

The ultimate dream

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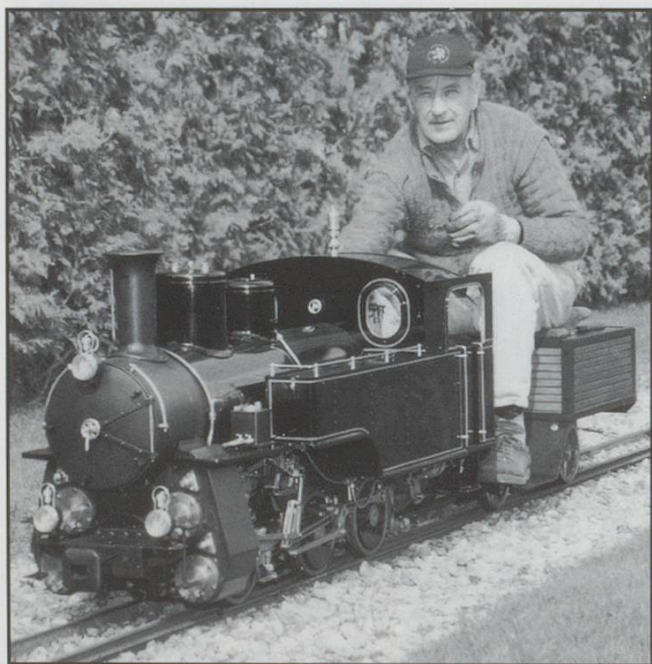
Bernard Fenton

How many members get, or wish they had, the opportunity to drive a steam locomotive in Switzerland. Not many I guess? The ability to do this once would perhaps be a dream come true, but I have been able to drive for the past six years, plan to do so again this year, and possibly for several more years to come. Readers by now may well be thinking, where or how? Well, a little cheating comes into play here as I take my own steam locomotive to the Swiss Vapeur Parc (SVP), at Le Bouveret, VS, for the Festival International de la Vapeur, held annually in June.

For those unaware of the SVP, it is a creation of typical Swiss features linked by a passenger carrying railway all in miniature, but please do not get put off by the British 'model-town' type attraction, as it is far and away different and dare I say better than any in GB. It has interests for young and old. The buildings built to various scales have the excellence expected from Swiss craftsmen. The railway runs with usual Swiss efficiency, providing the passenger with a journey of some 20 minutes through ever-changing scenery, with either

1:5 model of an SBB HG3/3. At the controls is the builder, Mr Angel Bonvin. This is a rack equipped model by the way. June 2000.

Photo: J P Cerez



THE ULTIMATE DREAM

steam or petrol-hydraulic locomotives hauling the trains. The locomotive reproductions in miniature follow



Swiss, English, German and American prototypes, and deserve close examination to recognise the engineering skills of their builders.

The SVP is located at Le Bouveret, VS, easily accessible by road through Villeneuve (CH) or Evian (F). The SBB station has connections to Monthey and St Maurice, or those preferring a leisurely cruise from Lausanne or Montreux across Lac Lemman can alight at Bouveret where the Parc is only a few minutes walk away.

As to the Festival, I have a 5-inch gauge scale 1.1/2" scale type, 0-4-2 Orenstein & Koppel narrow gauge locomotive, finished in Swiss style which gets loaded into the car along with all its associated equipment i.e. oil, coal, driver and passenger cars etc., and transported across France. The Festival attracts visitors from many European countries. Every year some 120/150 locomotives are transported great distances to this weekend Mecca for miniature locomotive enthusiasts. They come from the Mediterranean countries of Italy and Spain, from Belgium and the Netherlands in northern Europe, the near neighbours of France and Germany, and of course Switzerland itself.

Then there is myself, in the past few years the sole representative from Great Britain. Quite why this should be is a little unknown, as many people in GB are aware of the Festival and have expressed an interest to visit. I can only assume the English Channel, maybe the distance, or language to be barriers. Actually the language is not a problem. I don't speak German, and very little French, and manage to get by with the usual arrangements of signs,



A 7 1/4" gauge model of a Diesel Hydraulic climbs the 100% rack track with quite a load. Battery-electric powered with electronic speed control. June 2000. Photo: Bernard Fenton

pointing, and the anticipation of the other person speaking some English! The distance is no real barrier, as I have completed the journey in a single day, but perhaps I have an advantage over some in living only 30 minutes from the Eurotunnel terminal. However for several years I have been stopping overnight in France to enjoy the local French cuisine.

