

An unknown, underwater Swiss Railway

Autor(en): **Snowdon, Alan**

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AN UNKNOWN, UNDERWATER SWISS RAILWAY



Rheinau - the highest of the 3 boat ramps. Boat on cradle starting ascent of ramp, note the outboard motors tilted to clear track..

Photo: Alan Snowdon

In August 1999, on a holiday for Waterway Enthusiasts, I encountered a Swiss Railway hitherto unknown to us.

About 4Km below the famous Rhine falls at Neuhausen the river makes a tight loop around the village of Rheinau. Three weirs were built around this loop, raising the water level so part of the flow could be diverted, by a tunnel through the isthmus at its narrowest point, to power station turbines.

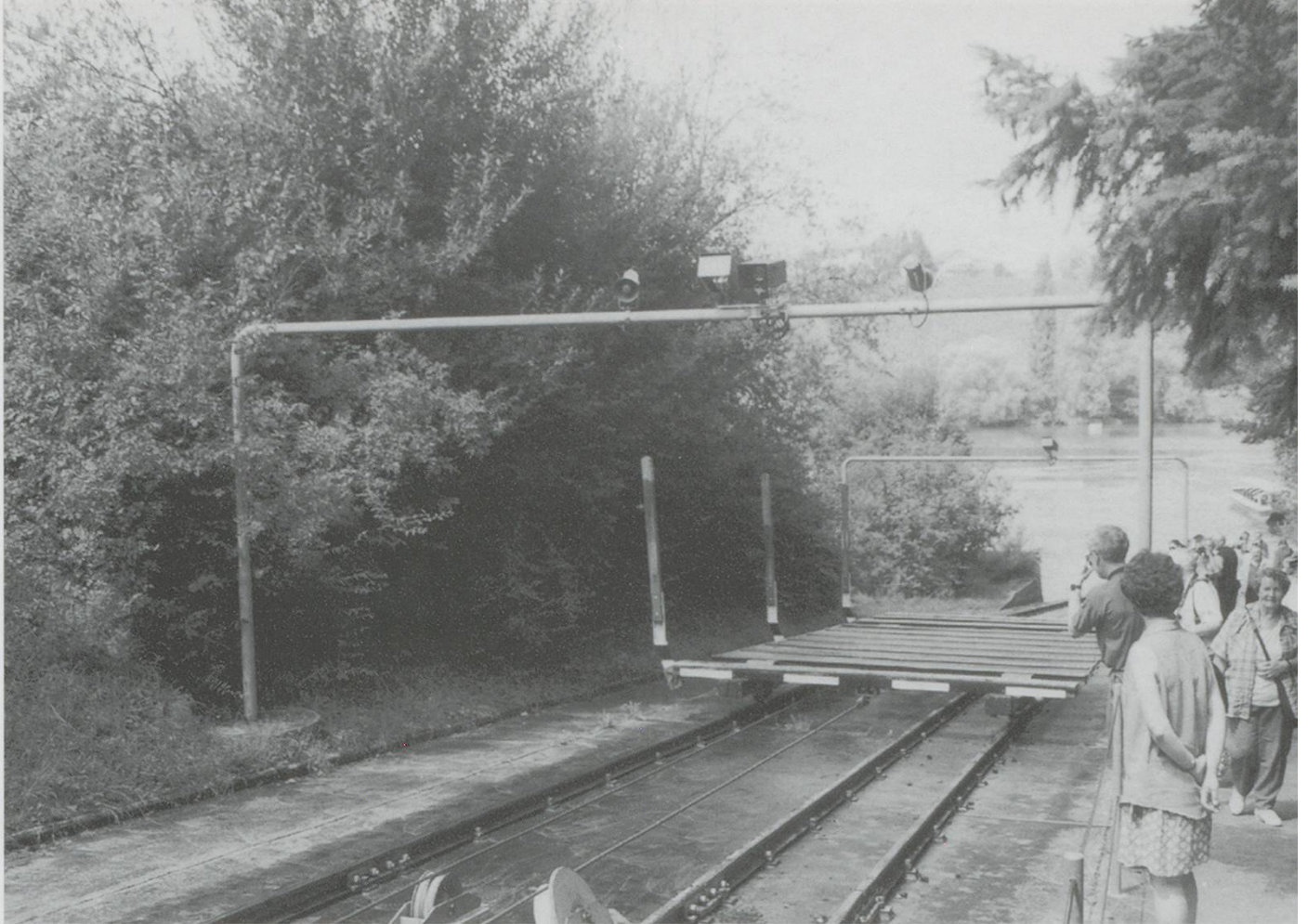
This part of the Rhine is above Rheinfelden, the upper limit for large vessels, but it had previously been used by small craft. Presumably the most cost-effective way of providing for them to pass the weirs was a railway at each. These lines extend below the water levels both above and below each weir. The boat-carrying cradle is moved by a continuous cable, powered by a winch situated beside the track, close to its highest point.

The winch is controlled from the power station's control room at the far end of the tunnel. CCTV cameras mounted above the track allow the operator to see all is well. Loudspeakers are provided for communication.

In operation, having first unloaded any passengers, the boat is driven between the stanchions of the cradle. Outboard motors are tilted to be clear of the track. The steerer waves "ready" to the TV camera. The cradle advances slowly to pick up its load, then faster up the ramp, over the hump, and down to deposit the boat in the other reach of the river. Maybe five minutes per boat transfer.

Gauge widening to improve the stability of the boat on the cradle probably accounts for the three-rail track.

Unfortunately there is no public service of boats on this part of the Rhine. Ernst Mandli AG who run the sight-seeing boats



The empty cradle returns down for the next boat. CCTV cameras and loudspeakers are on the overhead bar.

Photo: Alan Snowdon

Cradle with boat approaching the water above the weir. Note haulage cable in channels to under track pulleys at lead in to winch (out of sight on right).

Photo: Alan Snowdon



below the Rhine falls do the trip for booked parties only.

Access by public transport to the weirs is difficult. Either a long walk from Altenburg-Rheinau SBB, actually on German soil; or by

ZVB hourly bus, line 620, from Marthelen SBB, a 14-min. ride to Rheinau village. The opposite bank of the river is German territory, so if you cross by the footbridge above the weir, best have your passport.