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SWISS NEWS

It never rains but it pours...

This winter has seen a spate of collisions on the Swiss network. The most serious took place at around 07.30 on the morning of the 10th January when a Turbo GTW unit en-route from Winterthur to Schaffhausen, and a SBB RE from Schaffhausen to Zürich HB, were involved in a head-on collision at the south end of Neuhausen-am-Rheinfall station. Some 25 people were injured with 8 people taken to hospital as a precaution, although none were reported as being seriously injured. The line was closed for 24 hours. It is now known that the incident was caused by the Turbo GTW unit passing a signal at danger. This incident followed a rockfall on the RhB's Bernina line, adjacent to the Bruisio Viaduct at around 17.00 on Tuesday 8th January. The rocks were stopped from falling on the track by the works that had previously been put in place at this location, although they posed a potential danger to passing trains. The alert driver of the next train following the fall was able to bring his service to a halt short of the incident area. It is understood that the replacement bus service put in place by the RhB would stay in operation for around a month whilst the rocks were cleared and a survey of the local geology was undertaken. On December 12th at 01.00 a serious collision occurred just outside Lenzburg station as two trains departed westwards on converging tracks. One was FLIRT RABe 523 037, going to Aarau, and the other a Cargo Express postal train with Re 4/4 II 11277. Substantial damage was done to the track and to the FLIRT, which at that time was mercifully empty. Rebuilding track and signaling took some time, so traffic was delayed and diverted until Dec 13. On an earlier night with freezing rain Ziegelbrücke saw an accident which could have been much more serious. On the reverse curve of the road at the level crossing, a bus driver lost control, the vehicle slid off the crossing onto the tracks, demolishing signals, crossing and overhead catenary equipment. This was followed on November 26th by another level crossing accident, when a refrigerated truck became stuck between falling barriers between Gossau and Sulgen. There were no injuries but the Turbo GTW, RABe526 No.781, was severely damaged.

Rescue workers at the crash site.

Photo: Reuters / Arnd Wiegmann from the RT Website



Gotthard closed again

On Wednesday 14th November the Gotthard route was again closed due to a further rock fall in the Gurtellen area. The fall was far smaller than the one that closed the line for one month, but the catenary was damaged and both tracks were impassable. Thankfully no trains or people were involved and as the SBB ruefully commented 'Our new alarms worked!' It is now recognised that the whole of the mountainside in this area is a potential problem, with this fall attributed to early heavy frosts freezing the sodden friable rock face causing spalling. Similar emergency workings were put in place as were used earlier in the year and single line working was resumed on Sunday 18th for freight and Monday 19th for passengers. In November a serious Swiss newspaper published a partly sad, partly angry, partly nostalgic, major article about the downfall into ignominy of this once proud route. Although prompted by the rock falls most was about the breakdown of service quality; the absence of through trains, and the unreliability and unpunctuality. Again it calls into question the long term future of the old route once the base tunnel is in operation.

Snow strikes the Lötschberg

On Sunday 23rd December the 05.16 from Brig to Spiez, a 'Lötschberger' working over the BLS mountain line hit an avalanche run between Hohtenn and Goppenstein, in the Lonza ravine. Much of this section of line is protected by galleries so the driver had an unpleasant surprise in an unprotected gap. The leading bogie derailed and the line was closed until the afternoon of Christmas Eve as clearance work was threatened by the potential for further avalanches. There had been a period of heavy snow at high altitude, followed by a Föhn and thaw. Another problem was that it occurred in a difficult location. Buses ran between Goppenstein and Brig on the main road coping with people heading to winter sports holidays over Christmas, but due to the holiday, freight traffic 'over the top' was quiet.

SBB in conflict with Apple

US electronic giant Apple has agreed a CHF20m license fee with SBB to use the iconic Swiss railway clock on its products. Prior to the settlement SBB had accused Apple of using the design without permission. The clock icon that appears upon the new iPad and iPhone operating system introduced in September 2012, is identical to the one created in 1944 by Swiss designer Hans Hilfiker. SBB noted 'We are happy that Apple adopted the Swiss railway clock. It just goes to show that it is truly a great design piece'. The design is owned by the SBB who licence it to approved users such as Montaine, the watchmakers.

