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SWISS NEWS

A miscellany of news and information from Switzerland

Simplon re-opens...

The repair work that was needed on the Simplon Tunnel following the fire on the 6th June last year was completed on the 18th November. The CHF12m project involved the application of some 5,500m² of new fire resistant tunnel lining plus repairs to track, the electrical supply and lighting. The special timetable, that had been in operation during the emergency repair works, is now to be extended until the end of the previously programmed refurbishment works which are now scheduled to be completed in 2014.

...but other problems occur

On the 10th October a cold front deposited some 500mm of snow above 1,100m on the mountains of the Valais, Berner Oberland and Obwalden which was followed by two days of heavy rain that also melted the snow. The result was serious flooding in several areas that affected some railway operations. The Engleberg line was disrupted but repaired within a day; the Zentralbahn was severed between Giswil and Lungern, and Meiringen and Brien but it was only out a few days; a washout on the line between Zweilütschinen and Lauterbrunnen took 3 weeks to restore; but the most serious was around Kandersteg. The Gasterntal, a valley not inhabited in winter, was devastated. The water followed the gorge down to Kandersteg, which was not damaged due to new protection works only completed last summer, but then laid waste Blausee-Mitholz. The BLS old main line below the station, in the reverse curve, was destroyed with single line working only restored in early November. The River Kandern took to the fields and then through the new road gallery so that too was closed for two weeks. For some time Kandersteg could only be reached from the north by taking the express through the Base Tunnel to Brig and returning by shuttle service up the Südrampe and through the old Lötschberg tunnel. The Lötschental, served by PostAutos from Goppenstein, was cut off. Above Blatten, the road and galleries were destroyed and repairs will have to wait until spring meaning no winter tourism. Also the Dampfbahn, Furka DFB's new extension from Gletsch to Oberwald, only opened a year ago, suffered severely. Track, drains, signaling and embankments are covered with rocks or undermined, whilst between Tiefenbach and Furka landslides have undermined, the track. Apart from costs and the labour required, there is a serious risk that the opening in June 2012 will be compromised.

Two days later the skies cleared and Switzerland has had its driest November for 150 years, and an autumn to keep generations in calendar pictures!

More blockades in 2012

Although maintenance and renewal blockades as practiced by Network Rail in Britain used to be rare in Switzerland, the picture is changing. In 2011 the MOB was closed between

Château d'Oex and Sarnen (the replacement buses were however faster than the trains!); the ASD was closed for major track refurbishment; Bulle – Romont was closed for total renewal up to S-Bahn standards, whilst in 2010 the Arosa line had several long periods of bus replacement. On single lines, especially outside seasonal peaks, the practice can be understood, whilst some main line single-track tunnels like the Grenchen have also been blockaded. Sometimes there is an alternative route, as when the Adler Tunnel between Leistal and Basel (only 20 years old but bored through Gypsum which is swelling all the time) had to be repaired, with traffic returned to Muttenz. The NEAT tunnels, and the high speed Olten – Bern line, will for a long time, have the old routes as diversions. All this leads to thoughts about the blockade of Austria's Brenner Route from 6th August to 12th September this year, along with several weekend blockades in the high tourist season, but when freight is slack, plus 3 months of single line working. Renewing some 26km of route, much of which is only accessible by rail, will be a huge task. Inevitably diversions through Switzerland are planned, but the Gotthard does not yet have the loading gauge clearances needed for intermodal and piggyback trains with 4m high standard road trailers. Although the Lötschberg does, it is already heavily overloaded, whilst south of it repairs to the northbound bore of the Simplon following last year's fire are on-going. It is expected that between 6 and 8 diverted freight train pairs daily may take the Gotthard route, so SBB are correspondingly aiming to re-schedule their own planned maintenance on this route. Also this year the Luzern – Bern route through the Entlebuch will be closed between Wolhusen and Trübschachen from 2nd July to 19th August prior to which nightly closures between 20.45 and 06.00 have been programmed between January and June. Regarding general policy on blockades SBB Infrastructure has said 'We do not wish to close complete sections for long periods for maintenance. Special cases such as tunnels and total rebuilding may have to be considered individually. The SBB maintenance is standardized with time modules of 8-hours, day or night with, on double track sections, single line working.'

