

One hundred & fifty years on the Thunersee

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Among the various 150th anniversaries that fell during 1985 was that of the start of steam navigation on the Thunersee. As the present day fleet is owned and operated by the BLS company I feel that a brief history of the shipping services might not be out of place in our journal. First though we should consider the Thunersee itself. 18.2 km in length, its widest point is between Merligen and Faulensee, a distance of 3.8 km. The surface area is 48 sq. km. and the maximum depth is some 217 metres.

Up until the 1830s there were only paths and rough tracks around the shores of the Thunersee. In fact it was considered quite an adventure to travel into the Berner Oberland. The lake provided the main means of transport, goods being carried by boats of between 10 and 30 tonnes capacity, with a crew of 2 to 4, powered by oar or sail. Vessels known as 'Postships' provided a crack passenger service, rowing boats with 3 or 4 oarsman, they ran to a published time-table. In good weather they could make Thun-Neuhaus in 4 hours. 'Marketships' were private boats which as their name suggests, took the locals to market. After 1805, when tourism began, a new type of boat, surely ancestor of the present day vessels, made its appearance. These were small rowing boats, covered with a bright awning, fitted with a table for books, maps and food.

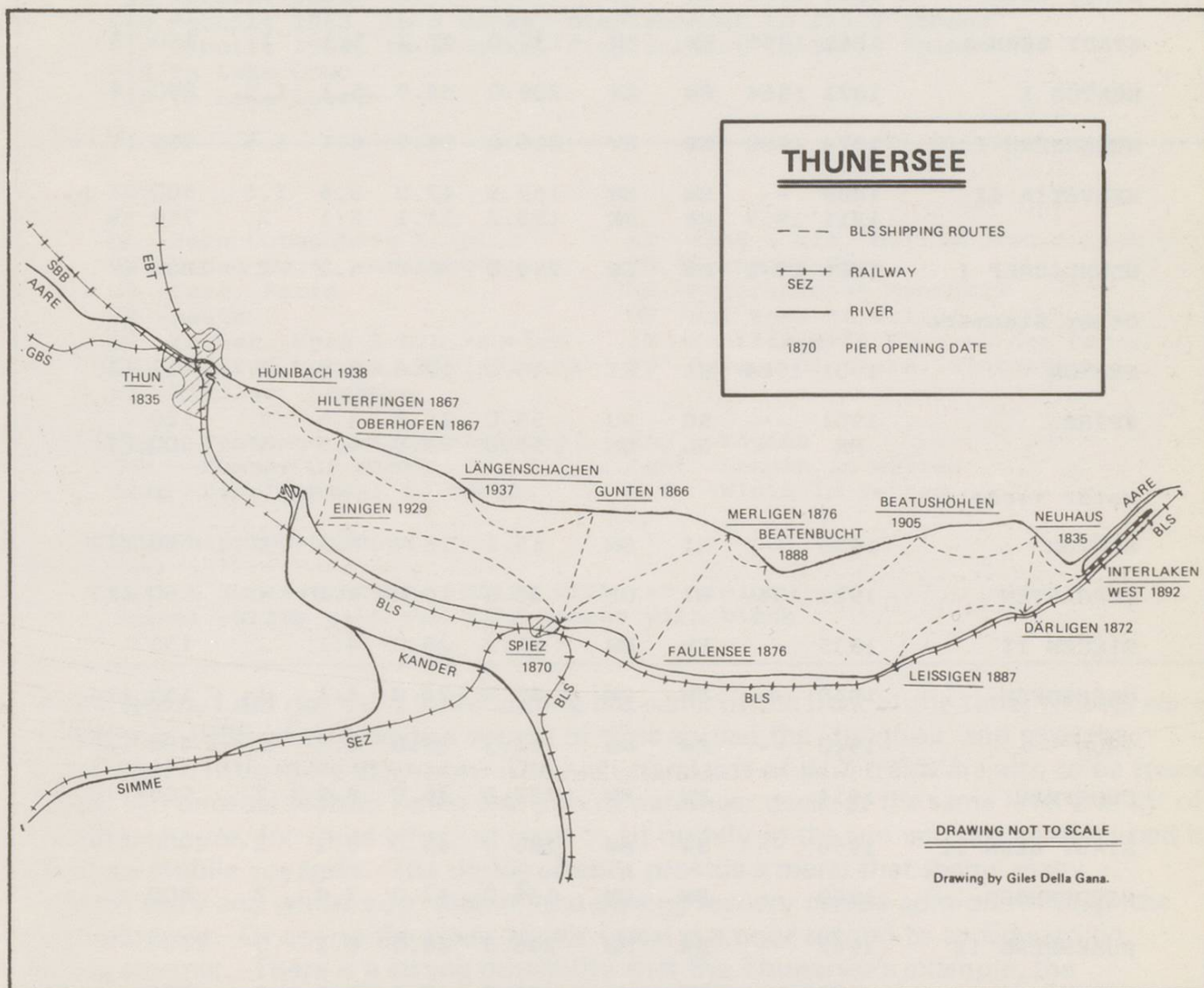
In the 1830s two gentlemen were viewing with some dismay a project for a road along the southern shore of the Thunersee. They were the brothers John Jakob and Friedrich Knechtenhofer, owners of the pension 'Bellevue' that lay on the northern side of the lake at Thun. They feared that their establishment would be by-passed. In order to get a piece of the 'action' they obtained a steam powered vessel from Cave of Paris which was brought to the lake by cart in sections. Named 'Bellevue' her maiden voyage took place on 31st July 1835. The following year she carried some 24,000 passengers, poor ones travelling free. Three sailings a day were made between Thun and Neuhaus during the 15th May to 15th October season. The journey along the lake now took as little as 1¼ hours. British and German custom must have been highly valued as the vessel was equipped with a barrel-organ that played 'God Save the King'. This instrument is now preserved in the Castle Museum, Thun. The rest of 'Bellevue' was not so fortunate. After being transferred to the Brienersee and re-named 'Faulhorn' in 1843 she returned to work as a dumb-barge from 1859 until sinking in a storm off Oberhofen on 2nd April 1864.

