

Swiss Preservation Pioneer

Donald Brooks celebrates the success of the metre-gauge Blonay – Chamby Railway.



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Above: – 0-6-OT no 5 'Bercher' (SACM 4172 of 1890) approaches Blonay along the roadside section of the BC with the 13.35 from Chaulin-Musée.

Left: Bercher nears Chamby with the 15.15 from Blonay to Chaulin-Musée.

Photos by Donald Brooks, October 1986, except where stated

Where Wales leads, the world follows. After the preservation of the Talylyn Railway in 1951 the idea that railways could be run or supported by volunteers began to spread around the globe. By the early 1960s countries as far afield as Australia were beginning to embrace the concept, with several European nations joining in.

That Switzerland was a slightly late entrant into the field is at least partly because in the 1950s and 1960s it did not have many closed or moribund railways suitable for volunteers to take over. In May 1966, though, an ideal opportunity arose in the Canton of Vaud when the 3km electrified metre gauge route from Blonay to Chamby (BC) closed.

Inspired by existing British operations, a group of local enthusiasts decided that lineside photos on the last day should not be the end of the story and in December the first meeting was held of the group that became the driving force behind the creation of the Chemin de Fer Touristique Blonay-Chamby.

The intention was not to preserve the status quo – the old model of regular daily public trains had gone, apparently for good, and was to be replaced by a weekends-only service for a completely new market. Initially there was some uncertainty as to how the railway should be branded for that market and whether the 'new' BC would be advertised primarily as a tourist or museum operation.

CF Touristique was initially preferred lest 'museum' proved too

off-putting to potential travellers, but the emphasis gradually changed and today the line is known as the Chemin de Fer-Musée Blonay-Chamby, describing itself as a Musée Vivant (living museum) to show that it is much more than just a gallery of lifeless exhibits.

Blonay and Chamby lie high on the slopes overlooking the northern shore of Lac Léman (Lake Geneva), towards the eastern end of the lake, where railway development into the hills from the 1861 lakeside main line included two metre gauge electric routes. The first section of the Montreux Oberland Bernois (MOB) line to Zweisimmen opened in 1901, climbing in sweeping loops across the hillside on adhesion gradients as steep as 1 in 13.5, and passing through the wayside halt of Chamby after seven kilometres.

From the almost equally celebrated resort of Vevey, not far west along the lake from Montreux, the Chemins de Fer Électriques Veveysans (CEV) opened a line in 1902, also adhesion only and electrified from the start, climbing to Blonay and continuing across the hillside to meet the MOB at Chamby.

The CEV quickly expanded, building a 1904 route from St-Légier, below Blonay, to Châtel-St-Denis, though this branch closed in 1969, shortly after Blonay – Chamby. The final addition was a 1911 rack section from Blonay to the 1361m summit of Les Pléiades, a spectacular viewpoint overlooking the lake. Today this rack and adhesion route from Vevey is the only part of the ex-CEV network to remain open, with a half-hourly service as far as Blonay, continuing hourly up the rack to the summit. It is now managed within the MOB group.

Great potential

Although the BC had not been able to sustain a daily passenger service, it quickly became apparent that it possessed everything necessary for a successful tourist line. There were good connections with metre gauge routes at both ends, holding out the possibility of through running as well as excellent access. The Montreux Riviera is one of the world's major tourist areas, celebrated for its lake and mountain scenery as well as its resorts. Several large towns nearby provide potential volunteers.

As the railway was already electrified, a variety of motive power could be used. Most importantly of all, the BC possessed everything a self-respecting railway could possibly want, including a curved viaduct, a short tunnel, a rural halt, level crossings, roadside running, steep

gradients and superb forest and mountain scenery, all packed into its three-kilometre length.

There was no Swiss precedent for volunteer operation of a passenger-carrying railway, so all legislative procedures had to be worked through from scratch. With the support of the CEV, which continued to own the infrastructure, discussions were undertaken at federal and cantonal level to establish the appropriate legal framework for the railway.

While this was happening, volunteers started to undertake maintenance on the line and in 1967 stock began to arrive, with electric railcars followed in June by the BC's first steam loco, 0-6-6-0T Mallet no 104, Hanomag 10437 of 1925, from the Zell – Todtnau line in Germany. In July the first works train ran along the overgrown tracks.

With approval from Canton Vaud and the Federal Council in place, a new concession was granted. After further renovation and restoration had taken place, services restarted on 20th July 1968, just over two years

after closure, an achievement reflecting considerable credit on everyone involved given the bureaucratic and practical hurdles to be overcome.

From the start a mix of steam and electric trains ran on operating days, which continues today. The inaugural service was worked by another Zell – Todtnau Mallet, 0-4-4-0T no 105, Karlsruhe 2051 of 1918, which arrived on the BC in 1968.

