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The Münchenstein Railway Accident

Bryan Stone commemorates the 125th anniversary of Switzerland's worst railway crash



J S No. 203 lies on its side on the river bank.

Photo: Courtesy of Verkehrshaus collection

It is a sad anniversary, 125 years later, just at a time when Switzerland celebrates a triumph with the Gotthard Base Tunnel opening. But it caused 71 deaths, and 171 injured. It was the greatest rail disaster that Switzerland has ever known – and hopefully will know.

There are some curious features to the incident that was caused by the collapse, under a train, of a 42m span skew bridge over the River Birs. This bridge, some 5km south from Basel SBB and just north of Münchenstein station, was constructed in 1875 as part of the new line between Delémont and Basel, built to complete the Delle – Porrentruy – Delémont – Basel and Biel routes, which were opened to give new rail access with France after Prussia occupied Alsace in 1870. The private railway company involved was the

Jura-Simplon, not wealthy but well managed in its time. French capital was made available to build the line and the firm of Gustav Eiffel, of tower building fame, undertook the engineering.

All seemed well, until in 1881 a flash flood seriously damaged the bridge pillar at the south side of the Birs, leaving the metal lattice girder span hanging unsupported some 750mm in the air. The resulting twisting of the bridge left various structural members cracked or torn. The buttress was rebuilt and the bridge lifted back into position, damaged parts being replaced, before an official loading test. Normal service continued until 1889 when the bridge was reinforced to allow a new class of heavier locomotives, the A3T 2-6-0s Nos 200 – 209, to operate on the line. This work was properly approved.

There seemed therefore no cause for concern when on the sunny afternoon of 14th June 1891 the 2.15pm train left Basel full and standing. Münchenstein, then a stand-alone community in Basel Land – now a densely populated Basel suburb was hosting the Regional Choir Festival and at that time there was no other means of public transport out from the City. The train comprised 12 vehicles with a total weight of 324 tonnes with two of the A3T Class, Nos. 203 and 209, at its head. On crossing the


On the left is what appears to be an early film maker recording the scene.

Photo: Courtesy of Verkehrshaus collection



bridge, the leading engine No.203 suddenly fell, turned 90° right and went into the riverbed killing its driver, followed by No.209 and 7 coaches. These were light wooden vehicles which were totally shattered, resulting in heavy casualties amongst their occupants, hence the high number of dead and injured.

The subsequent accident report was damning. The Bridge was then seen as too lightly built from the start; the ironwork did not meet laid-down standards; the flood of 1881 had left damage, which seriously weakened the bridge; and the strengthening of the bridge in 1889 was only partial. There was some evidence of excessive speed before the accident, and the resulting heavy braking for the Münchenstein stop was perhaps a contributory factor. The train had not derailed before the bridge failure and the engine crews were not criticised. The bridge was subsequently rebuilt as another lattice girder structure that is still in place. It can be seen from trams on BLT Line 10 as they traverse the nearby bridge to the north.

125-years-on there is a close link with the Basel of today. Visitors to the city love the cast iron street fountains that once numbered fifty – with some 28 remaining. Their central feature is a mythical creature the Basilisk, half cockerel, half serpent, which since the 15th C at least has been a symbol of Basel. It was reputed that the creature could kill with its stare. These fountains were designed by Wilhelm Bubeck, a German engineer who worked on the Gotthard Railway project, moved to Basel, and became Director of the Business School and Trades Museum. In 1888 he had won first prize, with his basilisk design, in a city competition for new street fountains. There was some delay, but in 1891 the fifty castings were commissioned from the Von Roll iron-works in the Klus, near Balsthal. The designer, alas, never saw them as they were installed shortly after the Münchenstein disaster, where Herr Bubeck was sadly one of those killed. However, they stand today all over the city, loved and photographed, having become Bubeck's unwitting memorial - and a daily reminder to those in-the-know of Münchenstein in 1891. 



TOP: Workers clamber onto the remains of the bridge to survey the damage.

ABOVE: Railway staff and others look on at the remains of the coaches.

LEFT: No. 209 more or less still upright amongst the remains of the bridge.

Photos: Courtesy of Verkehrshaus collection

RIGHT: One of the fountains designed by Wilhelm Bubeck who sadly died in the accident.

Photo: Bryan Stone

