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SWISS NEWS

A miscellany of news and information from Switzerland

Freight traffic policy

The Swiss Federal Council has now re-defined the task of the SBB, changing a 100 year old principle, as there is no longer an obligation to provide a comprehensive freight service to all parts of the country. Wagon-load freight should still be provided "economically and in support of the requirements of its customers", but the requirement to provide service wherever it is requested is now history. Although this reflects today's reality in Swiss political terms, it is another blow to the concept that public services are impartially there for all people and all parts of the country. In international traffic SBB is called upon to limit itself, as indeed it already does, to the traction of block trains in transit traffic. Active business development is of course necessary in this most competitive field, that is exploited by various operators including BLS and DB. The new joint SBB/HUPAC company, currently re-locating to Olten, will be well placed to compete.

'Playmobiles' for SBB's shunters

The new Class 922 electric shunting locomotives built by Stadler Rail for use at passenger stations, are apparently now being called '*Playmobiles*' by the shunters. Twenty-one have been delivered, and most of the station Ee3/3s are now withdrawn if not actually cut up. Some Ee3/3s are still in SBB Cargo use, but not for much longer as Class 923, a second series with diesel auxiliary power, is now being built. Since summer 2010, 16515, a last survivor of the old bi-current locos, built originally for SNCF has been on the buffer-stops outside Bâle SNCF with its pantograph up to keep it thawed out. It can be seen from the adjacent road, but is invisible from passing trains.

Re-use and Re-cycle

The Tramelan workshop of the CJ have rebuilt their No.402, a 1952 motor parcels/baggage car, to a diesel and electric hybrid unit, Gem 4/4 No.12, for the Meiringen-Innertkirchen-Bahn. The MIB is preparing for some heavy hauls as there is a major power station extension project going-ahead at Innertkirchen. Re-cycling the 59 year-old veteran is just the sort of innovative thing that CJ's Chief Engineer Theo Stolz and his team are used to doing. It was finished in Jan 2011 and after its proving trials it will have moved to the MIB, so watch out for it this summer on your Berner Oberland trip. Former CJ railcar No.604, now MIB No.11, is also there as reserve passenger railcar.

Snow-clearance on the narrow gauge

Passing through Langenthal or Solothurn you may just see on the metre-gauge lines of the Aare-Seeland Mobil (Asm) or RBS the old Ge4/4 locomotives, which are used for odd jobs including snow plough work. Eighty five year old RBS, ex Bern-Worb line, steeple-cab locomotives Nos.111 and 112, had several outings in December's heavy snow that caused problems even in Switzerland. For example on the morning of Dec. 17th, the first Langenthal train on the Asm only got to the Baseltor in Solothurn (in walking distance, if not sight, of the terminus) before 'sticking'.

BLS order more Lötschbergers

BLS recently placed an order with Bombardier Transportation to supply four additional RABe Class 535 Lötschberger EMUs. The order is an option to the original 2006 contract, and brings the total number of Lötschberger trains ordered by BLS to twenty-five. Deliveries are scheduled for late 2012. Like their predecessors the additional units will be assembled at Bombardier's Villeneuve plant from bodies built on-site, with the bogies coming from Bombardier's facility at Siegen in Germany. The traction equipment and the passenger information systems will be supplied by French-based Alstom.

An existing BLS Lötschberger unit at Spiez.

PHOTO: Anthony Warrener



Overloaded main line

Chronic problems are afflicting the busy Olten – Basel line. This line is really full, with trains timetabled at 2 min. intervals at many times each day, and a spell on the platforms at Sissach or Gelterkinden will highlight the problem. Freight to the Lötschberg are frequent; expresses from Basel to Luzern, Zürich and Bern; their long-distance permutations to Chur, Germany and Italy; and Basel's S3 suburban route, all use the line. The latter

service always falls foul of any hiccups, which are often serious, resulting in commuters and politicians being up in arms. A “bonus-malus” system is being devised (as applied in the Zürich S-Bahn conurbation), to align Cantonal subsidy payments to performance. The troubles are mainly catenary breaks, occasional points, signals or computer failures, but have also involved door mechanism problems on newly delivered Flirts. This has resulted in the punctuality record, usually around 97%, dropping during last winter’s severe cold to under 70%.

Shortest station

In SE 105 it was mentioned that Switzerland’s shortest station was at Aareschlucht Ost on the MIB. We have been asked “How Short?” It is just 2m long – consisting of a sliding door in the wall of the tunnel by which the line avoids the narrow Aare Gorge. Having informed the driver of the need to alight the front door of the single-car train is stopped by the door which can then be opened. Waiting passengers can illuminate a signal inside the tunnel to halt the train. The door opens onto a pedestrian suspension bridge over the often turbulent river. There are many quite short staff halts around the world but is it the shortest passenger station?

