

# Travels in the Suisse romande

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*Chemins de Fer du Jura BDe 4/4<sup>1</sup> 613 arrives at Glovelier 8/2000. Looks like an excellent place to wait for trains. You don't even have to leave your seat or glass.*

*Photo: Brian Allen*

During a 1999 trip I made a day-long 'safari' from Interlaken via the RM(EBT) from Thun to Solothurn, thence via the threatened RM route to Moutiers and on to Tavannes to join the Chemin de Fer du Jura (Tables 236 & 237). My interest in the network had been stimulated by the 'Private Railways' entry in 'Swiss Express' Vol. 4/8 December 1995 and by a rumour that part of the network may be under threat. On that occasion time permitted only a single trip from Tavannes to La Chaux de Fonds (changing at Le Noirmont) but the landscapes of the Jura - so different from the High Alps - were so attractive that I resolved to visit the Le Noirmont-Glovelier branch at the earliest opportunity. Operational interest was roused by the approach to La Chaux-de-Fonds where the train suddenly plunged onto the main road into town from the rural simplicity of the station at La Chaux-de-Fonds-Est and scuttled down the street with a tail of cars before abruptly angling across the road and diving down into the station shared with the SBB, and where the single car of the CMN service for Les

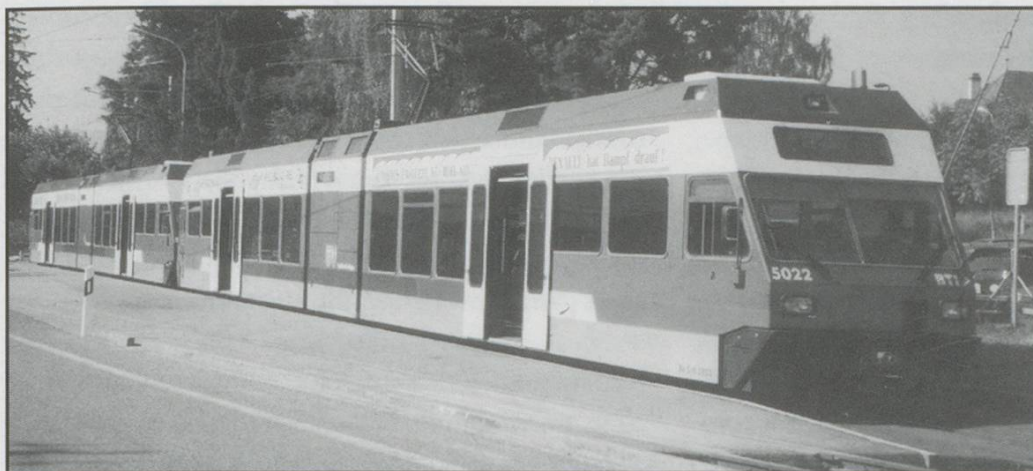
Ponts-de-Martel was waiting. Yet another metre gauge line for future attention!

In preparation for this year's trip, I was introduced to George Behrend's 'Railway Holiday in Switzerland' in which he described a 1960s journey from Le Noirmont to Glovelier, when there were only 2 trains per day on the rural stretch between the important centre of Saignelégier and Glovelier. Although the service frequency has now improved to 5 each way daily ( 3 to/from Tavannes, 2 to/from La Chaux-de-Fonds ) no time should be lost in visiting this section - just in case ! The itinerary I chose was dictated by the need to meet up with the 14.20 departure from Glovelier to Tavannes; the previous departure at 10.20 was too early and the next at 16.41 would be too late. In the event I travelled from Lausanne (SBB Table 251) by a 3-car RBde 560 set via Palézieux and Payerne to Murten; standard gauge single-line through rich farming country with wide valleys bounded by wooded hillsides with impressive chateaux and dramatic changes of scenery~from the gorge of La Broye above Bressonay to the industrial



area around Moudon. At the historic town of Murten, I joined the GFM's standard gauge Fribourg-Ins service (Table 255) for a sprint across the flat, open plain

then threads its way through suburban back gardens and streets until it crosses a major road junction and burrows its way to an underground terminus (constructed as recently as 1975) beneath the busy SBB interchange station at Biel/Bienne.



