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PROJECT CEVA – A FOLLOW-UP

Gordon Wiseman

There are one or two inaccuracies in the article on Project CEVA (*Swiss Express Dec 08*), a scheme I know much about as my family was one of the very first (in 1950) to be “Frontaliers”, as the cross-border commuters are called nowadays. One thing that has caused the explosion of commuting from peripheral France into Genève is that the Swiss city has a green belt, so the only land available for development is in French territory.

To clarify the comment about the “abutments of a proposed bridge that has not been built for 150 years” the origins of the CEVA project go back to 1840 when various sites for railway stations in Genève were investigated, until 1858 when Cornavin was opened.

Between 1853 and 1888 various proposals were put forward to link Cornavin to Annemasse, via essentially the same axis now adopted by CEVA. It was for this reason that when in 1888 the line from Annemasse into Genève Eaux Vives was opened, the abutments for a bridge over the main road on the alignment of the proposed link round to Cornavin were constructed. In 1909 a proposal was to build a link to the Simplon route from Paris and Dijon, using a direct route from Dijon under the Jura mountains via the Faucille tunnel to Genève, round the “CEVA” route and along the south side of Lake Genève to St Maurice. This was never realised due to competition from the Vaud canton which succeeded in keeping the Dijon - Vallorbe - Lausanne - St Maurice route as the main line to the Simplon Tunnel and on into Italy.

However, in 1949 the first section of the ring was built, connecting Cornavin to a new freight marshalling yard at La Praille, opened in stages between 1950 and 1968. This was used only for freight until 2002 when Lancy Pont Rouge station was opened.

To correct some other inaccuracies. There is no place called ‘Foron’ as implied, but the Swiss – French frontier follows the small river Foron, so the railway crosses between the two countries at the point where it crosses that stream. It should be noted that the station at Chene Bourg on the current surface line is not open at present, having been closed in the 1990s and replaced by a halt at Ambilly on the French side of the border. The line into Genève from Bellegarde (electrified in 1956) is not French owned. It is actually Swiss owned but SNCF-operated as is the 1959 built chord from Vernier direct to La Praille (avoiding the need for French freight to reverse in Cornavin station). These SNCF-operated routes are electrified at 1500 volts DC not 25kV ac as stated whilst the local SBB RER class 550 units are also 1500 v DC only.

Editor’s Note. I thank Gordon Wiseman for submitting this follow-up item. I take full responsibility for getting the operating voltage of the Franco-Swiss lines (and the rolling stock) wrong – I should have known better. With Gordon’s background knowledge of the Genève area I have suggested that he may wish to write a further article on rail operations in the area for publication in a future “Swiss Express”.