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GENÈVE – WHERE TWO NATIONS MEET – Part 1

Gordon Wiseman takes a historic and current look at the transport infrastructure of this City State



SNCF 4-8-2- 'Mountain' 241P17 with a special formed of French rolling stock on Swiss territory at Satigny (GE).

ALL PHOTOS: Gordon Wiseman

The Swiss City and Canton of Genève is almost an enclave in France, only a very narrow strip of land on the north side of the lake keeping it connected with the rest of Switzerland. Indeed Genève was the capital of Napoleon's French Département Léman between 1798 and 1814. To geographers the Genève area and the adjacent lake, Le Léman, are usually known as the Leman Basin whilst locals (when not in the surrounding mountains) refer to things being "en plaine". However, this is a misnomer as it is actually a plateau at some 400m above sea level, but despite this altitude official Swiss "sea level" is measured at a datum point on the lake in Genève.

The Basin comprises Canton Genève, Canton Vaud plus French areas known as the Chablais (south of the lake); Faucigny (Annemasse south towards Annecy and Chamonix); Genevois (southwest of the Rhone around St Julien-en-Genevois); and Pays de Gex (north of Genève and named after the town of Gex at the foot of the Jura). It was at the end of the 18th century that the famous philosopher Voltaire, who lived in the border commune of what is now known as Ferney-Voltaire, first helped to instigate special beneficial cross-border trade provisions. These later led to the creation of a "Zone Franche" (reduced tax zone) in the parts of the French Ain and Haute Savoie Départements that bordered Canton Genève, helping to reduce living costs, which is why

cross border commuting became popular. Close members of my family have lived in Voltaire's community since 1950 so I have grown-up knowing the area thanks to extended annual visits.

Given all this history it is not such a surprise that at one time there were no less than ten rail or tram routes crossing from Canton Genève into neighbouring France.

SNCF 141R approaches Chêne Bourg from Eaux Vives with a winter Saturday skiers train to St Gervais in 1964.



The main French route from Paris and Lyon to Genève leaves Bellegarde utilising a defile in the Jura created by the River Rhône before splitting into three. The line to Genève via La Plaine; a line north to Gex and Divonne-les-Bains that once crossed the border to Nyon; and a line along the south side of the border serving Annemasse, Evian and St Gingolph. At Annemasse a branch went off to cross into Switzerland to reach SNCF's Genève Eaux Vives station on the east side of the city.

The Bellegarde – Genève main line was opened by Cie Lyon – Genève in 1858 at the same time as the line from Lausanne reached the city. It subsequently became part of the giant Paris-Lyon Méditerranée (PLM) railway before ownership of the Swiss section passed to the Confederation in 1913, although main line trains have always been French operated. After serving the SNCF station of Pougny-Chancy (Pougny is in France whilst Chancy is Swiss and just across the border bridge) the railway enters into Switzerland at La Plaine, continuing through (originally) six Swiss stations Russin, Satigny, Bourdigny, Vieux Bureau, Vernier-Meyrin and Cointrin. A few years ago the halt at Bourdigny was closed and Zimeysa was added to serve the expanding industrial urbanisation which now encroaches on the countryside around Bourdigny village. Vieux Bureau has been rebuilt and renamed Vernier Meyrin, the latter's original station now only open for freight. For some time the ticket office remained open in the old station despite trains no longer stopping!

The line was electrified in 1956 at 1500V d.c. as an extension to SNCF's main line electrification programme and to operate the La Plaine local services SBB/CFF bought two non-standard two-car EMUs sets BDe4/4 1301 -1302. The local service (now extended to Bellegarde) is currently operated by six 1500V d.c. Class 550 Bem 4/6 articulated units (these have auxiliary diesel engines for trips to/from their dépôt) supplemented by Class RABe 524 dual-voltage FLIRTS recently moved from the Ticino. The unique tri-current Ae4/6III 10851 (rebuilt from gas turbine Am4/6 1101 in 1959) was also allocated to Genève at one time to cater for the different electrification systems. Over the years the line has seen all the main SNCF d.c. electric classes, including record breakers such as CC7100 class member 7107. Reflecting SNCF traction policy, use of bi-current locomotives has increased gradually. Due to the route to Grenoble not being fully electrified diesel traction has also used the line; from "Picasso" railcars in the 1950s; through the well-loved big CC72000 C-Cs; to today's next-generation bi-mode AGC units. Rolling stock variety has included Swiss



Erstwhile TEE/EC Catalan Talgo Genève – Barcelona train at Bellegarde in the mid-1980s.

coaches to Spain and Spanish Talgos from Barcelona, including for a short period in the late 60s RENFE's specialised Talgo diesel.

