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THE MODELLING SECTION

John Jesson

RESEARCHING THE MISOX

WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF ALAN PIKE AND THE
"ENCOURAGEMENT" OF MIKE POLGLAZE



The southern part of Pian San Giacomo with the new road curving round the community. The proposed railway would have followed a similar alignment.

All photos by John Jesson and taken 8/2000

At the start this was intended to be another in the Railway Walks series which have, so far, involved operating railways. This one is rather different, the railway involved being virtually disused, partly closed and partly never built. The article is therefore more research based and material from it and the various walks etc are the basis for... now read on.

Mike started it, of course, when he said he was intending to build a replacement for his "Via Mala" and "Bimblebahn" layouts. Both layouts, like their predecessor, are based on the proposed line over the San Bernardino Pass. All three have been "located" on the northern side of the pass. "Why not build somewhere on the southern ramp?", I asked. Mike indicated that this was not an option (his actual response was "NO"). A short time later, Mike told his son, Dave, the news.

Dave said "Why not build somewhere on the southern ramp?". At that point, Mike must have thought there was a conspiracy and gave in gracefully.

A metre gauge line was built from Bellinzona to Mesocco and opened in 1907, the first part as far as Lostello on 6th May, and the remainder on 31st July. Ownership transferred to the RhB on 1st January 1942, but this was as a result of financial difficulties brought about by WW2, not by any thought of extending the line over the pass to Thusis. Although this transfer of ownership may seem a little strange, it becomes more understandable when

one realises that almost the entire line lies in Canton Graubünden, the border with Canton Ticino being only three or four kilometres from Castione.

The route of the proposed railway over the pass was surveyed prior to WW1 and Mike has

The scenery between San Bernadino and San Giacomo looking North West.





The northern outskirts of Pian San Giacomo

copies of part of the routing. The station at Mesocco lies at 769 metres above sea level while the community of San Bernardino is about 1630 metres. To overcome this difference in altitude would have involved some impressive engineering, including 10 tunnels and several crossings of the river Moesa. Only one intermediate station seems to have been planned, at Pian San Giacomo, although others might have been built, as the proposed routing passed close to settlements at Logiano, Darba and Andergia. In the end, lack of Federal support and financial constraints caused the shelving of the project in the 1930s and it was never resurrected. However, the routing of the new road, built after WW2, bears a number of similarities to that of the proposed railway. A more detailed description of the proposed railway was printed in Mike's article in "Swiss Express" vol.3, no.3 (September 1991).

Mike dug out his plans and has decided to base his new layout on Pian San Giacomo. The railway here would have described a broad S-bend, climbing across the river on a long right-hand curve, then reversing direction by means of a 180° left-hand curve. The station was shown to be just after this left hand bend, but Mike is the proud owner of a fully paid up Modellers Licence, so the bends have been separated and the station will be on the middle

level between them, somewhat like Wassen. The same licence allows Mike to call his station just San Giacomo, which is what the railway survey says the station would have been called, even though all the maps prefix the name with Pian.

Working from plans and maps is all very well, but is not enough to model a place. This brings us to the real on the spot research. I volunteered to have a look at the area, taking photographs and getting an idea of scenery, foliage and building styles. Necessarily, the

project was split over two days. The longer and more energetic day started on the 06.47 Postbus from Bellinzona to San Bernardino. This is, in my opinion, a wholly indecent hour to be up and about, but it meant that I could be at San Bernardino just after 8 am. The intention was not to try to follow the proposed railway routing, but to walk to Pian San Giacomo and on to Mesocco using footpaths and tracks, rather than roads, gaining an appreciation of the valley.