Train des Etoiles Centenary

If you are on holiday in south-west Switzerland at the end of July you may wish to note in your diary that the centenary celebrations for the CEV line to Les Pleiades will take place on Sunday 31st July - the day before the Swiss national holiday. Les Chemins de fer Electriques Veveysans actually extended the line from Vevey to Blonay up the mountain to Les Pleiades on 8 July 1911, but it was felt more appropriate to hold the celebrations over the national holiday weekend. In addition, the Blonay-Chamby Museum Railway’s monthly steam train through to Vevey is scheduled to run on 31 July. For timings see the Riviera Belle Epoque window on www.blonay-chamby.ch. No details are available at press day, so keep an eye on the www.goldenpass.ch website nearer the time - and if you do join the celebrations please let us have your photographs for possible publication.

The rebuilt twin unit "Train des Etoiles" leaves Blonay heading down the hill to Vevey. 24/07/2009.

PHOTO: Michael Farr



ABOVE: CEV BDeh2/4 No 74 waits at the Les Pléiades terminus on 02/05/2008.

BELOW: The rebuilt single car of the CEV waits in the sunshine at Les Pléiades on 09/09/2010.

PHOTOS: Michael Farr



British Railfans steam to Grindelwald

On January 19th a group of British railfans chartered, from the Brienz/Interlaken based Ballenberg Dampfbahn, (BDB) a special train headed by the former SBB-Brünig Line HG3/3 1067, from Interlaken Ost to Grindelwald. Unlike normal practice on the BOB the train was propelled from Schwendi, the last passing loop, as the Grindelwald layout, radically simplified for railcar trains, no longer has any run-round loop.

Mürrenbahn on TV

In SE 104 we described the convoluted journey of ex. Asm railcar No.102 up to its new home at Mürren where it became No.31. This event went on to feature on Swiss TV. Now the BLM is purchasing another similar unit from the Asm, and this too will have to make the difficult, and apparently newsworthy, trip up the side of the mountain to its new home.

SBB rethink

Readers familiar with the wearying saga of ordering new high-speed trains for Britain (does anyone really want hybrids?), may not realise that trouble is brewing in

Switzerland too. Preliminary contacts between SBB and the interested manufacturers, for the fleet of high speed trains supposed to follow the double-deck units now on order at Stadler, have proved a dash of (very relevant) cold water for SBB planners. It appears that they had drawn up specifications on the 'Everything we can possibly think of, but cheaper' principle, which as your correspondent has heard, is also prevalent at the British DoT. The specification wanted a 300 km/h train for high speed line; tilt and 200 km/h plus for conventional line; and approval for seven national networks including the Netherlands. The costs and delays of the 610-class Pendolini hover like vultures over these talks because SBB have, it appears, had to accept that they cannot have it all. A nasty twist was to note that even carrying around seven different train control systems would add such weight as to make tilting capacity useless. European Train Control Systems are spreading (and harmonized in the EU by law) but it will be some time before all relevant lines are equipped. The specification has been withdrawn for re-drafting, six months added to the planning schedule, and rumour suggests that the tilt requirement has already been dropped.

Minor mishaps, fortunately minor consequences

On the Wengenalp Bahn (WAB) above Allmend, early on Feb. 4th a descending (and nearly empty) passenger train ran into a standing works train. Both trains derailed. Conditions were clear, no-one was hurt. Now, the WAB has a block system (see SE 104) but having more than one train in a section is foreseen in the rules, and is usual as trains run in convoys at busy times. However, a standing works train is something different, and how this happened was not clear. Also, at a maximum speed of 17kph, the descending train, on the rack and with three brake systems, can stop almost on the spot (your correspondent once experienced a downhill emergency stop on the Brünig rack line - believe me, we stopped!). So it's not as easy to crash as it looks. The next morning at Chiasso five empty 100-tonne tanks ran away and collided with standing wagons during shunting operations. However one on its side was feared to contain residual ethylene oxide and this caused a major alarm with evacuations for some hours. In practice an empty tank can be as dangerous as a full one, especially if an explosion or poisonous gas is feared.

Specials

Last year the Dampfbahn Furka-Bergstrecke DFB opened its last section of the old Furka Pass line, from Oberwald to Gletsch, to connect with the Realp-Gletsch section already operating. There is this year an assortment

of new tours and round trips which include this section, and a specially interesting one runs on assorted Sundays in July, August and September starting at Interlaken Ost. The Ballenberg steam railway (BDB) runs to Innertkirchen, on the MIB, using the new connection at Meiringen - I have never seen a steam engine up there. A historic 1958 PostAuto takes passengers on to Gletsch where they ride the DFB to Oberwald and return by the outward route. I've booked for Aug 7th. Information on this excursion and others, from www.dampfbahnen.ch or www.dfb.ch.

