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SWISS NEWS

Winter 2011/2012

Last winter was one of the coldest recorded in Switzerland in recent years. Following blizzards in December very heavy snow fell again over a long period in January and February with daytime temperatures dropping to as low as -22°C even in the lowlands, and much colder in the Alps and on the Jura. Although parts of the Engadin saw temperatures below -30°C in early February Switzerland's coldest place is actually La Brévine on the Jura where a low of -41° C was recorded in 1987. In neighbouring Austria during the arctic weather the ÖBB opened waiting rooms overnight in its main city stations to house the homeless. On Feb 1st SBB got a prime spot on the main TV news describing how it keeps moving through very cold conditions, noting that its rolling stock is designed to operate at temperatures of -20°C. Visits to the Bern and Zürich control centres, and video of gas-heated points and switches, made good viewing. Of the 10,000 points on the SBB network some 6,800 have gas point heaters whilst SBB had mobilised 360 extra staff to clear snow at critical locations. Apparently the 'Winter Plan' was in place by the 31st October, long before the exceptional weather set in.

Panorama-Wagons

Following a presentation last year to the media of a refitted and modernised Panorama-Wagon nothing more was heard about the fate of the remaining eleven vehicles. SBB have now confirmed that these popular 1st class coaches, presently intensively used on the Gotthard Inter-Regio services, have not been forgotten and four will have the same treatment this year and the remaining seven in 2013.

Court delays trains

In March the Federal Administrative Court ruled that SBB's new IC200 double-deck trains have to be equipped with more space for wheelchairs, disabled-accessible toilets, and that the planned wheelchair spaces in the restaurant areas have to be relocated for easier access. The changes will add CHF10m to the overall costs, and delivery of this new generation of rolling stock will probably not now be until 2013. The Court also ruled that all SBB trains need more wheelchair space.

A veteran locomotive hiding in Cham

Paper has been made in Cham (near Zug, but in Kanton Luzern) for 350 years. However, in 2014 the factory will close marking the end of an unusual private siding that goes right through the town, including crossing two busy roads, to access the plant. Currently it is still busy with wagonload cellulose and raw materials hauled by a battery-driven 4-wheel, centre-cab veteran loco built in 1919. Although it is probable that somebody will rescue the loco we suggest seeing it in action this summer.

A new tunnel in Samedan

The St Moritz line now leaves Samedan in a 288m long tunnel costing CHF18m and constructed by lowering the track by 5m and lifting a road by 1.5m. This, along with other

improvements, avoids a major level crossing. The track lies in a waterproof caisson as the water table would be above rail level. A concrete slab base for the rails, and a solid conduit rail for the traction current replacing the usual catenary, were used to achieve clearances. Samedan station has also had a CHF8m rebuild with new platforms at statutory height and access ramps.

SBB improves profit, but cuts services

SBB recorded a net profit of CHF338.7m in 2011 a 13.5% increase on the previous year with revenues up by 3.4% to CHF8bn. These results came against a background of a 26.9% drop in passenger traffic revenues to CHF213.9m, although passenger numbers increased by 2.7% to 356.6m. Income from rail freight also improved with the loss of CHF64m in 2010 reduced to a loss of CHF45.9m last year. However performance was down 5.8% to 12.35 billion/tonne/km. In its efforts to boost efficiency and to reduce losses in this area SBB intends to restructure its rail freight sector. Currently SBB Cargo regularly serves some 500 traffic locations, both goods stations and private sidings. In January its CEO Nicolas Perrin, announced that 155 of these were being considered for closure, either because of declining traffic or the costs of providing service. Like freight operations in many countries 90% of this traffic comes from just 30% of its customers.

Pendelino on the ground

Late on the 3rd January the Venice – Geneva through service, operated by Pendelino 610 013, halted near Varzo north of Domodossola in Italy after a passenger had operated the alarm following the leading bogie of the last car derailing and damaging some 8km of track, plus the cables and signalling. The line, owned and maintained by the Italian RFI but operated by SBB, is on a winding alignment rising at 2.5% (1 in 40) with almost continuous tunnels so speeds are moderate. A reserve train-set was brought through the Simplon Tunnel from Brig, located next to the derailed train, and side-by-side evacuation of passengers took place over bridging boards before it returned to Brig where connections were provided for Bern and Geneva. A broken rail was announced as the cause and the investigation recommended that track on the whole section should be relaid. Damage to 610 013 was serious and it had to be left at Varzo for examination by Alstom before it could be recovered. This delay resulted in single line working that held up many BLS freight trains. Some trains were diverted over the Gotthard, however the RoLa piggyback trains cannot use that route as the required clearances for standard 4m high road vehicles travelling on the trains are not available, resulting in 60 such trains scheduled from Freiburg-im-Breisgau to Novara being cancelled. See "Notepad" on pages 34 and 35.