The Festival officially runs from the Friday morning through to Sunday evening, and virtually non-stop at that. Visitors start arriving during the week; all are welcomed by the Parc and enjoy some pre-Festival running on reasonably empty tracks. Ample facilities are provided for the visiting locomotive drivers to unload and service their loco for the festival period. Coal is imported from Poland, Russia or South Africa, with a somewhat suspect quality, hence the reason I take my own. I try to obtain Welsh steam coal, in itself a fast disappearing commodity, as it burns very well with very little ash or clinker and does provide the romantic steam loco atmosphere. (Or very sulphuric smells from the smoke for which I risk the annoyance from the people in the station!) Water is obviously very plentiful, and supplied from a water treatment system. The track is

open continuously and drivers are encouraged to join with others to enjoy themselves. There are no rules other than common sense; this is far cry from rallies held in GB where administration and red-tape seem to control things right from the start and which this loco owner views as an instant dampener on things to come. (And is usually right!)

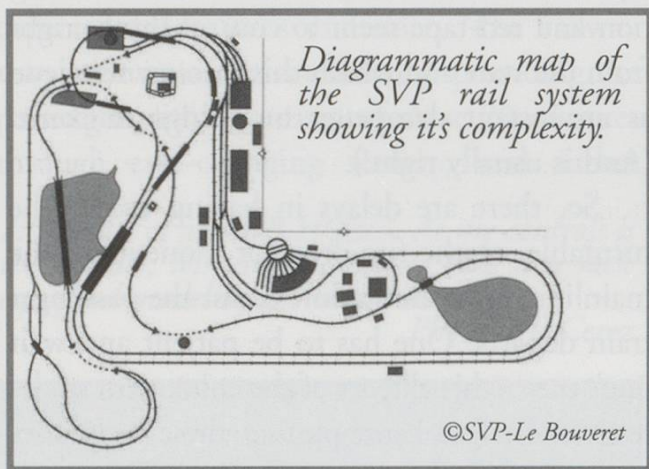
So, there are delays in having use of the turntable, or the fire-drop, or a queue on the mainline, or at the station whilst the passenger train departs. One has to be patient and wait one's turn - this all part of the enjoyment of the festival. In fact I am pleased these interludes crop up regularly as sitting at the loco controls not much more than 18" from the ground is not the most comfortable of positions to be in for a couple of hours.

Apart from the visiting locos the SVP set up a large marquee to accommodate static displays of locomotives and rolling stock, most of which are in the process of being built. A good selection of traders provide displays, selling a wide range of products on all transport matters. A well stocked "canteen" also operates from the marquee; this all day, and well into the night it seems, providing basic but filling barbecue style

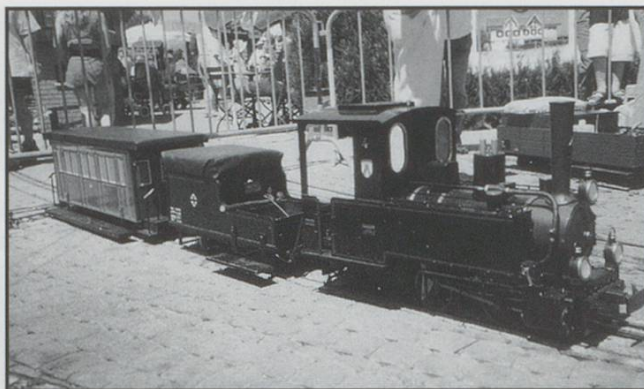
meals, to be washed down with a selection of chilled local wines and cold beers. These are very welcome as the Bouveret part of the Lac Lemman shore can get extremely hot on some days.

One of the highlights of the weekend has become the presentation of the 'placette'. This little ceremony takes place around 1900 on the Saturday evening. All participants are invited to 'Aperitif officiel des vaporistes', which is followed by the presentation usually by the President of the commemorative plaque. Every year the plaque is different and refers to the event significant to that year.

