

Wood in Switzerland and Bavaria.

By Roger Matthews © October 2006

These are casual observations of a tourist on aspects of wood that seem to figure large in the life of the more rural Swiss and Bavarian folk.

Forests:

We travelled through many miles of forests in Switzerland, in Bavaria and the Eifel region of Germany. There was plenty of evidence of timber extraction, but no visible 'sores' or bald areas in the forests. Felling must be done selectively and be well controlled. Some boles were up to a metre in diameter and at a guess the trunks up to 50 metres tall.

In some areas where the felled trees were visible they appear to have been left for years before being extracted as the stumps were discoloured and moss-covered.

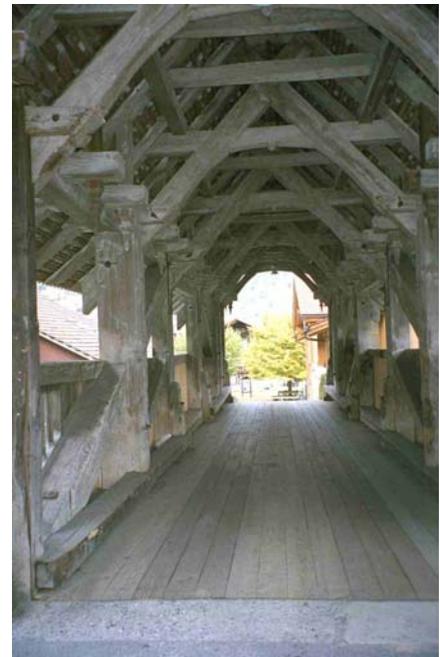


Large Timbers:

Structures such as bus shelters, carparks, bicycle sheds at stations, waiting rooms at rail halts are made from heavy section beams and planking. Many of these are simple lean-to roofs instead of the traditional Swiss chalet style roof. These feature super-strong roof structures to support the snow load each winter.

Damaged timberwork on old structures such as barns, factories and covered bridges are replaced with new (as can be seen on the centre section of the bridge below).

New industrial and commercial buildings are erected with timber structural members and sometimes sheathed in timber to maintain the Swiss chalet appearance.



Saw several new barns, some industrial and commercial buildings being



constructed with timber in the traditional style. Completed units are light beige compared to the weathered black of the really old chalets.

In Bavaria benches on the wanderweg (walking paths) were constructed from two stout vertical trunks (600 mm dia.) set

in the earth with heavy planking for the seat and backrest (300 x 50 & 200 x 40 respectively). Along one wanderweg there was a children's playground comprehensively furnished with bulky wooden gadgets – 3 oversize chairs, 2 log bridges criss-crossing a stream, a horizontal tree trunk with the upper-side branches left intact as a climbing frame, log walking steps, et al.

Decaying structures:

Not all is perfect. We saw many some neglected homes where the walls were rotting and falling off. One residence in Wilderswil was in achieve the expected Swiss been a gracious home when built patterned timber components on wooden equivalent of "brookie



drunken farm sheds and barns, small vertical shingles on the

use but lacked the care needed standards, however it must have as it featured many carved and balconies, beams and the lace".

Firewood:

This must be the biggest areas. Split logs are stacked in every specially broad eaves of the towns, and alongside roads and seem to be built one timber-length metres high, then covered with Hydraulic log-splitting machines do town we came across a senior casually on his shoulder. The axe the reverse side and was well

consumer by volume in the rural

conceivable place – under the chalets, in sheds, in yards in the rail lines everywhere. The stacks deep (about 600mm) and about 2 corrugated iron or plastic. exist, but walking through a small citizen toting a large splitting axe had a sledge hammer head on polished from use.

Wood shaving boxes:

These are similar to the shaker boxes demonstrated by Clive Stacey in March 2006. There is a museum of "chip-wood" boxes in the small town of Wengi, close to Frutigen in the Kander valley. I suggest the translation should be "shaving-wood" boxes. The enterprise supporting the museum is Buhler Holzspan with a factory mass-producing boxes and other wood products. In their yard and at other wood merchants there were stacks of wood stored straight and some deliberately curved in the form of a big arch – possibly getting some pre-curl?



Die Spanschachtel



This text is copied from Buhler Holzspan's pamphlet. *"The "Chip-wood" box is the oldest type of packaging for dry goods and was known to the Merovingians, the Celts and the Vikings. It is the predecessor of the tins and cardboard boxes that appeared only during the last century. In the Middle Ages the "Chip-wood" boxes were decorated in innumerable ways and used for a variety of purposes. Among other things they were use by chemists for powders, pills and ointments, as coffins for infants, as storage for hats and ribbons or as a safe haven for bridal wreaths and precious souvenirs.*

The reason this handicraft is present in the valley of Frutigen today is thanks to the cottage industry that grew up to produce one of the smallest boxes, the matchbox. These matchboxes were made to hold the first yellow phosphorus matches between 1855 and 1910.

