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SBB Historic and Erstfeld

by Ron Smith



The lineup at Erstfeld, left to right, BDe 4/4 No. 1646, Ae 6/6 No. 11402 'Uri', Ae 8/14 No. 11801, Ae 6/6 No. 11411 'Zug', and SBB Cargo's Re 620 015-8, 6 July 2019. All photos: by Ron Smith (except where shown)

Erstfeld is a real railway town. As late as the 1990s there were still around 250 loco drivers living there. The railway (the GotthardBahn) built many of the houses and community buildings, such as the central wash house (today a kindergarten) and the canteen, known as the 'Milchküche' (milk kitchen) as brakemen often fell ill and weak, especially after passing through the tunnel on a freight train, and a glass of hot milk was found to build them up. During the Second World War, railwaymen at Erstfeld received an additional ration of meat, as they did such nationally important work, moving supplies through the Alps.

Of course today, especially with the base tunnel, the SBB no longer has any need for the depot. Locally I was told that the SBB had tried to close it before, but it was so highly regarded nationally that a petition was soon raised and the SBB couldn't close it (Switzerland being a real democracy of course, where the population's votes must be implemented

by the government). But what to do with it?

The answer is that today it performs three functions. Before the base tunnel opened, freight trains were constantly running into the sidings here to add or detach a banking loco, change crews, and continue. This happened all day and night. Those sidings are now paved over and the tracks full of "intervention" trains. These Harsco (USA) trains are available to go to the rescue of any incident in the tunnel, either the new base tunnel or the old summit tunnel. They are out almost every night doing safety checks, and even have a shield wagon, which extends panels out to touch the sides and roof, to protect workers from the winds which blow through the tunnel up to 70 kph! The rest of the depot is shared between SBB Cargo and SBB Historic, who rent three buildings from Cargo. This gives SBB Historic another base for its growing collection of historic vehicles.

In 2001 SBB decided to split off its Historic section into a Foundation, which gives it access to funding not available to a national railway, and tax advantages.

SBB Historic is very active; it looks after 15 steam locomotives, 44 electric locomotives and railcars, 2 diesel shunters, 31 maintenance engines and 124 coaches and goods wagons. These are stored at various locations, principally Erstfeld, Olten, Winterthur, Rapperswil, Delémont, St. Maurice and Brugg, as well as in the Verkehrshaus transport museum in Luzern. The foundation itself is sited at Windisch. At all these locations,

In heavy rain Ae 6/6 11411 'Zug' of 1955 runs round its one coach train past the water crane, 6 July 2019.



SBB Historic rents space from the SBB. A lot of repairs and maintenance are undertaken by SBB workshops, as commercial operations, with four of SBB Historic's own engineers working at Olten workshop.

Brugg holds a considerable and growing archive of over 3,000 shelf metres of documents; 450,000 photos; 6,500 historical film and video clips; 100,000 locomotive design drawings, a poster collection, lamp; music boxes; 1:10 models, and rail and art collections. All this is also available online at www.sbbarchiv.ch. There is a library containing over 30,000 railway books, 300 trade journals, and every timetable produced by the SBB. This library is open to the public and is part of the network 'Informationsverbund Deutschschweiz Basel Bern', see www.baselbern.swissbib.ch.

I went to Erstfeld on 6 July 2019. The signs directed me under the tracks to the goods sidings where the loco parade was taking place from 10.00 to 12.00. Four historic vehicles; railcar BDe 4/4 No. 1646, Ae 6/6 11402 'Uri' (one of the two prototype Ae 6/6s that ran three years of test before series production commenced); 11801, the gigantic Ae 8/14 of 1931, and Ae 6/6 11411 'Zug'. In the far siding were Re 620 025-8 (11615 'Kloten') and Re 420 330-3 (11330) forming an 'Re 10/10' unit, not of SBB Historic, but incidentally parked there by SBB Cargo. In contrast to the UK, the security was minimal, and unnecessary, and the relaxed freedom to walk about taking photos was very much appreciated.

Then it was over to the sheds, 12.30 to 13.15 was a guided tour. There is a striking display of the Gotthard route and its construction, the town of Erstfeld, and locos on the tracks. There was also a grill serving hot sausages, and sandwiches and drinks for sale.

Then came the best bit. Ae 6/6 11411 'Zug', coupled onto a coach (there are usually two but one was away at Olten to form part of the train the next day with the Crocodile locos), pulled into the station for the 14.45 train to Göschenen (return to Erstfeld 16.53), and you could even ride in the cab. There are many trips possible riding in the cab of locos (see sbbhistoric.ch and sbb.ch/erlebnisfahrten.ch).

The run up the Gotthard was as spectacular as usual, with the bonus that the timetabling of the special train allowed it to slow to a crawl at many spots which the onboard host described (in German, English available for groups of 20+), especially the church at Wassen. Being a classic coach, you could, of course, lower the windows to take good photos. A visit to Erstfeld on one of these open days is certainly worthwhile.


SBB Historic does not have a railway museum - there is the national one, the Verkehrshaus at Luzern (which incidentally also has some vehicles and locos belonging to SBB Historic on display), However, this does not stop them from being dynamic. 2020 will see even more special trains, and - so that they will appeal to tourists as well as railway enthusiasts (who come especially for the works) - more will be regularly timetabled throughout the year.

SBB Historic work with eight different clubs, who look after "their" locomotives at one or the other of the depots, and these volunteers contribute around 13,000 hours of work a year

Personally I would love to be on the footplate of the massive C 5/6 No. 2978, of 1917, the 2-10-0 'Elefant' that is one of the class which were - and still are - the most powerful

steam locos in Switzerland - maybe one day!

For more information, go to www.sbbhistoric.ch or www.facebook.com/sbbhistoric.

There are also cab rides and special trains run by SBB itself, and some other railway companies, and details are in a brochure 'Erlebnisreisen und Führerstandsfahrten', and online at www.sbb.ch/erlebnisreisen. 

TOP: The mighty C5/6 no. 2978 of 1917, an 'Elephant'.

Photo: SBB Historic

MIDDLE: On the special train to Göschenen, windows down (despite the rain) and the train slows to a crawl to photograph the famous Wassen church from three different places. Here you can see the solid traffic jam on the motorway going north, 6 July 2019.

BOTTOM: The loco parade at Erstfeld on 6 July 2019; left to right, Ae 6/6 11402 'Uri' (one of the two prototype locos that ran three years of trials before series production started), Ae 6/6 11411 'Zug' Ae 8/14 No. 11801, and SBB Cargo's 'Re 10/10' of Re 620 015-8 (with 11615 'Kloten' 'on its sides) plus Re 420 330-3 (with 11330 on its sides). The relaxed and informal style of the event is evident.

