to me. Until recently, it was possible (if you had the stamina) to climb the 890 wooden steps from near the former base station up to a terrace giving views over the Oberer Gletscher. A couple of winters ago a storm destroyed part of this staircase and ascent is no longer possible. Wouldn't it be wonderful if the Wetterhornbahn was revived as a replacement? *Perchance to dream, I suppose....* 



A couple of the twelve brewing vats.

All photos: Neil Wheelwright

The article about the Feldschlösschen Brewery by Ron Smith in the December 2013 *Swiss Express* reminded me of when I had a tour of the brewery in October 1982. Whilst the group would not normally have been big enough to be taken up to the brewery by their steam train, but as the loco was still in steam, we were given a ride up to the brewery pushed by their ex-SBB 0-6-0T 8481. After

refreshments, we were given a very full tour. As can be seen from the outside of the building when going past on the train, it is built in the style of a late 19-century impression of a mediaeval castle. Construction started in 1876 and a rail connection was laid in 1889. After watching a wagon being shunted by an adapted road tractor and a quick visit to the steam loco shed, we were taken inside. The twelve