The museum shows in a fascinating way, the machines and tools used by the original creators of "Shingle" and "Chip-wood" boxes. There is

also a large collection of original antique boxes, which gives the visitor a good impression of the variety of shapes, sizes and many purposes they were used for. There is also an exhibition of new boxes that have been made in the area but decorated by artists from various parts of the world". Unquote.

The museum is in four parts:

- Working tools – a display of tools, jigs, cutters used by the workers before machinery.
- Collection of a variety of historic handmade boxes from the area in many shapes, sizes and applications, some plain and practical, some with decoration and artwork.
- Collection from round the world of old and new boxes, most with quality finishes and some with beautiful artwork.
- The showroom and shop. This is a ubiquitous feature at every place of interest tourists visit and skilfully designed to extract many Swiss Francs from your pocket.

Some of the artwork and decorative carving is primitive and homely with simple pictures of traditional themes, while some lids were elaborately carved and further decorated and painted with delicate artwork. The joints and lacing varied from copper rivets to lacing threaded from plant roots and sometimes contrived into decorative plaits.

One box mimicked the tall stem and stern posts of a Viking boat, with a complex locking mechanism – also of wood - comprising four rotating buttons set in the lid. These had to be actuated in a specific sequence to release the locking peg.

Many novelties for sale are created from shavings of differing thickness and curl radii. One example was a Xmas tree built on a square tapering stem, with the branches graduated from large to small, with each layer of four branches matched for width and radius of curl. The old shaving machine on display in the shop is typical of machines of that vintage. It is made from heavy castings and could only be looked at. It may be demonstrated for visiting groups. It appears that the blade can be rotated from a square cut to differing approach angles, probably to change the curl radius.



At the Ballenberg cultural museum boxes were on sale and I found a booklet on their history – but published only in German.

Examples and illustrations of shaving planes were seen. These are wide wooden bodied planes with two pairs of handle set in the sides, for two people to apply the strength needed to separate the shaving from the parent timber.

Factory made shaving boxes are sold in big stores in the craft sections, with a variety of stickers and accessories for buyers to create their own artwork and embellishments.

Wood Carving:

We made a pilgrimage to Jobins factory, showroom and school in Brienz. This is the home of expensive woodcarving, beautiful music boxes and clocks. Very impressive work and there were 2 artisans on view creating uprights for a balcony with a vine decoration.

In the entrance was a bench of which the one end was a carved full size bear sitting in a relaxed pose with one foot across the other knee. The carving of details like the face and every hair was exquisite, but my first prize went to the detailed carving of the underside of the pads and claws on the raised foot!

The workshop featured a multi-purpose grinder with extended spindles each terminating with a drill chuck. Spaced along the spindles were 2 or 3 abrasives or buffing pads in differing shapes to accommodate the numerous shapes of the tools. A set of about 30 artisan's carving tools set out on a bench were all buffed to a mirror finish at the business end.

Wooden Water Pipes:

We did not notice any in use, but at Ballenberg museum there was a series of illustrations describing how trunks were bored lengthwise to form pipes – and all done by hand. Like all hand crafts there were several ingenious holding devices and guides to ensure the accuracy of the bore, and that it remained true to the axis of the trunk.

Water-powered sawmill:

Also at Ballenberg there is a working sawmill dating from 1840. This is driven by an overshot waterwheel connected to an impressive roomful of gearing and shafts that reciprocate a 2 metre vertical saw blade, and also synchronise the progression of the cast iron bed with the securely clamped log.

Water Troughs:

In every town we came across water-troughs in the streets. They now appear to be more of a street decoration but are still functional, although the tell-tale stainless water outlet secreted in some of the wooden delivery pipes indicates that modern hygiene has caught up with tradition. We drank as and when thirsty. Generally 2 to 3 metres long and hollowed out from 600 to 800 mm diameter logs these are generous reservoirs, connected to a continuous flow of water. Some were quite plain, as were those we saw on every farmers plot, but some were elaborately and delightfully carved, with bears, dogs and Ibex prominent. In the smaller towns animals regularly graze in front gardens along the streets and are driven to their barns each night, so the troughs do still serve their original purpose.



Not Wood but Copper:

This was a surprise to the South African psyche as we noted the widespread use of copper for roofs, gutters, down-pipes, flashings on domestic and business buildings. Saw a new wooden carport with the whole roof sheathed in bright copper.

Many roadside shrines along the wanderwegs are roofed in copper. There is obviously no thought of possible theft and we saw no evidence of vandalism.



Old Objects:

We saw small wooden hay wagons and sledges used in the shops as receptacles for goods, but appear to have been functional in earlier times.

Functional but great Workmanship:

At the Aareschlucht (river Aare gorge) there is a cantilevered walkway about a kilometre long. It is attached to the rock wall of the gorge and comprises angle iron stringers with the outer legs upturned to retain the timber decking laid crosswise. Nothing remarkable – one could say – but the cut ends fitted closely and at the many changes of direction, the boards had been accurately cut, matching board to board and board to angle iron frame. No gaps greater than a millimetre – and there were thousands of boards to be cut. The crowning pieces were the safety infill pieces positioned between the inner metal frame and the natural rock face where the custom-profiled timber followed the



rock very closely.