Although the future success of the BC was immediately apparent, with almost 3,000 passengers carried during the first weekend, there was still much infrastructure work to be done. As always, the key need was undercover storage for the growing collection of rolling stock as well as suitable conditions for the volunteers to work in. The first shed, a functional five-road building, was built at Chaulin, the end of a short branch or long siding near the Chamby end of the line.

Opened in 1973, the shed was served by passenger trains, which today run from Blonay to Chamby,



Above: SEG Mallet 0-4-4-0T no 105 (Karlsruhe 2051 of 1918), the locomotive which worked the first train on the revived Blonay – Chamby in 1968. It is crossing the curved viaduct over the Baye de Clarens in October 2020. Photo: Alain Candellero

Below: Bercher stands in the attractive and excellently cared for chalet-style station at Chamby on arrival with the 16.45 service from Blonay, the last steam service of the day.





then reverse down the branch to Chaulin-Musée before returning to Blonay with a reversal at the junction, without calling again at Chamby.

An additional three-road exhibition hall opened nearer the junction in 1993 and development of the Chaulin site has continued with the building of a shop and café-restaurant. Unlike the 'main' BC line, all the Chaulin infrastructure is owned by the museum railway.

One particularly interesting development was the experimental reintroduction of regular weekday passenger trains between May 1998 and May 2000, with the MOB running Tramway Léger de la Riviera services between Montreux and Vevey via the BC. Unfortunately the trial failed to meet the passenger targets set, with some trains running empty. Despite the failure of the experiment, it did show that public and museum services could happily co-exist and today the MOB still regularly uses the line for stock transfers between its Montreux and Vevey operations.

World famous

Over the years the amount of rolling stock on the BC has grown

substantially, to the point where today it forms one of the most significant metre gauge collections in the world. The first two steam locos were from outside Switzerland, albeit just across the border from Basel, and 'foreign' locos have continued to feature, with a 1926 2-6-2T from Spain's Olot – Girona line and a 1927 DR 0-10-0T. Swiss steam has not been neglected, with examples from the Bière Apples Morges, Furka Oberalp, Régional des Brenets and Lausanne Echallens Bercher, all relatively local, as well as the superb 1912 SLM self-propelled rotary snowplough from the Berninabahn.

There are also two steam tram locos, an unusual 1882 SLM 2-4-2 from Mulhouse in France and a 1900 Krauss two-axle machine that worked in Italy. Electric trams include an example from the local lakeside Vevey – Montreux – Chillon – Villeneuve route, while the electric railcars all originate from Swiss systems, happily including a 1905 specimen from the MOB and a 1913 one from the CEV.

The MOB has also contributed three-bogie articulated power car 2002, designed for the heaviest trains on the challenging climb from

Above: Opposite extremes of BC locomotive sizes inside the original shed at Chaulin. On the left is Régional des Brenets (see NGW166) 0-6-0T no 1 'Le Doubs' (SLM 618 of 1890), while on the right is 0-6-6-0T Mallet 104 (Hanomag 10437 of 1925).

Below: An MOB service from ends its journey at the joint station at Chamby, Waiting to return to Chaulin-Musée is BC tram loco no 4 (Krauss 4278 of 1900).

Montreux, including the Golden Mountain Pullman, which unfortunately only ran for the single 1931 season and had already been withdrawn when the new locomotive for it arrived the following year.

The BC has no paid staff, with all tasks undertaken by volunteers, who maintain everything in immaculate condition as might be expected in Switzerland. Efforts are currently concentrated on 'Projet 104', aiming to return the line's original steam locomotive to service. While this will largely be achieved through volunteer effort, the chassis and axles were sent to Meiningen for overhaul and the project budget is almost a million Swiss Francs (about £850,000).

Trains run on the BC every Saturday and Sunday from the beginning of May to the end of October. The timetable varies with either eight or ten return trips operated, three or four of which are steam-hauled.

On the last Sunday morning of every month there is a through steam train from Vevey to Chamby, the Riviera Belle-Epoque, full details of which are on the website. A separate fare is charged for this train, but otherwise the standard adult ticket acts as a day rover for the line and includes entry to the museum and depot, providing an excellent value day out.

In 2023 the Festival Suisse de la Vapeur will be held from Saturday 27th to Monday 29th May, with four locomotives in steam. Some trains will be hauled by Berninabahn 1916 Ge 4/4 electric BB81, just back from an extended return visit to its original home line, but most services over the weekend will be steam. **NGW**

More Information

For more details of the line see www.blonay-chamby.ch – the site is available in French or German though unfortunately not in English.

Donald would like to thank Alain Candellero of the BC for help with additional information and photos.