The next stage involved joining an IR Geneva Airport-Basel express to negotiate the 5<sup>1/4</sup> mile Grenchenberg Tunnel and the awesome limestone gorge beyond Moutiers - predominantly a high-speed single line with passing

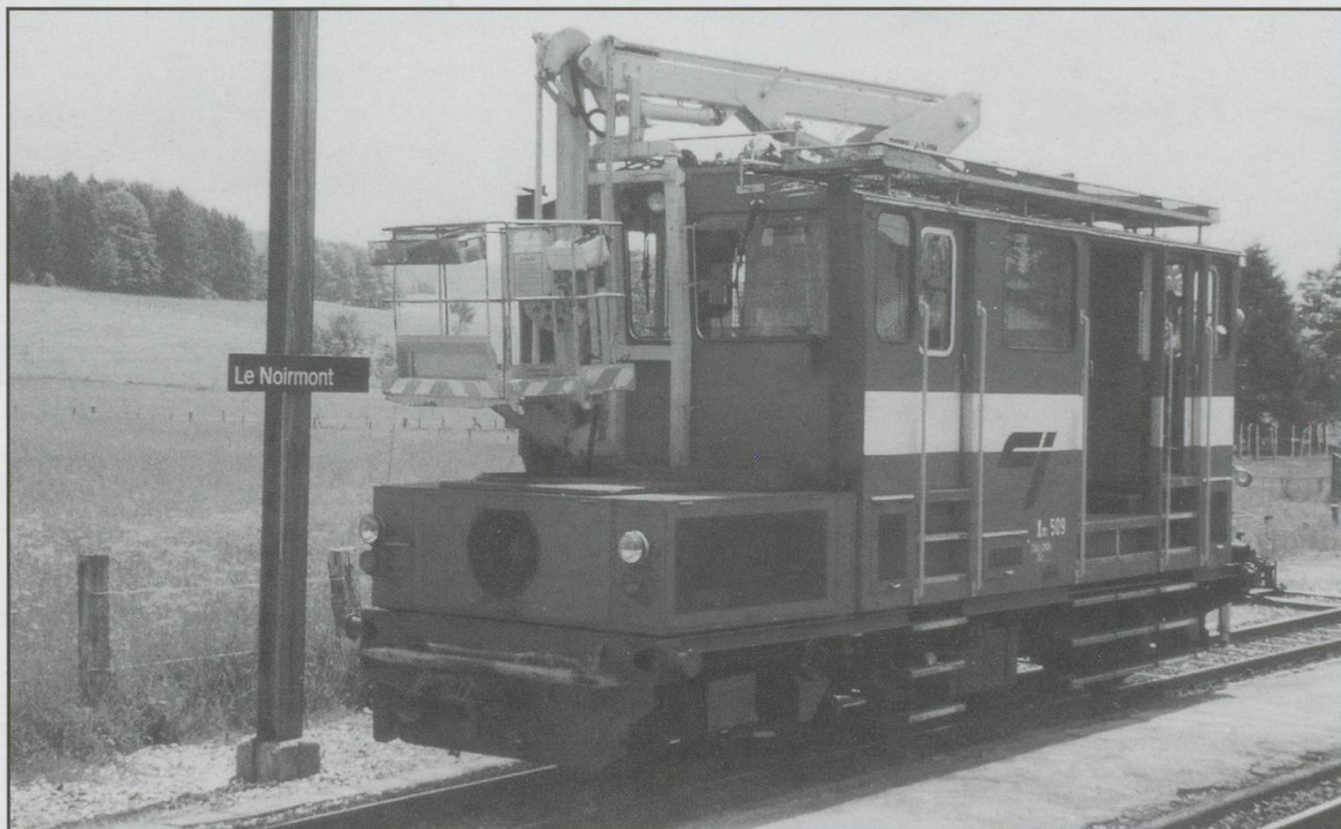
*OSST Group. BTI Be 2/6 nos. 5022 & 5052 await departure in Ins Station Square. 8/2000. Photo: Brian Allen*