By now the time approaches 2000 and it's time to join approximately 400 others for the banquet in the marquee. Wives, friends, and supporters of the SVP prepare a wonderful buffet meal for the visitors. Once again despite language difficulties we join a table and soon get engaged in conversation with other guests. They are usually very surprised we come from GB and want to know all about the clubs etc.



we have here. Every year entertainment afterwards is provided on stage by a local brass band, and very good they are too. After refuelling the inner man, it's back to the track, to fire-up the loco again, then ensure lights front and rear are operating and off for an hour or so night running. This makes quite a change and requires extra awareness when driving to ensure your distance from the loco in front. (Although the track is signalled for normal Parc operations, for the Festival these are turned off and everyone drives on line of sight. This might



The author's own locomotive awaits a turn during the festival. Readers may remember this loco and coach from the Stevenage AGM at which it made an appearance. June 2000.

Photo: Bernard Fenton

raise a few questions regarding safety, but is quite normal practice for many miniature loco track operations – even in GB). Tiredness sets in for me early on and I leave the track, to the younger driver. I let the fire out then back to the hotel, a few minutes walk across the SBB tracks to the village, having completed some 12/16 hours in the SVP.

Sunday morning comes late after the previous day's exertions, but time is still available for another run or two before loco and kit are cleaned up and packed back in the car for another year. I guess the locomotive owner gains the most enjoyment from the Festival, but to the casual visitor there is much to watch, and anyone with an interest in railways must surely be fascinated with all the locomotives, be they large or small, their drivers and support crews.

The SVP comes highly recommended at any time, Festival weekend or not.

I was introduced to the SVP several years ago and now conclude this article with a description of a typical journey and some recent activities.

The attractive route starts in the historic railway station of Chablais City. The railway journey will take you through tunnels, over the pass, through a typical Swiss village having houses with their flower-bedecked windows to the famous castle of Aigle on a second level and then drops down to the idyllic shores of the two lakes and their pleasant playgrounds.



Would that all drivers were this attractive, or indeed as happy! A model of a BVB railcar and trailer about to leave the main station Chablais City. Photo: courtesy SVP Le Bouveret

We start from the station, our steam engine having refuelled with coal and water, to haul possibly 60 other visitors and us on a joyful journey. We pass the petrol hydraulic loco depot then the main workshops, before disappearing into the longest tunnel at the Parc, and under the highest mountain. The track now follows the edge of the largest lake, providing fine views of the George Washington Bridge. Towards the end of the lake the rack-railway branch leaves the main line to the right and we soon pass under the bridge that carries its trains to the summit of the route. Meanwhile our track takes us into rolling Swiss fields, past the site for the proposed Museum of Miniature Railways, then on to the George Washington Bridge we saw earlier. This suspension bridge was built in 1996, is 50 metres long and used 11 tonnes of steel. The journey now passes through three short tunnels. We see the main station in the distance then arrive in Chablais village. On the left are the wonderful village buildings that require close examination after

the ride. These include the Halles de Neuchâtel, La Banque de Zürich and Saanen Church.

After crossing the two smaller lakes the track now sweeps round to the right in preparation for the climb up the incline to the higher level, with it now joined by the return route giving the impression of a twin track railway. We now arrive at the summit, to our left we see once again the full glory of the George Washington Bridge. Le Chateau d'Aigle stands proud surrounded by its vineyards that make a fine wine every season. The building is the most accurate to scale of all the structures in the park. Swiss railways are full of bridges and so is the SVP, as we now travel over three more bridges round the mountain, the highest point in the Parc, under a snow canopy and back down the incline, where the driver requires great skill in controlling his train. We are now arriving back at Chablais Station, passing first the main steam locomotive depot where machines are being tended for their next duty. We alight from the train to go off and examine the buildings we saw earlier or take a refreshing drink at one of the cafés and to watch others take an enjoyable ride round the SVP.

Innovation is a tradition at SVP, with the introduction of a new feature every two or three years. The Supreme Rail Route through SVP was inaugurated in June 2000, with steam and electricity over the mountain in 1/5 size. In 1998 work started on the construction of a "rack railway" to carry passengers. It was formally opened to trains at the last Festival (June 2000). This is considered to be a first for a railway operating in miniature gauges, and was inspired by the SBB's Brünig line.