Veteran locos staying

SBB Cargo has recently confirmed that their big Re6/6 (Class 620) Bo-Bo-Bo workhorses, 30 years old and incurring increasingly heavy repair costs, are not to be withdrawn. They are now seen as the ideal means of heavy traction for the central plateau of Switzerland (the Mittelland

- Geneva to Rorschach and Basel to Buchs/Chur) and also for the future Gotthard /Ceneri base line. The 86 surviving engines with one-piece bodies - the earliest two prototypes had a divided two-piece body - will therefore be substantially renovated in 2013/14. Swiss Express readers will know that they often work on the TransAlpine routes in semi-permanent pairings with an Re4/4 II or III, the combination known colloquially in Switzerland as a Re 10/10. Apparently Re6/6s always remind our Swiss News Editor of the Clydesdale or Suffolk Punch railway draft horses of his younger days. Although another four Ae6/6 locos were withdrawn in the winter the remaining operational members of this class can still be seen working in Thun; Spiez; Bern; Olten; Limmattal; Basel/Muttenz; and on quite heavy freights between Basel and Zürich.

RhB

Ge4/4s reprieved again. Last winter there was an official Ge4/4 diagram for the 'second sledge train' (the Schlittelzug Shuttle between Bergün and Preda) that operated until mid- March as it was one of the best sledging winters for years. At New Year it was being worked by No.611, a Ge4/4II. In January the RhB also had to handle the several thousand visitors, media and sometimes demonstrators, who came to Davos, many of them via Zürich airport, for the World Economic Forum. A press notice warned that the Klosters - Davos line might be disturbed, and security measures allowed for passengers to be off-loaded at Fideris to be searched, before entraining again. This procedure seems not to have been needed. Some Landquart-Scuol trains were diverted via Samedan and the Albula. An editorial team contact attending the WEF confirmed that generally the arrangements worked well. See "Notepad" on pages 34 and 35.

BLS

The blow-torch was cheated again when Nos.420 503 and 506, two of the engines bought from SBB in 2004, were re-animated in December. Both of these had been carriage-warming locomotives, literally and figuratively a dead-end job, on the buffer stops at Thun and Langnau since 2010. As Thun still needed a carriage-warmer 1965 Re4/4 prototype No.164 took over, implying its days are numbered.

Transports publics Fribourgeois gets a new main line

After several months of bus operations during last November trains started running again on the reconstructed Bulle-Romont line. There are no intermediate stops for the hourly fast Bulle-Romont-Fribourg trains now operated by both TPF FLIRT, and SBB Domino units. Traffic on the route, with its former slow trains and frequent stops, had earlier fallen to 500 passengers a day, but it is already rising fast thanks to the massive investment in the local railway. Visits in January and April showed a substantial new, and strikingly young, clientele. Bulle is a lively town, with substantial industry, that had long wanted a direct connection to its Cantonal capital. The approach to Romont from the south, in a wide S-curve, gives a fine view of the

medieval walled old city on top of its hill. It is suspected that few SRS members ever alight here - but it's worth it. The new trains run at peak hours through to Bern and from next winter this should become normal for all services.

Politics and railways

There are major developments under discussion regarding rail improvements in the densely settled and industrialized region between Zürich and Olten. SBB have a project to improve the direct Heitersberg line by building new tunnels near Killwangen and Lenzburg in order to enhance the operational gains offered by the already planned Eppenberg tunnel between Aarau and Olten. The SBB regard the projected Chestenberg tunnel, north of Lenzburg, as the key to various time savings which one day will yield a 45 minute journey time and a 15 minute interval service on the Zürich - Basel and Zürich - Bern routes. It's now a very tense situation as an alternative, potentially faster, route has been proposed by a prestigious engineering and rail policy team to build direct from Altstetten to Roggwil (for Bern) with a branch from near Schöftland to Olten (for Basel). It is claimed that this could give 42 minute journey times and be cheaper to build, although costs have not been disclosed. Behind this are two problems. One is a parliamentary timetable. Some CHF42.5 billion is already in the outline plan for rail investment up to 2050, and in March the appraisal by the Transport Commission of the Chestenberg tunnel project will start. Should this recommend going ahead, as SBB wish, it will soon be too late for the alternative proposal to be developed. However, if the alternative is shown to be cheaper and more effective, then the money would go further and everyone would gain.

Do you know the VCh?

The little line from Vevey to Chexbres is, or rather was, a private railway. Although worked for many years by the SBB it was owned by the Canton Vaud, the town of Vevey, and several private shareholders, including the villages on its short but steep route. The owners have now sold up. SBB has bought most of the shares and a few individuals have been asked if they too would sell their stake. Another curiosity disappears!

