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AN EVENING AT ERSTFELD (OPERATIONS EXTRAORDINAIRE!)



Re 4/4^{III} 11363 waits outside Erstfeld depot for its next turn of duty. The Hotel Frohsinn, known to many and situated less than a one minute walk from the station entrance can be seen in the background. 27/7/1998.

All photos: David Adams

The Gotthard line is renowned for its heavy freight traffic and from time to time there are reports that another record tonnage has been conveyed over a 24 hour period. Often I have wondered what is entailed operationally in moving such vast quantities of freight over a two track main line with lengthy sections of 1 in 38 gradients whilst at the same time accommodating at least two passenger trains an hour in each direction over the mountain section to the south of Erstfeld and three per hour each way on the flatter section north of that town.

In July 1999 I was staying at Erstfeld for three nights and on my first evening I spent some time watching proceedings at the north end of the station. I appeared to have struck gold for this must have been one of those days when line capacity was near saturation. The scene was almost unbelievable with freight trains arriving and departing at a frequency more akin to a busy passenger suburban line. I was so intrigued by this highly efficient and

intense operation that I decided to record all train movements at the north end of the station the following evening (Tuesday 6 July 1999) and these are reproduced in the following tables showing movements and train types. I have also included a summary of the traffic and motive power involved. In order to follow the table of events more easily I have shown a diagram of the north end of Erstfeld station.

Erstfeld is a strategic point on the Gotthard line as far as freight train operations are concerned as all freight trains stop here to change drivers. Those heading south up the 1 in 38 ruling gradient to Göschenen usually require two train locomotives and often rear end assistance as well. A few trains change locomotives. Others heading for the flatter northbound section and which may not need the power or braking capabilities of two locomotives may detach a second train locomotive.

The station has three through platforms, two are in effect the main line, and the third is

a platform loop to the west side of the station and shares an island platform with the northbound through line. There is also a south facing bay on the east side used mainly for stabling empty passenger stock. In this instance Ee3/3 16397 had removed some coaches from the rear of the 19.23 southbound train and was stabled with them in the bay where they remained until midnight before moving to the

excellence of the work carried out there and its relatively secure rural location being significant factors in its favour.

The station area is controlled from a panel on the main southbound platform and which, on this occasion, was being operated by a young lady while another person appeared to be dealing with other duties such as liaison with train crews, shunters etc. On other occa-



A glimpse into the past. The cabs of Re 6/6 11643 "Laufen" and Re 4/4 II 11320 frame the plinthed cab of Ce 6/8 II 14270 at Erstfeld. 5/7/2000.

sidings on the opposite side of the main line. In addition there are two through loops parallel to the station on the west side as well as further through loops and sidings which were not used to accommodate any through freight trains during the period I was there. As a result all trains were dealt with by using just five lines in the station area all of which are signalled for bidirectional working, a facility that was put to very good use. There is also the well known adjacent locomotive and maintenance depot. Ce 6/8, 14270 of 1921 vintage, sits resplendent on a plinth outside the depot administration building, a poignant reminder of the past. A local resident informed me that there were now plans to retain Erstfeld locomotive depot and works after the Gotthard base tunnel eventually comes into use. Its closeness to Altdorf, the

sions I did note that only one person normally undertook all duties associated with the signal panel. It is possible to detect an approaching train by noting a string of white lights on the panel which indicates that a route has been set. These change to red as the train occupies particular sections of track. I also noted a television monitor which appeared to display information in relation to line occupation and advance warning of approaching trains outside the immediate vicinity. Nearby there are two staff rooms. One is frequented by train crews where they are able to obtain information on their next train working. The other is used by shunters of which there appeared to be three, a head shunter instructing two assistants who actually did most of the work. A bicycle on the island platform enabled shunters to access the

south end of the station and they had radio contact with the signal panel, drivers and other key operational staff. Such was the precision of the operation that every relief driver was positioned ready to take over before the train actually arrived. Therefore the appearance of a driver at the north end of the island platform was a useful indicator that a northbound freight train would be arriving very shortly. To set the scene I will highlight one or two movements. For reasons of space please note that the detailed movement table (Table 1) shows movements over two hours, other tables show cumulative movements over the whole period.

