

Zeitschrift: Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal
Herausgeber: Swiss Railways Society
Band: - (2006)
Heft: [1]

Artikel: Winter Wonderland : John searches for snow - and finds it!
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-854793>

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Winter Wonderland

John searches for snow - and finds it!



ALL PHOTOS IN THIS ARTICLE ARE BY JOHN JESSON:

11623 & 11315 stabled at Biasca, having been abandoned to the snow. 28/01/06.

The vagaries of my shifts and the dates of the Nuremberg Toy Fair conspired this year to allow me a few days to enjoy before the Fair. Brian Shelton (my usual companion at the Toy Fair) and I decided to make a quick visit to Switzerland before travelling on to Nuremberg. Maybe, we thought, there might be a chance to photograph trains in the snow. Walking, one of my favourite pastimes, would likely have to be curtailed as paths in winter tend to be blocked, not only by snow but by fallen trees and the occasional landslip.

Friday 27th January therefore saw us en route to Erstfeld and the Hotel Frohsinn, via Brussels, Luxembourg and Basel. I understand that the Belgian railways staged a runaway locomotive that day that disrupted services between Brussels and Namur, our route, but it must have happened after our train had passed, as we saw nothing untoward. The same day also saw large quantities of white stuff dumped on Ticino and northern

Italy, around 60cm, which turned out to be rather more than could easily be coped with. Apparently, Lugano had to find the snow-chains for their buses to enable them to get anywhere. It was very obvious that the railways had been badly affected, as there were no freights running.

To get an idea of what might be practical as regards walking, we started Saturday with a "survey" of the conditions on the North Ramp, using the bus to Göschenen, rather than the train. There was quite a lot of snow and ice left from earlier falls in the lower part of the North Ramp but no fresh snow. As the bus climbed higher up the valley though, new falls were evident until, at Göschenen, there was about 20 cm. A freight that had been in Track 4 at Erstfeld the previous night was still there this morning, showing that freights had not restarted. Passenger trains were running, but these were limited to the hourly semi-fast (IR) services, which were not running further

RIGHT:

One of the point clearers watches as Bm 4/4 18404 moves off prior to shunting electric locos into the shed. Bellinzona, 28/01/06.

CENTRE:

The winter wilderness at Airolo in the afternoon of 28/01/06. II305 runs into the station with a southbound IR service to Bellinzona.

LOWER:

Snow and sleet flurries continued through Saturday, especially at higher altitudes. II305 at Airolo during one of them, working a southbound IR.



south than Bellinzona (as we later discovered). There were trains running in the IC/EC paths, but only as far south as Göschenen until the afternoon, when some started to run through to/from Bellinzona. These were formed of more or less anything, varying from a loco-hauled set that had to be run round before returning, Zürich S-Bahn sets of RBe 4/4 + 4 coaches + RBe 4/4 (running as 2 sets coupled – 12 coaches), and even a CIS 470 Cisalpino set. To ease the transfer of passengers from the MGB, only Gleis 3 was being used, and passengers were shepherded across the tracks, instead of having to use the subway. As many of them were carrying skis, snowboards and the like, this saved quite a lot of time.

The south side of the Alps was a similar story, only more so, with fresh snow in abundance. Almost every station was playing host to an abandoned freight train, some still with locomotives attached, well covered in snow. Biasca was hosting a freight (complete with locos) on Track 2, with another in one of the loops. A pair of locos, 11315 + 11623, was

also in one of the loops, and the yard Tm^{IV} shunter, all looking very sorry for themselves. At Bellinzona, the TILO locals to/from Biasca were running, and services southwards were being provided by all-stations shuttles to/from Chiasso and Locarno (we did not see any for Luino). Outside the depot was the usual collection of locos, all with lots of snow on them, and groups of men in HV clothing were clearing points in the sidings adjacent to the station. While we were there, Bellinzona's Bm 4/4, 18404, also covered in snow, started up and began the task of shunting electric locos into the depot where, presumably, they were to be "dried out". I would guess that large quantities of snow on high-voltage switchgear is not conducive to reliable operation. The weather on both sides of the Alps was dull, with some light showers of snow or sleet, but no more heavy snowfalls.

Sunday saw clear blue skies, with a Föhn blowing, so the temperature was quite reasonable (just above freezing). We took

BELOW:

Not only Swiss Locos were heading south. A pair of DB class 185 pass Chiggiogna on 30/01/06.





LEFT: While no Re 460 were seen operating over the Gotthard while the weather was bad, a few reappeared once it improved. 460.021 in "Kambly" livery approaches Chiggiogna on 30/01/06.

CENTRE: At the northern edge of the village of Chiggiogna, an Re 10/10 heads an intermodal freight south. 30/01/06.