Project costs rise

Revised estimates indicate that there will be a rise of €88m on the original estimate of €210m in the cost of electrifying the double-track line between München and Lindau in Germany. The completion date of the project has also been put back two years to 2019. The upgrading of the route is to enable the diesel-hauled Zürich – München service (and local

trains) to be replaced. Some of the increased cost is attributed to the provision of €30m of additional noise mitigation measures; material costs have risen, and new standards for permanent way construction, signalling, structures and level crossings have been introduced. Financing for the improvements, which will cut inter-city journey times, is based on an agreement between infrastructure manager DB Networks, the German Federal Government, the Swiss Government, and the State of Bavaria.

Four Tracks to Germany

On 21st October 2012 a new 240m, CHF57m, concrete railway bridge was inaugurated in Basel, crossing the Rhein between the SBB network and the DB at Basel Badischer Bahnhof. Carrying two electrified tracks the new crossing is only planned for use by passenger traffic and will ease the current bottleneck for both international and local suburban trains. With the bridge in place it is anticipated that improved cross-border commuter services will be developed. The work is not complete as the old double track bridge will now be subject to a four year, CHF10m, renovation to be the crossing point for freight trains. During this work one of its tracks will remain open to enable a distinct improvement in traffic flow, with the separation of passenger and freight operations. This Rhein crossing has a convoluted history. Arriving in 1855 the German (Baden State) trains terminated on the north side at what is now the Badischer Bahnhof, but there was a connection along the north bank of the Rhein to Waldshut where the first German/Swiss rail crossing was built. In 1873 the 'Basler Verbindungsbahn', the 'Connecting Railway' owned by a separate international holding company, was opened as a single line eventually having a simple flat junction to go left to Muttentz yard, or right to the SBB station. This remained the case until the new double-track steel bridge opened in 1962. This was built on the pillars of the 1873 one and the current 4 year renovation work revolves around these old structures. Apart from improving passenger train capacity the work is linked to the opening of the Gotthard Base Tunnel in 2016, and with the seriously delayed quadrupling of the DB lines on the northern approach to Basel, essential to ease the already acute congestion. However one major project in Germany is now completed: the 9.4km Katzenberg Tunnel between Basel and Freiburg-im-Breisgau that came into operation on December 9th 2012. It will remove the picturesque, slow wind through the cliffs, vineyards and quarrying above the Rhein at Istein. It forms part of a 17km continuous new 275kph high speed line from Haltingen to Schliengen.

Future rail funding agreed

Last November the Swiss parliament fixed the funding for the future development of the rail network by agreeing to an allocation of 0.4% of VAT income to the future railway infrastructure fund until 2017, then 0.1% until 2030. This should generate CHF300m. This represented considerably more expenditure than was originally recommended by the Federal Council. Limiting the Federal Tax allowances that workers can claim against their transport costs to CHF3,000

will release another CHF500m of tax income annually for rail improvements. Cantons will be expected to contribute CHF500m/annum to rail infrastructure financing, an increase of CHF200m, whilst they will also assume responsibility for financing stations within their area. The 2025 rail development phase, which is to be paid for by these measures, is expected to cost CHF6.4 billion, against the Federal Council's planned CHF3.5 billion. There is an urgent need for investment in the rail infrastructure to meet the expected growth in ridership and it now looks as if serious progress is being made. Funding proposals include a new double-track tunnel between Aarau and Olten giving, in effect, a four-track main line and widening around Genève, including Cornavin station where land requisitioning and demolition of a residential quarter are highly controversial.

