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Autor: Wheelwright, N.P.
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SWITZERLAND'S OTHER RAILWAYS

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SWISS URBAN TRAMWAYS

By N.P. Wheelwright

General.

The title of this article comes as a result of watching many film shows on the subject of Swiss railways which, whilst extolling the undoubted virtues of the BLS, RhB, MOB etc., usually omitted the urban railway. These may not offer a comparison in scenic terms but are every bit as fascinating (and often more so) as their larger and more famous brethren.

Distinguishing a tramway from a light railway is a difficult task although there are distinctions in Swiss law. A recent example would be the conversion of the BLT line 17 from a light railway to tramway status, but the differences are not always obvious and in places the new incarnation more resembles a railway than before. For the purpose of this article I am keeping to the five urban areas of Basel, Bern, Geneva, Neuchâtel and Zürich. Although this list is fairly widely accepted it does lead to at least one contradiction: the remaining line of the Neuchâtel system has less street running than Zürich's Forchbahn (FB) which is classified as a railway, whilst using near identical new generation rolling stock and the FB has a significant amount of street running over the VBZ.



New articulated tram unit.

Photo supplied by B.V.B.

Surprisingly, given Switzerland's approach to public transport, many urban tramway systems have closed: Biel, La Choux-de-Fonds, Fribourg, Lausanne, Locarno, Lugano, Luzern, St Gallen, Schaffhausen and Winterthur although only the Lausanne system was of significant size. All these towns (excepting Locarno), along with the five under consideration, operate trolleybus services.

The tram systems share some common features. All are metregauge and have a Direct Current (TN 630v, others 600v) power supply with pantograph collection. They all offer some form of "24 hour Rover ticket" although the validity should be checked locally (eg. BLT line 17 may be excepted in part) and some offer longer duration tourist cards. The Swiss Holiday card is valid only on BLT line 17 but travel over grooved rail can be sampled on VBW in Bern and FB in Zürich. All systems have ticket machines at stops which include a route diagram indicating the various fare zones. The instructions for use occasionally include an English translation. Most supply only single tickets although larger machines at major stops (eg. SBB stations) will often include a much wider range of tickets. If in doubt (and the Swiss impose large on-the-spot fines in frequent checks) the local tourist office or transport authority information offices will be pleased to help, if only by providing an English translation of the appropriate pamphlet. (Since this article was prepared, the Swiss Holiday Card validity has been changed. Details in this copy of the journal. Ed.).

I would like to thank all the companies for providing information but especially Herr P. Marrer of the BVB.

BASEL

BVB — Basler Verkehrs-Betriebe.

BLT — Baselland Transport AG.

Basel is unique in Switzerland as it is served by two tramway companies. BVB operate the Green trams on a predominately urban part of the system within Canton Baselstadt and BLT operate the Yellow trams on the longer distance routes serving Canton Baselland.

BVB

The current system is only 5Km shorter than it's 1958 maximum, the major closures being cross border routes to Lorrach in West Germany and to St Louis in France. BVB until recently operated a network of ten routes, reduced to nine when the then circular route, operated as No 1 anti-clockwise and No 4 clockwise, became route No 1 both ways. This was further modified, originally temporarily, and since 1985 route 1 has not crossed the Mittel Rheinbrücke. A coincident 'temporary' change was to replace routes 7 and 18 with 8 and a lengthened route 2.

The Cantonal border is a far from strict boundary between operations. Route 14, probably the longest BVB route, operates over BLT track east of St Jakob and BVB owns several sections of route in Baselland, principally the extremities of route 6. BLT operates over BVB tracks to Aeschenplatz and route 17 is wholly owned by BLT.

The busiest section of route is between Barfüsserplatz and Schiffplände through Marktplatz, which carries all routes except Nos 2 and 3, although the latter route passes through the junction at Barfüsserplatz. This section has now reached maximum capacity and any new routes, or extended running of BLT routes would have to avoid it.

