

# THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF EARLY TOURISM IN THE SWISS ALPS

July 14, 2014    Regula Gubler    Archaeological Prospection, Buildings, Day of Archaeology 2014, Historical Archaeology, Post Medieval    Berne, Bernese Alps, Glacier, Grindelwald, Switzerland, Tourism, Unterer Grindelwald glacier

Or how a short survey of archaeological remains in the Grindelwald area (Berner Oberland) shows that not only modern but also 18th and 19th century tourism left traces in the land-scape. In my job at the Archaeological Service of the Canton of Berne I don't get to do much field-work these days. I do however get the occasional treat to check out sites that volunteers report to us. On this day of archaeology, I am writing up the results of such a day out. To-gether with our local man, I drove and walked around Alpine pastures and steep forests above Grindelwald. Peter grew up in Grindelwald, knew everyone we met and has a wealth of knowledge about local history.



*The Unterer Grindelwald glacier in an early 19th century book (Gabriel Lory 1822, Voyage pittoresque de l'Oberland Bernois). The highest grassy knoll to the left of the glacier is the Bäregg where the guesthouse would stand some 30 years later, the site of the kiln would be in the steep wooded slopes further down.*

We recorded several building remains (dry stone masonry) and structures to do with early modern or medieval agriculture/transhumance, but a lime kiln in rather strange location led me to find out more about the history of early tourism in Grindelwald. Thanks to its location at the foot of the Eiger and two large glaciers reaching the valley floor, Grindelwald has been destination for foreign travelers from the late 18th century onwards. Although agriculture still plays a role, economically the village relies almost solely on tourism.

One of the first paths constructed in Switzerland for touristic rather than transport purposes was built in 1821 from Grindelwald to the Stieregg, a spot roughly 600 m above the valley floor and from which one could admire the so-called ice sea («Eismeer») of the Unterer Grindelwald glacier. From 1823 there was a refuge at the end of the path and 1858 a guest-house was built at the nearby Bäregg. The guesthouse was twice destroyed by avalanches and rebuilt (1868, 1906), but after another avalanche in 1940 its ruined walls were left un-touched. A replacement was erected at Stieregg in 1952, this time lasting until 2005 when it had to be pulled down because the glacial moraine it stood on became unstable. Due to the substantial retreat and decreased thickness of the glacier since the 19th century the moraine has been sliding on the glacier.



*19th century lime kiln above Grindelwald (Flielenwald). Foto: Archaeological Service of the Canton of Berne.*

But back to our small kiln. It lies in an extremely steep bit of forest to the north of the Unterer Grindelwald glacier gorge and a good 400 m above the valley floor. This was puzzling, because chalk and wood occur abundantly on the valley floor to allow lime production near the permanent settlement. Also, huts and houses on the higher summer pastures were until very recently timber structures resting on dry stone plinths. Having a look at the ruins of the Bäregg guesthouse we hit upon the solution. Its walls were mortared and our kiln site does lie near the path to the Bäregg. According to late 19th century maps the



kiln would have been just below the tree line, suggesting it was probably used to produce lime for building work on the Bäregg guesthouse far above where trees grow. Whether the lime was destined for the new guesthouse of 1858 or a rebuilding phase we cannot say for the time being.



*Ruins of the Bäregg guesthouse above Grindelwald, built in 1858. Photo: Archaeological Service of the Canton of Berne.*

Today, the glaciers have retreated far above the valley floor, changing the landscape of Grindelwald substantially, but still tourists keep coming to this picturesque spot in the Swiss Alps. Like them, I too enjoyed my detour from my usual field of activity in prehistory into the history of 19th and early 20th century tourism.



6213. P. Z. - GRINDELWALD. GEB. HALANSICHT VON BÄREGG.

*The Bäregg guesthouse in 1900 with the Unterer Grindelwaldglacier in the background.*