

SCHOOL JOURNEY 1951

SWITZERLAND

Memories of a School Journey to Switzerland - Easter 1951

By **B M Pollard** VI Arts

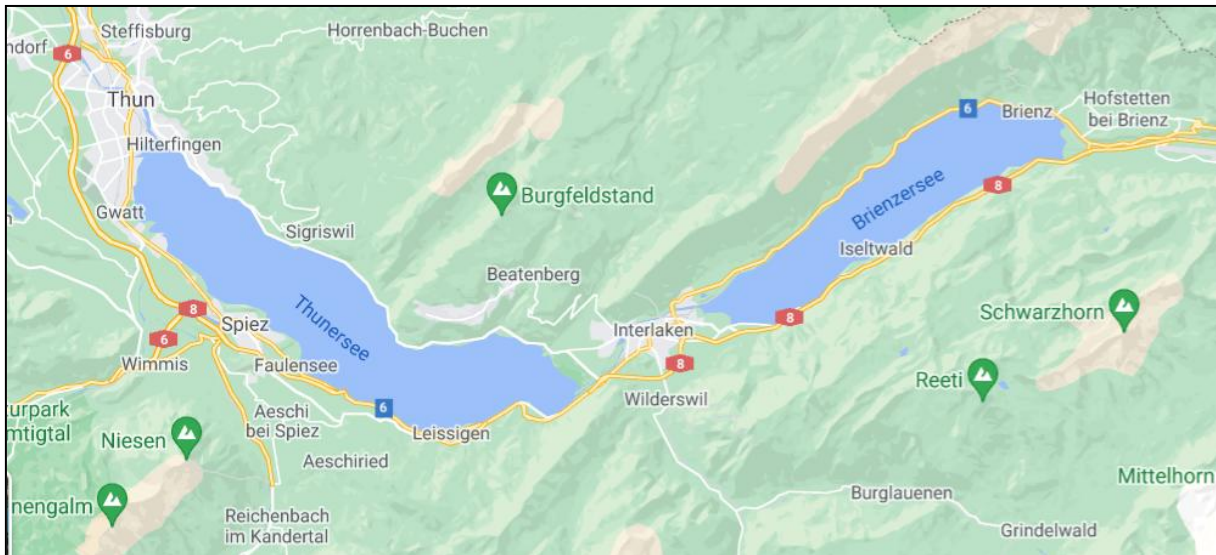
On March 2nd the school parties to Switzerland met at Victoria, and there was only one topic of conversation – the French rail strike. Calais was the only port open to cross-channel steamers, but nobody knew what would happen when we arrived there.

The journey to Folkestone was uneventful and we were soon on board the "*Maid of Orleans*". We were scheduled to depart at 3.20 pm, but, due to the uncertainty concerning our reception at Calais, we did not leave until 5 pm. The sea was choppy and the steamer rolled in the approved style. We arrived at Calais at about 6.30 pm and were not allowed off the boat for an hour. We stood amidships, packed closely together, clutching our luggage. This was the most unpleasant part of the holiday.

Eventually, the French officials condescended to allow us on shore and we unpacked ourselves and relaxed. There was no train ready for us, and little prospect of one. We settled down to our vigil in the waiting room, which soon developed an atmosphere capable of being cut by a knife. Tired and dispirited, we streamed onto the platform once more. Altogether, we waited in Calais station for four hours. At 11 pm a string of carriages arrived. Over the loudspeakers, it was announced that only holders of "special tickets" would be allowed on. As nobody knew what constituted a "special ticket" we got on. To my amazement, I saw nearly all the KGS party were with me, thanks to the untiring efforts of the fifth-formers. Certain bright sparks, who shall be nameless, endeavoured to board another train. They were soon gathered in and, shortly afterwards, the train started off on its long journey, about five hours late..

Getting to sleep on a night-train journey is a definite art, and one which I have not acquired, unfortunately. The guard is certain to arrive when one is just dropping off, or the train will

stop with a vindictive jerk. However, a certain member of staff slept like a log. Our late start had its compensation, for, in the early hours, we were able to see both the Vosges and the Black Forest



At last we arrived at Basle in blazing sunshine. Here we had coffee and were given a packed lunch. Starting off once more, we travelled through beautiful country under a cloudless blue sky, and eventually arrived at Interlaken. We were then transferred to a light railway running to Wilderwil, our destination. We arrived at the Hotel Baren after a fairly long walk from the station. The evening was spent in settling in and enjoying a lovely meal.

No excursion had been arranged for the following day, and most of the party walked into Interlaken, a delightful town. Not only is it an excellent centre for excursions, but, lying between Lakes Brienz and Thun, it is a charming centre in its own right. In fine weather, it commands a fine view of the Jungfrau, framed by the open valley. Unfortunately, it was raining when we visited Interlaken and this weather continued for most of the holiday.

On Sunday we went by train to Grindelwald, a delightful and unspoiled mountain resort. We travelled by train from Wilderwil up the valley of the Lütischine, passing through Zweilütschinen, at the confluence of the Swartzer and Weisses Lütischine and, as the valley narrowed, we arrived at Grindelwald, shrouded

with snow. Here we travelled to the second station on the ski-lift, a very interesting experience. One hangs suspended above deep fields of snow, with silence and greyness all around. We reached the second station and started back almost immediately as the visibility was heavily restricted and the cold intense. The weather was again disappointing and we were unable to see the Wetterhorn and other famous peaks.

The sun was shining brightly the following morning and the Jungfrau could be discerned between the clouds. Dressed in summer clothes, prematurely as it turned out, we set out for Interlaken where we embarked on a lake-steamer for the journey to Thun. On the way the fickle sun deserted us and the grey clouds once more resumed their mastery.