SBB RBDe No. 560 131 in Saint Saphorin in it's special 'Train des Vins' livery Photo: Roy Marriott



Fare increase proposals

Year-end fare increases are promised that will exceed the normal low rate of inflation. The reasons are well known, and have been outlined previously in *Swiss Express*. Demand, especially on key routes, is exceeding available capacity, whilst infrastructure costs, and the queue of investments, are not being adequately remunerated by users. Access charges for track use have been increased by the BAV (Federal Rail Authority) but the fare rises of around 5% - 8% will not cover this increase, so there is more to come. Populist newspapers and politicians unfairly blame the SBB, however the same commentators criticize deficits, crowding, delays and other good headline subjects. Additionally, some of the system-wide passes being used to avoid normal season tickets are being sharply increased. Population growth, business and social mobility, the basic quality of rail travel, and affluence, have meant that demand is still planned to rise steeply. As has been noted elsewhere the Alpen-Initiative demands that more trucks must be taken off the roads and transferred to rail. This will require increased investment to keep passenger and freight flows apart; that has to be funded from somewhere – a nettle many Swiss politicians do not wish to grasp.

A curious survival

The old EBT/VHB network, which became the RM and was later absorbed by BLS, had some distinctly rustic layouts and signalling. Much has now been modernised, but the practiced eye will still spot a curiosity at Ramsey, the junction for Sumiswald. Here there is still no route setting and securing, indeed no central interlocking between signals and points, with the points being set by hand for each train and the station agent riding a BLS heritage bicycle to get around the station and yard. Your *Swiss News* Editor remembered seeing something similar at Seattle in the 1980s to let Amtrak's prestigious 'Empire Builder' arriving from Chicago off the main line into King Street Depot - it seemed remarkable then, but it is still the case in this rural Swiss backwater. Ramsey by the way gives its name to a universally available Swiss apple juice. A trip from Burgdorf around the former RM lines to Sumiswald, Langnau and Thun is still a peaceful day out in wonderful countryside.

New rail finance proposal

The Swiss Federal Council wants to create a new fund for the financing of railway infrastructure in Switzerland and has submitted the proposal for the development of the Fabi fund to the Swiss Parliament. The Federal Council estimates a need for around CHF1 billion in financing every year and hopes the fund will secure financing of the rail system on a permanent basis. The money for the fund would primarily come from the heavy vehicle fee LSV, as well as from VAT. A further CHF2.3 billion per year will come from the federal budget. The new proposal contains a number of changes to a previous proposal presented in November 2011 and still receives mixed reactions.

The end of an era?

It is understood that the BOB, after streamlining its track and operations, will no longer run historic trains. The last He3/3 No.26, and the remaining open platform coaches and baggage car, normally standing at Interlaken Ost are being

offered for sale to museum railways and clubs. Whether this decision includes steam operations by third-parties such as the Ballenberg Dampfbahn, whose HG3/3 No.1067 has made 3 or 4 trips each year, both private and public up the BOB lines, is not known.

Street Running to Go

The December 2011 Kursbuch, warns in a special heading, of a 6-week bus substitution on the CJ from the 5th July between Glovelier & Saignelégier for 'track reconstruction and tunnel renewals'. There are 8 tunnels, some quite short, between Combe Tabeillon and Bollemont in the cliff-face section that need attention. They were built for standard gauge steam, and therefore allow CJ's substantial freight traffic of timber and household refuse, using standard gauge wagons on transporter trucks, down to the interchange in Glovelier. The track reconstruction is concentrated here, where trains will be diverted through the current sidings area to terminate adjacent to the SBB tracks, rather than on the 200m of street running on the decrepit track in the station road. This will require alterations to the gauge interchange point and the run-round loop. The project has been planned for some years and is linked to the possible extension of the metre-gauge CJ to Delémont utilising a third-rail on the main line. The work will impede this year's seasonal steam operations of La Traction, which can only operate west of Bollemont, but on completion, that rustic view of the Portuguese Mallets, in front of the station and café, under the chestnut trees, will have gone for good. Street-running in Tavannes was sorted out over 40 years ago, but the CJ will still have a long street section down into La Chaux-de-Fonds.

Interruption In the Entlebuch

This scenic, winding, line between Luzern and Bern has night closures for most of this year for catenary replacement, renovation of 6 tunnels, and some 5 km of track renewal. Between July 2 and August 19 (the school holiday period) the section Trübschachen – Wolhusen will be closed completely with bus substitution.

RhB: Street View by train

Google Street View equipment and technology have been used to make comprehensive rolling views of the Albula and Bernina lines, the RhB routes that are recognized as World Heritage Sites by UNESCO. They were made with video equipment mounted on a flat car propelled by an Allegra unit and should be accessible by the time this is published having been launched at an event in the Verkehrshaus at Luzern on the 22nd March.

