

Zeitschrift: Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal
Herausgeber: Swiss Railways Society
Band: - (2006)
Heft: [1]

Artikel: Untervaz - a microcosm of Rhätische Bahn freight working
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-854794>

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UNTERVAZ - a microcosm of Rhätische Bahn freight working



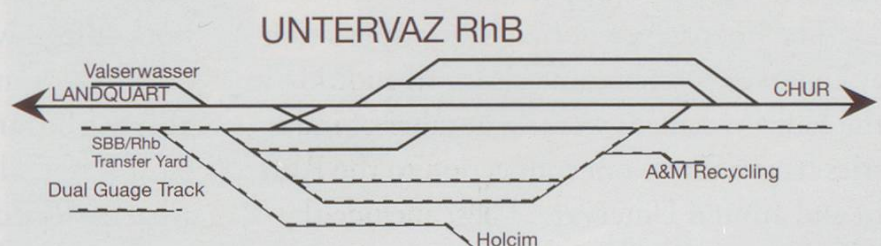
ALL PHOTOS BY BRIAN MASON
26/08/02

LEFT: RhB Mohrenköpfe on the dual gauge lines in Untervaz station yard waiting to be attached to passing freight trains.

With the possible exception of the SBB, the Rhätische Bahn (RhB) probably has the greatest following of all Swiss railways. Since I first became aware of the RhB over 20 years ago, I have enjoyed many hours observing, photographing, reading about and travelling on this narrow gauge main line railway of the Graubünden. Nonetheless, compared with many enthusiasts, I am still relatively uninformed in many aspects of the RhB. Most rail enthusiasts are certainly aware of some of the RhB's famous trains, such as the Glacier Express and Bernina Express, and perhaps are also familiar with the 'Krokodil' locomotives. However, it should not be forgotten that freight activities are also an extremely important function of this railway. This is partly due to difficult access by road to some of the towns and villages in Graubünden and also because of the emphasis by Switzerland on taking freight transport off the roads and on to the railways. The magnitude of freight operations on the RhB was brought home to me on a visit in August 2002 to Untervaz, a small village approximately half way between Chur and

Landquart. On previous visits to the area I had either passed through Untervaz on the RhB or bypassed it travelling on the SBB from Zürich to Chur. The presence of the well-known domed cement trucks (Mohrenköpfe) on the lines around the station had certainly made me aware of the cement industry in the vicinity but I had given little consideration to how the commercial activities of this and other industries were supported by the RhB.

I found myself in Untervaz quite by chance. I had just spent four action-packed days, with ninety other enthusiasts, participating in the Rhätische Raritäten event (see Swiss Express December 2002) after which a reservation had been made for me at a hotel in Untervaz. I was looking forward to spending the next day just watching the trains go by but the final decision about the location was made for me early the next morning, when I heard the grating of wagon wheels on a tight curve somewhere in the vicinity of the hotel. After breakfast I went to investigate and, following a short path through some woods, soon found myself beside the River Rhine and heading towards the road bridge that straddled it. To my surprise when I climbed up onto the road





ABOVE; Ge4/ II 624 arrives at Untervaz with a standard gauge truck atop a narrow gauge transporter.

I found a dual gauge railway line alongside the road, crossing the bridge and leading into the Holcim (formerly Bündner Cement Untervaz) cement factory on the opposite side of the river. Following a brief investigation of the line as it entered the factory I returned to cross the bridge and was delighted to see the works diesel locomotive pushing a train of empty standard gauge cement tankers towards the industrial complex. I later realised that this was not just a fortunate coincidence but an event that took place on a regular basis throughout the working day. Next I tracked back along the road to determine the source of the line at Untervaz station and found it ran down behind the station area and eventually into a yard for transferring the wagons to the SBB. Of course I was primarily interested in any RhB operations on this dual gauge line and therefore decided to spend time around the station waiting to see any such action - after all there was a line of the typical RhB cement wagons waiting in the yard.

The importance of freight transportation at Untervaz soon became clear. In addition to the Holcim cement works a number of industries have a direct rail connection to the RhB in and around Untervaz. These include the Valserwasser distribution centre, the A&M

Recycling Centre, GEVAG (rubbish disposal incineration) and a number of other smaller industries scattered along the side of the track in the direction of Chur.

Because of these local industries, passing goods trains provide much of the activity and regularly drop-off or pick-up wagons. The relatively large amount of goods traffic necessitates a diesel shunter being permanently based at Untervaz (in August 2002 it was Ge 4/4 241) although sometimes the freight train locomotives also perform shunting duties themselves. In addition the diesel shunter often leaves the confines of the station to transfer wagons to and from the various industries in the vicinity. As well as the line to the cement works, the tracks immediately behind the station building are also dual gauge, and during my short stay at Untervaz it appeared that they were primarily used for assembling the cement wagons. The Holcim works diesel was constantly transferring cement wagons between the works and the SBB/RhB transfer yard and it is probable that most if not all of the RhB cement wagons are transferred in this way, although I cannot confirm this. The only journey made by the

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RIGHT: RhB Ge 4/4 241 travels down the bank from the Holcim works with two Fad wagons in tow.

BELOW: The Holcim diesel reverses across the bridge spanning the River Rhine with an assortment of mixed cement wagons for the cement works.

