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A Steamy Weekend in Switzerland by John Jesson

The combination of a steam special over the Gotthard, RhB No.1, Rätia, running on the Castione - Cama line and the steam trains running between Küssnacht and the Verkehrshaus made a visit to the Gotthard at the end of August a must for me. Although I was unable to find any timings for the Gotthard steam special during my visit in July (the Plus Travel Jura trip), I did find timings of the northbound electric-hauled "1930's" special on the Sunday of the first weekend.

Three of us made the journey to Göschenen by road, stopping off for a night with friends in Germany. Our route into Switzerland was via Bregenz (and the Klein model shop) and St Margrethen, and did not bode well for the holiday, as the rain was of monsoon proportions. We ran out of the worst of it on the run down to Chur, although it continued all the way over the Oberalp pass to Andermatt and Göschenen. The next morning, Friday, was overcast but (thankfully) dry, and we spent the morning assessing photographic viewpoints suitable for both video and still photography. I know the Gotthard north

ramp moderately well, together with many of its photo viewpoints, but have never succumbed to video, so I had to look again to check them out for video suitability. We ended up with two locations. One was overlooking the Reuss bridge at Intschi, the other between Gurtnellen and Wassen, near the lower entrance of the Pfaffensprung spiral tunnel. Both met photographic requirements, but the latter location offered two advantages. Only the river Reuss separated our viewpoint from the railway, giving the chance that only the trains would be in our pictures, rather than the trains and other photographers, and there wasn't a large electricity pylon in the middle of the video pan.

On the Friday evening, after popping into Exclusive Models in Zürich, we visited the Luzern club, EMBL. We were made very welcome, and were able to see the beginnings of their new HO layout, as well as the existing H0m layout. SRS and EMBL member Ruedi Steinmann was there, and warned us to be in position early the following morning, as thousands of enthusiasts were expected to



Previous page: The first steam special after passing through Gurtellen, headed by Eb3/5 5819 and B3/4 1367 (and banked by Re4/4 100002). 30/8/97.

Above: Five locos heading the second special through the Gotthard tunnel. Göschenen, 30/8/97.

Photos: John Jesson

invade the Gotthard for the steam specials. Indeed, some clubs had hired coaches to take their members to the area. We also found out that there were two steam specials, not one, and timings were available.

The first special was due to leave Erstfeld at 10.30 and arrive at Göschenen at 11.20, and was to be worked by B³/₄ 1367 piloted by Eb³/₅ 5819 and banked by an Re⁴/₄, which would run round at Göschenen and haul the train through the Gotthard tunnel at 12.30. The second train would leave Erstfeld at 10.45, stop at Gurtellen 11.10 - 11.35, and arrive at Göschenen at 12.05. Motive power was to be A³/₅ 705 piloted by C⁵/₆ 2978 and banked by SCB Ed2x²/₂ 196. The catch was that this train was to run "wrong line" from Gurtellen to Göschenen, while a railcar ran on the "right line" to video the steam special. As we would be on the left of the train, this could result in our view being blocked by the railcar. Vintage electrics were to follow the train to Göschenen and haul it through the tunnel at 13.20, but timings for these were unknown. An added attraction would be the "Churchill Arrow" 1021, and there was the likelihood of several other oddities to break the

monotony of Re¹⁰/₁₀ combo's and pairs of 460's on scheduled trains.

The weather on Saturday morning was somewhat better, with broken cloud. After an early visit to the Co-op to purchase lunch, we set off for our chosen location, were there at 08.45 and set up by 09.00. Not another photographer in sight, and we bagged the best places, although the location gave plenty of room for others to set up without getting in each others way. It was over an hour before others started to arrive, and we ended up with only about 20 people spread over about 100 metres of river bank. True, one individual wanted to set up directly in front of one of my friends, and came dangerously close to ending up in the river, but common sense prevailed in the end.