Zürich New Works

The new direct line ('Diametric') through Zürich is the cause of the huge construction now visible between Hauptbahnhof and Altstetten, as the 394m long Kohlendreieck bridge, and the 1156 m long Letzigrabenbrücke are built. The first of these names, 'the coal-triangle', recalls the area where until the 60s the last steam engines used to stand in all weathers, and the coal stack which was their servicing point. The viaducts will contribute a new through, high-level,

double track route. For the bigger one a series of 16m to 30m high supports have been completed prior to the deck being installed this year.

ASD to Diablerets in trouble again

After all we have recently written about the ASD, the storms and snow of winter put the line out of action for 2 weeks in early January, in the peak of its skiing season, due to extensive emergency repairs being needed following over 1,250 trees being brought down on the line.

Terminal news

SBB have announced that they will construct a new container terminal in Basler Rheinhafen. This is to have the capacity for an expected doubling of container traffic by 2030. The new container terminal will be connected to the existing ones.



11196 entering Zug with Bpm 51 coaches. Photo: Ron Smith

Asbestos contamination in Bpm 51 coaches

In February 2012 asbestos was discovered in a Bpm51 coach that was undergoing modernisation at SBB's Bellinzona workshops. Similar work is being undertaken at Olten. All work was immediately suspended; employees who could have been in contact with the asbestos were medically tested and found clear; a specialist company called in to check the air quality also found no problems. SBB's workshop employees are covered by life long insurance for asbestosis. There was never any risk to passengers. These coaches, built in the 1970s and refurbished in the 1990s, still retain the green and light grey livery and are used to strengthen trains, for relief services and specials such as group travel or football specials. They have been criticised for being uncomfortable with noisy brakes and no air conditioning and ideally they should be scrapped. However, with increasing customer demand and a rolling stock shortfall, it was decided in 2010 that all 180 coaches would undergo another modernisation. It appears that during an earlier refurbishment a layer of varnish was applied over the asbestos in small areas in door wells and ceilings and during work in these areas the asbestos was revealed. Modernisation work includes bogie overhaul; new emergency brakes; automatic selective door opening; seat re-upholstery; and dealing with bodywork corrosion. Work

will continue once the necessary precautions have been put in place although 50 coaches had been dealt with before the asbestos was discovered in the current batch.


Zentralbahn: Luzern approach ready in Nov 2012

Four years of work on the Zentralbahn line in Luzern will be completed one year early in Nov 2012. A 560 m long tunnel and new double track approach from the south will replace the existing alignment through the inner city suburbs. There is then a new station for the stadium and exhibition quarter, and a further 475 m tunnel, coming into daylight at Kriens-Mattenhof. If you are in Luzern this summer, follow the line to where it at present has some seriously inconvenient, albeit picturesque and archaic, level crossings that (to little regret) will disappear. However problems will remain as at Luzern station it's a single-track approach to the narrow gauge platforms and there remains a long single-track section at Hergiswil. From December expect considerable changes in local and main line services. For the latter, the first Class160 main line EMU was delivered in February to Interlaken Ost and moved to Meiringen for trials, before entering service. See "Notepad" on pages 34 and 35.

Gotthard blocked for 5 days

On Wednesday 7th March a cliff fall above Gurtellen dumped a 2t boulder on the Gotthard main line - the SBB announcing that the line would be closed until next day. Next day it became clear that the problem was more serious. As always in spring, thawing of frozen rock faces leads to rock falls; here some 250 cubic metres were still hanging loose, 100 m above the line and needing to be blasted out. The railway remained closed until Saturday 10th when the motorway and old road were also closed while Albert Müller, the SBB's full-time expert for 'natural dangers', supervised the blasting. This meant that all communication with the Ticino on this morning was stopped, although some freight and passenger traffic to Italy was diverted via the Lötschberg/Simplon route. The roads were reopened that afternoon, but to allow clearance of the debris and a full inspection the railway remained closed, with services resuming on Monday 12th March. Swiss TV highlighted the story and the blasting.

A good year for HUPAC

Loads, trailers, container or swap bodies, carried in 2011 were up by 6.6% at 723,894. Of these 292,000 passed through Austria, and 431,000 took routes through Switzerland, this share only growing by 1.8%, with a marked fall-off in the second half of the year. This was partly for economic reasons, but also because of serious disturbances through accidents. HUPAC has expressed concerns that even with the opening of the Gotthard Base Tunnel it will not be able to capitalise on the route, due to the failure to complete other infrastructure improvements. 

Swiss News is compiled by Bryan Stone and includes items from Ron Smith, Jakob Jäger, Michael Donovan and others.