In 1839 a second navigation company was formed, but did not get around to having any ships built. They joined with the original operators together with the Brienersee company to form the Vereinigte Dampfschiffgesellschaft für den Thuner-und Brienersee (VTB) in 1842. A new vessel, the 'Niesen (1)' was introduced in 1843, followed by the 'Stadt Thun' in 1856 and the 'Stadt Bern (1)' of 1861. Further details of individual vessels are set out in a table that accompanies this article. The opening of the railway from Bern to Thun in 1859 provided a great stimulus to traffic. The ships 'Beatus' (1), 'Bubenburg (1)' and 'Helvetia (II)' were introduced to deal with the increasing number of passengers.

When in 1872 the Bodelibahn reached Darligen, at the eastern end of the Thunersee, from Interlaken, the lake provided its link with the rest of the Swiss railway system. The railway company owned two steam powered rail ferries, 'Trajektshiff 1' which served throughout the life of the service, 1873-1895, and 'Trajektshiff 2' which operated on the Thunersee from 1886 until 1895. These ferries became superfluous with the opening of the Thunerseebahn (TSB) from Thun to Darligen on the 1st June 1893. 'Trajektshiff 2' was sold to the SGV, being passed to a sand and gravel company in 1930. Following a period of disuse it was rebuilt, the rails being removed in 1964 and was reported as still being in operation in 1972. From 1872 until 1882 passenger vessels had also been calling at Darlingen, rather than Neuhaus, in order to connect with

Bodelibahn trains. In 1892 lake vessels gained direct access to Interlaken by way of a 2.75 km long canal built at a cost of 2,300,000 francs.

On the 1st January 1912 the VTB amalgamated with the TSB. Exactly one year later the TSB amalgamated with the BLS and so the Lotschberg company acquired its shipping fleet. Unfortunately at this time it was more of a liability than an asset. Traffic was hit by the First World War together with the lake-side railways and a new canal had to be built at Thun to bring the ships closer to the railway station where previously they had docked on the river Aare. The first motor vessels, the 'Gunten' and 'Morgarten' appeared in the 1920s, being introduced for the service to Beatenbucht, they were only used during the winter season. 1935 saw the introduction of a larger motor-vessel, the 'Niesen (II)' to provide improved communication with the right-hand bank.



After an increase in tourist traffic during the 1930s, World War Two brought another drop, though not as bad as during the previous conflict. In fact two vessels were acquired in 1940, the 'Oberhofen' and 'Thun'. Despite these additions, after the war the BLS found itself with an out of date and uneconomic fleet. The company therefore embarked on the modernization programme that replaced the old paddle steamers with the series of fine motor vessels that work the lake today.

The current fleet consists of twelve ships with a total passenger capacity of 6720. It was on one of the larger vessels that the writer made, back in 1967, his first voyage on a Swiss lake, the passing mountain scenery making a deep impression. Incredible though