to Ins on the Neuchâtel-Bern main line. Tucked away at the back of the station forecourt was the impressive 2-car formation (Be 2/6 Power Car 5070 and Trailer 5072) of the metre gauge Biel-Täuffelen-Ins Line (Table 261). From the main station of Ins, good speed was made over open farmland to the line's focal point at Täuffelen where the depot and works are located. Beyond this point the line serves a prosperous dormitory area bordering the Bielersee, running on roadside reserved track for much of the way until Nidau ( the original northern terminus of the line ). The train

loops - until the train bursts into the open plain approaching Delémont , where the express reversed and I left to join the connecting ubiquitous RBde 560 unit of the Delémont-Porrentruy- Boncourt line (Table 240) for the short run along the northern slopes of the Jura to Glovelier.

In order not to miss the crucial 14.20 train, I had arrived an hour earlier, also in the hope that I might be able to buy a mid-day snack. And lo ! .... right opposite the station building was the Hotel de la Gare. Not only was the scene redolent of rural

*Chemins de Fer du Jura overhead maintenance tractor XM 509 at Le Noirmont. 8/2000. Photo: Brian Allen*





France but the language was the same and the food good. My spaghetti bolognese was delicious and given a Swiss spin with a gruyères cheese topping instead of parmesan. Having eaten, I made my way to the transfer yard where, contrary to normal continental practice at siesta time, CJ De 4/4 No. 402 was shunting a single Rollschemel with Hopper wagon. At 13.35, the 12.05 from Tavannes (Table 236) arrived behind BDe 4/4<sup>n</sup> No. 613, one of the later 1985 built Power Cars ; the 'on time' arrival left the driver with a welcome 50 minute layover for lunch, while the narrow gauge train occupied the street between the SBB station building and the Hotel. Promptly at 14.20 the train left with a complement of driver and 3 passengers and climbed to

shoulder of the ridge ahead. I could only assume the points were of the usual narrow gauge spring-loaded variety permanently set for unidirectional travel. Having climbed above the tree line and executed a 180° turn, the line entered another steep-sided combe with frequent curvature and a series of short tunnels and arches through rock outcrops and all the time following the south-facing slope of a wooded valley. A stop at Bollement, deep in the woods, produced no passengers but the heartening sight of a track gang at work and the encouragement of seeing a series of neatly-stacked bundles of metal sleepers, presumably for imminent relaying. Continuous close growing pine woods produced a depressing atmosphere with little relief until at Pré-Petitjean we



*Chemins de Fer du Jura. Saignelégier depot 8/200. L-R. Bde 4/4<sup>n</sup> 611, De 4/4 401 and trailer 754. Photo Brian Allen*

the left, away from the main line to Porrentruy and beyond and which runs straight ahead to plunge into a 2 mile tunnel. After 3 miles of steady climbing through pine woods we reached the reversing station at Combe-Tabellon, reminiscent of the methods adopted for gaining height in the Andes , where the train ran into the left-hand face of a rudimentary island platform. The driver changed ends and, without any apparent authorisation, moved out over the scissors crossover to climb relentlessly towards the

suddenly burst into the open with the village perched high up to the left and a broad open valley beckoning ahead. The driver having received phone authority to proceed, we made good progress across typical dairy country, between huge meadows dotted with white and yellow flowers interspersed with brown and white cows and bordered by dry stone walls, to the contrasting environment of the town of Saignelégier, the focal point of the branch and home of one of the 3 depots serving the CJ. Ample accom-



modation is provided under cover for the rolling stock, with an elderly 3-road shed at the eastern end and a spacious modern 6-road structure to the west of the station. Both sheds are connected by what seems to be a popular feature on the narrow gauge, access lines from each end of the station coming together in a single line to serve the fan of tracks at either end of the yard. What happens, one wonders, when a key set of points fail? But, perhaps, being Switzerland, they never do!