The Swiss border can still be reached by tram. The German border is reached by route 6 beyond the village of Riehen, the cross border section closed in 1967, and route 15 reaches the French border at St Louis Grenze, it's erstwhile extension closing in 1957.

All routes are double track and range from railway appearance ballasted track on reserved road side right of way to 'normal' street running. Some city centre streets have been closed to through traffic reducing problems for trams and pedestrians, although the latter are often surprised by the quiet approach of a tram whilst 'jaywalking'. Much of the remainder of the routes are segregated from road traffic by road markings.

The majority of the fleet consists of Swiss standard bogie cars and Düwag single articulated cars along with bogie trailers. The remaining three axle trailers now see use on the BLT Rodersdorf line although still carrying BVB livery.



Tram type Be4/4 and B4/4 trailer.

Photo supplied by B.V.B.

Four wheel cars were in rush hour use in December 1978 but I have not seen them in service on subsequent visits. Swiss built double articulated cars, but using three bogies, were tested but the Düwag cars cost less to purchase and have proved more reliable. For a long while the two prototype cars were limited to peak hour operation on route 7 but can now be seen all day on route 8. October 1986 saw the introduction of new Schindler bogie cars, similar in appearance to the later BLT artics. All post war cars are single ended requiring turning circles at all termini. Several multiple-unit can be seen, especially on weekdays, including paired artics and (unique?) double bogie cars plus trailer.

The reserve fleet of four wheel power cars and trailers are available for private hire and one set was seen carrying a wedding party, definitely 'one up' on a Rolls Royce! The four wheel car No 4 built in 1900 plus a 1902 trailer have been preserved in an early livery and run occasional Oldtimer services. Following the experience with the Bern Restaurant tram, borrowed during the Eisenbahn 82 exhibition, bogie car 400 of 1914 vintage, known locally as Tante Schuggi, was restored and has been used as a Restaurant tram since 1985. Eisenbahn 82 was also the occasion for the use of a couple of BLT trams on BVB routes, in particular the circular routes, often with green trailers. This curious sight has become fairly common since 1984 as BLT trams stored, some in BVB

depots, pending conversion of route 17, were used by BVB to alleviate stock shortages caused by a large increase in traffic. This was due to the introduction in March 1984, of an environmental season ticket which gave a much reduced season ticket price. Route 14 remains operated by trams of both companies.

The central works is situated at Klybeck, near Ciba on route 14. The system is operated from three depots. The largest of which at Wiesenplatz, near Klybeck, houses much of the departmental and reserve fleet with Morgartenring/Allschwilerstraße depot housing the remainder and, of particular interest, the double artics. Dreispitz depot is much smaller, housing trams for route 15/16 and the BLT cars used on route 11.

BLT

Baselland Transport was formed in 1974 combining four tramway/light railways running in the Canton along with some bus services. The constituents were:- BTB - BirgsigalBahn (Line 17), BEB - Birseckbahn (Line 10), TBA (Line 11) and the BUeB (Line 14). Prior to 1974 lines 11 and 14 had been operated by BVB and, curiously, this arrangement continues. Route 11 is now operated by BVB from Dreispitz depot but using BLT trams. Route 14 remains operated by green trams although with some BLT trams 'on hire' until sufficient new BVB cars are delivered. Thus all 'street furniture' on these lines remains in BVB green.

Lines 10, 11 and 14 run from or through Aeschenplatz and this is the principal location for seeing the operation of green and yellow trams together. This location can be reached easily from the SBB station - one stop/0.5Km north on routes 1 and 8 - even during a short stopover.

Routes 10 and 11 show signs of modernisation, especially at their junction where the section of route 10 crossing the SBB is almost to full metro standards. The routes are predominately double track and on road side or private right of way for much of their length. Unfortunately the terminus of route 10 in Dornach is no longer in it's much photographed village centre location, complete with market stalls, but is now by the SBB station.