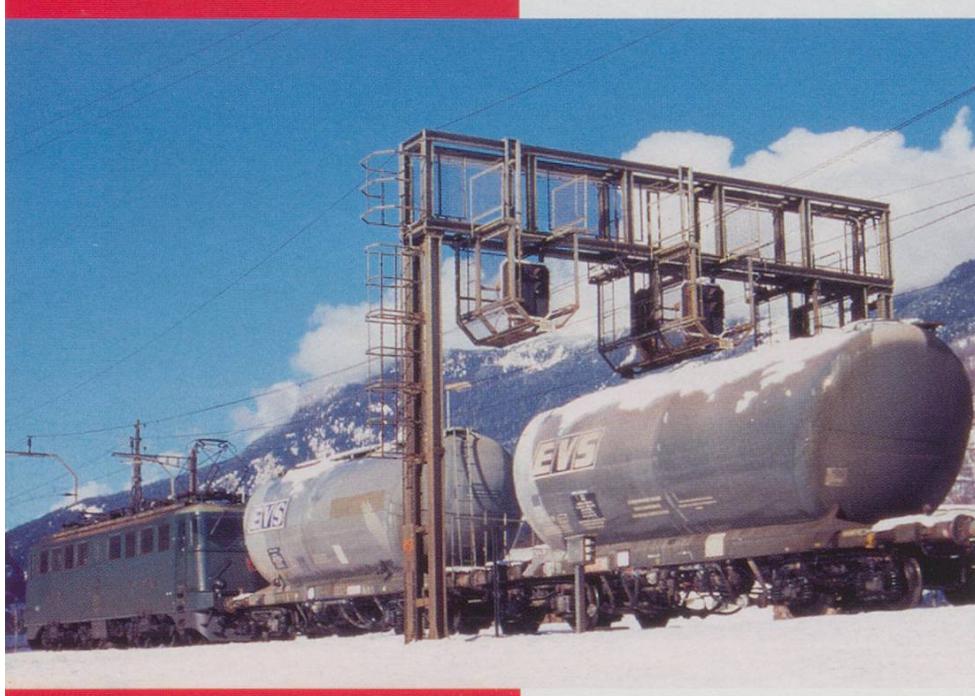
LOWER: Mainstay of the Gotthard for many years, the Ae 6/6 can still be seen on the route. One example heads north through Chiggiogna on 30/01/06 with a train of cement wagons.

OPPOSITE PAGE

TOP: Although more usually seen with an Re 4/4 or RBe 4/4 providing the motive power, The BDT control trailers can also be used with the Kolibri 560 units, as here on a "Tilo" service running into Bellinzona. 30/01/06.

CENTRE: II206 leads another Re 4/4^{II} on a southbound EC through Biasca. 30/01/06.

LOWER: With the sun about to disappear behind the mountains, TXL ES 64 U2-097 heads south through Biasca. 30/01/06.



the opportunity to walk the path from Amsteg through Ried to Gurtnellen-Wiler, continuing after lunch to Pfaffensprung. The north ramp gets very little sun in the winter, so photography is not as satisfying (neither is standing around for trains). The path we walked is really a track, as it serves a number of all-year houses and farms, so was clear of snow but, as I mentioned earlier, footpaths are not clear in winter. It was noticeable that some tracks were sheets of ice – not the easiest surface to walk on when the track is steep. The IC/EC services were running through to Bellinzona today but freights only made an appearance in the afternoon, the first

being headed by a pair of DB 185s, and those that ran were mostly southbound. The afternoon postal train also ran, formed of a mix of container wagons and the more traditional vans. We cut our day out short, returning to Luzern to meet one of our Swiss members, Ruedi Steinmann, for a meal and an evening of railway discussion. Although clear of snow, Luzern was colder than it had been on the Gotthard, but this didn't seem to worry the considerable number of ducks and swans on the lake, all taking advantage of the lack of lake traffic in the winter. There must be more "quack" per square metre here than anywhere else I know.

Monday was also fine, so we ventured to the south ramp. While supping coffee at Airolo prior to catching a bus, we watched a snowblower transferring piles of snow from the roadside into an endless convoy of small lorries. Catching the bus enabled us to keep an eye open for a suitable site for photography, and we ended up at Chiggiogna, just south of Faido. By this time, there were more freights on the move, although not to the usual frequency. The pleasant, quiet surroundings, a reasonable number of trains, and the warm (for January) sunshine, made for a very pleasant interlude.





ABOVE:
"Tilo" service pulls out of Biasca, alongside Am 843.068. 30/01/06.

BETWEEN:
Possibly to help out while Bellinzona's locos were being dried, a double "Re 10/10" runs through Biasca on the way south.

The Föhn had melted a lot of the snow and later, at Biasca again, we watched the abandoned pair of locos being checked over before being hauled towards Bellinzona by an Am 843. International passenger services had resumed, so there was plenty to watch.

All through the weekend, those trains that were running had been punctual. It was noticeable that the Swiss dealt

with the snow very well, but I suspect the Italians were not as well-prepared. Possibly this has something to do with how often they have to deal with such problems. The few days made a most interesting contrast to my more usual summer visits. The photography, in particular, was a challenge and, although I am reasonably happy with the results, the often-used teacher's remark "do better next time" applies.

