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TRAXX THROUGH THE ALPS

John Weaver

Simplon southern tunnel portal. ALL PHOTOS: John Weaver and taken: 13.9.2009

When offered the chance of a cab ride on a freight train in Switzerland there can only be one answer. That the departure would be at 01.00 on a Sunday morning from the marshalling yard at MuttENZ was a mere detail at the time, as was the fact that the Alps would be in darkness, both inside the tunnels and out!

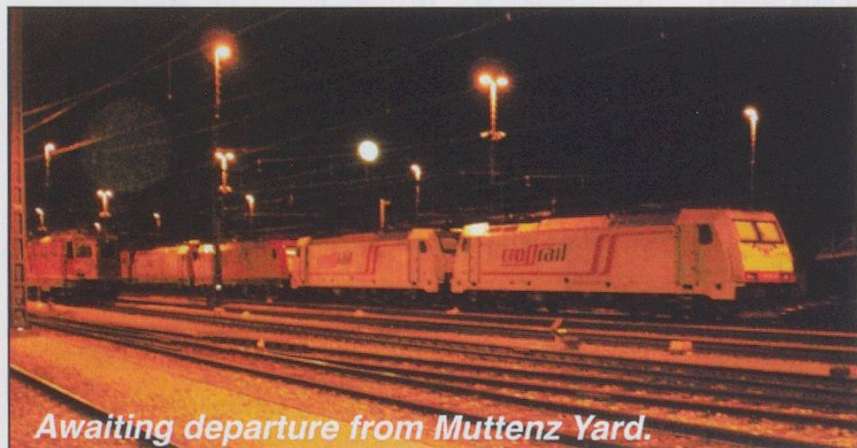
The offer had come from ex-B.R. colleague John Porter, now Chief Operations Officer for Crossrail, a small company based in Switzerland that operates freight services between Northern Europe and Italy by way of the Gotthard and Lotschberg-Simplon routes. Their fleet consists of 23 very

modern Bombardier TRAXX electric locomotives, and 17 Class 66 diesel locomotives, supported by 5 ex-RM Re4/4s. There is a programme to overhaul the Re4/4s, at Bellinzona, with the intention to retain them in service for many years to come. Two have been completed so far, 436-113 and 436-114.

Come the day, I arrived at Crossrail's control centre in Basel at just after midnight to be greeted with the news that, just as in Britain, Swiss civil engineers spend Saturday nights engaged in track work. The route to Domodossola, by way of the Lötschberg, was closed to traffic until 04.30. As to what

to do with me in the meantime, the solution lay in the cab of one of the two waiting locos – the driver's reclining seat was surprisingly comfortable and ideal for a nap were it not for a succession of freight trains arriving in the yard.

The driver arrived at 03.30 to prepare the train, which by then consisted of five



Awaiting departure from MuttENZ Yard.

locomotives. The revised departure time of 04.18 seemed feasible, but the on-board computers required setting up, with route details and various train characteristics. The leading two locomotives were Bombardier TRAXX locomotives and these would power the train, the trailing load would consist of three TRAXX locomotives. ('TRAXX' is derived from Transnational Railway Applications with eXtreme fleXibility!)



Driver's seat of TRAXX loco 185 599.

The departure time passed with the driver still consulting manuals and entering data on the computer. He asked if I knew the loco's underframe stress values, but my ignorance on this matter sent him back down to the ballast to search for the information on the side of the locomotives. At 04.30 we were ready to contact the yard controller, by way of the cab telephone, with the request to clear a route for us. The horizontal pair of white lights of the ground signal protecting the points ahead of us changed to the vertical and the locos eased forward – just 15-minutes down.

The Swiss are renowned for the punctuality of their passenger trains – would this apply to a freight train? Surely



Re4/4 11285 and Ae6/6 11501 in MuttENZ Yard.

no more delays could be expected at such a time on a Sunday morning? But as we rolled past two EWS class 66s on an adjacent siding, the yard's exit signal was at danger – the 04.40 Basel – Zurich passenger service takes precedence. In fact, by the time we approached Thun, the delay had doubled – due largely to two engineering sites that had to be traversed at caution, with the on-board computer screen displaying the 40kph maximum. Nevertheless, despite this, the driver proposed that we stop for coffee in the staff room at Thun... Drivers are, of course, entitled to rest breaks and one at Thun would give the sun time to make an appearance. However, the request to the Crossrail control office was turned down as the locos, already several hours late on the original schedule, had consists awaiting them at Domodossola.

The response failed to ruffle my driver, who continued to converse quite happily. A Kurd from Istanbul, he lives in Germany with an Italian family; his work is normally centred on Zürich; and he supports Liverpool football club! With such an international background it was not surprising that subjects ranged from sport and politics to (of course) how the railway might be better managed.

Frutigen was reached at 06.36, some 33 minutes late, and the climb toward Kandersteg began. The traditional route had to be taken because the locomotives, although modern, are not ETCS-fitted and as such are not permitted through the base tunnel. (ETCS – the European Train Control System – dispenses with the need for traditional lineside signals.)

Nearing Kandergrund it was possible to make out a silhouette of mountains against the lightening sky, but it was a flashing purple signal that grabbed the attention. Such signals exist on the approach to sections of tunnel where one of the two tracks has been lowered sufficiently to cater for larger containers. There were several such sections to be traversed before reaching Domodossola. The signal serves as a reminder



Two of the 5 locos shunting onto a north-bound freight at Domodossola. Viewed from cab of TRAXX loco 185 600.



Two Re484 locos await freight traffic at Domodossola main station yard.

to drivers that they and the signaller must ensure that if there are large containers aboard (piggy-back loads of lorries are a good example) the train has to switch to the lower track. To pass a fixed purple signal with a large container would have dire consequences.

Having descended the Sudrampe into Brig there was a brief pause to allow a northbound freight train to cross our path before continuing toward the Simplon Tunnel. As the train entered one of the single-track bores the driver adjusted the air-conditioning to ensure that the cab was kept cool. He also switched on the headlight, although there was little of interest to see for the next 12 miles other than crossovers near the tunnel's mid-point

that access, through short linking tunnels, the other bore.

The driver remarked that a decline in maintenance quality would mark our crossing the border. He may have been right – there were damp patches on the tunnel wall, and water splashed the windscreen, and we emerged to find weeds on the track and rust on the overhead gantries, but we were in Italy and the sun was shining.

We soon bypassed Domodossola station and slowed to a stop at the entrance signal to the exchange sidings. The driver had experienced lengthy waits at this signal, especially when a live football match was on television! But there was no such problem on a Sunday morning – he spoke (in Italian) to the yard controller and a “proceed” aspect appeared immediately.

As we entered the sidings, a pair of Crossrail locomotives departed northward with a long train of wagons, and a third was already at the head of another train, waiting to be paired with one of the in-coming locos. We came to a stand at 08.07, 44 minutes down. Four drivers were already emerging from their mess room to start the process of splitting the five locomotives and coupling them to their waiting trains. Adding to the activity, a pair of Crossrail Re4/4s shunted onto another train and two SBB locos stood at the head of yet another freight train, ready to depart.

Thus, within an hour, six freight trains departed for Brig and beyond. My driver, however, had finished work for the day and was last seen heading for the station and a trip back north “on the cushions”.



Locos having arrived Domodossola Interchange Yard.