On the evening in question I arrived at 20.22 on the 19.17 from Luzern which I have included in the table. While this was standing in the platform Ae6/6 11497 moved from the depot yard to the north end spur. 5 minutes after my train had departed Re6/6 11688 and Re4/4^{II} 11310 arrived with an intermodal on the same line. One minute later 11497 moved from the spur to the rear of this train to provide banking assistance. After coupling up and the necessary brake test had been completed, the driver of the banker being in radio contact with the train engine driver, the ensemble departed after a total stop of just 6 minutes. The action immediately switched to northbound with 11662 / 11158 arriving on the northbound through line, also with an intermodal, at 20.33. There was a northbound passenger due to leave at 20.34 from this platform but it was diverted to the platform loop line departing 3 minutes late behind 11603. As soon as this train had cleared the station 11688 / 11158 set off in pursuit leaving just 2 minutes later at 20.39. Blink twice and 11679 / 11121 arrive at 20.41 with another northbound intermodal, this time on the southbound through platform and a minute later at 20.42 they were also heading north with a fresh driver. The next arrival, just 5 minutes before the Cisalpino which passed at 20.57, was headed by 11611 / 11182. Both locomotives were removed from the train,

11182 went to depot and 11611 then reversed back onto the train to work forward unassisted.

Every evening an Re4/4 would arrive from the south with just two Interfrigo wagons (still running July 2000), stable for a short time and then head north still with just two wagons in tow. Unfortunately I do not know the cargo conveyed, its origin or destination and find that using a path for just two wagons on this busy line quite remarkable. Intermodals were, in contrast often up to 35 vehicles in length and many mixed freights were also of similar length.

I also noted that the northbound through platform was not always kept clear for non-stopping passenger trains. The Cisalpino that passed at 21.49 was routed through the platform loop and on another day, when it was running about 13 minutes late, took a goods loop through the station area, a freight occupying the main through platform line on both occasions.