An experimental engine

If you are in Genève watch out for a strange and unfamiliar engine, painted mainly white. Numbered 933 001 it is a rebuild by ABB for experimental purposes of Ee 3/3 No. 934 560, one of the 4-current rod-drive Ee3/3 shunters, with a PETT replacing the traditional transformer and other components. It stands for 'Power Electronic Traction Transformer', which appears to be English but still means little! On 933 001 the conventional transformer is linked with a very high frequency rectifier, and supplies 1500 V dc to the traction motors. A locomotive built new with such technology, with only a PETT and no transformer, would save considerable weight and complexity and deliver power direct to traction motors. 933 001 is now only a 3-current locomotive, but adequate for testing performance in the French 1.5 KV, Swiss 15 KV ac, and Italian 3 KV, environments.

Lyria enhancements agreed

SBB and SNCF agreed in February to step up the level of service between France and Switzerland operated by TGV Lyria, their jointly-owned subsidiary. This will be allocated a fleet of nineteen dedicated TGV POS units, at a cost to SBB of CHF100m. Following the December 2010 re-routing of the Paris - Genève TGV services via the Haut-Bugey line, December 2011 will see the Paris - Basel services accelerated by 24 minutes following their move to the LGV Rhin-Rhône route. The fastest timing will be 3 hours 3 minutes and the frequency of weekday services will increase from five to six each way. In the medium term the aim is to cut all the timings to below 3 hours and plans are also being drawn up to expand the number of Swiss destinations served by TGV Lyria. The joint company carried 4m passengers in 2010 and saw a 17% rise in turnover to CHF340m.

Better – at a cost

Our old pictures show how only a few years ago Swiss platforms were often at track level, passengers walked across main line tracks on boards, and there were often 3 or 4 almost vertical steps to clamber up into the train.

How did we do it? Members have in recent years seen many stations big and small modernized, for several reasons. One is handicapped access, enforced by law. Another is, obviously, safety and allied to this, speeding things up, as subways keep trains and passengers apart, replacing elaborate (and restrictive) operating rules of the past. Then the need to be customer friendly is better perceived, and we are all older. Finally, new low-floor trains and S-Bahn schemes have brought a systematic

TOP: Grellingen showing step down for passengers to the low level platform.

MIDDLE: Grellingen with class 560 showing original platforms.

BOTTOM: Showing the comparison between the modern platforms to the older ones at Grellingen (above).

PHOTOS: Bryan Stone




standardization of platform heights at 55 cm. This doesn't come free. At Payerne, a large but secondary station without fast trains where work is just starting, the cost of new platforms, ramps, subways, and improved lighting, is budgeted at CHF10m. If you like the old style of Swiss station, there are still a few about, especially on the secondary and narrow-gauge railways. Try Ramsei.

Western Gotthard Tunnel breakthrough

The western bore of the Gotthard base tunnel was finally opened-up on the 23rd March some five months after the celebrations to mark the breakthrough of the eastern running tunnel. This second breakthrough was not marked by the same kind of public ceremony as the first last October, although Alptransit Gotthard AG entertained some 350 guests at the celebrations. The next task in this massive project is for the remaining construction plant to be dismantled and the second bore readied for the installation of railway systems, including track, overhead electrification, control and safety equipment, etc. May 2016 is the deadline for the hand-over to SBB of the completed tunnels.

Swiss events

The annual 104-page guide book "Schweizerferien 2011 - Dampf und Nostalgie" was published at the end of March. It tells you of all museum railways, ships and technical sites with directions and opening times. Order from schweizerferien@laupper.ch for CHF12 - plus postage. 

Swiss News is compiled by Bryan Stone and includes information supplied by: Michael Farr; Michael Donovan; Paul Russenberger and Jakob Jäger.

Ivan Rodrigues of the Switzerland Travel Centre writes:

SRS members might already know our brochure "Scenic Railway Journeys" featuring the most spectacular train routes in Switzerland. This brochure has now been complemented by our latest edition "Experience Switzerland", which offers attractive packages for major destinations in Switzerland. These packages can be combined, extended and adjusted to your individual travel plans and come with a best price guarantee. Of course Swiss Railways Society members can benefit of a 5% discount. There will also be the popular 2 for 1 promotion of the following regional passes: Berner Oberland, Adventure Card, Tell Pass and Graubünden Pass. Travel periods on these passes are restricted, call us for more details. Plenty of options to travel to Switzerland. We will be delighted to arrange your next trip. 