As usual in Switzerland, the paths are marked by signposts at end and junction points, and with white/red/white or yellow markers on trees, rocks or buildings along the way (especially where the way forward could be in doubt). All the possible routes from San Bernardino have white/red/white markers, indicating that they require a fair amount of care and energy. Although the paths are well marked, I prefer to also carry the 1:25,000 Swiss maps covering my route, as they are able to give a reasonable idea of what to expect on the walk. The route I chose ran along the west side of the Lago d'Isola before crossing the dam at the end of the lake and continuing along a farm track on the eastern side of the river. It was along this part that the route degenerated from the farm track to a barely discernible path (through very wet high grass) that suddenly dropped about 100 metres into the river gorge and led to the delightful Ponte Romano across



Fairly typical of the farmers buildings tucked away in odd corners of the landscape. This one is just below Soazza

the river. Just how old this bridge is I do not know, although the name possibly gives a clue. It is certainly not neglected, despite its obscure location. After this, the route on to Pian San Giacomo is through woods and straightforward, and ends by crossing the river again over a somewhat more modern bridge that leads directly to the Postbus stop outside a restaurant (which was put to good use).

When leaving the whistle stop I made the mistake of following the sign posted route to Mesocco.

Although delightful, the routing was, in places, very obscure,

and the route markers proved indispensable. Even with these, I had to double back to regain the right way. At one point, the path peters out at a couple of hilltop barns and it is necessary to find the starting point of another path

(shown on the map) a short distance away. Eventually, that path became another farm track and eventually ended on the old road. Still following the sign posted route led me to another path that was even more obscure, although I passed a workman who was clearing the grass and this gave me a little more confidence. The path dropped down through the tiny community of Cebbia, then followed the river to the outskirts of Mesocco, where the Postbus stop and depot is close to the former

railway station. Overall, the walk took about 8 hours, of which about 6^{1/2} hours was actual walking, and I was very pleased to relax into the seat of the Postbus (a double deck Neoplan).

The other day of research was much shorter and less energetic and started from Mesocco. As mentioned, the Postbus depot is close to the old station, and the buses turn round in the area

that was once occupied by the approach tracks. The station building is still there, with both the original and later lettering of the station name visible on the end wall. Although the building is disused, it is far from derelict, and it is possible to ascertain that the doors and window



Mesocco station. Trains arrived from the left and, had the line been continued, would have started to climb almost immediately on leaving the station. Faintly visible on the end wall, centred under the top two windows, is the original painted station name

frames were once painted grey. Leaving Mesocco, the trackbed of the former railway is now a footpath that runs through a rock cutting and under a couple of bridges before continuing through the woods on a gently falling grade.

The next community is Soazza, where the former station is at the edge of the village. Like that at Mesocco, the station building is disused, but generally in good repair. The Postbus calls here, but has to climb up a side road from the old main road, turn round, then go back down the same road to resume its journey. The trackbed squeezes between the church and a rock face then skirts the village on an embankment before crossing a small road and diving back amongst the trees. Gradually, the trackbed gets

closer to the old main road, both vertically and horizontally, until it joins the road and all



From Mesocco to Soazza the line winds along the mountainside through thick woods. This bridge spans a stream, viewed towards Mesocco. The handrails, although rusted, are still sound.

Rather than follow the road, I followed a path along the river bank to Cabbio, the next

Postbus stop, and hoped for a hostelry of some sort. I was out of luck, as there wasn't a living soul to be seen, so I continued to Lostello where I found an open bar conveniently located opposite the Postbus stop.

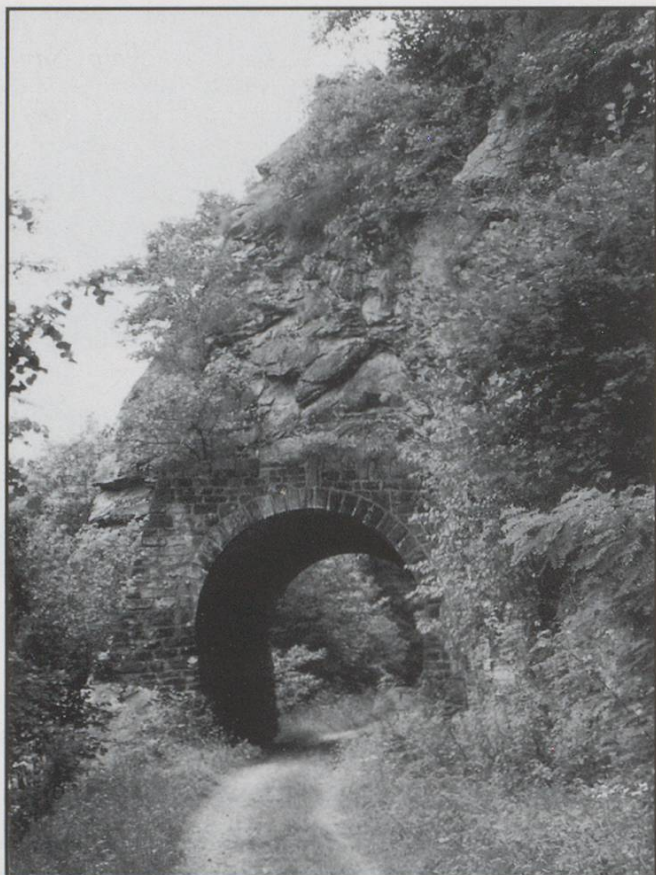
I saw no signs of the old railway at either Cabbio or Lostello, but this is not to say they are not there, hidden behind buildings. Lostello, in particular, would probably have repaid a more exhaustive check, as this was the most important intermediate point