Thunersee Vessels 1835-1985

Vessel Type/Name	Dates		Builders		Dimensions			Dck	Cap
	In	Out	Hull	Eng	Disp	Lght	Wid		
Paddle Steamers									
BELLEVUE	1835	1843	CA	NK	NK	34.0	4.0	1	NK (1
HELVETIA I	1843	1855	EW	EW	NK	NK	NK	1	NK (2
NIESEN I	1843	1890	EW	EW	NK	36.6	4.2	1	300 (3
STADT THUN	1856	1924	EW	EW	133.0	47.2	4.8	1	300 (4
STADT BERN I	1861	1956	EW	EW	137.0	47.2	5.1	1	450 (5
BEATUS I	1871	1964	EW	EW	208.0	54.9	6.1	1.5	800 (6
BUBENBERG I	1874	1962	EW	EW	210.0	54.9	6.1	1.5	800 (7
HELVETIA II	1889	--	EW	EW	169.5	47.0	5.6	1.5	500
	1911	1959	NK	NK	195.2	51.1	6.1	2	750 (8
BLUMLISALP I	1906	1971	EW	EW	294.0	58.0	6.8	2	1000 (9
Other Steamers									
NEPTUN	1901	1914	KI	KI	15.0	12.8	2.8	1	12 (10
SPIEZ	1901	--	SU	SU	53.0	25.8	4.5	1	120
	NK	--	BL	GM	56.0	28.8	4.5	1	200 (11
Motor Vessels									
GUNTEN	1920	--	HI	GM	15.1	16.7	3.1	1	60 (12
MORGARTEN	1929	1949	HI	DE	15.3	16.0	3.1	1	60 (13
NIESEN II	1935	--	EW	MB	31.7	24.0	4.1	1	155
OBERHOFEN	1940	--	EW	GM	35.2	24.0	4.1	1	155 (14
THUN	1940	--	EW	MB	91.2	37.0	5.3	2	400 (15
JUNGFRAU	1954	--	BW	MW	223.0	46.0	8.2	2	900 (16
STADT BERN II	1956	--	BW	MW	226.0	48.0	8.2	2	1000 (17
NIEDERHORN	1959	--	BW	GM	146.0	42.0	7.4	2	600
BUBENBERG II	1962	--	BW	MW	246.3	48.5	8.2	3	1100
BEATUS II	1963	--	SW	MB	183.5	45.0	7.5	2	700
BLUMLISALP II	1971	--	SW	MW	297.3	52.0	8.8	3	1200
STOCKHORN	1974	--	SW	GM	90.0	35.7	7.0	2	250
Rail Ferries									
TRAJEKTSCHIFF 1	1873	1895	EW	EW	NK	40.0	6.7	1	5 (18
TRAJEKTSCHIFF 2	1886	1895	EW	EW	NK	43.0	6.7	1	5 (19

- (1 To Brienersee as FAULHORN 1843-57
- (2 Ex GIESSBACH 1839-43 on Brienersee, SCHIFF MATTI 1843-46
- (3 Rebuilt 1879
- (4 Rebuilt 1898
- (5 Rebuilt 1910, to 1.5 decks
- (6 Rebuilt 1907, to 2 decks
- (7 Rebuilt 1909, to 2 decks
- (8 Extensive rebuild
- (9 At present (1986) laid-up in Kander Delta awaiting restoration
- (10 On Zurichsee from 1894 as EMIL
- (11 Extensive rebuild, re-engined with diesel 1952
- (12 On Lake Luzern from 1910 as ASTRA
- (13 Built 1923, to Brienersee as HARDER
- (14 Ex ENTE, built 1939
- (15 Rebuilt 1965
- (16 Rebuilt 1963, to 3 decks, displacement to 235.9 tonnes
- (17 Rebuilt 1964, to 3 decks, displacement to 236.6 tonnes
- (18 To Lake Como
- (19 To Lake Luzern

Key

BL -Bern Lotschberg Simplon	KI -King & Cie, Wollishofen/Zurich
BW -Bodan-Werft, Kressbronn	MB -Mercedes-Benz
CA -Cave, Paris	MW -Motorenwerke Mannheim
DE -Deutz	NK -Not know to writer
EW -Escher, Wyss & Cie, Zurich	SW -Schiffswerft Linz an der Donau
GM -General Motors, Biel/Bienne	SU -Sulzer Brothers, Winterthur
HI -Hitzler, Hamburg	

Cap -Passenger/wagon capacity	Eng -Engine
Dck -Number of decks	Lght -Length in metres
Disp -Displacement in tonnes	Wid -Width in metres

BLS Shipping Colours

Hull & Superstructure -White with red lining
 Funnel -White with red band topped with black

it now seems, I did not think of recording the name of the boat at the time. Things were different in 1985 when I made a couple of trips aboard the 'Jungfrau' and gave the vessel itself a little more attention. The high standards of BLS trains are also to be found afloat. An unusual feature noted was a third passenger deck, at the same level and aft of the wheel-house, for those who just want to sit quietly in the sun and not be disturbed by we more mobile voyagers. The dining saloons provide a menu that shame many a Channel ferry and whilst you 'tuck-in' the passing scenery can be admired through the large windows. Of course the finest motor vessel is a poor second to an Edwardian paddle steamer. There is a strong possibility that the Thunersee's example, the 'Blumlisalp I', may be restored to running order. This would be a most fitting way to mark any anniversary.

Publications Consulted: Flottenparade Thuner und Brienersee - B.L.S. Paddle Steamers Switzerland - Anton Raber and Robert Horlacher, Railway Magazine, July 1972 - The Why and the Wherefore. The Illustrated History of Paddle-Steamers G.W.Hilton, J. Jobe and R. Plummer. Schiffahrt auf den Schweizer Seen - Anton Raber. Switzerland Rail-Map. Thuner und Brienersee Schiffahrt Navigation - B.L.S. VST Revue May 1985 - 150 Jahre Thunersee-Schiffahrt

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