

Open access on the Gotthard

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David Adams

OPEN ACCESS ON THE GOTTHARD



While the long term future of the Gotthard ramps is nearly a decade away from the serious threat of the new base tunnel, there have already been many changes in operational practices over the current line in recent times affecting both passenger and freight.

I have used Erstfeld, at the foot of the

Gotthard northern ramp, as a base for my annual wanderings around Switzerland for the last seven years and have witnessed many of those changes as I commuted almost daily between there and Arth Goldau during my stays, usually in early June. I forecast in an article some time ago that multi-voltage

ALL THE PICTURES IN THIS ARTICLE ARE DAVID'S OWN. THOSE THAT HAVE ITALICISED CAPTIONS INDICATE TYPES NO LONGER SEEN OR ARE ABOUT TO DISAPPEAR.

TOP: 04.06.03. RM 436113 & 11679 approaching Flüelen with a southbound freight.

LOWER: 05.06.03. Bm4/4 18402, shunting at Erstfeld, is now withdrawn.





locos of various nationalities would no doubt appear in the not too distant future. My crystal ball appears to have been working well as both Bombardier and Siemens-Krauss Maffei multi-voltage designs have made a considerable impact since the advent of open access agreements. As a very rough measure of just how much through freight working now takes place with multi-voltage locos between Switzerland and Germany, during a 90 minute

period at Weil-am-Rhein in DB territory just north of Basel Bad, only 4 single voltage DB freight locos, an ERS class 66 diesel and an SBB-C(argo) Ae6/6 were seen against 12 SBB-C/BLS/Railion dual voltage machines. In fact there were times when I had to remind myself that I was in Germany as SBB dual voltage class 561 units were also working the shuttles between Weil-am-Rhein and Lörrach which is also entirely in DB territory.



At the turn of the century in 2000 Gotthard line passenger services were mainly hauled by Re6/6s with a few Re4/4^{II}s and Re460s also appearing. There were through trains between German and Italian destinations via Basel, the "Tiziano" and the "Verdi" being two examples which formed of DB stock. The local service between Zug and Er-

OPPOSITE PAGE

ABOVE: 08.06.04. 8270 – SOB unit 566079 pauses at Sisikon with a local service to Erstfeld.

BELOW: 08.06.04 – SOB 456096 arriving at Erstfeld with the 05.45, hence the difficult lighting conditions, all stations service from Luzern via Küssnacht am Rigi.

THIS PAGE:

TOP: 07.06.05 – Vossloh diesel 843055 marshalling a local freight for Bellinzona at Airolo.

CENTRE: 08.06.05. Ae6/6 mini revival at Erstfeld – 11486 waits to bank a freight to Göschenen while 11441 comes off the depot to work a stone train to Flüelen. The top of a class 185 can be seen in the north sidings on the right.



stfeld was shared by SBB class 560 and SOB class 566 units. An SOB 456 with a “Voralpen Express” push and pull set also made an early morning trip from Luzern to Erstfeld and back. Freight services were mainly in the hands of either Re10/10 formations or pairs of Re460s with the odd Ae6/6 making an appearance. RM Re4/4s also regularly appeared in the Re10/10 formations.

By 2005 much of that had changed. Passenger services are now hauled by a predominance of Re4/4¹¹s, in pairs on a few of the heavier EC/IC trains and some by Re460s. The latter now belong in total to the SBB Passenger sector and have completely disappeared

from freight workings. Conversely all the Re6/6s are now owned by SBB-C. There are no longer any through Gotthard line services between Germany and Italy via Basel and DB stock is no longer seen. Cisalpino has taken over some EC loco hauled services between Zürich and Italian destinations using stock repainted in Cisalpino livery. The Italian Cisalpino ETR 470 tilting sets continue to operate a number of Milano – Stuttgart via Zürich services. The local passenger service to Erstfeld now operates as line S2 of the Zug S-Bahn, entirely with SBB units which are normally new “Flirt” RABe class 523 units though class 560s, displaced from both Win-



PREVIOUS PAGE

TOP: 10.06.05. 8682 - Railion branded 185118 passing Arth Goldau with a southbound freight.

CENTRE: 10.06.05. Re10/10, 11646/11246, heading north past Sisikon where part of the newly installed soundproofing can be seen along the platform. It extends from just north of the station to the south tunnel on both sides of the track prohibiting lineside photography on that section including the river bridge.