Thun was originally a fortress town guarding the entrance to Aar Valley, but it has now degenerated into a manufacturing centre. Evidence that it was a fortress town lies in its imposing castle and in the Hauptgasse, which is a double-decker street with its footpaths on the shop-floor level and its carriageway several feet below, the intervening space being employed as cellars. After wandering about in its streets and experimenting with its cafés, successfully in my case, we returned to Interlaken by rail. A dance was held in the evening.

Tuesday was the most depressing day of the holiday. The rain poured down all day long with relentless intention. In the afternoon **Messrs Cox and Moller** and Mrs Payne and Miss Anderson of BKHS led the hardy spirits on a walk to Zweilütschinen. Everybody got wet and the afternoon was enlivened only by the discovery of the local liquor, called Bätzi and possessing distinct possibilities.

On Wednesday the rain stopped, but the sun obstinately refused to appear. However, we set out by train to Brienz with the intention of walking to the Giessbach Falls. This we accomplished, but our customary ill-luck pursued us, for, instead of seeing a mighty, roaring waterfall, we found a small inoffensive trickle of water. We heard later that ice had formed on the source, preventing a powerful flow of water. When we had reached Brienz once more, we ate our lunch in the Hotel

Adler and afterwards visited a school of wood-carving nearby (Brienz is the centre of the Oberland wood-carving industry). Then back to Wilderwil and the customary lovely meals.

Thursday proved to be one of the more enjoyable days of the holiday, although containing a disappointment. We travelled by train to Spiez and then took the Lötschberg train to Kanderstag. On the way we passed the ruins of the Tellenburg and Felsenburg castles, and gained height by doubling into the hillside, as on the St Gotthard route. We ate our packed lunches in a pleasant hotel, but were unable to visit the Oeschinensee, a beautiful lake nearby, as the snow had rendered the route impassable. So we returned to the station and went back one stop to Kandersteg-Blausee, and there visited the beautiful Blue Lake. In its clear, turquoise waters fallen pines are lying – slowly being turned into stone by the action of the water. The lake also contains shoals of blue trout of substantial size.

On the way back to Interlaken some of the party broke the journey at Spiez, a delightful little lakeside town. Here we purchased glassware and pottery, some of which was unfortunately broken on the return journey. Another dance was held in the evening.

No excursions were arranged for the following day and the members of the party did much as they pleased. The saner types went out for walks or climbs whilst others wasted their time in the table-tennis room.

Saturday morning was free, but in the afternoon two excursions were arranged. The vast majority of the party went by train to Lauterbrunnen; then the hardy few, including Mr Moller, Miss Anderson and myself and, I was glad to note, two more KGS boys, attempted to reach Saxeten, a mountain village. We pluckily, or stupidly, whichever way you look at it, ignored the main road and struck up a mountain path. Needless to say, we were soon lost. The snow was coming down heavily and we wondered where the confounded village was. Eventually we gave up, beaten but not disheartened, and returned “to camp” I almost wrote. Up here amid the snow I could not help regarding

our little party as a mountain-climbing expedition battling against huge odds. In the evening, after all our exertion, there was a dance.

Sunday proved to be the most enjoyable day of the holiday. To begin with, the sun was shining brightly in an almost cloudless sky. We walked into Interlaken and then along the lakeside to Beatushöhlen, where we ate our lunch. Then we climbed up the hillside and visited the caves of St Beatus. These were inhabited in prehistoric days and gave shelter to St Beatus, the British missionary who brought Christianity to this part of the country. Then we climbed upwards to Beatenberg. Here there was another ski-lift leading to the summit of the Niederhorn. Naturally, it was very cold on top, but the wonderful view amply compensated for this. In one direction we could see as far as the Rigi Massif (pleasant memory of 1949), and, looking towards Interlaken, we could see the river valleys in their entirety, with the Oberland giants towering behind. Then we returned to the Oberland Hotel and ate the most delicious meringues imaginable. Here the party split up, the energetic, or stupid, walking into Interlaken with Mrs Payne and the idle, or sensible, returning by bus. There were thirteen successive hairpin bends on the downward journey and the driver took them all with commendable *sang-froid*.

To digress at this point, the Swiss temperament is a curious thing. One might imagine that, living amid so much natural beauty, they might be volatile and expressive, like the French. However, they take pride in their stolidity and lack of emotion. A little story illustrates this: When the Swiss Cantons were fighting for their existence against the Austrians, they found themselves near defeat in the battle at Morgarten. The long lances of the Austrians prevented the Swiss from engaging in hand-to-hand fighting and they were losing men rapidly. Eventually, a Swiss patriot flung himself upon the Austrian lances, thus clearing a way, and shouting "*I die that Switzerland may live; look after my wife and children*", or words to that effect. However, the Swiss have a different version; they say that his last words were "*Who is the pig who pushed me?*"

Monday was the last day of the holiday and we made our last-minute purchases in Interlaken. In the evening we set out on the return journey to London, which had none of the eventfulness of the outward one. The sun was shining, the sea was smooth, the customs officials were not inquisitive. Not that we had any heroin, hashish or howitzers about us, I hasten to add!

On behalf of the party, I should like to thank Mrs and Mrs Cox, Mr Moller, Mrs Payne and Miss Anderson for the work they put in to make our holiday so enjoyable. Additionally, I should like to thank Miss Anderson for her unfailing good humour and Mr Moller for being what is known colloquially as “a good sport”.

And so, goodbye to Switzerland, land of mountains, lakes and beautiful scenery, and of good food, nylons and never-filing courtesy. But it is not really “goodbye”, the Spanish better express it as “Hesta la vista”.