The SVP passenger hauling miniature railway is built in 7.1/4-inch and 5-inch track gauges for adhesion operation, and 7.1/4-inch-track gauge only for the rack section. Scale is 2.1/2inch; with a total main line track length of 5000 feet. 300 feet of track on the branch line is rack equipped.

The rack branch line has one bridge and a train stop and is equipped with the Von Roll rack-system, and climbs 10 feet at a maximum 100% gradient (1 in 10). Operating speed for adhesion working is 7 mph and rack working 1.8mph. Three Alpine Trains (cog-wheel fitted) transport passengers over the whole track system: one steam powered train pulls 12 adults and two battery electric each pulling 6 adults.

For those with a technical bent details of the rack equipped locomotives follow. Angel Bonvin of Crans, Switzerland completed the steam loco, Swiss type HG3/3 SBB Brünig line of 1910, in 2000. (A real loco of this type can be seen during the summer operating tourist trains with the Ballenberg Dampfbahn from Interlaken Ost.) It is a 2.1/2inch scale, 4-cylinder compound expansion, adhesion-high pressure cylinders; rack-low pressure cylinders. Two battery electric powered locomotives were built in 1996/9 to test the system on a temporary



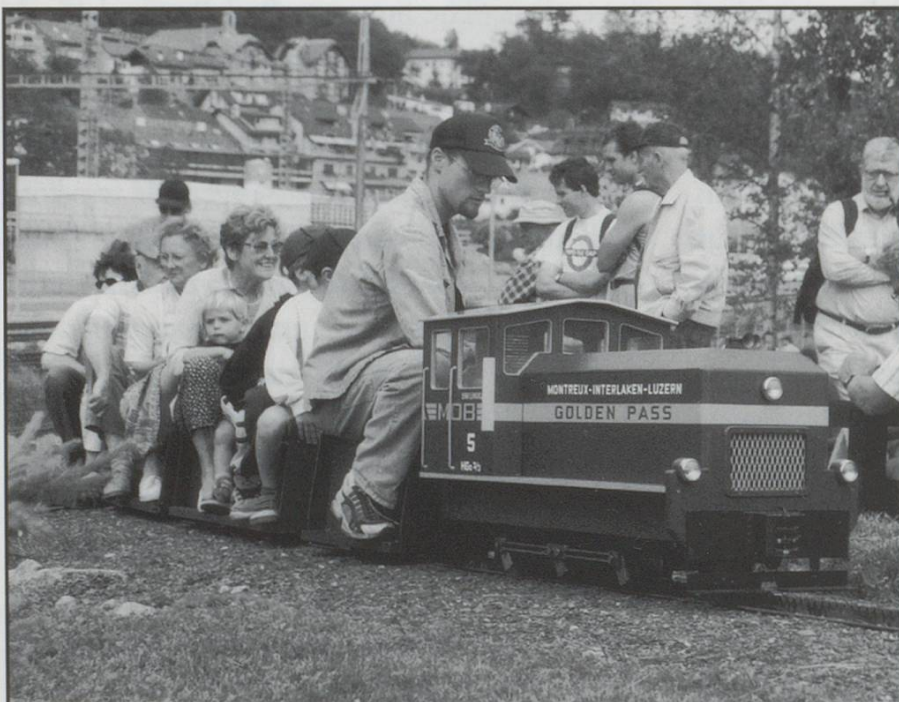
A train leaves the tunnel headed by 1/3 scale Decauville type 020.

Photo: courtesy SVP Le Bouveret

rack track, before work started at the Parc. These, a type HGe2/2 of the Schöllenenbahn, and a type HGm3/3 Diesel Hydraulic, finished in Montreux-Oberland-Bernois (MOB) livery. These two locos are battery powered by electronically controlled electric motors, with rack and transmission equipment supplied by Maxitrak Limited of Staplehurst, England.

The SVP is open every day from April to October, weather permitting, and will be pleased to welcome visitors from the Swiss Railways Society. The Festival International de la Vapeur (International Steam Festival) takes place every June. For more information please look at the Internet site:

www.swissvapeur.ch



The electrically powered model of a diesel-hydraulic climbs the rack section with a another load.

Photo: Fred Stanffer