LOWER: 10.06.05. SBB "Flirt" unit 523011 at Brunnen backed by the twin peaks of the Mythen with a Zug S-Bahn S2 service to Erstfeld.

THIS PAGE: 10.06.05. Siemens 182598 (ES 64 U2 098) on hire from Dispolok pauses at Erstfeld with a northbound TXL working.

terthur and the now BLS-run Bern S-bahn services, were standing in for non-availability on one of the two daily diagrams in early June. The SOB class 456 no longer operates the early morning service to Erstfeld and of course SOB units are no longer seen on the Gotthard main line. In Ticino additional class 560 units, mainly former Winterthur based examples that have been replaced by Stadler low floor class 526 units, have bolstered the existing fleet and now work all the "Tilo" (Ticino/Lombardy, which includes the Luino line) branded local passenger services. However an order has already been placed for a fleet of Stadler dual voltage class 524 units, similar to the class 523s, to replace the class 560 units, which will allow through operation between Biasca and Milano.

If the new Swiss passenger timetable was deemed difficult to master following the big-

gest change in schedules for several years, then the complex changes in the current freight scene surely pose an even bigger challenge to the interested bystander.

Although SBB Cargo remains the main freight operator over the route and Re10/10 formations still predominate, some of their trains no longer make the time honoured stop at Erstfeld to change drivers but change locos at Arth Goldau instead. 12 drivers have transferred from Erstfeld to a new SBB-C depot at Arth Goldau, the majority of those transferring already residing in the local area. Re10/10s are mostly used south of that point and Bombardier class 482s to the north via Basel through into Germany. Locomotives are stabled by the goods shed platforms between duties, 482s on one road and Re10/10s on another. This development was criticised by the local press as the location at Arth Goldau is not wholly satisfactory for this purpose. The site will have even less flexibility when two sidings disappear to make way for the new Rigi Bahn terminus which has now been approved to allow demolition of the bridge terminus.

Ae6/6s appear to have made a mini revival on the Gotthard. During my week's stay in June I saw 16 examples at Erstfeld and 3 at Bellinzona of which one was seen later on a freight at Cadenazzo and another



at Erstfeld in the evening. They once again predominated on both SBB-C banking duties to Göschenen and also on NEAT stone trains from Erstfeld to both Flüelen and destinations further distant. SBB-C class 482s were mainly confined to German workings from and to Arth Goldau though two examples did work Erstfeld - Flüelen stone trains during the week. It is reported that problems with rail wear on curves on the Gotthard ramps due to their more rigid wheelbase has resulted in their non-use over this section but Bombardier class 185s, which are an identical design, appear unrestricted at present. SBB-C dual voltage class 421s (formerly Re4/4^{II}s 11371-11397) were less in evidence in Re10/10 formations and appeared to be mainly concentrated in the Basel area for working, often in pairs, into Germany. The lower geared Re4/4^{II}s (11350-370) also appeared in smaller numbers than hitherto and were spread more widely across the SBB system.

Railion/BLS has made by far the biggest impact of any of the new freight operators and now run several daily freight services using dual voltage Railion class 185s (formerly DB Cargo) from a pool of over 60 based at Mannheim through from Germany to Chiasso and Luino. I have seen only 185118 sporting Railion branding, the remainder still carrying the DB logo. Some of these locos are stabled in the north sidings at Erstfeld between duties. The general pattern is for trains to be hauled by a single loco on the flatter northern sections and a pilot is attached to the front at Erstfeld for the run south. I was interested to note that a pair arriving at Erstfeld on a northbound train were separated by the driver rather than the shunter. The driver then took the leading loco to the holding sidings, having to change ends part way through this manoeuvre, and then walked back to the station to continue forward with the train.

When a class 185 is used to bank a train to Göschenen, again the driver couples the

loco to the rear of the train. BLS now have an office and driver's signing on point at Erstfeld and for the unknowing the BLS sign on both entrances to the booking hall must be confusing. Diverging for a moment, visitors to Erstfeld should not miss the magnificent digital panorama of Erstfeld station on display by the seated area inside the booking hall/waiting room. The shots were taken from a specially constructed platform and stitched together to form a unique display of the utmost sharpness.

