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Modern management of a traditional local railway.

Bryan Stone looks at how his local line has adapted to the 21stC



BLT Be4/8 No. 245 approaches Leymen, Alsace.

All photos: Bryan Stone

What today is known as the BLT, Basel-Land Transport, is a collective public enterprise of tram routes, bus services and light railways, owned by the Canton and some private shareholders. The principal tram service - Line 10, there are others - was once two separate metre-gauge lines. One was a light railway, the Birsigal Bahn (BTB) from Basel Heuwaage to Rodersdorf. The other a tramway, the Birseckbahn (BEB) from Basel Aeschenplatz to Dornach. The two Basel terminals were some 800m apart and the lines quite independently served separate regions south and south east of the city. The BTB opened in 1889 as a steam tramway serving the then rural villages along the course of the small River Birsig to Flüh just across the cantonal border in Solothurn (SO). It was electrified in 1905 and extended in 1910 through 3km of open country on the Swiss-French frontier, to serve the communities of Leymen (Alsace) and Rodersdorf (SO). The BEB came later in 1902, was electric from the start and served a residential area out to Dornach, southeast of Basel. By the 1960s both were in dire straits, with worn out equipment and infrastructure, poor financial results and some serious safety risks. After first some Federal help for essential renewals, the BEB and BTB merged in 1974 into the new BLT. A connection over the Basel City tramway (BVB) tracks, involving a very substantial harmonisation to modern standards of electrification systems, track and rolling stock, then allowed a 26km through operation on the new Line 10 linking Rodersdorf through Basel to Dornach. As befits its once railway status it still commands a place as Table 505 in the current Kursbuch.

These changes are now history - some 44 years ago. For Line 10 they were a complete success, far beyond the hopes of 1974. In the interim period Basel has spread its suburban

Modern units at the Theater stop entering the critical 1970s junction link line to Heuwaage.

tentacles down the valleys of both the Birsig and the Birs and the trams have become an integral part of the City's operational infrastructure. Across the BLT as a whole, some CHF1 billion has since been invested; tracks have been doubled and renewed; new stations have been opened; Park and Ride facilities constructed and a large fleet of almost 100 standardised trams is in service shared between BLT tram routes. Thirty-eight of these are new low-floor 'Tangos' built by Stadler, the remainder having been acquired in recent years with some of the earlier batches now being phased-out. The BLT now handles some 56m journeys per year, a total rising annually, across all its services. It is a successful operation well regarded by its many users.

Success, however, brings its problems. In 1974 the problem was to keep going, with primitive infrastructure relying on professional diligence to avoid disasters. There was little signal protection, and there were still, in 1974, unlocked hand-worked facing points on the running line. It had to change. Today's timetable has trams running at 3-minute headways on





Modern Tango unit at Ettingen, 2017. the core section of the former BTB, and despite much double tracking, there are still bottlenecks that cause delays to the scheduled 66-minute through trip. The track and signalling were by 2010 again inadequate; accidents occurred and drastic improvements were again needed. More single-track sections

were doubled, and a new automatic signalling system is now installed throughout, interlocked with points and crossings, though the inner city sections are operated 'on sight' as a traditional tramway.

Last year your Swiss News Editor (also in his capacity as an unofficial historian of the former BTB) was invited to visit the depot at Hüslimatt in Oberwil on the old BTB, there to see the state-of-the-art control centre that had been newly brought into operation. When all is well, the system runs itself. A broad screen display automatically highlights divergences from the timetable. The operators have an overview of the whole system. They intervene as little as possible, when irregularities arise or are anticipated, or equipment failure (e.g. level crossing barriers) is reported. They have of

course direct access to emergency services. They monitor unusual delays, as well as controlling depot access to the main line, (there are two main depots at Hüslimatt, and Dreispitz north of Dornach) and ensure that trams and drivers are properly allocated and relieved. Regulation via radio contact

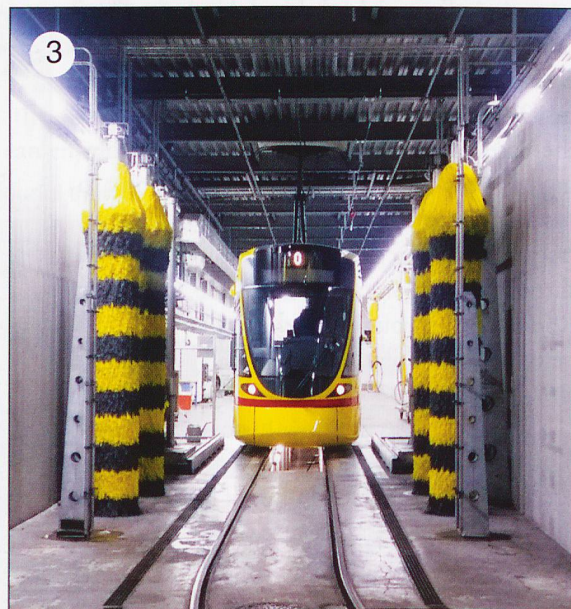
with all drivers is often needed, as there are still remaining sections of single, and also some gauntleted, track. Professionalism is still demanded. Incidents still occur; motorists live often outside the rules! With around 2km of city street running, shared with several other tram routes, normal street traffic, and pedestrians, tram driving requires steady nerves.

