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GENÈVE – WHERE TWO NATIONS MEET – Part 2

Gordon Wiseman continues his historic and current look at the transport infrastructure in and around this City State



CFF (SBB) BFm 2/4 No. 791 heading towards Divonne from Nyon, passes Eysins in August 1958. This unit was renumbered BFm 2/4 No. 1691 the following year. PHOTO: Jeremy Wiseman

Having discussed the two 'French' lines which serve Genève itself, it's time to turn attention to the other cross-border railway, which ran into Switzerland hereabouts, but not to Genève itself. This is the Bellegarde (Ain) – Divonne Les Bains – Nyon route. My close relatives have been resident in Ferney-Voltaire - once home of the famous philosopher - since 1950. I was born 10 years later in 1960 and have visited very regularly ever since and thus virtually grew up halfway between Genève and the Divonne line.

The Divonne line was an east – west international route along the foot of the Jura Mountains. The physical border is east of Divonne at Crassier, so in the days when border controls were still border controls, my uncle was able to photograph Swiss trains without having to trouble any border guards! The Swiss section, despite appearances, was actually a private railway – the Nyon – Crassier (NC), though not obvious to the casual observer as CFF/SBB was granted the operating concession. Swiss trains ran across 4.5 km of French

territory beyond the actual border at Crassier to reach Divonne, where border formalities took place and was the terminus of trains from each direction.

A committee was formed in Nyon in the mid 19th century to promote a link with the already planned French section, and a concession application was made to Bern in May 1883. The promoters had their eyes on tapping into the then-planned direct Paris – Genève route via a long tunnel under the Col de la Faucille in the Jura, the idea being to offer Paris – Lausanne avoiding both Genève and the sinuous Vallorbe route. Unfortunately Genève complained that they would be cut off, so the federal government refused the application in November 1883. In May 1890 Canton Vaud made new contacts with the French and because the Faucille plan had by then been abandoned, Bern gave the go-ahead in June 1902, and CFF/SBB was given the operating concession in August 1904. The line opened from Nyon to Crassier frontier on 1st May 1905, and on to Divonne on 3rd November the same year. It was never electrified. Mounting losses forced Canton Vaud to buy the NC for CHF50,000 in 1922. Crassier – Divonne services were suspended from October – December 1939 and from June 1940 – November 1944 for obvious reasons.

Services were operated by Eb2/4 4-4-0s (which also ran the Genève main line locals before electrification) until 1925, with No 5469 exceptionally surviving on the line until 1947. Later, more modern steam locos were released by extensive electrification elsewhere. These were of three classes Ec3/5 (6601-6615), Eb3/5 (5801- 5834) and Eb3/5 Maffei ex-BT (5881-5889). Steam shared the line with the rare Swiss diesel

In the last week of passenger services on the French section in late May 1980, an X3800 'Picasso' railcar is seen near Tuteigny.

PHOTO: Gordon Wiseman



railcars including Fm 2/4 No 1692, BFm2/4 No 791, which was a diesel version of the CFF/SBB De4/4 No 1670, and the diesel version Red Arrows RCm 2/4 Nos 101 and 102. Am4/4 No 1001 or No 1002 of Genève depot were occasional visitors and towards the end new Em3/3 diesels were also used. Many photographers of the era, perhaps naturally, favoured steam as the line was a rare non-electrified section of the CFF network. As such my uncle's photographs of the diesels on the line are, I believe, comparatively rare.

Sadly, construction of the Genève – Lausanne motorway forced closure of the Nyon – Divonne line and the last train ran on 30th September 1962. No-one was willing to pay for electrification, nor the extra cost of a bridge on a loss-making, comparatively lightly used service. There is a much published photograph which shows the Nyon – Divonne steam train crossing the half complete motorway as if a level crossing was going to be built there! The rump of around 2km of the line from Nyon to Eysins still operates for freight.

Having been too young to appreciate the Swiss section, which closed when I was 2-years old, I am most familiar with the French section from Bellegarde to Divonne, which diverges from the Lyon – Bellegarde – Geneva main line at Collonges-Fort L'Ecluse and hugs the foothills of the Jura via Gex to Divonne les Bains, transiting the area known as the 'Pays de Gex' – i.e. the French part of the Lemman Basin, situated north of the Rhone and Lac Lemman which belongs to the Ain departement. The line was opened by the PLM railway on 1st June 1899. Passenger services were suspended in 1940 when Bellegarde became the frontier between occupied and 'Vichy' France. Although there was great sadness when passenger trains were finally withdrawn in May 1980, this was over 40 years later than originally planned due to a quirk of railway fate.

Immediately after the cessation of hostilities, only the through coach for Paris ran (due to Divonne's status as a spa town), along with goods services. The line's real 'break' came when it was selected as an experiment to stave off the post-war threat from road competition with FNC type railbuses serving extra wayside 'bus stop' halts. To help this cause the national federation of railwaymen (Cheminots – hence FNC) had promoted the design of a low floor entrance 2-axle railbus. Low floor trains are actually nothing new... Thus when local passenger services restarted in 1949, ten new halts were added to the eight original 'proper' stations. Most were simply very low height 'patches of gravel' adjacent to the many level crossings along the line. The through coach from Paris saw steam haulage survive until the late 1950s, when it was replaced by a bus connection



from Genève Cornavin to Divonne. The line remains open from Collonges as far as ZI Crozet, where there is an aggregates terminal and a household refuse transfer station, from where containers are collected and taken to incinerators on the other side of the Genève basin. Most available photos show either SNCF railcars on the French section or Swiss Eb3/5 on the Swiss section, or both together at Divonne. It is therefore little known that Swiss steam locomotives actually ran all the way to Bellegarde as late as the 1950s. 

TOP: CFF (SBB) Eb3/5 5827 at Divonne on 29 September 1962. Note the small engine shed also visible in the 1980s.

BELOW: After a period of Em3/3 diesel operation on the Nyon - Divonne line in early September 1962, Jeremy Wiseman was both happy and sad to see steam back in action for the last days of passenger service.

BOTTOM: 3 year old Em3/3 diesel heads a Divonne – Nyon passenger train between Divonne and Crassier, 26 September 1962.
PHOTOS: Jeremy Wiseman