Whilst evaluating sites the previous day, we had seen a couple of departures from the normal flow of traffic over the Gotthard. Most interesting



was the official exhibition train, hauled by the chrome 460.084 but, for the first time, I saw one of the advertising livery 460's - one of the pair of SF locos - working on the Gotthard. The "odds" continued on the Saturday. For, I believe, the first time ever, a set of EW-III stock worked on the Gotthard, working a special to Göschenen. The loco was still in the orange/grey "Swiss Express" livery to match the train. A pair of Re⁴/₄'s worked one of the IC's southbound, with the leading Re⁴/₄ carrying an advertising livery. What the loco number was I do not know, but the livery was an SBB one, advertising their "2 x 150 = 222" offer. Also spotted was yet another new overall advertising livery on a 460, this time bright yellow with a black panel advertising "Western Union Money Transfer".

The first steam special gave plenty of warning of its approach, not only by the whistles as it approached Gurtnellen station, but by the columns of smoke. With a clear run, it was making good time and passed us in fine style, even if there was an electric hanging on the back. How much work the electric was doing I don't know. Not too much, I think, as speed had noticeably dropped by the time the special emerged from the Pfaffensprung tunnel above us.

Above: SCB 2 x 2/2 196 leaves Göschenen with a pair of AB-RIC coaches, on its own special to Oensingen.

Photo: John Jesson

The progress of the train was marked by the smoke hanging in the still air - indeed, it was still hanging when the second steam special passed 45 minutes later. Before this, though, the "Churchill Arrow" passed. A northbound EC passed at the same time, but was behind 1021, so merely provided a different background.

The arrival of the second special at Gurtnellen was advertised by much whistling, lots of smoke and a helicopter. Although still photography is not much bothered by helicopters, they are a curse to the video fraternity because of the noise they make. Fortunately, but rather surprisingly, this one headed off up the valley before the steam special re-started, leaving us wondering whether the "filming railcar" would muck it up for us. We need not have worried. The special passed in fine style and looked magnificent, although little old 196 looked more like an afterthought than a banker. As the train disappeared into the Pfaffensprung tunnel, the railcar (a BDe⁴/₄ with a platform rigged on the back) made its appearance, apparently determined to catch up