If there is to be digging, Luzern wants its share

For years Luzern has dreamt that one day there might be a through station built underneath the present terminus with its circuitous approaches. It is not disputed that there is a problem as both the platforms and the approaches to the current station are overloaded, and the wonder of getting 750 trains daily through the double track under Gutsch cannot go on for ever. This leads the City to be badly served by the Taktfahrplan as anyone who has awaited connections there will confirm. Logical, but hopelessly expensive, would be a tunnelled loop from above Rothenburg on the Olten line approaching from the south, an underground station parallel to the present one, then continuing under the Luzerner Bucht across to Ebikon on the main line to Rotkreuz for Zürich and the Gotthard. Recently more modest proposals were announced for a

tunnel from below Emmenbrücke, under the lake to underground platforms at the station, then feeding into the existing station approach tracks. This would give through running, eliminate many reversals, save journey time and take away half the traffic under the Gutsch. It might even be affordable. There is now some progress as Kanton Luzern has approved a credit for a further planning stage for this proposal. The Confederation is not impressed with the scheme and has offered CHF600m to improve the section from Rotsee to the Gutsch area, but this clearly solves no long-term problems. In the meantime, the tunnelling of the Zentralbahn approach from the south is already well advanced but as no further narrow-gauge construction is intended this would remain divorced from any major new project. It is worth noting that when the KKL Congress Centre and Concert Hall was built 15 years ago the foundations were planned so that they would not be affected by a Luzern underground station. That was real forward planning.

Vandalism hits the BAM

Over a period of three months in 2011 the BAM (Biere Apples Morges) was hit by around twelve examples of vandalism with tree trunks, fire extinguishers, bales of straw, etc being placed on the tracks. Although no trains were derailed or people injured by these actions, the cost to the railway to clear things up was some CHF350,000. In October the police in Canton Vaud arrested three men aged between 20 and 25 and charged them with these criminal acts. It also transpired that the three had also placed some obstacles on the SBB tracks, and caused other damage in the area including, setting fires and even sending a road roller running down a slope. The culprits said that they were not doing these things as any sort of protest, but just for the "fun" of it!

Playing Dominoes

Another curious story involves the Koblenz (AG)-Waldshut (BW) shuttle, over the oldest Swiss-German Rhein crossing by rail. The bridge at Waldshut, still almost in original condition, was built in 1856 to allow trains of the Baden State Railway to reach Switzerland, via Badischer Bahnhof and Waldshut, prior to the building of the Basel Rhein Bridge in 1870, following which this crossing became less important. Though a historic relic, the link is now seeing growing use, so a new problem was bad news. The Class 560 NPZ trains have been allowed to use it, giving a through service to Waldshut that is soon to be Zürich S-Bahn service S27 from Baden/Turgi, but the SBB has been modernising its NPZ trains as almost-new Domino units. The DB, which owns and

SBB NPZ unit arriving at Koblenz (AG) en-route to Waldshut via the Rhein Bridge. A Thurbo GTW unit waits with a working to Winterthur.
August 2011. PHOTO: Jacob Jagetz

maintains the bridge, discovered that these now have a maximum axle load of 19.3t, which is too heavy for the ageing structure, rather than the former 18t which was just tolerable. It was first suggested that through passengers should change into lighter units at Koblenz, but this idea was rejected in favour of passengers riding over the bridge in the Domino's trailing cars, not their power car. This, empty at 20 kph, is just within tolerances whilst the trailing cars are lighter, so even when loaded are no longer a problem. The solution came just in time to rescue the new December timetable.

Problems for freight operators

By the end of 2011 it was apparent that Switzerland will not meet its set targets for relocating freight haulage from roads onto rail, so a consortium of rail freight companies have put forward a set of suggestions for improving the infrastructure. German rail freight firms TX Logistik and DB Schenker, together with BLS Cargo and SBB Cargo are demanding the improvement of operational processes and the elimination of infrastructural bottlenecks, especially on the route between Rotterdam in the Netherlands and Genoa in Italy. Bottlenecks identified are Chiasso and Basel in Switzerland; Milan, Italy; and Oberhausen, Germany. Without improvements at these locations they suggest that much of the investment in the Lötschberg and the Gotthard Base Tunnels will have been wasted. They also suggest that there is room for streamlining different national regulations in regards to rail security; simplifying the complex approval procedures for rail freight companies; and for greater priority to be given to rail freight in many operational areas. Freight operations have also been affected by exchange rate pressures. This has not been ignored in Bern, where an emergency measure to assist Swiss firms against exchange rate losses saw CHF28m made available for five companies hauling freight on the north/south routes, including BLS Cargo and SBB Cargo International. Although volumes have held up as rate deals were mostly made in Euros, their Swiss Franc revenues fell sharply. During the winter, as the Olten headquarters of SBB Cargo is fully established, some 200 jobs will be lost through 'natural wastage' and the remaining staff and their



