

Working on the railroad

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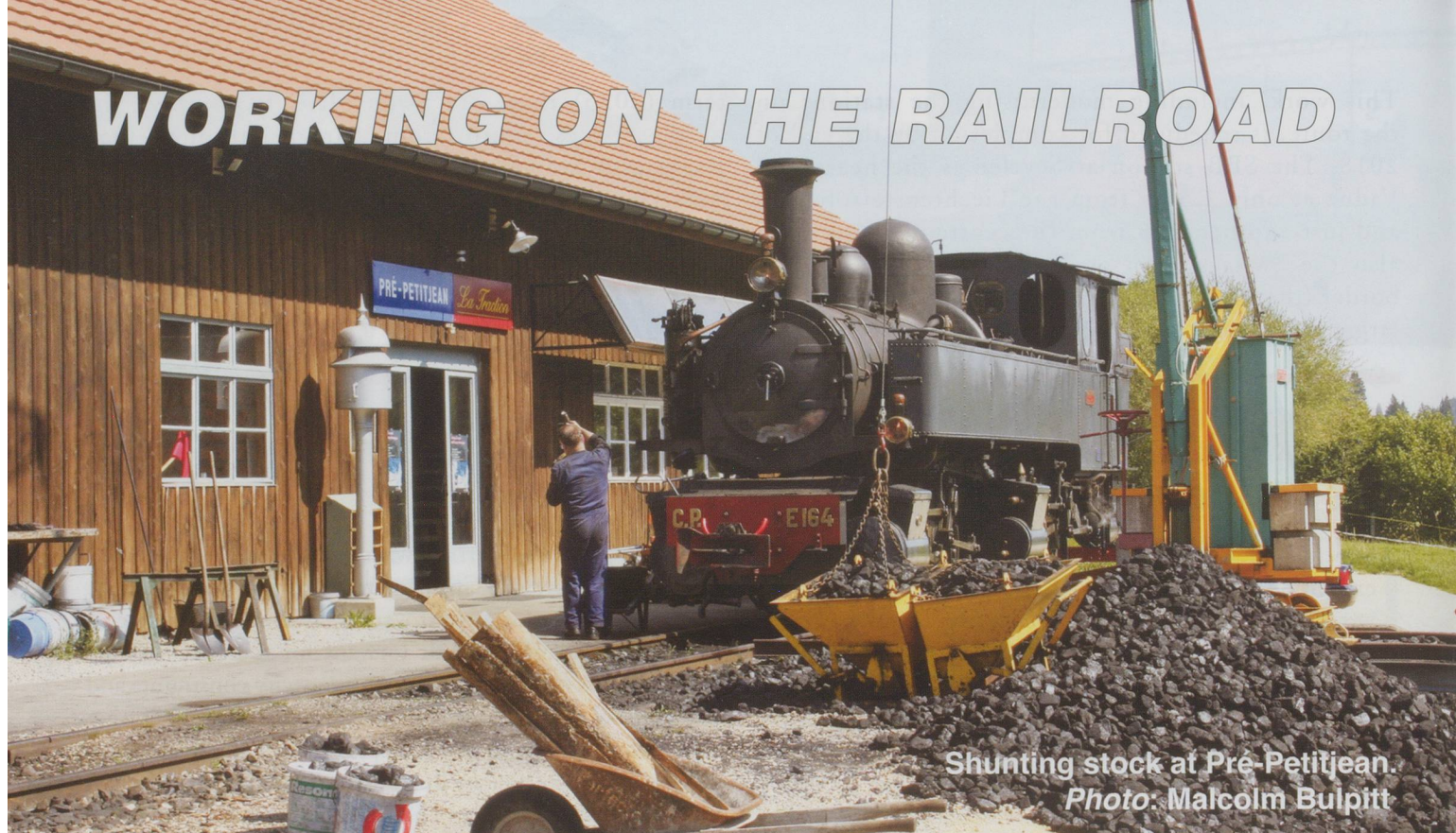
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WORKING ON THE RAILROAD



Shunting stock at Pré-Petitjean.
Photo: Malcolm Bulpitt

In summer our Bryan Stone 'Swiss News' Editor is also a part-time volunteer for the association La Traction based at Pré-Petitjean in Canton Jura. This owns two ex-Portuguese metre-gauge Mallet locomotives and runs steam specials on the Chemins de Fer du Jura (CJ). Bryan reports on a typical day.

My village is lonely at 06.00; mist lies over the hills, but the sun is promising. Signing on, says Pierre's note, is 07.15, so today I have to drive. It is 65km, through Delémont and on to the rolling hills of the Jura to Pré-Petitjean at 930 m altitude. On the narrow lane down to the depot, a brown haze betrays No.164, the 0-4-4-0T, coming to the boil. I'm there before Adrien, my mate, so I'm not late. Theo, traction chief of the CJ, technically responsible for La Traction's competence, is driving No.164 this morning. He and his fireman are preparing her. She was steamed slowly overnight. Although 106 year sold she's in good shape after a heavy overhaul the other winter when things were tightened up, but her left-hand injector is still dripping (and wasting) water.