The station building at Soazza. Although slightly different in size and style from Mesocco, the door and window stonework are the same. This view is looking towards Mesocco, the tracks running to the right of the building

traces are lost. This section from Mesocco to where it merges with the road is the most interesting of the whole of the Misox line as built. There are a couple of short tunnels and several bridges, all in a good state of repair for walkers, though I doubt that the condition of the bridges would be suitable today for trains.

between Castione and Mesocco, with a 3-track station. Indeed, apart from the two station buildings, the tunnels and a few short lengths of track embedded in the road at Mesocco, there is nothing to noticeably indicate that there ever was a railway. The bridges could easily be mistaken for an old road alignment.



A short tunnel through a rock outcrop near Mesocco.

Until a few years ago, there were still some catenary masts in place, but even these have gone. There is another Postbus stop at Sorte, although the village is across the river, then comes Cama, where the rails now start.

From here, the track runs alongside the road through Leggia where, again, there is a station building and a passing loop. Just before Grono, the line swings away from the road, passing behind a factory that used to provide some traffic for the line. Alas, no longer. Beyond Grono, the track crosses the river Calancasco and briefly runs alongside the road again before diving between buildings on the outskirts of Roveredo. By now, the river Moesa has become quite substantial, having been augmented by numerous tributaries, and the railway crosses it on a lovely stone arch bridge. The former station site is sandwiched between the new road and an open area for car parking. There is no longer any station building, but a passing loop and siding still exist and it is possible that a large wooden structure was connected with the railway.

From here on, the line alternates between crossing flat fields and disappearing between unattractive industries, some of which have, in the past, contributed to traffic on the railway. At Castione, the two railways, Misox and Gotthard, are at right angles to each other, and it is necessary for the Misox line to accommodate itself to big brother. This it does by swinging to the right across the road and through a residential area, and then a long left hand curve into the station area. Stabled in the station yard is usually a selection of the stock owned by the preservation group that runs occasional weekend trips on the line. Alan Pike in "Swiss Express" Vol.1, no.3, July 1985, described a trip on this lower part of the line.

The section of the original line onwards to Bellinzona was closed on 27th May 1972 and quickly lifted. On the same date, passenger services ceased between Castione and Mesocco. Between Cama and Mesocco, the line remained nominally open for freight traffic until 7th August 1978, when it was abandoned. The track stayed in place for only a little over a year from this date. The remaining tracks now show very little sign of use, but imagine what a difference there would have been had the route over the San Bernadino Pass been completed. The Post buses run every hour between Bellinzona and Mesocco, and there are a number of additional through workings to and from Thusis. The existence of a through railway route would probably have increased passenger traffic, and who knows what freight flows would have developed. For the answer to this conundrum, we shall have to see what runs on Mike's new layout.

Before submitting this article to our Editor, I sent it to both Alan and Mike. Alan kindly ensured I had a copy of his book covering the line, from which much of the data has been gleaned, while Mike has added the following remarks. *See next page.*

First of all I must thank John for making this trip to the "wilds" of Graubünden, which has enabled me to get a better idea of the area I am modelling. San Giacomo is a direct replacement for Bimblebahn, much of which now rests on the Test Valley Council tip! Via Mala (dv) is still going strong although due for retirement at the end of 2001. It is not planned to consign it to the Test Valley tip!

