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Ae6/6 11462, similar to one being preserved at the VHS, is seen at Spiez in 2009. PHOTO: Bryan Stone

Big old engines: the Ae6/6 are rare, but still indispensable

Recessions are bad for freight and old engines. In winter 2010 there were only 10 diagrams left for Ae6/6, all local and pick-up freight. You will find them in the Valais, around Neuchâtel, Bern/Thun, Solothurn, Olten/Zofingen/Aarau, Zürich Limmattal, Sargans, but it appears that the active ones in fact operate more jobs than are planned, including some Basel freight and even banking on the Gotthard from Erstfeld. Some are in doubtful condition and any breakdown can lead to withdrawal.

Moral: get out and see them while you can. It's an ill wind... for while the sword of Damocles hangs over the Ae6/6, the Re6/6 have cascaded into some of their jobs. You will find them on many more freights around Zürich – Olten, and on the surprisingly busy line from Olten to Solothurn and Bie/Biennel. One was up at Ramsei, on the BLS (former EBT) in March, with timber and oil tanks. I am always moved by how big they really are from close up.

On the Lötschberg

In December I was travelling from Brig to Bern via the NEAT Lötschberg base tunnel. All was normal and punctual, but at the north end we slowed down, and I saw we were unusually

routed through Frutigen station instead of directly out on the fast line to bypass the station and rejoin the old line at the junction 2 km further north. We did not however stop, as occasionally happens in emergencies. We rolled through at 'line speed' and I thought 'Ah! I wonder?', and watched out on the right hand side. Sure enough, as we dropped through the S-curve to the junctions, there was a heavy southbound freight roaring along the Frutigen avoiding line towards the tunnel. You see, the BLS base tunnel was a shoestring exercise, with, originally, a cliff-hanging decision process. Not all of the tunnel is double track, and the northern lead-in (the station avoiding line which is the normal tunnel extension at the north end) is also single track for about 2 km. These restrictions were imposed by some of the more troublesome right-wing politicians when the plan was approved, supposedly to save money but in reality also to try to hamstring the project.

The dispatcher in Spiez had seen, obviously well in advance, the approaching conflict of north and southbound trains, and let my passenger train run out of the tunnel, on double track, diverting it through the station to avoid occupying the single line section north of the tunnel. Thus we ran with minimal delay and under clear signals, through on the old northbound track,

and were clear of the southbound freight, which, approaching uphill from Spiez, ran under clear signals to occupy and pass through the new single line section at speed, and into the base tunnel (double track at the north end). All very professional. I am sure that this is happening all the time, though it gets more complex with the 10 km of tunnel at the south end which is single track; and we have 230 km/hr running (freights 120 km/h) all on ETCS. Most passengers notice none of this, and trains stopped in the tunnel or on high speed sections have been rare (except for the Class 470 Pendolini, but they stopped anywhere, even going downhill).

Matthäus Tromp, the old and rascally BLS Generaldirektor, who knows his politicians, had at the time (15 years ago) said 'Just let them get on and build it, and we'll sort out the single line later when we've got the business'. He was right, of course, though the layout has caused much head-scratching and the tunnel is, with 120 trains a day, now theoretically full. Lighter northbound freights still tend to go over the top. This is because although the Lötschberg was always meant to be the second string, the Gotthard base tunnel will not be ready until 2017. So the SBB freights still toil over their hill at 1 in 37 for 3-4 hours or more, at 75 km/h, with 2 or 3 engines. The BLS is now very successful, so the difficulties will increase.

Verkehrshaus Luzern

On May 8 patrons of the VHS railway collection (including your correspondent) are invited to Luzern to see one of the surviving Ae6/6's taken into the Museum. This being Switzerland, there will be greetings, speeches and a glass of white wine, and the loco will spend the season in Luzern. These locos were built from 1953 (when BR was still into building Britannias and 9Fs) and today we can scarcely imagine

the public sensation this new Gotthard freight engine made on Swiss people and by 1966 120 of the class had been built. No.11402 'Uri', restored in Erstfeld, is in working order and is one (11401 which had been troublesome was scrapped some time ago) of the two 6,000 hp prototypes. Rail Historic have also just bought 11425 from SBB Cargo.

Lots of real trains to see

Another place to see a lot of freight trains of various operators, but mostly BLS, is on the old line from Olten to Burgdorf. It carries trains from Basel via the BLS to Italy and leading via the Wankdorf east – south curve towards Thun and Spiez. Some freights get sent over the old Lötschberg route, but not many (Crossrail is a favorite up at Kandersteg). To see all the traffic, often 'on the block', in a mountain surrounding, drop off at a minor station above Spiez, say Mühlenen or Reichenbach, and walk along the line and riverside. Remember the sun and choose your time of day. Trains run seven days a week, though less at public holidays, and weekdays around lunchtime an Ae6/6 slips up to Frutigen and back. Then there are up to six passenger trains per hour too, including some Class 610 Pendolino workings.

Another two good places that are less well known are on the Bötzenberg line from Basel to Brugg where the Gotthard freights go through to the Aargau Südbahn (Brugg – Rothrist), and on the Zürich – Sargans line, which carries a lot of freight including some to Austria via the Arlberg. An hour at Ziegelbrücke can be exciting, but not I suggest at Wiesen or Walenstadt; these are miserable concrete deserts quite belying the pretty towns some distance away. Along the Walensee, observation and access is difficult because of the restricted view due to many tunnels and bends, but it's very atmospheric.

Allerlei is Swiss-German for 'Allsorts'.