Another transalpine operator

The Swiss Federal Transport Office (BAV) has awarded Rheinland Cargo Schweiz (RCCH), the Swiss subsidiary of RheinCargo, Germany, a license to operate its own regular services to Switzerland and through to Domodossola in Italy, from mid-2013. RCCH has been offering freight services in Switzerland for the last ten years in partnership with Swiss operators. RCCH was created earlier this year by the merger of the port and rail transport activities of Cologne Ports and Freight (HGK) and Neuss-Düsseldorf Port and is owned by the Cologne, Düsseldorf and Neuss local governments. It operates a fleet of 77 locomotives, more than 600 wagons, and carries around 20m tonnes of freight by rail each year.

4m trailers through the Gotthard

Last October the promoters of the Transhelvetica project (SNCF Geodis subsidiary Vila and Lohr Industries) successfully ran two return trips between Arth-Goldau and Airolo, using 'Modalohr' wagons. The test run was required by the Swiss Federal Transport Office (BAV), in order to demonstrate that these wagons could carry road trailers with a 4m corner height on lines normally cleared for a maximum corner height of 3.84m. The test run used slightly modified standard 'Modalohr' units. Further trials will be undertaken in early 2013 using the prototype 'UIC-Modalohr' wagon that would be used on the commercial Transhelvetica services. Providing the BAV clear these wagons for use it is planned to run services between the Ruhr, Lahr in southern Germany and Chiasso on the Swiss-Italian border starting in 2015. It is anticipated that these services could exextract some 100,000 semi-trailers, currently hauled by trucks, from Switzerland's trans-alpine routes each year.

Shipping News from the Ticino - and Italy

The Arona (IT) shipyard of Navigazione Lago Maggiore is confident that 'DS Piemonte' will be available for charter work in 2013. The 'MS Roma' has been subject to a refit and renovations during the winter but this ship should be back in service this coming summer. Also undergoing works at the shipyard during the winter was 1913 veteran, and former steamer, 'MS Torino' which is scheduled to re-enter service in 2013 operating in place of 'MS Delfino'. The company has

plans to order a new motor ship similar to the 'MS Anteres' that was commissioned in 2009. This new 295t vessel will be 45m long, and accommodate 460 passengers, some 110 of whom will be seated in two restaurants. It is also ordering a new 50m long diesel-electric car ferry for services between Intra and Laveno in Italy. Also in Italy the renovations to the paddle steamer 'PS Patria' being undertaken by a shipyard at Dervio on Lago Como are understood to be proceeding well, although there is apparently still a considerable amount of work to be completed. It is possible that this veteran ship could again be under steam in 2013.

Recognising the 'Grey Panthers'

BLT's recently delivered new TANGO trams (Nos. 151-169) have all been named - with the usual Swiss ceremony of speeches, a village band in attendance, an Apéro and much public enthusiasm. All except one had received the names of Communes, both large and small, along Lines 10 and 11 where they will operate. One however, delights the Swiss News Editor, long a pensioner. Tram No.168 is named 'Graue Panthers, Nordwestschweiz' ('Grey Panthers Northwest Switzerland') after the independent organization which looks after pensioners' interests and wellbeing, both socially and politically. Years ago 'proper' engines carried good solid names all their lives, so let us hope that this TANGO will recognise and serve, this growing group of citizens for a long time. Stadler has designed and built these trams with serious thought to needs of the elderly, a compromise inevitably with their commuter vocation.



BLT's new "Grey Panther" tram - photo Bryan Stone

A French Connection

The line from Porrentruy to Delle, of which the last 400 m are in France, has up to now been operated with NPZ units, awaiting approval by the French regulatory agency of more modern Swiss equipment. This was getting urgent as NPZs were rapidly disappearing due to their conversion to 'Domino' sets. The French have now given authority for the use of SBB's Class 522 'Flirt France' units, and Class 560 'Dominos' although these can only operate at 30 km/h into Delle station. It was then embarrassing for the Swiss to discover that, as earlier at Waldshut, a steel bridge adjoining the sweeping arched viaduct just east of St Ursanne, is not authorised for the over 20-tonne axle loading of the power

car of the 'Domino' units, so since September the Class 522 units have been regularly rostered on the service. As we have previously reported it is intended that the old international line between Delle and Belfort will be re-opened to give connections from Bern to the French TGV network at the new Belfort station on the recently opened Rhein - Rhône LGV.