skills, will be re-integrated. SBB Cargo, which loses CHF550m annually, still has a substantial local freight in wagon load business, however this is in constant retrenchment. By next year many of the 500 or more local freight operations will be closed down and the service pattern will also again be sharply cut back; re-marshalling again concentrated; and motive power and shunting staff reduced.

2011 - A difficult year in the mountains

The Brienz-Rothorn-Bahn (BRB) had a disappointing season (as had other mountain railways) and will declare a shortfall for 2011. The problems of a gloomy economy and poor exchange rates were not helped by heavy continuous rain in July and a wet peak season. Tour groups and agency parties still came but internal Swiss travel and day trips (a big part of the business) did not happen. A sunny August made some amends, but a very beautiful September came when the crowds had gone, and on the 10th October the storm that swept Switzerland covered the railway in deep snow. Like many other operations the BRB will have to see what it can really do next year, as in the face of hard times you still have to bring new ideas and develop creative services. In 2012 the BRB has to renew its concession, which means having everything up to scratch. An appeal to its "Friends" organisation has already raised CHF1.7m that is helping to fund new track in many places (that laid in 1891 hasn't done badly!), and a superb new set of switches was installed at Oberstafel before the snow - one big job less for 2012.

Basel tram news

As Basel-Land Transport BLT took delivery of their new Tango trams from Stadler Rail, in time for December 2011's improved schedules, Basel Stadt (BVB) placed an order for 60 Flexity trams from Bombardier. Since they will often run on the same tracks, the comparisons will be obvious. Competition is, of course, a great stimulus. The BVB trams will cost CHF3.7m each; the Tangos of BLT are CHF4.3m. Direct comparisons are not quite fair, because the specifications differ. BVB was originally to place a joint order with BLT, and then pulled out. The greater BLT journey distances and times require other speed and suspension qualities than an inner city tram, but low-floor and handicapped access were another point of contention. BLT has another operational problem as the 7.5km from Ettingen to Rodersdorf at the western end of Line 10 is still single line. The plan to double it from Ettingen to Flüh was set to be completed by Dec. 2011 but this was postponed for financial reasons and the few crossing places imposed a 10 minute interval on the former service. However with the new Tangos a 7½ minute interval service has operated from December 2011, so every second tram from the city turns at Ettingen, where the single line starts. The new timetable means for those villages further out, coincidentally in Canton Solothurn which pays part of the costs, a worsening from 10 to 15 minute frequency, and they are hopping mad. On the eastern end of this 26km line a spectacular and potentially dangerous accident occurred in Münchenstein in

October. Although what happened is clear – a tram was derailed at 50 km/h on the facing point of a turn-out to a turning circle and almost flew into a house wall 50m further on – why it happened is still not understood. Since it was installed 30 years ago well over a million tram movements have crossed this point without suspicion. Official statements so far have cleared the track and the tram (BLT No.250, damaged beyond repair) from blame. Late November pictures were released showing that the critical turnout was indeed, after the wreck, in position for the turn-round loop, which it should not have been. A full report is not yet out.

If it can go wrong – it will

What do SBB's automatic ticket machines do at the Summer/Winter time change? They are linked to complex computerised systems of recording and checking, powered by atomic clocks, etc. Guess what? At 03.00 on changeover night, out of the 3000 ticket validating machines that validate open tickets for use, some 500 did not change. The result was that for limited-time journeys next morning, many tickets, supposedly properly stamped, were out of date before they had even started to be used. All ticket and train staff were advised to be understanding!