The 'other way' into Genève from France is the 6km long Annemasse – Genève Eaux Vives line opened in 1888. This is living on borrowed time in its present form as a bucolic French-style railway threading its way through a Swiss urban area. The route crosses into Switzerland just 2 km after leaving Annemasse, then runs for 4km through what was until the 1920s open land, but is now back yards and gardens of the expanded city. A station at Chêne Bourg (closed in the mid-1980s) once served what was once a separate Swiss town but is now a contiguous Genève suburb. This stop was replaced by a station in the French suburb of Ambilly which is squeezed in between Annemasse and the border. Although at face value a SNCF branch, the Swiss part belongs to the Canton of Genève so its legal title is Chemin de fer de l'Etat de Genève (CFEG) – the Genève State Railway - arguably one of the smallest "state railways" in the world! The line once formed part of various grandiose late 19th century plans to put Genève on an international route from Paris to Rome, which would also have seen a direct north-south route from Dijon pass through the Jura mountains via a series of long tunnels to surface in the Pays de Gex, pass through Genève and then go on to Rome via either Annemasse – La Roche – Chamonix, or via Evian and the Simplon route. In the event the Vallorbe – Lausanne – Simplon route won the day.

Even after the arrival of SNCF diesel rail buses and railcars in the 1950s the line still saw some peak-period steam hauled services (and weekend winter sports extras) up to the mid-1960s. It was electrified at 25kV 50Hz a.c. in 1986. For such a short line, it has seen a remarkable variety of traction. In late steam days PLM 2-8-0s gave way to 141Rs; then came



diesel units of the "Mobylette", "Picasso" and "Caravelle" classes; with 63000 locos on freight. Electrification brought Z2 EMUs and now the new generation TER Rhône Alpes Units, including double-deck TER2N and bi-mode AGC units, work the line. The line parallels Transports publics genevois (TPG) tram route 12, which ran beyond the present border terminus at Moillesulaz into Annemasse until 1958.

As part of the CEVA project (described in SE96) to upgrade Genève's urban transport infrastructure the existing line is planned to be replaced by a double-track through route constructed in a cut-and-cover tunnel to placate local residents. This is taking a long time to come to fruition as CEVA is one of the most protracted railway projects in European railway history, with similar plans dating back 160 years! Apart from the Eaux Vives branch the only part of the planned CEVA loop built so far is the Cornavin – La Praille section opened in 1949 to serve Genève's then new marshalling yard. The current project will at last join these two branches via the suburb of Champel on the route first proposed in about 1850! Projects were launched on both 1888 and 1912, but both came to nothing. The only evidence of these original plans, and long a notable site at Eaux Vives, are the expectantly built abutments of the bridge which would take the line on beyond the existing buffer stops over the Route de Chêne, the Genève – Annemasse road. Now the existing line is planned to be replaced by a double-track through route constructed in a cut-and-cover tunnel to placate local residents. 

1. In January 1982 an SNCF Picasso railcar heads towards the short Grange-Canal tunnel mid way along the Eaux Vives – Annemasse line in the then semi-rural Genève suburbs. Grange Canal tunnel was an early example of an 'environmental-protection' tunnel built to hide the line from nearby well-to-do villas.

2. Gateway to the Bassin Lémanique: Bellegarde. The station layout in this 1980 photo has been completely changed since the reopening of the Haut Bugey line for TGVs in December 2010.

3. Genève Eaux Vives on a winter Saturday in 1964.

4. Eaux Vives looking towards the buffer stops in May 2009. Comparing the buildings on the right with the buildings adjacent to the front of the steam loco in the 1964 picture shows the extent to which the station yard area has been truncated.

5. A SNCF Z2 EMU approaching Eaux Vives from Annemasse in May 2009. Compare the single track in use with the 1964 picture showing extensive goods yard and multiple passenger platforms. The nowadays almost hidden large goods shed can be seen behind the steam loco in the 1964 picture.