More Cross-border News

The Franco-Swiss border crossing between Vallorbe and Pontarlier, once busy with the 'Direct Orient Express' and a succession of heavy expresses and blue CIWLT cars, is now very quiet. A new service on the route is a seasonal (December to April) Saturdays-only Lyria TGV between Brig and Lille, with connections to London (through journey time 9-hours) and Brussels. In the Lille to Brig direction it runs via Genève and the through journey takes 10-hours. There is also a new Paris to Interlaken TGV connection, with a return from Interlaken at 06.09 on Saturday and Sunday mornings. Growth on the Zürich - Basel - Paris Lyria TGV service was 10% in 2011 (to 4m passengers) and a further 11% growth is expected in 2012. It has been announced that the Lyria organisation is to operate the Genève - South of France services, and it seems probable that the suspended Barcelona - Zürich service will be resumed with TGV equipment.

Open-air on the MGB

This coming summer the MGB is to run the observation car B 2226 and the 'Nostalgie-Wagen' B2225 in regular service trains, and not in Glacier Express or other special train formations, enabling them to be used by passengers on the non-supplement local trains.

Joint tender for new stock

Four organisations in the Suisse Romande who operate regional metre-gauge railways have published a joint tender for 17 new EMUs, with options for further vehicles, to enable them to modernise their fleets and provide more frequent services. The MOB require four units; Transports publics fribourgeois (TPF) six units; TRAVYS three units (for their YStC operation), and Transports de la région Morges-Bière-Cossonay four units (for the BAM). The tender was due in at the end of 2012 and delivery of these units is scheduled to start in early 2015 and run to mid 2016. It is unclear who will be the first to receive their allocation but anyone interested in seeing/riding on their older units are advised to do it in the next two years.

Investment at Aigle

The Transports Publics du Chablais embrace the group of railways and buses, based on Aigle and Monthey in Canton Vaud. These services are very active, with commuters and tourists, but it has been at times literally cliff-hanging. We have previously reported on the misfortunes of the ASD, whose track and foundation have recently been thoroughly renovated. Now, as one of the last lines of its kind in Switzerland, the ASD is to replace its telephone and timetable dispatching, by block signalling as from Easter 2013. Also Le

Sépey station and facilities will again be rebuilt. Looking forward, the line so often threatened by closure, is now preparing to celebrate its centenary. Aigle to Le Sépey was opened in December 1912, and Le Sépey to Diablerets in July 1913, but the party is in 2014. The TPC are also preparing for a CHF104m upgrading of their Aigle – Ordon – Monthey – Champéry (AOMC) line. CHF64m is to be spent on the infrastructure, including a new signalling system; replacing the existing Strub rack with the Abt system (to be compatible with their Aigle-Leysin and Bex-Villars-Bretaye lines); raising the traction current from 850V dc to 1500V dc. CHF40 is to be spent on new rolling stock, as much of the current equipment has reached the end of its useful life – only five units are less than 25 years old. Five of the power cars, Be4/4 Nos. 101-105, date from 1966 and were taken over from the BLT (former Birsigalbahn-BTB) in 1985/6. One is being sought by the Club 'Pro-BTB' in Canton Basel-Land for preservation.

'PS Piemonte' - A rare steamship and an unusual trip

Opportunities to see and experience the paddle steamer 'Piemonte', built in 1904 by Escher Wyss of Zürich, on Lake Maggiore are very rare. Therefore all the more interesting is a trip being organized on April 13th 2013 by the Verein Historische Seethalbahn (Historical Seethal Association), utilising ex-SBB RBe4/4 No.1405 of the Draisinensammlung Fricktal (Fricktal Museum) and possibly other historic rolling stock. The trip leaves Luzern at 08.15, travelling by the Gotthard to Luino for a private cruise on the 'PS Piemonte', and hopefully returning to Luzern by 20.00. It's not cheap at CHF150, but it may be the only chance you will ever have. Contact info@historische-seethalbahn.ch for information, or see their website www.historische-seethalbahn.ch.