Routes 10 and 11 are operated by Swiss built single articulated cars, usually working in multiple. The older design looks similar to the BVB Düwag cars and are the Swiss industries response to that purchase. The newer cars are externally similar to Zürich's Tram 2000 cars but lack many of the innovative features incorporated in the Zürich vehicles.

The works and main depot are situated in the village of Arlesheim but BLT cars are also to be seen in Dreispitz depot for BVB operation of route 11.

We now come to the inevitable exception, BLT line 17, the BirgsigalBahn. My first visit to the line in 1978 revealed a fairly typical Swiss light railway. The line was single track with passing loops at most stations, road side running for much of it's distance and operated by the usual 1960's 'Pendelzug' type stock in blue and white livery with the BLT logo.

Anyone visiting since September 1984 will find a modern tramway, frequently double tracked and operated by the BLT's yellow articulated trams working in multiple. The change is more than cosmetic: most of the track has been relaid, sometimes fenced off from the road: many fixed installations modernised or replaced and a new depot constructed. Pointwork profiles have been altered, turning circles installed to accommodate the single ended trams and the line voltage has been reduced from 940 Volts to 600 V DC.

The line runs from Heuwaage, about 1Km from the SBB station, where the changes are most obvious. The whole area has been rearranged and the connection to the BVB re-instated. This location was further modified during 1986 to change the single track BVB link to double track and modify the station layout further to allow full through running of routes 17 and 10 from October. This has only been possible since the lines have become compatible, although a connection did exist many years ago when the Birgsigtalbahn worked further into the city. Route 10 now claims to be the longest European tram route, running via Bankverein. Line 17 now operates during peak hours from Ettingen or Oberwil via Barfüsserplatz to Kleinbasel. The capacity in the city centre was provided by the earlier deletion of route 18.

The line runs through the suburbs of Basel but the villages tend to merge through to Ettingen. From here the line becomes more rural and passes into Canton Solothurn (thus allowing the line's trams to carry the flags of three Cantons on 'high' days). At Fluh, half of the service terminates. There are connections into PTT buses outside the post office cum station buildings.

The line's claim to fame lies beyond Fluh. Soon after the station the line passes into France for 2 to 3Km before re-entering Switzerland for the terminus at Rodersdorf. This section runs across open country, on it's own alignment, and has an intermediate station, Leyman, in France. The small station building houses a customs office but it is usually unoccupied.

The fleet, up to 1984, consisted of Be4/4's (built 1966) with matching trailers. Most intermediate trailers were of early 30's vintage. Some of the 1966 stock has been sold to the Aigle Ollon Monthey Champéry Railway (AOMC) to run on the adhesion section between Aigle and Monthey. The new stock has a newly built depot at Hüslimatt, the size of which suggests it may take over some of the duties from the Arlesheim depot.

The line is now wholly operated by trams with up to three cars running in multiple units or with BVB bogie or six wheel trailers whilst the BVB is borrowing some of the BLT trams.

Feb 1987 update. As a result of the high traffic levels on routes 10 and 17 the BLT is studying the conversion of it's latest trams to double articulation. The new centre section would have an especially low step height. The prototype conversion should enter service in March 1987.

MARKT PLATZ

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Quantity of BEMO "HOM" RhB stock items and associated track, plus books and video's on the Rhätische Bahn. Please send s.a.e. for list. C. Perkins, 26 Bramblewood Road, Weston-Super-Mare, Avon. BS22 9JQ.

FULGUREX "HO" SBB Rotary Snow Plough. Ex factory condition. £300.00. Large quantity, ROCO, LILIPUT and FLEISCHMANN "HO" stock, "HOM" detailing items, all e.f.c. Some 2nd hand boxed ROCO and FLEISCHMANN coaches and wagons. Contact Editor for full details.

Wanted:

Archive photographs or documents of the Gotthardbahn and SBB Gotthard, prior to 1960, please indicate copyright ownership. Anybody seen any "Sputniks", not the Russian types but the Liliput "HO" ones. If you have any for sale. Details to Editor please.