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Frauenfeld-Wil Bahn

Christian Ammann



Historical Jubilee train with Be 4/4 201 in summer 1987 at Münchwilen.
All photos: Christian Amman unless otherwise stated

In 2013, one year after its 125th anniversary, the Frauenfeld-Wil Bahn (FW, now marketed as the 'fwb'), acquired five new low-floor articulated 'DIAMANT' units from Stadler Rail. The arrival of these units marked another very important step in the modernisation of this 17.5km line. The investment programme was prepared after the 2006 decision by Kanton Thurgau to keep this metre-gauge railway as an efficient transport system serving the Murg Valley between Frauenfeld, the kantonal capital, and Wil a regional centre in Kanton St. Gallen.

The FW is a local railway that does not serve any tourist destinations, but it has a very interesting story. It is one of the oldest narrow gauge lines in Switzerland, and was not constructed as an electric suburban line (as were the Trogenerbahn or the Forchbahn), but as a roadside steam railway. At the time thousands of kilometres of such lines were being built across Europe to serve rural communities – few now survive. Projects for a standard-gauge line to serve the area failed to become a reality, and the main lines Winterthur – Frauenfeld – Romanshorn (Nordostbahn) and Winterthur – Wil – St. Gallen – Rorschach (Vereinigte Schweizer Bahnen), failed to serve communities in the Murg valley. Needing links into the developing national railway system the region decided to construct the narrow gauge line as a cheap and pragmatic solution, and originally – after the example of Waldenburger Bahn – it was planned to build it at 750mm gauge. It is also interesting that at the inauguration of the line on 1st September 1887 all the stations were only constructed as freight sheds. Only at Frauenfeld Stadt was a little station building and depot provided, at all the other stations on the line the commercial functions (selling tickets, etc.) were done by the owners of nearby Gasthofs. The administration of the little company was in a poor location in a factory near the Frauenfeld Stadt



BDe 4/4 207 (ex BTI) on 12th July 1982 at Frauenfeld Stadt (with old station and administration building).

station. Outsourcing is not only an idea of our time...

So it was only step-by-step that the FW became a "better" railway. In 1898 a new station building was constructed at Frauenfeld Stadt (today Marktplatz), with living accommodation for a director and space for the administration. This was subsequently demolished in 1993. Following the failure in 1921 of a project to build a standard-gauge line from Stammheim (on the Zürich-Etzwilen-Singen [D] route) to Frauenfeld and on to Wil, the electrification of the line at 1200 V dc took place. The line quietly served its local area for 40 years but by the end of the 1960s it became more and more in need of modernisation. At this time many narrow gauge lines were being closed, but the FW hung on to be saved by the 1973 fuel crisis when its potential worth was realised. Between 1978 and 1988 the first important modernisation of the line and the rolling stock was executed. In 1984/5 the FW acquired five motorcars Be 4/4 Nos.11-15 (FFA/BBC) and four driving trailers Bt Nos.111-114, followed in 1992 by two other more or less identical motorcars, Be 4/4 Nos.16 and 17 (Stadler/ABB/SIG). Between March 1978 and June 1999 the FW transported standard-gauge freight cars on special trucks, using for this a semi-automatic installation at Wil, constructed by ACMV Vevey under the technical supervision of the FW, and Appenzellerbahn (AB). Until the bankruptcy and subsequent liquidation of the Mittelthurgaubahn (MThB) it, and the FW had a common management and administration. After a short time of provisional administration by the SBB, since June 2003 the FW has been administered by the AB Group, although it is still an independent company. Construction work, track and electrical maintenance, and commercial services (such as ticket control) is all done by the AB Group.

The 27th March 2013 was an important day for the FW as Stadler delivered the first of the five ABe 4/8 articulated, low-floor, 'DIAMANT' units No.7001. During the night of the 5/6th April this unit covered for the first time the whole line to check the

TOP: Be 4/4 unit at Altes in the old 'Zebra' livery.

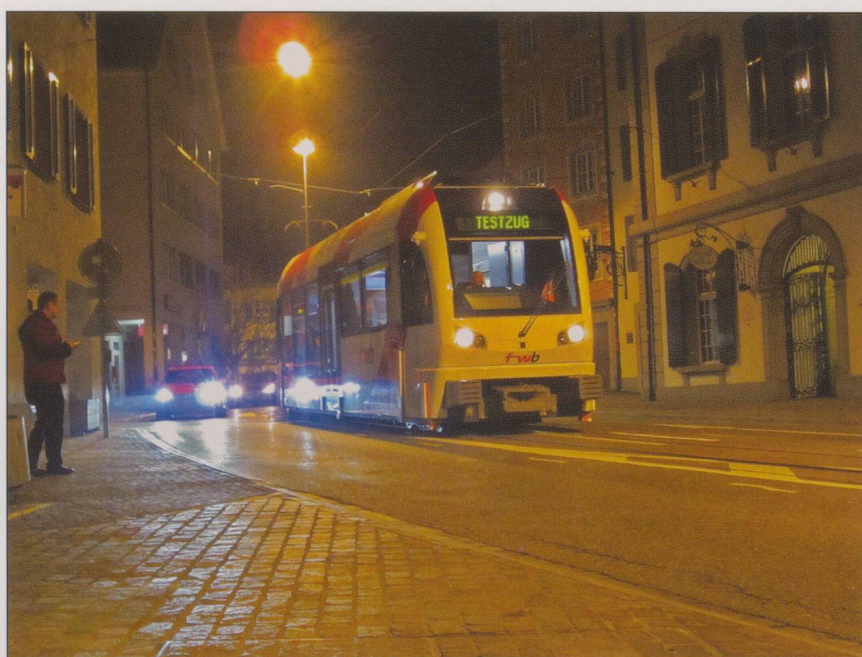
Photo: Christop Gut

MIDDLE: A new unit running through open countryside.