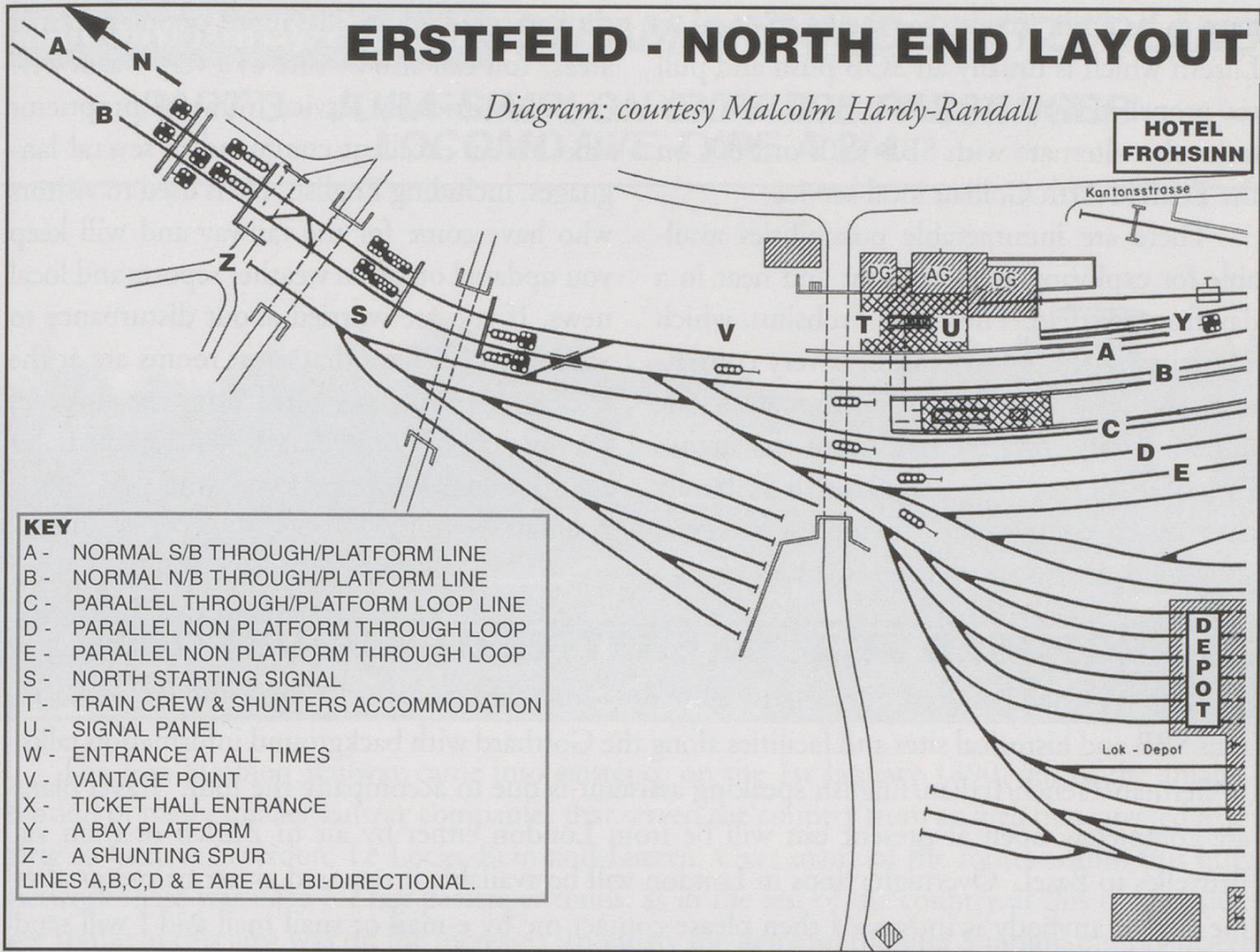
I stayed at Erstfeld again in the same week 2000 and did a similar exercise on the same evening. This was a quieter evening with only 25 trains, as against 33 in 1999, being dealt with in the same time period. However, there was definitely a change in the pattern of use as far as main line locomotives were concerned and observations suggest that many locomotives were now working from a common pool on an as available basis irrespective of depot allocation.

There was little, if any, evidence to suggest that the proposed split between passenger and cargo sectors had taken place. For example, I noted that 11146 which arrived at Erstfeld with the terminating 21.17 passenger train from Luzern at 22.20, quickly shunted its stock to the sidings and by 22.35 was coupled up to the rear of a southbound intermodal train to bank it to Göschenen. On three occasions I saw a 460 paired with a BLS 465 on freight at Erstfeld. Banking duties were covered by anything that happened to be available, Re460, Re6/6, Re4/4^{II} & ^{III} and Ae6/6 all being seen on this duty during my stay. However, if you want to see one of the editors favourites then you