Another freight operator is TX Logistics (TXL), a company that is well established in both North America and Europe. For their European operation they use Siemens class 182s hired from Dispolok, single locos on the DB but mainly pairs throughout from Basel to Chiasso though some attach/detach a pilot loco at Erstfeld which is usually stabled in the south spur between duties. There are relatively few such trains on a daily basis. TXL was recently in the Swiss news for failing to strictly adhere to driver's statutory working time directives and their Swiss operations office has subsequently closed. Since my visit this operator has joined forces with Trenitalia.

Other players are Rail4Chem (R4C) and Ferrovie Nord Cargo (FNC), both members of the European Bulls Railfreight Alliance. 185527 and 185542 appeared as single locos during the week on R4C workings the latter having both R4C & European Bulls branding. I was intrigued by an FNC southbound train of VOS containers which arrived at Erstfeld in platform 4 on a Sunday evening with Siemens 182600/189993 in charge. The former (which I suspect only worked from Basel) is one of three in "Hupac" livery which work as assisting locos for a variety of operators and the latter had FNC branding. It did not depart until the early hours of Tuesday, over 30 hours later, leaving Erstfeld without a spare platform all day on the Monday! The locos stayed attached throughout and at one point the train had to be reversed to allow a

182 to exit the spur at the south end.

Finally Regionalverkehr Mittelland AG (RM) have also joined "the party" and work a car train from Chiasso to Weil am Rhein. I am not clear if they use their own Re4/4s (436111-115) on this working but these locos have ceased to operate in SBB-C Re10/10 formations. A friend back from the Hotel Frohsinn at Erstfeld in late October reports that an RM driver is outbased there for working the Chiasso leg and another RM driver works the Erstfeld – Weil am Rhein leg.

On the minus side "Hupac" piggyback trains were far less in evidence than in previous years. The few I did see were very poorly loaded, contrary to those I saw using the Lötschberg line with BLS power where the number of such trains had increased significantly and were well patronised.

Further south Bombardier class 484s now have a foothold on SBB Cargo Italia workings from Bellinzona (where they take over from Re10/10s) via both Chiasso and Luino to destinations in Italy. The Siemens class 474s (identical body to a class 189) only received authorisation to work in Italy on 15th May. 474003/06/10 headed south to Chiasso on 6th June with Siemens diesel loco ER20-006. Veteran Ae4/7 10997 was also in the cavalcade. On the 9th the ER20 headed northwards with two of those 474s. 474007/8 are still in Munich as both have been severely damaged and are awaiting new bodies. SBB-C has now cancelled part of the contract for this class (for which no payment has been made) and will not accept six members of the class when they become available for delivery. Dispolok are most likely to take over ownership when no doubt they will become class 189s. Cisalpino are now using at least 2 474s on through passenger workings between Milano & Bern and Milano & Geneva Airport both via Domodossola, 474017 now carrying Cisalpino branding and which I assume is on long term hire from SBB-C.

Some Gotthard line local freight trips are now worked by the new SBB-C class Am 843 Vossloh Bo-Bo diesels which certainly look the part and have taken over some duties from Bm4/4s. 843053 spent weekdays at Altdorf and weekends at Erstfeld depot. Two other examples were seen between Airolo and Bellinzona. Erstfeld's Bm4/4, 18402, has already been withdrawn.

Photographic opportunities of these new types are certainly a bit of a lottery. Railion 185s make fairly frequent appearances but the Dispolok locos tended to turn up either in the wrong place or at the wrong time. I managed one shot of a 182 at Erstfeld and that at 08.30 before the sun had risen sufficiently to illuminate the loco.

Information regarding the multitude of Siemens and Bombardier types that are now working all over Europe, including Switzerland, can be obtained by visiting <www.railcolor.net>, an excellent website run from the Netherlands, mainly in English, that gives details and latest news of every type of Euro Sprinter/Runner and TRAXX loco built to date, as well as Alstom's PRIMA series. The latter are now regularly seen passing through Basel SBB working freight via Mulhouse to and from Muttentz but SNCF dual voltage BB 20200s were also still making appearances in June.

I suspect that there will be even more diversity on the Gotthard in due course leading to even more confusion for the casual observer. Indeed it is becoming increasingly difficult to keep abreast of developments in the freight operators' market due to the seemingly continuous process of mergers, partnerships and new players. The volume of traffic over the Gotthard ramps remains at an unbelievable level for a two track main line. Hopefully it will continue to provide considerable interest for the foreseeable future, but the years are ticking by and this spectacle is certainly not going to last for ever.