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The changing face of the B.L.S. (Bern Lötschberg Simplon)

by Roger Kemp. Photographs by author

This summer, my wife and I spent our summer holiday in Spiez. This enabled me to see what developments had occurred on the BLS since our last visit two years ago and what the future held.

As most members are probably aware, the BLS occupies a unique position in the railway infrastructure of Europe. Although privately owned, it owns and operates trains through the Lotschberg mountain range and on into Italy via the Simplon Tunnel. It complements the Gotthard main line run by the SBB and is therefore responsible for a large number of freight movements as well as passenger traffic from Northern to Southern Europe. On my last visit, talk of realignment of the track and the advent of high speed trains was being discussed as was the total redevelopment of Spiez station and marshalling yard to accommodate this increase in traffic. This was despite the fact that at the time the track had only recently been doubled for its entire length. Passenger trains to and from Brig were largely in the hands of the ubiquitous BLS brown Re 4/4's as were car carrying trains.

Freight traffic was the preserve of Ae 4/4's as well as the famous Ae 8/8's. SBB traction was used on some services to Interlaken as well as Eurocity trains, and haulage was usually by one or two SBB Class Re 4/4's. The Class Re 4/4 IV's were also used as at the time they were still SBB property.

Today, much has changed and will continue to do so until 1999 when the complete rebuilding of Spiez station will have taken place. In fact this rebuilding typifies the changing face of the BLS. Those members familiar with the station will recall that Platform 1 was reserved for trains to Interlaken, Platform 2 for trains from Interlaken to Basel/Zurich, Platform 3 for trains from Brig to Basel/Zurich, Platform 4 for trains to Brig and Platforms 5 and 6 for trains to and from Zweisimmen. At present, Platform 1 is out of use and Platform 6 is only used intermittently. When Platform 1 is once again available, Platform 6 will disappear for good. On my visit, therefore, I noted that trains to Bern/Basel/Zurich from whichever direction were being routed into Platforms 2 and



*Previous page: Re465 001 with the new over bridge at Spiez station, you can have a clear view of the comings and goings across the whole station.
Above: The drivers cab of an Re465.*

3. Trains to Interlaken were also using Platform 2 using bi-directional signalling. The use of Platforms 4, 5 and 6 was unchanged. This arrangement does, however, cause scheduling problems. An example of this was that on numerous occasions, Brig bound services were held up while Regionalzugs from Interlaken to Zweisimmen crossed over the tracks to Platform 5. Track rationalisation is also taking place at the Thun end of the station. Eventually, Platform 2 trains from Interlaken to Bern/Basel/Zurich, Platform 3 trains to Brig, Platform 4 trains from Brig to Bern/Basel/Zurich and Platform 5 trains to/from Zweisimmen. A feeder line will take trains from Interlaken to Zweisimmen across the station to access the correct platform. There will also be a crossover to enable trains to/from Brig to access either Platform 3 or 4.

As far as the station itself is concerned, work is also continuing on replacing the original platform roofs as well as raising platform levels to assist passengers. Ramps are also being installed to ease access for passengers with heavy luggage or those who may be disabled. There is also a pedestrian bridge across the station linking the main part of town with the flats and houses to the

south of the station. Traditionalists will, however, be pleased to note that it looks as if the main station building together with the famous "white tower" signal box at the Thun end will be spared demolition.

A new signalling centre has, however, been built on the site of the old BLS offices. This is a huge construction with a formidable looking radio antenna on top. When this centre becomes operational in 1997 it will control all movements on the BLS between Spiez and Brig/Interlaken.

Photographers should be aware that until completion, unwanted construction clutter may well intrude while the work continues. What is clear, however, is that once complete, the station will become the hub of the BLS network, bearing in mind that the main depot is also located here.

Turning now to motive power, I have noticed many changes in the last two years. The BLS has now taken delivery of 8 Class Re465 locomotives. These are similar in design to the Class 460, of



Above: A DB ICE at Spiez station note the new canopy and the higher platform the low metal platforms can be seen on the right.

the SBB but with a higher power rating in order to enable it to take heavy loads at speed over the mountain route. They are designed to work in tandem with the SBB Re 460 as well as SBB Class Re 6/6's. This means that the motive power through Spiez has changed considerably. Most passenger trains to or from Brig are worked by Re 465's sometimes in tandem with an SBB Re 460 or Re 6/6. Exceptions to this are through trains to and from Milan to Bern which are usually in the hands of a SBB Re 460, and the Eurocity train "Vauban" from Milano Centrale to Bruxelles Midi which is now hauled by two SBB Re 6/6's displaced from the Gotthard route. The BLS Re4/4's cover most Interlaken trains and augment 465's on occasions. They also work services to Zweisimmen and freight duties. The fleet of Ae4/4's is due to be scrapped as are the famous Ae 8/8's. When the signalling centre is complete, the only locomotives that will be able to use the line will be those equipped with radio telemetry systems such as on the TGV. These older locomotives do not have this equipment and I learned that it would be too expensive to install it as the locomotives themselves were nearing the end of their life expectancy.

On the subject of the Re 465, I could not help wondering who thought up the naming policy for these prestigious machines. All 8 are named as follows:

- 001 - Simplon/Sempione
- 002 - Gornergrat
- 003 - Jungfrauoch
- 004 - Saas Fee
- 005 - Niesen
- 006 - Lotschental
- 007 - Schilthorn
- 008 - Thunersee/Beatenburg/Neiderhorn

It is difficult to see what connection some of these names have to the BLS and wonder whether it is an advertising ploy. In addition, whilst in Spiez I noted 001 had been adorned with various logos commemorating the 125th anniversary of SLM Winterthur who of course, had a hand in the construction of all main line traction. I should also add that I had the opportunity to visit the depot at Spiez and sit in



the cab of one of these locomotives. The comparison with other BLS machines is pointless. Ergonomically it is a vast improvement on the Re4/4's. There is even air conditioning in the cab! It is clear that the control panel has been designed to allow the driver to act quickly whilst at the same time not compromising his train. There is also a speed regulator which automatically applies the brakes if the locomotive is travelling too fast, and in common with other new locomotives, a large panorama window replaces smaller panels. The Re 465 also has adhesion grips between the bogies on each axle to prevent slipping in adverse weather.

The BLS itself is thus equipped for the future. There is, however, one element I have not yet discussed - high speed travel. Since last year the German ICE has operated into Interlaken via Basel and Bern and the Italian ETR 470 "Cisalpino" train is due to make its passenger carrying debut on BLS metals at the end of October 1996, handling at least two services in each direction from Bern to Milan. This means that the BLS will need to accommodate the technology of these trains as

Above: Another view of the over bridge with older BLS Re4/4's on the left, SBB Re4/4 11650 & BLS Re465 008 with an Inter City train to Interlaken.

well as enhancing its own passenger carrying ability. Add freight diverted from the Gotthard route and car carrying trains through the Lotschberg Tunnel and you have a picture of a very diverse railway needing to cater for many different needs. The face of this famous line is changing and it will be interesting to see what it looks like when all the modifications have been made and how its financial state will compare with the currently beleaguered SBB.