Photo: Christop Gut

RIGHT: Older train with Be 4/4 14, another Be and Bt in the Rheinstrasse at Frauenfeld, with Frauenfeld castle in the background.





loading gauge, then testing and staff training started. Inauguration and naming the unit 'Frauenfeld' followed on the 26th June during the annual shareholders' meeting and the next day this modern train entered into regular service. No.7002 arrived on the 8th July followed by the other three new units at monthly intervals, the whole acquisition of the new Stadler units having gone to plan. After naming ceremonies in Wil during November and December 2013 all the units now have names and blazons: No.7002 'Matzingen'; No.7003 'Wängi'; No.7004 "Münchwilen"; and No.7005 "Wil". The older units also had names and blazons of cities and villages, with Be 4/4 No.16 carrying the name of Frauenfeld's 'partnership' city of Kufstein in the Tirol.

The new EMUs are a longer version of the fourteen 'DIAMANT' EMUs supplied to the BDWM since 2009. The BDWM version has an overall length of 37.5m with 70 (+11 fold-up) seats in 2nd Class and 20 seats in 1st Class. The FW units have an overall length of 45.5m with 110 (+11 fold-up) seats in 2nd class, and 12 seats in 1st class, and an axle arrangement Bo-2-2-Bo. Floor height both versions is 385 mm in the low-floor sections and 950/1010 mm in the high floor areas. The tare weight of FW's units is 59t, vehicle width 2.65m, height 3.85m and the maximum speed 100kph. The cost of one air-conditioned, WLAN-equipped, FW unit was CHF6.2m. From February 2014 Stadler's one-year guarantee period commenced but apart from some small problems FW is very satisfied with the new trains, whilst passengers very much like the increased comfort levels.

With the arrival of the new units, storage space at the Wil depot became a problem. It was hoped to sell the 1984/5 units and retain Be4/4 Nos.16-17 built in 1992 as reserve stock, even though neither of these units meets the disabled access regulations. For economic reasons, due to the cost of equipping both with expensive new control equipment, Be4/4 Nos.16 - 17 will form an "inseparable unit" (with separation only possible in the workshop). Both will receive a technical revision, with new seats and the doors painted in a contrasting colour to

TOP: Be 4/4 11 at Wil, one truck for the car body, one truck for bogies.

MIDDLE: New 7005 on test and another (7002-04?) at Frauenfeld SBB. 7005 is standing on the 2nd track, without high platform.

LEFT: First test trip in the night 5th-6th April 2013 to Frauenfeld.

comply with current disability regulations. Trailers Bt 113 and 114 were scrapped in Autumn 2013. Trailer Bt 111 is still in Wil but will be scrapped, or given away. Railcars Nos.11,12,13 &15 were sold to the Chemins de fer du Jura (CJ), and by the spring of 2014 all will have been transferred to its Tramelan works. Three will be reconditioned, allowing some CJ units to be overhauled, and it is intended that they will also replace the CJ's two ex-RhB railcars in handling that line's freight traffic. In November 2013 motorcar Be4/4 No.14 and driving trailer Bt No.112 were moved by road from Wil to the Aare Seeland mobil (ASm) at Langenthal. ASm plans to use this train as reserve, especially for the Langenthal – St. Urban service. The main duty for the remaining old rolling stock at Wil is to operate a daily return working between Wil and Frauenfeld Marktplatz carrying students, and to provide back-up for their new units.

As a part of the overall modernisation of the FW a total closure of the line from the 7th to 13th October allowed important work to be done, specially to adapt the signalisation and for work on level crossings, which all have to be adapted to the Federal security regulations, or closed. From 14th October 2013 the AB's Network Control Centre at St. Gallen has controlled the line, and on the 25th October the last staffed station at Matzingen was closed. The former Matzingen station office and freight shed (only constructed in 1980) is rented to a cycle outlet. From 16th June to 12th December 2014 on Mondays to Fridays the Wil – Wängi section will gain a 15 minute service frequency in the peak hours - the rest of the line will run at 30 minute intervals. On the 15th December 2013 a new control system came into operation (ZSI 127) resulting in the inability of the former rolling stock, except Be4/4 Nos.16 &17, to be used. It is planned that by 2018 the whole line will operate at a 15 minute headway, resulting in new crossing stations at Lüdem and Jakobstal. The former crossing point at Frauenfeld Marktplatz (until June 1996 Frauenfeld Stadt) has been removed as part of the modernisation process. At Frauenfeld SBB the 2nd track is not normally used in regular operation, so during the modernisation only one track received a higher platform, becoming Gleis 11. The FW, with its new equipment, is now fully equipped to become an integral part of the essential transport system in this part of Switzerland. 

TOP: At Frauenfeld Marktplatz.

MIDDLE: Test trip to Wängi GB

LEFT: Test trip with 7001 at Rosental.