Now the BLT is in the forefront of modern technology as it is currently undertaking trials with a collision warning system that,

1. Hand clearing a point on the approach to Bottmingen, 1969. How things were!

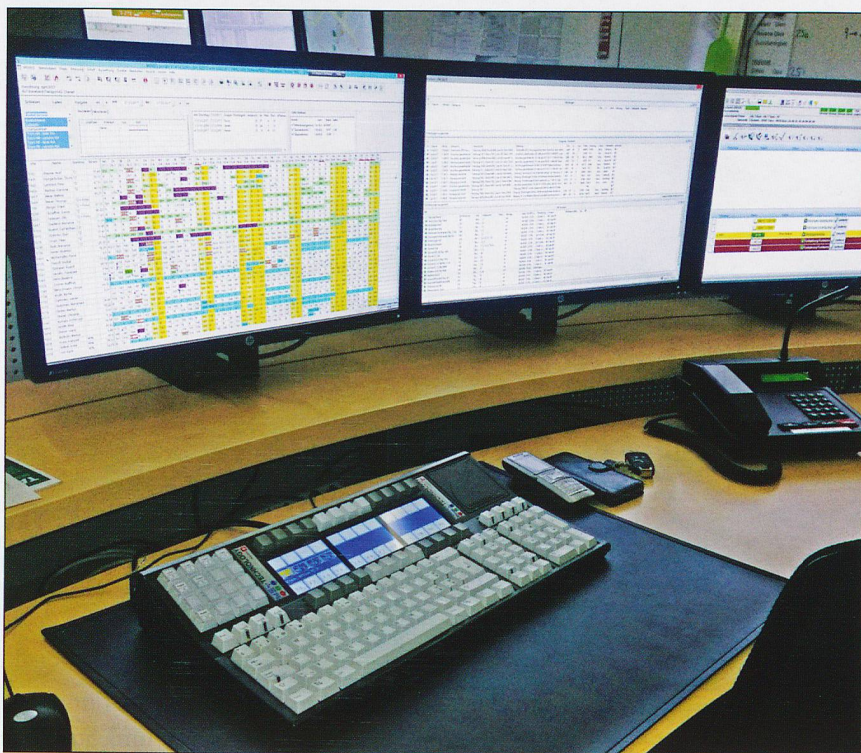
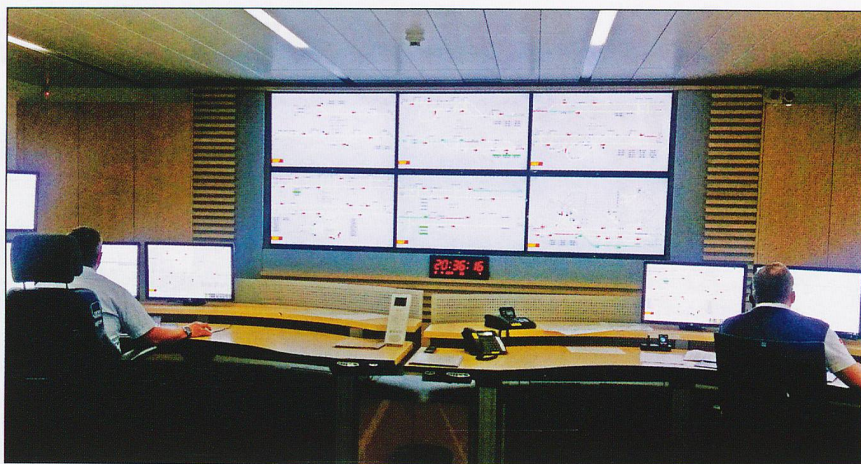
2. Sorting out a derailment on an unlocked spring-loaded facing point at Ettingen, Layout now double track.

3. Hüslimatt Depot tram wash.



if successful, could be fitted to its new 'Tango' trams. Undertaken in partnership with tram builder Stadler and Bosch Rail Transport, developers of the 'Tram Forward Collision Warning System', these trials will aim to adapt proven car industry technology to assist tram drivers to recognise and react to potentially critical situations in the face of increasing levels of road traffic. The Warning System uses both video cameras and radar sensors to detect the speed and distance of moving traffic as well as any stationary object in the path of the tram. The first phase of the trial will see the system simply giving an appropriate warning to the driver. If this proves to be successful the next stage will see the equipment automatically apply the brakes in the event of an emergency, although the driver will have the option of overriding the system.

The once rural railway from my home village is now a remarkably different operation from when I first encountered it in the late 1960s. As a frequent user of Line 10 I know how my journey is conducted and protected, but in fact, I take it for granted. Sometimes, though, I still think of the heroics of almost 50-years ago. 🇨🇭



BOTH ABOVE: Control centre during an evening visit.

LEFT: Trams awaiting entry into service during evening visit to Hüsli Depot.

Where's Heidi?

Question?

At which station do you get welcomed in a variety of languages? 🇨🇭

Answer on page 48.

