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OLD TRAINS, NEW TRAINS - and a canoe!

Helena Moretti



Chaos abounds at Versam as RhB Ge4/4 ii 627 waits on 20th June 2005.

Photos: Helena Moretti

Since my first visit to Switzerland over six years ago I have noticed incredible changes to the railways. SBB has chased its new modern image with an alarming pace that has seen a huge reduction in the older types of motive power in favour of new super fixed-formation sets plus Re460 double deck and DVT combinations. The Re6/6, sadly, have no passenger diagrams; the SBB Ae616 no longer have their three diagrams on the BLS (and face a rapid reduction in numbers); the brown BLS Re4/4 have hardly any passenger work; and the Ae414 have been retired. Even the perennial SBB Re4/4 ii have had their diagrams slashed. An hour spent at Bern summed things up for me in June 2005 when I saw nine Re460 or 465 hauled trains and only one BLS Re4/4.

The national train set, as Switzerland's railways were once called, is in danger of becoming dull, and in danger of following Britain to a rail network with only trainload freight and emu passenger trains. Some enthusiasts may like this, locomotive haulage isn't for everyone, but it's not my cup of tea. What worries me is that where SBB go, the private railways often follow.

The design type for the Re4/4 ii was copied by both the RhB (Ge4/4 ii) and the RM (Class 436). The Re460s, or "slabs" as I call them, have their miniature clones on the MOB & RhB and the move to greenhouses on wheels like the FLIRT units have rapidly been adopted by the ZB.

A recent trip to Switzerland threatened to be my last - where could I go to avoid the wall-to-wall monotony of ICN and Re460s? Thankfully some lines still have a bit of variety and as my partner was keen to take her canoe and go white water paddling, we decided on three places: Zweisimmen for camping; the luxury of the Seeburg Hotel on the shores of the Brienzer See; and a B&B in Valendas, near Chur.

It began ominously with three days of continual rain whilst we camped at Zweisimmen, prompting the use of some train days. The MOB epitomises the image-conscious new Swiss railways. A Ge4/4 (mini-slab) sat anonymously in the middle of the Golden Pass Panoramic train which is a set of greenhouse-style observation cars with the poor driver perched up above in a "bird's nest" cockpit so he didn't spoil the view. I suppose it's good for the

tourists. We opted for the rather wonderful looking GDe 4/4 - 6002 on a following train with normal coaches and had a day trip to Gstaad. A walk along the boiling waters of the local river suggested it was too rough for canoeing without local help. However this arrived in the form of Matt & Jo from Konolfingen who took Sandie for a paddle on the Simme, where a bouncing set of wave trains seemed to last the entire length of the river. I couldn't bear to watch as she was in a Canadian-style open canoe.

The next, train-orientated, day began well. A BLS Re4/4 162 hauled us down to Spiez on the Golden Pass coach set and the booked Re4/4 ii - 11210 rolled in on EC130 "Verbano" to take us to Bern. This is one of only two daytime Re 4/4 ii diagrams northbound over the BLS lines, EC90 "Wauban" is the other, with them both going back together on EC133 (13.39 off Bern). Otherwise, like Bern, the Lötschberg is now a procession of one Re460 after another. After a depressing hour at Bern we set off to Neuchâtel behind BLS Re4/4 166. I cheered up on arriving as we found the Le Locle trains were still Re4/4 ii sets with a choice of five locos. Later we returned with one of the new BLS Re420 - 502 (a rather fetching luminous green ex-SBB Re4/4 ii - 11117), just in time for the Bern-Thun commuter train with Re4/4 ii - 11258. New ICN units have resulted in Re460 being cascaded onto Olten-Bern and Sion-Geneva local trains as well as taking over most Lötschberg and Interlaken duties. I grudgingly admit that they are at least locomotives.

I spent a day riding on the ZB hoping for locos. First thing I saw was one of the new mobile-greenhouse units (oh dear image is getting everywhere) that work the Interlaken-Meiringen stopping services whilst 101 locos take the fast trains over to Luzern. Here local trains are still in the hands of the old 110 locos and integration with the LSE meant that 122 has joined 110.000-003 on services to Giswil & Engelberg. Luzern is a wonderful city with a good variety of traction at the station. Ex-SOB 446.018 worked out on the Voralpen Express,



Re 4/4 ii 11141, still in orange livery, provides some variety on IR767 at Sargans on 19th June 2005.

Canoes are loaded onto a Disentis service at Trin.





Is there room in here for a little one (or a goat)?

Chaos abounds at Versam as RhB Ge4/4 ii 627 waits on 20th June 2005.



Re4/4 ii worked to Basle and to Locarno and yes, there were plenty of Re460 & Re465 for the more modern enthusiast.

The Hotel Seeburg was bliss after camping. On one roasting hot flat calm day we both paddled on the lake. It was one of those perfect days you cherish in your memories forever, as we sat out there on the lake in splendid solitude, the frantic noises of the shore muffled by lapping waters.

The following day we drove over to Valendas, in Graubunden, taking in the Kandersteg car train (BLS No 161) and

Oberalp car ferry (FO No 82) on the way. Valendas proved to be a real old style Swiss village. A road twisting round in a series of ninety degree corners; a water trough and fountain; a bar; a kind of shop (usually closed); muck on the road; horses pulling carts of straw; tractors everywhere; sun worn, leathery and wrinkled faces that watch the strangers in town, and a traditional wooden construction comfortable B&B in which we stayed. The station is down in the Flims gorge, a good 20 minute walk downhill and a sweaty 30 minute uphill battle coming back. Despite major car problems on the steep local roads, it was a magnificent stay as the Rhine gorge at Versam is stunning with its wonderful heavily deformed and folded exposed cliffs of limestone, where the wide river cuts through. Sandie had three consecutive days canoeing on this exciting stretch of water in the company of a group of other open boat students, whilst I went off on the RhB chasing trains. At night we would meet at the station cafe and sip a beer before tackling the climb back to the B&B. The trains, mostly Ge4/4 ii, with the odd Ge6/6 ii, all conveyed a luggage van stuffed with kayaks, paddles and

dripping wet canoeists returning from Valendas, Trin & Reichenau. You try and do that in one of those new mobile greenhouses! It is an aspect of the line that the tourists locked away in their air-conditioned Glacier Expresses rarely see - we even had a man with a goat get on and struggle his way through the wet-suits and wet people. Nearby Chur still has plenty of mainline variety too. Of course it has the Re460 double deck trains to Basle but the Rheintal Express and some of the stopping trains to

Zurich still have Re4/4 ii haulage and on reaching St Margrethen I was able to take SBB Cargo 421-381 to Zurich (on the service from Munich) then 421-385) back.

So what's the moral of this tale. Progress is inevitable. My eulogy will do nothing to halt its inevitable course as "greenhouses", ICNs and "slabs" will soon come to dominate every line as operators chase a modern image with lower costs. What is also true is that the private operators will only follow very slowly. The RhB will not have FLIRT-type units on the Disentis line for some time - even the mini clones of the Re460 are not numerous enough to work every train (yet). Re4/4 ii will be eliminated gradually from passenger services as new fixed formation sets displace them at one end with FLIRT and other "mobile greenhouses" displacing them at the other - but not for the next few years. So the moral then is get them while you can. I shall be persuading Sandie that another course at Kanuschule Versam is just what she needs.



Big water, the Vorderrhein at Versam is no obstacle for Sandie.

With no booked diagrams Ge6/6 is worth chasing, 701 ease into Versam on 5th December 2004.