During our stop at Saignelégier, I witnessed a textbook example of operational efficiency. As we came to a stand in the right-hand (westbound) platform at 14.50, simultaneously the 14.09 from Tavannes arrived with BDe 4/4<sup>II</sup> No.611 propelling 3 trailers. The first 2 coaches disgorged a special schools party. Then, in less than 7 minutes, the set had been propelled into the siding adjacent to the east shed, the front 2 vehicles had been detached and the standard driving car & trailer formation was re-platformed - ready for its booked departure for Glovelier at 15.03.

Following the main road out of Saignelégier, we stopped briefly at Muriaux and Les Emibois, at the latter to be inspected curiously by a number of elegant horses in the adjacent paddock, a reminder that this is renowned equine country. Approaching Le Noirmont, the line from Tavannes trails in from the south to parallel that from Saignelégier for the last kilometre or so. We stopped alongside overhead line maintenance tractor XM 509, and crossed the 14.43 La Chaux-de-Fonds to Saignelégier passenger train, formed of BDe 4/4<sup>II</sup> No. 614 & trailer. Both trains left together at 15.14 and ran side by side until we swung away across the valley floor and turned through 90° to climb the steep northern flank of the ridge through well spaced trees to Les Breuleux-Eglise, with its delicately-spired church, then descended by a hairpin bend to Les Breuleux itself - on the south facing slope of the next valley. The going became easier with a generally downward inclination until we reached Les Reussilles, the next passing point, where we crossed the 15.09 Tavannes to Saignelégier - this time headed by one of the older (1953 build) BDe 4/4s No. 605 & Trailer. Here the horse was again in evidence with a pedigree stud farm close to the station. A sharp drop away to the left from the level crossing and a 180° hairpin brought us first to the College and Chalet stations before we ran into Tramelan station itself, after run-

ning down the main street. Tramelan was the objective of the first constituent of the CJ, the TT (Tavannes - Tramelan), opened in 1884. The line was subsequently extended to Le Noirmont in 1913, to form a connection with the metre gauge SC (Saignelégier - La Chaux de Fonds) which had been operating since 1892. Meanwhile, in 1900, a standard gauge line had been opened from Saignelégier to Glovelier thus completing the metre gauge network of the CJ as it exists today, although the latter section was not converted from standard gauge until financial difficulties resolved with the assistance of public funding had been overcome. The conversion took place in 1949, the constituent companies having already been merged under the Chemin de Fer du Jura banner in 1944. The main works and servicing depot of the CJ are located at Tramelan, with a similar yard layout to that at Saignelégier.

After departure from Tramelan, déjà vu set in as we sped down into a forested area similar to that which we had left at Pré-Petitjean an hour before, although this time we were travelling east towards our original departure point. At last we broke into the open and ran into modern Tavannes, over a low reinforced concrete viaduct alongside the main road before swinging right into the station yard, where we came to rest alongside the 'Big Brother' trains of the SBB.

The rest of the trip was an anticlimax - a straight run down to Biel/Bienne and the smoothest of mainline journeys via Neuchâtel and Yverdon to Lausanne and home to Vevey. But, nothing to compare with the exhilaration of travelling on a small self-contained line with its own very special aura of quiet efficiency. If you haven't yet tried the CJ, give it a go ...you won't regret it! I have heard a whisper that MITV may be producing a CJ video shortly. I shall be first in the queue, but why not have a look if you need convincing.

#### *Acknowledgements*

*To Brian Hemming for the encyclopedic detail in his 'Private Railways' articles which I have used shamelessly for the background information.*

*To George Behrends for his book 'Railway Holiday in Switzerland' which gave me the incentive to explore the Jura.*

*Note from the editor - MITV are indeed preparing a programme on the CF Jura, in fact they are filming starts in August.*