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GENÈVE - WHERE TWO NATIONS MEET - Part 4

Gordon Wiseman continues his look at transport in and around this City State

September 1958 view of a CEN Annemasse – Sixt railway train.

Photo: Jeremy Wiseman

As well as the cross-border tramways discussed in SE 109 there were two other railways in the area that operated wholly within France, but served the needs of the city. These can be seen on the map accompanying Part 3. The overpowering presence and proximity to Genève of France's Mont Salève made it a destination for Swiss excursionists from the early days of leisure travel, and subsequently a destination in the Victorian railway boom. In yet another first for the area the Chemin de fer du Mont Salève (CMS) was the world's first purpose built commercial electrified rack railway. Utilising Abt rack and 600V dc third rail electrification, it was unusual for a 'tourist' railway in having two starting points forming a vaguely Y-shaped network. The 5.7km 'back' route climbing round the back of the Petit Salève from Etrembières Salève to Monnetier Mairie and on to Les Treize Arbres terminus station (1112m) opened first in December 1892. The 'front' (as seen from Genève) route opened in March 1894 started at Le Pas de L'Echelle, near Veyrier and climbed steadily up the rocky Genève-facing

escarpment of the Salève to meet the 'back' route at Monnetier Mairie.

The CMS used Swiss built 3-axle tramway-like vehicles built by SIG at Neuhausen-am-Rheinfall with electrical equipment from Genève's Sécheron. Unfortunately the railway's heyday did not last long. Journey times were slow; the line failed to reach the 1380m summit; and after only 20 years operation WW1 closed the Swiss/French border eradicating income from the Swiss majority customers. It struggled on after 1918 but it failed to survive the inauguration in 1932 of both the 'Route du Salève' road and the Téléphérique du Salève. This cable car reached the Pas de L'Echelle, to the top of the escarpment, ten-times faster than the railway. Etrembières – Monnetier closed in 1932 and the rest in 1936. Even the cable car became less well used as car ownership increased in the 1960s and has come close to closure on several occasions.

I became aware of the railway as I grew up in the 1960s through seeing the stark face of Mont Salève with the route of the line rising gradually from west to east clearly visible from Genève. I recall walking on the then still accessible incline section with my family, including going through the tunnel that was situated just before the bend that took the line into the valley between the Salève and Petit Salève. After ignoring the line for many years, last December I decided to refamiliarise myself with the line. Through Monnetier the trackbed can be followed on foot and is still quite clear with a waymarked trail and information boards. These boards, a village road name, and other sources erroneously imply that

Period postcard view of Monnetier Mairie. Compare with the present day view. The station nameboard and the abutment of the bridge in the background on the line to the summit survive today.



the line was a 'funicular'. Monnetier Eglise Halt, near the village church, no longer exists but Monnetier-Mairie the main junction station, being a typical substantial stone French station design, still stands complete with name board and can be investigated, being unoccupied. Trees have grown up all around the area – it was open land when the railway was in service – but the trackbed in both directions can be walked, with a fair proportion being official footpaths. I walked along the waymarked section through Monnetier village and down under the surviving Pont Gosse bridge as far as the tunnel mouth. It is no longer possible to walk through the tunnel itself, and the trackbed on the escarpment side down to Veyrier is nowadays much less visible, as the quarry in the face of the Salève has gradually extended. Elsewhere, Treize Arbres station survives, as do many of the bridges and other works. You can even still find third rail electric isolators along the trackbed.

Another French railway had close links with Genève, offering excursions for the Genèveise into a pleasant Alpine valley with winter sports possibilities. This was the metre-gauge CEN Annemasse - Samoëns – Sixt-Fer-à-Cheval line. Despite its location in the Haute-Savoie, it had a curious association with tramways in Nord - Pas de Calais as it was built and operated by the Chemins de Fer Economiques du Nord. Its 49km long main line was opened to Samoëns in 1892 and was extended to Sixt in 1914. Starting across the road from the main SNCF station in Annemasse (400m) it climbed gradually but not over dramatically to 757m at Sixt. Two branches, from Bonne to Bonneville and from St Jeoire to Marignier, closed in 1927 and 1946 respectively. Lines to Habère-Poche and Morzine were planned but never built. The line was rebuilt and electrified at 1500V dc in 1933, closing in 1959. The electric stock consisted of seven 32t, 17m long, 400hp bogie passenger railcars, and two similar motor luggage vans, built by Alsthom and Hormes-et-Buire. They could achieve a maximum speed of 70kph when hauling three of the 21 bogie coaches that included six rebuilds of original steam hauled 4-wheel coaches stuck end-to-end - a little like a kit bash model! There were around 100 freight wagons and five 2-axle ski carrying wagons. Around 12 trains a day took 90-110min for the journey. Few sources cite an exact reason why the line was abandoned although various factors appear to have contributed. Pressure from the road lobby; emerging bus competition; and, as in Britain at the same time, the general anti-rail trends of the 1950s. Another factor was probably the heavyweight railcars causing track problems, with by 1959 the cost of modernisation being prohibitive. After the electrification of 1933 the line had a modern ambience that would not have looked out of

place in Switzerland up to the late 1980s. Indeed had it been just across the border it would probably still be running today as it ran to what is now a major French ski region. Indeed equipment and infrastructure scrapped in 1959 was more up to date than that used on the Nyon – St-Cergue – La Cure line, just across Lac Léman, which used its outmoded 1916 vintage equipment until modernisation in 1985!

The final, fascinating link to Genève was the operation of through coaches on winter Sundays between central Genève and Sixt. These 'Trains des Neiges', comprising three CEN coaches and a ski wagon, commenced in February 1936 and were hauled by CGTE's Fe4/4 'Goods Trams' Nos.154 & 155 (equipped with special couplings and cable connections) along its line to Moillesulaz and Annemasse before the CEN took over. However, due to the incompatibility of grooved tram rail versus CEN railway track and because CEN flanges were bigger, a track sweeping tram had to run the previous evening. Such inefficiencies were enough to prevent the service, which ceased on the outbreak of WW2, recommencing after the war. ☒

Editor's note. At Samoëns the old CEN station building houses the Tourist Information Office and is central to the operation of the village bus station. There are photos of CEN operations in the public areas. Much of the track bed in the area has been used for a realigned road. CGTE 'Goods Tram' No.151 is preserved at the Blonay-Chamby Museum Railway.



TOP: December 2011 view of Monnetier Mairie station building from the best available angle to match the period view. The building extensions detract from the comparison with the period postcard and spoil the clean lines of the traditionally French railway station design.

RIGHT: December 2011 view of the upper portal of the tunnel on the escarpment of the Salève facing Geneva – the 'valley floor' can be seen through the trees on the right.

Photos: Gordon Wiseman