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Cantons on the Gotthard


Following the articles in the June *Swiss Express*
John Jesson reminisces

Ae 8/14 No.11801 on a northbound freight at Airolo in 1967.

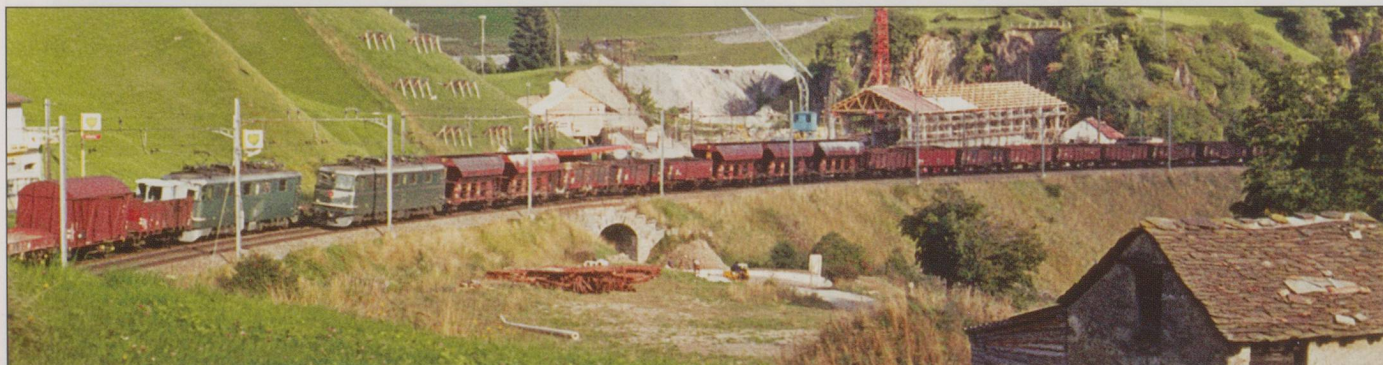
All photos: John Jesson

When in the late 1960s I first became acquainted with the Gotthard route, the Ae 6/6s were very much in charge. Certainly there were other types to be seen. The stopping services were in the hands of Re 4/4's and push-pull sets, though often with a luggage van attached. The two Göschenen/Airolo car shuttle trains were worked by a pair of modified Ae 3/5s (the "Baby Séchérons"), and these continued until the opening of the Gotthard road tunnel. The dozen Ae 4/6 locos built during WWII specifically for the Gotthard were still working, despite their faults. These were the first Swiss locos, I believe, to be fitted with multiple control equipment, which was not without difficulties. Also to be seen were the three Ae 8/14 locos, all of different appearance. The crocodiles, of course, had gone from the mountain route, although I did see one in 1974, perhaps visiting Bellinzona works. The fact remains, though, that the Ae 6/6s were the mainstay of services. They were not fitted with multiple control so, if a train needed a second loco, it also needed a second driver. Heavy freights sometimes had a pair of locos on the front, with a third cut into the train for the north ramp climb. This was removed at

Göschenen. For some reason, the south ramp climb did not seem to warrant this third loco, although a pilot loco could sometimes be seen, perhaps being detached at Airolo.

The Ae 6/6s became something of an icon of the Swiss railways. Appearance is subjective, but I always felt that the cab design was simple and elegant, much better (to my eyes) than those to be seen in Austria and Germany. It must have found favour, as the basic design was used for the Re 4/4¹¹ and Re 6/6 classes. It was even used on one of the Ae 8/14 locos (11851) during an overhaul, changing its appearance radically. Of course, the names and colourful crests added to the appeal, especially on the first 25 of the class that sported the chrome steel decoration. The whole class was often nicknamed 'Cantons' although, strictly speaking, it was only that first 25 to which it applied. The Ae 6/6s are now all withdrawn but they will live on in the memory of many, me included. Several have been preserved in working order, so an occasional appearance can be expected. Such a sighting will be a rarity and a pleasure – a far cry from the days when the cry went up "Freight! Oh, it's only another Canton!" 

Just below Airolo, a pair of Ae 6/6-worked freights pass on the curve leading to the Stalvedro bridge.





ABOVE: After detaching the assisting loco, the freight goes forward with its pair of Ae 4/6 locos, Nos. 10808 + 10811, according to my notes of the time.

BELOW: No. 11410 'Basel Stadt' on a northbound International express on the Middle Meienreuss bridge, with Wassen church behind.



ABOVE: No. 11422 'Vaud', at the head of an express from Italy, curves into the Gotthard tunnel at Airolo in the summer of 1967.


BELOW: A northbound freight has arrived at Airolo and is about to detach the Ae 6/6 which has been the assisting loco on the climb from Bellinzona.



BLS Ae6/8s on the Gotthard

Were you there? Bryan Stone makes an appeal to older members.

The first-class railway historical magazine *Semaphore* has in its Summer 2014 edition an article about a few days on the Gotthard line in August/September 1958. Members will be well aware that in high summer in the mountains, thunderstorms occur often and fiercely. In late August 1958 one hit the Simplon line between Iselle – Domodossola, closing it for a period and causing the heavy BLS summer traffic to be diverted over the Gotthard. This had happened previously, but the traffic and motive power situation then on SBB demanded help, so on August 21st two Ae6/88, along with 6 BLS drivers, were transferred to Erstfeld Depot. On August 28th a further three engines with 9 drivers joined them. All five locos ran in regular diagrams under special instructions and load conditions in the thick of the summer timetable, with SBB pilotmen at first accompanying the

BLS men. Judging by SBB working notices, and the dates of the few pictures available, the diversions lasted at least 17 days, with the engines running between Zürich/Luzern and Chiasso. Few photographs are available, although there are some very good ones to go with the article. This prompts my question above. As this would have been a typical time for British visitors to visit Switzerland, do any of our members have any pictures of the BLS Ae6/8 locomotives on the Gotthard, or its approach routes, during that period? They may be historically significant. If you can help please contact me on stone@eye.ch or through the Editor. 

Editor's Note: Semaphore appears, in German, four times a year, with well-researched articles and the highest standards of reproduction of historical material. Subscription outside Switzerland costs €82. www.semaphor.ch.