RhB shunter to the Holcim site on the other side of the river was with two empty hopper wagons (Fad). It returned ten minutes later with the hoppers loaded with an aggregate other than cement.

The rail link into the Valschwasser distribution depot warehouse is at the Landquart end of the station complex while, as one might expect, the source of Valschwasser lies, in Vals, a small village to the south of Ilanz. The water is bottled at source, transported by road to Ilanz and then loaded into their 'private owner' wagons for transportation by rail to Untervaz. As I arrived at the station the shunter was collecting empty wagons from the Valschwasser depot for return to Ilanz and these were soon attached to the rear of a passing goods train. However, before they could be sent on their way, another consignment of freshly bottled water arrived. Before long another goods train came from the direction of Landquart, headed by a Ge 4/4^{II}, bringing a solitary load of a SBB goods wagon aboard a narrow gauge transporter wagon. Minutes later this wagon was hurried off by the shunter in the direction of Trimmis for delivery to another railside industry.

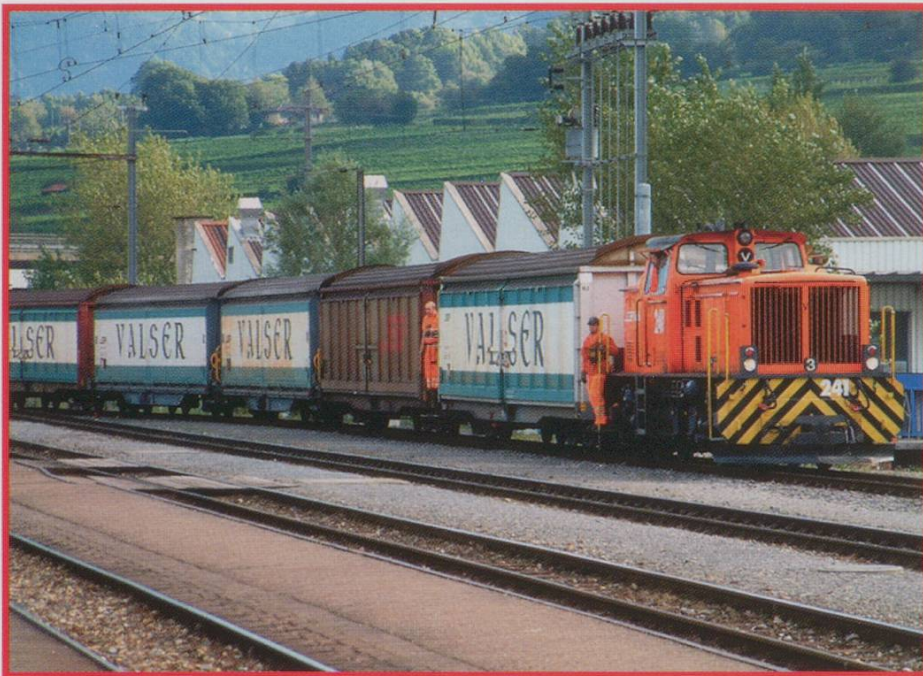
During the remainder of my short stay the RhB shunter assembled Mohrenköpfe, fetched trucks loaded with small pre-cast concrete items from another industrial site down the line and collected a wagon loaded with scrap



metal from the A & M recycling site just outside the station confines. (Incidentally one of the coaches in A & M's colours sat in their works area and could be seen from the road leading to the station). These wagons were all eventually attached to passing goods trains and at times it was difficult to keep up with all the activity around the station.

The village is also well served by passenger trains with two trains each hour in both directions that cross at Untervaz. Shortly before the hour the local stopping train from Thusis and Chur arrives on the line nearest the station building and sets down and picks-up its passengers. The train from the opposite direction then enters the station and is followed by the immediate departure at 55 minutes past the hour of the first train to Schiers.





TOP: The RhB shunter collects a rake of empty wagons from the Valslerwasser distribution centre for return to Ilanz.

BOTTOM: Valslerwasser wagons departing for Ilanz behind Ge 4/4^I 606 while on the adjacent track newly arrived wagons wait for transportation into the distribution depot.

shunting activities, particularly those on the RhB, a few interesting and rewarding hours can be spent around Untervaz station. At the time I originally wrote this article I found an excellent

The sequence is completed by the departure of the second train to Chur and Thusis at 58 minutes past the hour. These trains usually consist of one of the Be 4/4 units numbered 511-516. A similar process is repeated around the half-hour with trains running on the Disentis-Chur-Landquart-Klosters-Davos route. These are standard compositions of locomotive plus coaches and were hauled by a variety of motive power including the latest Ge 4/4^{III} locomotives. In addition to the passing of the trains, buses are timetabled to connect with trains and take passengers to and from destinations between Landquart and Chur.

If you have an interest in goods trains and

German language website from 'alex durner'. This was dedicated to goods traffic on the Rhätische Bahn and had some good information on both the types of goods transported and the facilities and locations of industrial connections with the railway. Unfortunately I am now unable to locate this website. There are of course many websites covering various aspects of the RhB including the RhB's own (www.rhb.ch/gueter/gueter.d.php) that provides some information on the goods services they offer their customers. However, if anyone manages to trace the 'lost' website I would be pleased to hear from them. Letters to the magazine please.