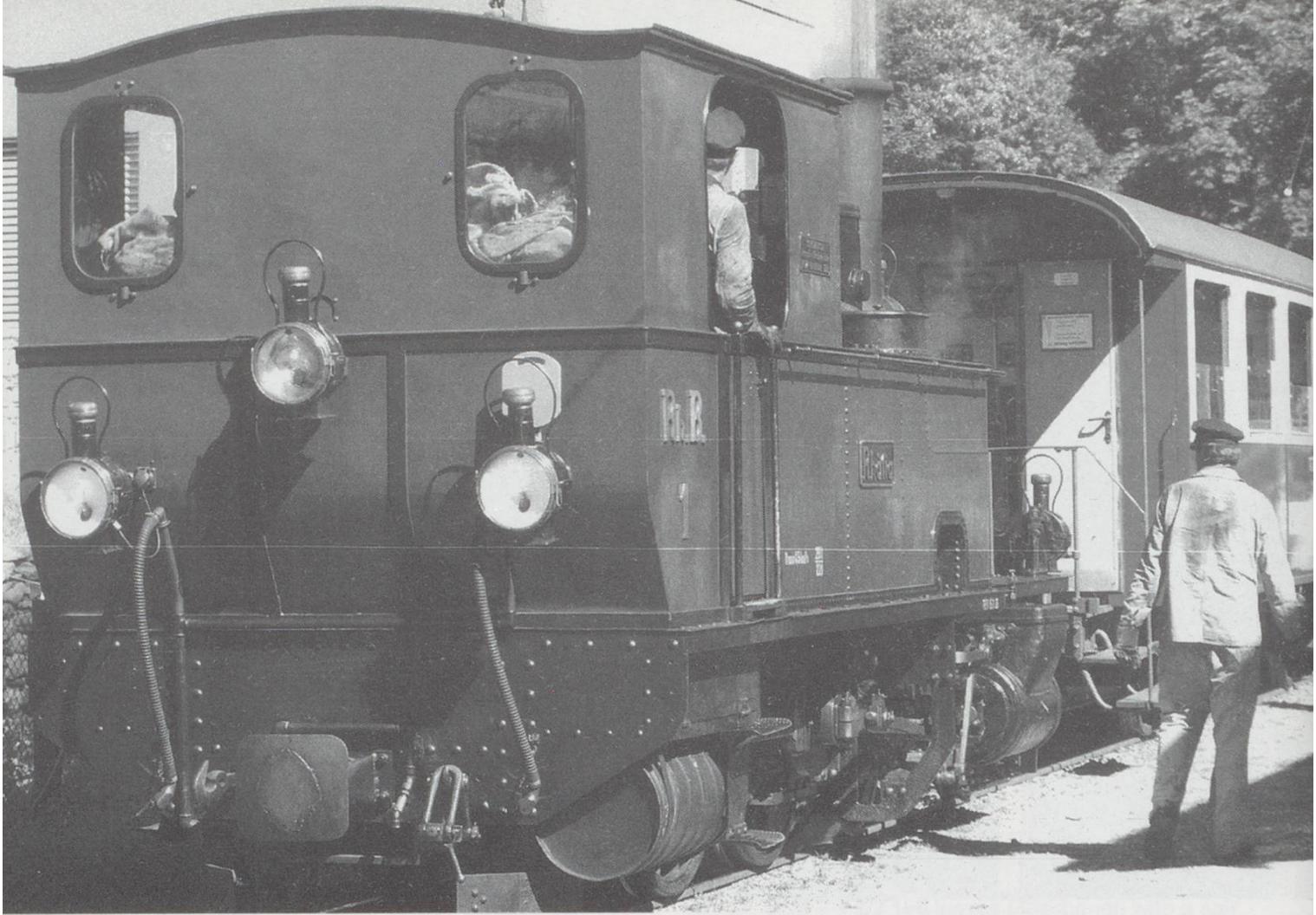
with what it was supposed to be filming. When the cavalcade re-appeared, the railcar was in front by about half a coach length, so it still wasn't in the way.

As is so often the case, there was a mad dash to get packed up and away, which the three of us watched while we had our lunch. Afterwards, we ambled back to the car (as the vintage electrics passed) and drove to Göschenen, where the second special was still standing at track 2. 196 had been detached and was standing by the footbridge over the river at the north end of the station, while the "Churchill Arrow" was on track 1. Passengers from the specials had partaken of lunch at tables set up on the platform outside the buffet. Everywhere, there were people - photographers, enthusiasts, families, passengers. The tracks were not out of bounds, and everyone wandered across them as far as the island platform. Track 3 and beyond (the freight loops) were being used for the booked traffic in both directions, and were out-of-bounds. All the people were kept in order by a small army of railway and volunteer fire brigade personnel, and everyone behaved themselves. Railtrack (and my lot) would have had kittens !

Above: Rhb No. 1 'Ratia' between Castione and Roverdo, heading up-valley. 31/8/97.

Photo: John Jesson

After taking a few photos at ground level, I sought a higher viewpoint for the departure of the special. I ended up over the tunnel mouth for the departure of both the "Churchill Arrow" and the steam special, which was hauled through the Gotthard tunnel by Re^{4/4} 10001, Ae^{4/7} 10976 and Ae^{8/14} 11801. The SCB Mallet, 196, then found a couple of coaches and worked its own special back northwards towards Erstfeld. Not quite Thomas, Annie and Clarabel, but not far off it. Now the station had cleared a bit, Bm^{4/4} 18402 appeared with the Gotthard tunnel rescue vehicles and parked at track 1. Everything was opened up and explained, and the rescue vehicle was decorated for the occasion. The Furka Oberalp, not to be left out, had their rotary snowplough on display, together with a loco. The old goods shed had been turned into a beer hall, and an open-sided tent set up between the goods shed and station building and a grill was doing a roaring trade. The weather tried to put a damper on things, but was unsuccessful, despite it



Above : RhB G3/4 No. 1 'Ratia' at Cama after running round its train. 31/8/97

photo: John Jesson

raining from late afternoon until well into the night.