TIME	LOCO	DIRECTION	TRAIN TYPE	MOVEMENT RECORD
20.22	11358	SOUTH	SEMI FAST	ARR A
20.22	11497		LIGHT ENGINE	DEP DEPOT TO Z
20.23	11358	SOUTH	SEMI FAST	DEP A (RIGHT TIME)
20.28	11688/11310	SOUTH	INTERMODAL	ARR A
20.29	11497		LIGHT ENGINE	Z TO ATT REAR A
20.33	11662/11158	NORTH	INTERMODAL	ARR B
20.34	11688/11310	BANKER 11497		DEP A
20.36	11603	NORTH	SEMI FAST	ARR C
20.37	11603	NORTH	SEMI FAST	DEP C (3 LATE)
20.39	11662/11158	NORTH	INTERMODAL	DEP B
20.41	11679/11121	NORTH	INTERMODAL	ARR A
20.42	11679/11121	NORTH	INTERMODAL	DEP A
20.47	11611/11182	NORTH	MIXED FREIGHT	ARR C
20.52	11611	LIGHT ENGINE		C TO S
20.53	11182	LIGHT ENGINE		C TO Z
20.53	11368	NORTH	2 X INTERFRIGIO	ARR D
20.54	11611	LIGHT ENGINE		S TO TRAIN C
20.55	11182	LIGHT ENGINE		Z TO DEPOT
20.57	470007/057	NORTH	CISALPINO	PASS B (APP 10 LATE)
20.59	11611	NORTH	MIXED FREIGHT	DEP C
21.01	460062/460061	NORTH	LIGHT ENGINE	ARR E
21.02	460062/460061		LIGHT ENGINE	E TO Z
21.05	460062/460061		LIGHT ENGINE	Z TO OTH SDGS
21.07	11503	SOUTH	INTERMODAL	ARR B
21.10	11159/11655	NORTH	MIXED FREIGHT	ARR A
21.11	11689/11135	SOUTH	INTERMODAL	ARR C
21.12	11159/11655	NORTH	MIXED FREIGHT	DEP A
21.14	11503	NORTH	LIGHT ENGINE	A TO Z
21.18	11503		LIGHT ENGINE	Z TO DEPOT
21.18	460062/460061		LIGHT ENGINE	OTH SDGS STH TO B
21.18	11622/11455/11137	NORTH	MIXED FRT	ARR E
21.19	11622		LIGHT ENGINE	TO Z
21.20	11455		LIGHT ENGINE	E TO S
21.21	11137		LIGHT ENGINE	E TO Z
21.22	11137		LIGHT ENGINE	Z TO DEPOT
21.22	11622		LIGHT ENGINE	Z TO DEPOT
21.23	11455		LIGHT ENGINE	S TO DEPOT
21.24	11368	NORTH	2 X INTERFRIGO	DEP LINE D
21.25	11652	SOUTH	SEMI FAST	ARR LINE A
21.26	11652	SOUTH	SEMI FAST	DEP LINE A (2 LATE)
21.26	11419		LIGHT ENGINE	DEPOT TO LINE Z
21.28	11665/11161	NORTH	INTERMODAL	ARR LINE D
21.29	460062/460061	SOUTH	INTERMODAL	DEP LINE B
21.30	11665/11161		LIGHT ENGINE	LINE D TO S
21.31	11672/11361	NORTH	MIXED FREIGHT	ARR LINE A
21.34	11672/11361	NORTH	MIXED FREIGHT	DEP LINE A
21.34	11689/11135	SOUTH	INTERMODAL	DEP LINE C
21.34	11419		LIGHT ENGINE	LINE Z TO LINE D
21.36	11497		LIGHT ENGINE	LINE E TO Z
21.37	11665/11161		LIGHT ENGINE	S TO LINE E
21.39	11497		LIGHT ENGINE	LINE Z TO DEPOT
21.40	460091		LIGHT ENGINE	DEPOT TO LINE Z
21.42	11364	NORTH	SEMI FAST	ARR LINE C
21.42	460091		LIGHT ENGINE	Z TO A SOUTH END
21.43	11364	NORTH	SEMI FAST	DEP LINE C
21.49	470002/052	NORTH	CISALPINO	PASS LINE C
21.52	11419	NORTH	INTERMODAL	DEP LINE D
21.52	460049	SOUTH	INTERMODAL	ARR LINE A
21.55	460091		LIGHT ENGINE	ATTACH FRONT 460049
21.55	11665/11161	NORTH	MIXED FRT	DEP LINE E
22.01	460049/460091	SOUTH	INTERMODAL	DEP LINE A
22.01	11606	SOUTH	MIXED FREIGHT	ARR LINE C
22.03	11610	NORTH	MIXED FREIGHT	ARR LINE D
22.05	11610	NORTH	MIXED FREIGHT	DEP LINE D
22.10	116XX/11XXX	NORTH	INTERMODAL	ARR LINE B
22.11	116XX/11XXX	NORTH	INTERMODAL	DEP LINE B
22.12	11681/11170	SOUTH	MIXED FREIGHT	ARR LINE A
22.15	11681/11170	SOUTH	MIXED FREIGHT	DEP LINE A
22.16	11642/11203		LIGHT ENGINE	DEPOT TO LINE Z
22.18	11184/11686	NORTH	MIXED FREIGHT	ARR LINE D
22.20	11140	SOUTH	SEMI FAST	ARR A TERM.(2 LATE)
22.20	11671	NORTH	CAR TRANSPORTERS	ARR LINE C
22.22	11642/11203		LIGHT ENGINE	Z TO E S.END