It is true that both John and David "talked" [translation – bullied (JJ)] me into going for the southern end of the line, but the inspiration to build another model came from an article in Bemo Post 18 and the MIBA magazine where some German modellers have built a line based on Alp Grüm with an overall size of 4m x 1.2m.

I worked out that I could build a layout of similar size in my garage/workshop (no car has seen the inside of it for 17 years!). So San Giacomo came into being. As John has already

said I had the plans from Schweizerische Bauzeitung of October 1927 that show San Giacomo at the top of the series of loops etc. on the climb up from Mesocco. I reckoned that on a model it would be better to have the station on the middle level, allowing trains to be seen approaching or leaving in two directions.

I laid the trackwork and built the basic scenery and waited for John's report. Having seen this and the considerable number of photographs and other information he brought back I have been able to complete the scenic side. He also gave me a copy of the latest PTT timetable for the area from which I have worked out the sequence timetable which we shall run.

At the time of writing San Giacomo will make its first public appearance at the Sussex Assoc. of Model Railway Clubs Exhibition at Crawley on March 3rd/4th 2001. Perhaps we shall see you there!

Philip Elwin

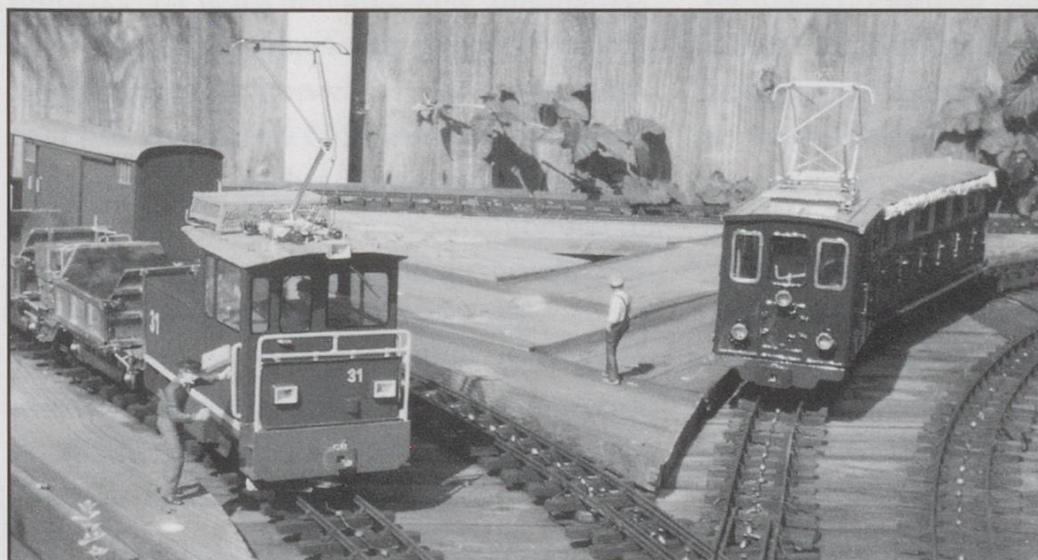
INSPIRED BY SWISS EXPRESS

A few years ago a very interesting drawing was published in Swiss Express showing pre-production proposals for new He 2/2 type rack locomotives for the Wengernalpbahn.

During subsequent visits to the WAB I was able to take some photographs of Nos. 31 and 32 in traffic and used these along with the drawing to make a model to run on my 32mm gauge 1/19 scale garden railway. I had already built a model of No. 17 based on one of the

older series of locos to experiment with rack systems, as a result of which both are now adhesion machines !!

I thought that you might like to know how useful the drawing was, I can not claim to have built a 'scale' model but have achieved a good likeness despite having had to make a few practical adjustments. The use of 32mm gauge is a matter of economy, details of the construction of this battery powered model were published in Garden Rail magazine for April if anyone is interested.



WAB Nos 17 and 31 in 1/19 scale, battery powered in the garden.
Photo: Philip Elwin