PS Piemonte.

Photo: Corinne von Andrian

ETCS on BLS

On the 436 km of BLS track the Lötschberg Base Tunnel is currently equipped with ETCS Level 2 (with cab signaling,) whilst the old Lötschberg route via Kandersteg, the Interlaken branch and the regional lines, will be completely equipped with ETCS Level 1 LS (i.e. Limited Supervision). This work is planned to be completed by 2017,

involves some 1350 signal locations, and will cost CHF28m. SBB has a similar programme, the new line from Rothrist to Wankdorf being already equipped with ETCS Level 2, as will be the Gotthard Base Tunnel, and various other main lines. The supporting SBB network is to have ETCS Level 1.

Gotthard Approaches. Heavy engineering is in view.

With the Gotthard Base Tunnel approaching its 2016 completion date, the Federal Council has approved measures to enlarge clearances on the main Gotthard axis between Basel and Chiasso/Luino in order to accommodate contemporary intermodal traffic. The issue is of road freight vehicles, semi-trailers, and unit loads all built to the same standard 4m corner height. These, which represent the bulk of the European domestic intermodal market, can use the Lötschberg – Simplon route to Italy, but not the existing Gotthard route, nor its approaches. CHF940m has been provisionally set aside for the creation of 4m corridors that will also permit normal double-deck intercity trains to use them. The standard Gotthard freight route is from Basel via Stein-Säckingen and the Bözberg tunnel to Brugg, continuing from there by the so-called Aargauer Südbahn (that forms a freight by-pass to Rotkreuz) then via Arth-Goldau and Flüelen. The principal task is to drive a new Bözberg tunnel through the ridge of the Jura above Brugg. The existing tunnel is 2.5km long, and complete replacement is proposed. The rest is mostly platform roofs, signals, catenary, and several flying junctions. However, there is a snag. The Monte Ceneri Base Tunnel will not be ready until 2020, and even then the Italian Railways must undertake their part further south. In the light of experience it is realistically considered that some CHF230m is needed to kick-start the financing of matching work in Italy, especially on the Luino line that avoids the Monte Ceneri bottleneck.

The Simplon fire

It was quickly concluded that the fierce and destructive fire which closed the Simplon tunnel in 2011 was caused by a loose wagon sheet that was flapping and subsequently shorted out the traction current. The NZZ (the leading Zürich newspaper) has apparently seen the Italian accident investigation report. This seemingly concludes that the protective sheet, which is an integral part of the intermodal load units used by the railways' customer LKW Walther of Austria, could only have become loose following malicious intervention from outside. This was apparently confirmed by signs of deliberate cutting, implying an attempted theft.

Early snow and the Blonay-Chamby

On two weekends last September the MOB was the theme of an event on the Blonay-Chamby Museum Railway. Their G3/3 No.6, which came from the BAM, was out and about in the guise of a contractor's engine complete with a convincing works train; the restored historic MOB railcar BCFe 4/4 No.11 (which had earlier been active at Lenk) and the splendid MOB FZe 6/6 No. 2002 were turned out, while the MOB sent its BDe 4/4 No.28 and BDe 4/4 No.3004. Special trains, including the two Pullmans 101 and 102 ran

in 'Golden Mountain Pullman Express' sets from Vevey to Blonay. Following this, October 27th/28th was the last weekend of the season on the B-C. This is later than on other museum lines due to the normally gentle warm autumn days on the south-facing slopes above Le Léman. However last year, after a glorious autumn week, there was an 'unheard of for that region' heavy snow fall. This snow blanketed the whole country as overnight temperatures dropped below zero. B-Cs G3/3 No.6 and its companion No.105 were out and about in these unusual climatic conditions, resulting in a bonanza for photographers who were able to take some splendid 'Christmas Card' shots. On the main line railways the unexpected snow resulted in no serious incidents but some minor delays. However on the roads some passes were closed and there were numerous, fortunately minor, crashes that caused long delays. Members may not know that it is usual in Switzerland to fit snow tyres (adapted for low temperatures and with a special tread profile) to cars for the winter, but at the end of October few had yet done so.