No. 206, the big 2-4-6-0T, is in the workshop, cold, awaiting attention; she's used on heavy trains and on the winding 1 in 20 gradients of the Tavannes branch from Le Noirmont. Our car numbers were listed on our orders; two restaurant cars and a two-axle 3rd Class, have been cleaned, batteries charged

and water tanks filled. A freight car runs as stores wagon. Roland, the President, is also coming today. The kitchens are loaded with food and drink by Denis and Elisabeth, the gas cylinders changed. One hundred passengers eat and drink a lot in two hours. Today's job is a prestigious charter train for a travel agency; some 12 charters a season are typical, and we also run public advertised trains, great fun but harder work to operate, as you never know who will turn up. I once had 12 wheelchair patients and their attendants from a home, and they were really good fun. We can turn out a low-floor car with ramps when requested.

Little No. 10, a motor tractor acquired from the MIB near Meiringen, warns us and eases the cars into the yard, to be rolled down onto No.164, whose air pump sets to work urgently with the brake test. The CJ is a single line railway with hourly electric trains each way. We have a tight slot and must leave, and run on time. There are no rewards for disrupting the regular service. We are due away at 08.03,



empty down to the mainline junction at Glovelier, so at 7.55 we're all on board. The supervising CJ train conductor gets a 'release', to propel out to Pré-Petitjean station loop. A regular train goes past, and we're out, No.164 chattering happily bunker-first, a falling grade, a gentle 35kph through the woods, meadows, and past the lake, cows and grazing horses and past La Coombe, as the morning sun gets stronger. With no passengers to worry about we take a break. Through Bollemont we're on the cliff face, with some six tunnels. Glimpses of the Tabeillon gorge alongside are always exciting. Not many know that this section, Saignelégier – Glovelier, was once a private standard gauge steam railway, narrowed and electrified only in 1952. The size of the tunnels gives it away. Soon a wide 180° curve (a photographer's dream) brings us, falling at 1 in 40, to stop at Combe-Tabellion with its two tracks and scissors crossing. This is a rare thing, a reversing station, and No.164 will uncouple, set forward, reverse through the loop and again be attached at the other end. This takes 6 minutes.

Still falling at 1 in 40, a long curve brings us out of the woods to a stop outside Glovelier yard, again to run No.164 round, then to propel back on the street in front of the station. Out comes the hose to a hydrant across the road. A full tank for the loaded climb out of Glovelier is a must. In the meantime we are laying tables, and watching out as the passengers arrive, by coach today from Aargau. Then there's running about, excitement, taking pictures, until all are sitting down. Now we tell them about the line and the engines, remind them of safety rules like respecting the open platforms of these old cars, and at 09.52 we await the right-away. An obstinately red signal says the goods is not down yet, but here she comes, a heavy electric railcar with a big load of timber, standard gauge cars on metre gauge trucks. With a clear road and a whistle No.164 starts to pull. It will take 11 minutes to get clear inside at Combe-Tabellion, and another run-round, while a regular train crosses again. We let passengers climb down here to see and photograph the working. Safety demands vigilance, but that's what we are there for. A long whistle says 'All aboard', and we leave, 1 in 40 again, thumping round that lovely curve, up the cliff, and through the tunnels, where three years ago a spring cliff fall at La Roche closed road and railway for several weeks. It's much smokier going uphill, so watch the doors and windows, but after 20 minutes we stop in Bollemont.

We are still in a direct line only 8km from Glovelier, but to climb 306m we had to go 13.4km by rail. Now we have a 30 minutes' stop: time for pictures, toilets and a host of often well-founded questions, even perhaps a visit on the footplate (and not only for small boys). No.164 has

already used Glovelier's water, so more is needed. It comes from a hillside spring, adjacent to Track 2. Black smoke shows that the fireman's hard at it again. Railcar No.614, coming up on schedule behind us, runs slowly through Track 1 while we keep the passengers safe. When it's cleared the next section, it's time to go: 'en voiture, svp.'

Our trains are sometimes brought on the next bit to a sudden stop, by shots and galloping horsemen. 'Bandits' (a long way from the supposedly Wild West) can roam these woods, and passengers are often kidnapped and must be ransomed. But somehow it all ends with laughter and a glass of white wine, and we watch to make sure that running the railway is not impeded by all the excitement. Today there is no hold-up, so a quick run, past La Coombe and Pré-Petitjean, sees us into the last 15 minutes to Saignelégier where our passengers alight, happy and gritty. After another run-round, we work the empty stock back to the depot. The last job is just like home: wiping tables and seats and cleaning up, while the cars are shunted out. This lot wasn't too bad, so with any luck we're done quickly. For those on the engine, there is the disposal procedure; emptying the smokebox, a filthy job (even after 50 km it's deep in hot soot and ash); raking out the ashpan; coaling and watering; entering repairs in the log (that injector's still leaking), and, depending on what's happening tomorrow, throwing out, or cleaning and banking down the fire, before cleaning up the footplate. That too is the romance of steam. But for me, after signing off, a wash, a coffee and a bite together. It is 13.30 and 65 km in the car will soon see me home. +



LEFT: Double Headed Steam at Pré-Petitjean.

Photo: Bryan Stone

ABOVE: The large Mallet inside the depot.

Photo: Malcolm Bulpitt

RIGHT: Cleaning out the ash.

Photo: Malcolm Bulpitt