On the Sunday morning, we drove over the Gotthard pass towards Castione and RhB No.1. The weather had definitely taken a turn for the better - the sky was cloudless blue instead of blueless cloud. We did not know the times of the steam trips, but were in luck. As we approached the bridge over the Cama line, a cloud of steam went under it, so we turned left and chased it. We managed several shots on the way to Cama, where the loco took water and ran round its train. Railcar 491 had followed the steam special, apparently on the "time interval and prayer" system, the time interval being something less than a minute. For the return trip we went to Roveredo, where the line crosses a river on an attractive stone bridge. Both steam and electric trains were photographed before we headed into Bellinzona to see what was going on. The answer seemed to be "not a lot". The exhibition train, complete with the chrome 460, was stabled at the north end of the station, opposite the goods shed, with a couple of stalls selling the SBB RailShop products, as well as books,

postcards and other bits and pieces. The Works was open (although we did not go in) but the Depot was not. It was possible to see that two of the steam locos were in the depot, but they were hemmed in by electrics and well away from the station.

The stock of Saturday's steam specials was returning north behind electric traction, and was billed as a 1930's train. We settled on the spirals between Giornico and Lavorgo to photograph the train. A lot of other people decided the same, so it was a little crowded. The special was hauled by three locos, Ce⁶/₈ 14253 + Ae⁴/₇ 10976 + Ae⁸/₁₄ 11801, and the train was a motley collection of vintage coaches, including the brown dining car and a CIWL Pullman. After the train had passed, and the usual desperate scramble to pack up and get away we headed unhurriedly towards Airolo, passing the special at Lavorgo. It was probably "looped" for pathing purposes, so we decided to have another go ourselves at Airolo. To my



surprise, there was only one other person at the north end of Airolo station, where the line swings to the right to enter the Gotthard tunnel. Not only is there a good clear field of view, but the late afternoon sunlight is perfect, and the results were better than those taken earlier at the spiral spaghetti. The day was completed by the arrival of the Gotthard Post Coach at Airolo, where we were relaxing after our strenuous photographic duty. During the summer, this lovely vehicle, hauled by 6 horses, runs over the Gotthard pass, and is impressive enough that even the locals stop and gaze.

The final steam experience was that between the Verkehrshaus and Küssnacht. The adverts had said that tickets had to be booked in advance, and could be booked through "your local station". Somehow, I can't see the staff at my local station being too responsive to such a request, so we tried Göschenen. "All trains fully booked until the middle of September" we were told, which was unfortunate, but didn't stop us from going to the museum anyway. We were able to photograph the steam trips, though. One was running with "Limmat" at one end and the Austrian "Licaon" at the other, while the second

Above: Ce6/8" 14253 headed the "1930's special" northwards through Airolo. 31/8/97.

Photo: John Jesson

train was top-and-tailed by the SMB Ed^{3/4} 2-6-0T, no.2 and the VHB tram loco. In fact, we found later that we could have queued for a steam train ticket at the Verkehrshaus, so the stations were probably only being allowed a proportion of the available seats. The displays in the museum are as good as they always are, and the new "Gotthard tunnel" experience is well worth trying. Other than saying that the approach to the story of the building of the tunnel is refreshingly different, and that you listen to the commentary in your choice of language, I will not spoil your visit by describing it any further.

Apart from not being able to book tickets on the Küssnacht steam trip, we managed to see and do all we had planned, so the trip was definitely a success. Next year, I am planning something rather less hectic.