BC No 105 pulls its train through the snow.

Photo: Nicholas Regamey

Zentralbahn: New trains and a new line


In September 2012 the Zentralbahn's new EMUs, the 'Adler' and 'Fink', were unveiled in Meiringen and Luzern. The Class 120 'Adler' (Eagle) units are for 'main-line' service and comprise four 7-car sets that include a buffet. The six 3-car Class 160 'Fink' (Finch) units are for secondary services. The first few have been in trial running since the late summer. When deliveries, and some track improvements, are complete the December 2013 timetable will allow at least a 10 minute gain between Interlaken and Luzern. Not only can 'Adler' units run at 120kph, but engine changing in Meiringen and the need for locos to run-round at Interlaken Ost will become a thing of the past helping to speed up the service. As a consequence the 2013 Inter-Regio timetable will also allow one train set, of the five needed today, to be saved outright. In Luzern, on the night of November 8th/9th the last ground-level S-Bahn service train of the ZB negotiated the old line with its rustic level crossings and huts, and a Dampf-bahn Ballenberg steam train then marked the end of the 1888 era. Three days of heavy work, to slew in and test the new connections, saw the first train through the new double track Haltiwald tunnel on November 12th. On the 2km route, and also underground, a new station at Luzern Allmend opened

on the 9th December. (See pages 16 -17) In reality, although this investment improves the ZB's operations all is not yet well; the single track south of the new tunnel means that the high-density timetable on both Engelberg and Brunig lines is not yet perfect. Proposals for double track, necessarily on a different alignment, are around, but Hergiswil wants to see it all underground. That is an expensive option and unlikely for some time to come.

Poor BLS finances hit 'Lötschberg 100' activities

Last October BLS Cargo released results for the first half of 2012 that showed the financial impact of various interruptions, including the Gotthard closures in spring and the 4 weeks in June. A 14% decline to 1,703m net tonne-km reflected a fall of 31% on the Gotthard route, where BLS Cargo runs many trains in 'Open Access' mode. The revenue from the diversions to the Lötschberg route did not prevent substantial net loss of income. Generally money is tight even in Switzerland, causing the BLS to review a number of its activities and its staffing levels, with recruitment frozen and staff vacancies not being replaced. Of more immediate interest to the SRS is that one of the things affected by the review was the plan for a big celebration of the centenary of the Lötschberg route this summer. However, the company still plans a lower-key event in Frutigen for 'the people and staff'. This will probably be mostly static displays, like the event in Lenk last year. On present thinking what will be missing are expensive activities such as a special historic train in which VIPs and guests were to ride, unless outside sponsors come to their aid.

An accident and its causes

In 2011 a BLT twin-unit tram working Line 10 to Dornach late at night, derailed at speed in Münchenstein ending up, after a big jump, against a house wall. The crash occurred on a turnout on a double track section, leading to a turning loop used to bring southbound trams back onto the northbound rails. The turnout is interlocked with two protecting signals and is normally set in the straight (main line) position. Photos taken shortly after the accident showed that it had in fact been set for the loop, with its speed limit of 10kph - the main line is allowed 65kph. The official accident report has just been released. It confirms that the tram driver had run past the two warning signals, and then braked to 38kph before hitting the turnout. The leading bogie immediately climbed over the facing point blade (the marks were evident) and the tram followed, almost straight and upright, crossing diagonally the northbound track and a narrow road. Fortunately, these were both clear, and none of the few passengers were seriously injured. All this is clear, but what has not been explained is why, at 22.35 at night, the turnout was in fact set for the divergent track. That can have various explanations, not all reassuring. More may come to light. 

Swiss News is compiled by Bryan Stone and includes items from Mario Gavazzi, Jakob Jäger, Michael Donovan, s'Murmeli, and others.