ERSTFELD - NORTH END LAYOUT

Diagram: courtesy Malcolm Hardy-Randall



TRAFFIC SUMMARY - for total time, 2022-2311

TRAIN TYPE	SOUTH	NORTH
INTERMODAL	7	5
MIXED FREIGHT	4	7
CAR TRANSPORTERS	1	
HUPAC (LORRY RAIL)		1
PASSENGER (LOCO HAULED)	3	3
CISALPINO		2
TOTALS	14	19

MOTIVE POWER SUMMARY

Re4/4 ^{II}	Re4/4 ^{III}	Ae6/6	Re6/6	Re460	Ee3/3	ETR 470
11112 11164	11358	11419	11603 11662	460036	16397	470002/052
11121 11170	11360	11455	11606 11665	460049		470007/057
11135 11182	11361	11497	11610 11666	460050		
11137 11184	11368	11503	11611 11671	460057		
11140 11203			11614 11672	460061		
11152 11204			11622 11678	460062		
11158 11310			11624 11679	460090		
11159 11xxx			11642 11681	460091		
11161			11652 11686	460109		
			11655 11688			
			11657 11689			
			11661 116xx			

(xxx OR xx = INDIVIDUAL LOCO IDENTITY NOT RECORDED)

ALL TRAINS WERE ACCOMMODATED ON JUST THESE 5 LINES.

ALL FREIGHT TRAINS CHANGED DRIVERS.

INTERMODALS WERE UP TO 35 VEHICLES IN LENGTH.

DEPARTURES FROM ALL LINES WERE TO MAIN LINE A SOUTH & B NORTH

BAY Y HELD EMPTY COACHING STOCK ATTACHED TO 16397 FOR THE DURATION.

have to be up in time to see the 06.57 local to Luzern which is usually an SOB push and pull set propelled by a BT Re4/4! SOB class 566 units also alternate with SBB 540s or 560s on the Erstfeld-Arth Goldau local service.

There are innumerable possibilities available for exploring areas both far and near in a day from Erstfeld. The Hotel Frohsinn, which advertises in the Swiss Express, is very convenient, the hotel entrance being literally a one minute stroll across the road from the station entrance. In true Swiss tradition it is family run, clean, comfortable, friendly and serves good food. It also costs far less than hotels of a

similar standard in the more popular tourist areas. You can also be sure of a very warm welcome and friendly service from the proprietor who has an excellent command of several languages, including English. He is used to visitors who have come for the railway and will keep you updated on Swiss weather reports and local news. If you are worried about disturbance to your sleep I believe that most rooms are at the back of the hotel and free from the noise of nearby trains. Sorry that I cannot vouch for that personally, I sleep (some would say snore) through anything!

PROPOSED TRIP TO ERSTFELD - AUGUST 2001

The trip is planned to depart on August 25th 2001 for 8 days based at Erstfeld, and will visit various SBB and historical sites and facilities along the Gotthard with background information talks. A German/French/Italian/English speaking assistant is due to accompany the tour. Travel plans are completely open at present but will be from London either by air to Zürich or train via Bruxelles to Basel. Overnight stops in London will be available if required either before or after the trip. If anybody is interested then please contact me by e-mail or snail mail and I will send them full details when they have been approved.

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Hotel Frohsinn

Visiting the Gotthard and the surrounding area of Lake Luzern?

Experience real Swiss hospitality in a family run hotel with well appointed rooms, excellent food and plenty of local atmosphere.

The hotel is located in an ideal place to start your tour. Situated at the beginning of the North Ramp of the Gotthard with a commanding view of the railway, and equally well placed for those walks in the beautiful surrounding countryside of William Tell fame or that longed for journey on nearby Lake Luzern.

For brochure and reservation details:

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