SBB Cargo roll-out Class Eem 923

The 14th October saw the arrival of the first of the thirty Cl. Eem 923 locos developed for SBB Cargo from the now familiar Cl. 922s in passenger duty, which in turn are banishing the Ee3/3s. The main difference is that this loco is a 'hybrid' using both a diesel motor and electric drive to promise considerable efficiency gains. SBB Cargo's yard, shunting and positioning work has been done with Cl. 843 diesel freight engines, along with 40/50 y/o Cl. Bm4/4 and Em3/3s, early examples of diesel technology, which had replaced steam in their time. Many of the remaining station tractors are also over-age. However, to serve non-electrified industrial plants often involves considerable distances under the wire hence the 923s will spend 90% of their lives in 'electric mode' saving over 4,000t p/a of CO₂ emissions. Moreover, today's trip engine must be fast enough to fit in on the main line between frequent passenger services, so the 923s have a 100 km/h performance. Catch the veterans now, before they are displaced.

Zentralbahn in 2012

Stadler at Bussnang are currently assembling for the Zentralbahn(ZB) four metre-gauge rack-equipped main-line railcar sets for the Luzern-Interlaken service, plus two short sets for stopping services. The moment is coming when the 101 class locomotives will be cascaded from the main line, together with their assorted coaches, saloons and vans, and the venerable 110s will be finally pushed out of Meiringen – Interlaken. Already only one or two of the local services on this section of the ZB are 110 hauled, as the ZB-Flirts have taken over, but an Indian Summer of 70-year-old 110s had seen them on the express services, as these need an engine change at Meiringen. With the new railcar sets that will end and 2012

will probably be the last chance to see the 'old order'. The ZB has taken delivery of a new diesel shunting locomotive, HGm 105.001, again from Stadler. A co-ordinated project for a standardized batch of four meter-gauge engines for the ZB, MGB and Austria, (with variations of fittings, etc) allowed some economy. The ZB already has generally similar HGm 104 001 and 002. These railways all need tough, economical locomotives which can handle works trains and emergency services, and also be used in workshops and main yards.

Sugar beet again

The 2011 sugar beet campaign was, with ideal weather conditions, better than expected. Over 2m tonnes will be processed at Aarburg and Frauenfeld, of which about 50% moved by rail. Additionally, a further 23,500 tonnes (561 wagonloads) came from Bio-cultivation in Germany. Wagons this year were not hired in from the Czech Republic as last year, but from Ermewa, the French wagon leasing company. Many looked new. The production is still threatened by fiscal policy and a reduction of subsidy, but has survived another season. The remaining Ae6/6s were less in evidence this year.

Good news for railways and beer drinkers

Brewers Heineken, in Felsberg, near Chur, along with the Confederation, are each spending CHF1.2m to create a loading point for block trains of beer, in intermodal swap-bodies. Beating the recession, sales of beer were up by 1% in Switzerland in 2011 - but then the SRS study group was here in August!

Zürich delayed by newspapers

On the 22nd November at 05.00 a newspaper van was driven down the platform at Zürich Stadelhofen in order to ease delivery of the papers to the kiosk. Space was tight for this, probably unauthorised, movement and while it was stationary an early train caught an overhanging corner of the van, dragged it 50 m, half on the track, and blocked one platform track for 4 hours. The Zürich people's morning peak, already grey, dark and in fog, was not improved!

MOB 100.

To celebrate the 100th anniversary of the MOB to Lenk, a 3-day Festival will be taking place at Lenk-im-Simmental from the 8th to 10th June this year. The official commemoration and opening events will be on Friday 8th with the main event running from 18.30 in the evening. On the Saturday and Sunday there will be trips on stagecoaches, steam train trips behind an historic MOB locomotive and rolling stock from the Blonay-Chamby Museum Railway; a model railway exhibition, a miniature railway; games for children, food and drink, etc. There will be a display of a freight loco and wagons at St Stephan whilst the Zweisimmen Depot will be open. In addition from 20.00 to 03.00 there will be a music 'Sommerfest'. On Sunday morning there will be a Brunch with 'Jodlermusik' and other entertainments. 



ABOVE:
100 Years of the
MOB in "Lenk im
Simmental"

LEFT:
Entrance to Lenk
station, 1994.
PHOTO: Gerlad.

BELLOW:
Lenk station.
PHOTO:
Peter Bowen.



BOTTOM:
End of the line at
Lenk, 1994.
PHOTO: Gerlad.



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