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The Basel Hafenbahn – Part 2

Bryan Stone

We continue the story of this unique railway



Schweizerische Reederei T3 at the harbour servicing point, not long before withdrawal. *Photos from:* Bryan Stone except where shown

In the 1930s the flow of the Rhein below Basel was again modified. At Kembs the river was dammed by a barrage of sluices, and a new canal led to locks and a generating station. The effect was most beneficial, as the water in Basel became 3m deeper. Bigger barges could pass in safety, and traffic increased rapidly. In 1936 building began on Basin 2, paid for by the Confederation from relief funds for the unemployed. Completed in 1939 the outbreak of war prevented its full implementation. River traffic continued through WW2 (for the Swiss the 'National Emergency'), with Swiss vessels carrying very necessary supplies into their country under a neutral flag until 1944. North-south rail traffic through the Badischer Bahnhof and the Verbindungs-

bahn was also very heavy for much of the war, mostly German-Italian traffic, allowed passage through neutral territory, until the Allied liberation of Italy.

In November 1944, Baslers' Sunday afternoon was disturbed by heavy aircraft, flying downriver from the St Johann side. Thirteen Lancaster bombers, from the RAF's famous 617 'Dambuster' Squadron, each carrying a single special 6t bomb, were headed to the Kembs Barrage. Two aircraft were shot down, their crews lost. One bomb, detonated under the barrage, sufficed; the backed-up water was released. The immediate effect was to empty the river in Basel and Kleinhüningen docks, so that several barges were stranded. The docks were no longer usable. It would be 1946 before the Kembs Barrage was repaired, and the river was again available, but the German collapse and subsequent damage to rail and industry meant that now little cargo was on offer to the barges.

Post-war recovery

After the war the port and its railway recovered steadily, with the harbour railway handling 2m tonnes by 1949. Cargoes were changing, and fuel oil and other raw materials displaced coal. After the 1970s containers became a staple load, replacing general loose cargo. Container gantries took over on the old coal quays. Railway operations reached



The old T3 0-6-0T shunter of the Schw. Reederei, replaced in the 70s by a Tigerli. (See photo in Part one)

levels of over 50 trains a day by the 1960s. The line was steam-worked until its electrification in 1958, and often afterwards when electric locomotives were needed elsewhere. Lists of locomotives stationed at Basel, and old photographs, show that the C5/6 2-10-0s of the 2951 series moved in after displacement on the Gotthard route by electrification. They could handle 1,200t as a normal load, but at 25km/h at best. That no doubt assured the disturbance of the DB's shunting as noted earlier!



13305 at Basel SBB in the snow in 1969.

Shunting in the port was largely done by E4/4 heavy 0-8-0T locos of the 8801 and 8901 series. Since there was a footpath on the Verbindungsbahn Bridge, many older Baslers remember from close-up the heroics, smoke and noise of the 2-10-0s on harbour trip workings.

As SBB steam was phased out, Bm4/4 diesel locomotives did much of the harbour work. As elsewhere on the railways, however, traffic changes meant that shunting fell away. Sidings were lifted and the yards simplified. However private engines of the dock tenants could for some years still be found operating on the harbour tracks; it was always good to find a 'Tigerli' at work in private stevedoring service. The harbour railway was always busy, and when in the 1960s SBB was acutely short of power, the steamers came out again. But another curiosity was the three antediluvian E 91-class articulated C-C (0-6-6-0) electrics, hired from the DB, for trip workings. Swiss Ce 6/8 Crocodiles were then often used, and reports suggest, though I never saw it, that a big DB E50 Co-Co was sometimes borrowed at busy times. Latterly, Basel depot turned out Ae6/6 veterans for Hafenbahn service. Today modern power, sometimes of private 'Open-Access' operators, can be seen.

Birsfelden-Hafen

This is up-river from Basel, in Canton Basel-Land. A further group of quays was built and inaugurated in 1943, at Auhafen and Birsfelden, with a direct rail link to the Muttenz marshalling yard. Although the Cantons can be very self-

E4/4 8911, at the loco siding, while a Crocodile sets out for Muttenz yard.

Photo: Marcel Broennle



willed, the harbour co-operation, under Federal supervision in the national interest, was always good. The line to Birsfelden and Au was built by the SBB with public funds, for the Port Authority. This became a joint managing body for all the ports of the two Basel Cantons. Birsfelden is today a main port for import and storage of oil fuels. The railway here is 3 km long, with extensive sidings along the river bank. It climbs at 12% to reach Muttenz.

The Basel Hafenbahn today

The Hafenbahn today has 5km of 'main line' in Basel and Birsfelden, plus 59km of tracks - 34km in Basel and 25km in Birsfelden. Inbound traffic in 2017 (loaded from ship to rail) was 799,000t in Basel, and 1,761,000t (mainly fuel in block trains) at Birsfelden. Inbound traffic was always much heavier, as it included fuel and raw materials. Outbound traffic in 2017 (loaded from rail to ship) was 359,000t in Basel, and 589,000t at Birsfelden.



E4/4 8904 again seen at Basel shed (the old shed, Nauenstrasse, near the station), shortly before withdrawal 1968.

There are around 14,000-harbour traffic trains/year in and out. About 61% of the landside cargo is on rail. Much of the rest is containers, often local, by road, including many empty moves.

Recently approved for Kleinhüningen is a dramatic new project: a new container terminal, on those redundant DB tracks, and, in all probability, a new Basin 3. The traffic forecasts, in world trade and in container volumes, leave little choice, and the Confederation is in the lead. But it will take time. In Au/Birsfelden, the newest project is to build a link eastwards to Pratteln, so that block trains can run out to the main line without reverse or delay. In 2018 Birsfelden also saw its 70-year-old signalling frame replaced by an electronic panel.

To see trains on the Basel Hafenbahn, take a tram on BVB Line 8 to Kleinhüningen and walk a short distance towards the river. The level crossing is where trains run in and out. Also, standing on the west side platforms at the Badischer Bahnhof, will usually give a good view, together with all the international transit freight. Birsfelden harbour is more difficult but it can be reached from the Birsfelder Hard (10-minutes' walk from the terminus of BVB tram Line 3). Taking a river trip on the Basel passenger boats also gives a good overview, but not naturally, of railway details. But as I write this in November 2018, not much is happening. The record drought of this summer means that Rhein shipping is greatly reduced. What the action of 617 Squadron did in 1944, has this year almost been brought about by climate change. A harbour without water needs few trains.

Postscript

The background to the November 1944 bombing raid was that the US Army was at the time approaching the Rhein in Alsace, near Colmar, and intending to make a first

amphibious crossing there into Germany. The Swiss Intelligence Service learned that the German Army planned, if a crossing was attempted, to swamp the liberators with the release of the water of the upstream Rhein dams, including those above Basel on German territory, and also some in the Black Forest. The Kembs Barrage was a key location. The Swiss told the US Army, who asked the RAF if the 'Dambusters', based at Scampton in Lincolnshire might, with their precision training and special 'earthquake' bombs, destroy the barrage in order to release the water in advance. On 7th November it was done. The RAF violated Swiss air space and flew down the Rhein from Basel to Kembs. Of the 13 bombs, one failed to explode; nine missed; two went down with their aircraft; only one bomb fell as intended, but it worked; one can only release the water once. In practice the American advance was subsequently held up by furious German resistance around Colmar, and plans changed. The first Allied Rhein crossing in Germany took place at Remagen, near Bonn in early March 1945. The raid was heroic, nearly a failure, and finally unnecessary. ✘

Part 1 of this story was published in the March 2019 Swiss Express.

Today, more modern power at Rheinhafen.

