Different times - 1951. Part 2

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Different Times – 1951 (2)
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The BR Office was in the buff-colour building behind the bus.   *Photo: Bryan Stone*

A few weeks after Geoffrey Bryson completed his first trip to Switzerland - see **Different Times (1)** - an *Express Delivery* letter was handed into the sub-post office next to Basel Hbf. This originated from British Railways' 'General Agency for Switzerland' that was located on the SW corner of Centralbahnplatz on the first floor of No.9, above a branch of the Danzas Travel Agency. The creases in the envelope suggest that it contained a bulky booklet or similar – urgent tickets for the addressee, Mr Maidment, perhaps? The delivery address was in Basel's Millhauserstrasse less than 3km away across the city. In practice Basels Tram Line 1 passed close to both premises.

The office occupied by the General Agency was first the location of the Agency of the South Eastern and Chatham Railway, then after 1923 of the Southern Railway, and ultimately after 1948 BR. The Agency's work was sales and promotion, including much freight (the Train Ferry services were used by Swiss forwarders) and later, ferry bookings for goods vehicles and automobiles. Passenger work was promotion of British Travel; sales of rail passes and tickets; making sleeper reservations, and reservations at BR's hotels. BR's Motorail services were also popular. Working with Swiss Travel Agencies for all-in and party travel was also important. There was also 'outdoor staff', as groups from Britain such as school and travel agent parties, skiing groups, etc. were met at the SNCF station and escorted; Swiss reservations were assured, waifs and strays were comforted! There was also an active round of promotion through film shows (BT Films) and illustrated lectures, for clubs, schools, and travel agency staff. Finally, the BR Agent was generally a prestigious personality in regional travel, political and representative affairs – often never missing an Apéro! All this ended when the office closed around 1987. Danzas has also now gone, and the building today is a Burger King 'restaurant'. The office also served another function for the ex-pat British community. This was the duplicating (by the now long forgotten RONEO system) of Basel's Anglican Church Newsletters and notices, at no charge, of course.

It is interesting that the date stamp on the front of the envelope shows it was handed-in on 28th July 1951 at 2 pm (-14) for *Express Delivery*. The octagonal date-stamp on the back shows that it was handled for delivery by the telegraph section of Basel Post Office. The same courier (i.e. a boy on a bicycle) was used for telegrams and *Express Mail* deliveries. Now, we know that the Swiss are super-efficient in nearly all things but . . . how is it that the octagonal delivery office stamp on the back is timed the same day at 1 pm (-13), one hour before it was accepted at the Post Office?

The three stamps on the envelope are from the 1949 'Industry and Landscape' definitive series. They depict the Grimsel Dam (20c), Verbois hydro-electric station (30c) and the 'Rheinhafen' docks at Basel (40c). Apart from railway sidings on the 40c design, as luck

1951 BR agency Basel envelope.

would have it the three stamps used did not include any of the railway scenes depicted on other values in the series. These were the viaducts at Sitter, near St Gallen (5c); a train on the Rochers de Naye railway (10c); the Melide causeway across Lake Lugano (25c), and the Landwasser Viaduct (60c) on the RhB near Filisur – with an approximation of a Rhätische Bahn Crocodile Ge 6/61. Additionally the 50c stamp bears a dramatic design showing the Säntis cable car.

Given that a member of the Agency staff could probably have delivered the letter by hand, and be back in the office in some 30 minutes, it speaks volumes of the efficiency of the Swiss Postal System at the time that the envelope was sent by this method. 🇨🇭

Bob Medland, the Librarian of the Helvetia Philatelic Society of Great Britain, thanks Bryan Stone and Malcolm Bulpitt for their input to this article.

Swiss stamps mostly showing railway themes of the time. Other value stamps can seen on the envelope opposite.

Pulling your hair out!

Steve Buck describes the frustrations of a Membership Manager at renewal time

For our members the arrival of December's *Swiss Express* is the reminder that subscription renewal is due, but for me the process starts two weeks earlier when I create a new spreadsheet from the list of members who renewed the previous year. The first job is to deal with those who previously paid for two years. They get a new membership card with their new password for the Members' Area, which is sent out with a note asking them to take care not to renew again. (It happens that, despite this, some do). For those who need to renew I prepare two sets of labels, one for the membership cards and one for the envelopes in which the cards are posted.

The week after the December *Swiss Express* is posted, the deluge starts. By the 7th December I had processed over 270 renewals. To process that many, quickly, means working to a system. I must ensure that the amount on the cheque corresponds with the amount (ticked or otherwise) on the form, that the cheque is signed and that the account details are correct. Then after making the necessary spreadsheet entries, labels are fixed to cards and a final check is made when fixing the labels to the envelopes. Check, check and check again to avoid any mistakes. When a suitable gap appears, out comes the franking machine to process the postage. (It costs the Society 39p to send each envelope franked, rather than 58p if we put stamps on). Then it's off to the Post Office as franked mail must be handed in, not put in a post box. Another deluge comes in early February after I have sent reminders to those who have provided email addresses, but who haven't yet renewed, that they will need to do so if they wish to receive their March magazine.

You may say this is a straightforward process, so why does he pull his hair out? Well, I did say I had to work to a system and matters are not helped when folk do not do what they are asked to do. That is why we ask members when renewing to help by observing a few simple instructions:

PLEASE DO NOT: send a stamped addressed envelope for return of the card.

You may think that you are helping by sending an envelope, but you are not. Renewal forms with an enclosed envelope have to be separated from the others to ensure the envelope is not mislaid. As part of the checking process, my mailing label has to be used. If my mailing label does not cover what you have written on your envelope, then I have to return your envelope unused. Some might just throw these envelopes away - but I am kinder than that.

PLEASE DO NOT: staple cheques to the renewal form.

Removing stapled cheques does take time and may break my nails.

PLEASE DO NOT: fail to send the complete renewal form – without the Society Diary.

I only need the renewal form. Keep the diary and support one of our branches.

As you can imagine this is a busy period. So messages asking if a member needs to renew; has changed address, or 'what is my membership number?' are not needed at this time. Please leave them to later in the month. I mentioned earlier that despite sending out cards to members who have already paid for two years, some members attempt to renew again. This does cause special difficulties. If I receive a cheque I have to generate a letter and label to return it. If payment comes from PayPal then an email to the treasurer is necessary to return it. The worst is electronic payment. As the treasurer does not have the account details on the incoming payment, we have to wait for the member to supply those details to return the payment. It slows the job. Another time waster I encounter is the use of pseudonyms rather than names on PayPal, or not using your membership number (shown above your name on the renewal form). The membership number has either one letter followed by numbers(s) or two letters (the first of which will be Z unless you live outside the UK when it is 0). As an aside the six number reference in the format xxx/yyy on the renewal form is a printing reference and not your membership number.

Despite all the above problems, I get a lot of pleasure from serving members, being intrigued by names, addresses and numbers which I find interesting. I hope to continue this role for a few years yet, and at the same time to hang on to what hair I have left. Please do your bit to help me by spending a few moments checking what you have done, and that you have done what you are asked to do. 🇨🇭