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Steam Shortage on the Furka

Peter Arnold



HG3/4 No.4, heading the 10.15 Realp to Oberwald, taking water at Gletsch. Photos: Peter Arnold

Whilst staying in Andermatt my wife and I decided upon a return trip on the Dampfbahn Furka Bergstrecke (DFB) for Friday 12th August. We reserved seats the previous day at the local tourist office for the 10.15 departure from Realp. However, the 13.50 return from Oberwald was fully booked beyond Gletsch, so we elected to change trains there and wait for the 15.15 for which

reservations were not required.

This was the first day of the line's peak service with three steam locos in operation but, as you will see, perhaps it should have been Friday 13th! It will help to understand the sequence of the afternoon's events by reference to the times for the relevant trains:

Locos in use @ 12/08/16		Steam HG 3/4 No.4	Steam HG 2/3 No.6 'Weisshorn'	Diesel HGm 4/4 No.61	Steam HG 3/4 No. 1 'Furkahorn'	Diesel HGm 4/4 No.61
Realp	dep	10.15	11.15		14.30	
Muttbach	dep	11.35	12.45		15.40	
Gletsch	arr	11.59	13.07		16.01	
	dep	12.05		13.15	16.10	
Oberwald	arr	12.30		13.40	16.35	
Oberwald	dep	13.50		14.45		
Gletsch	arr	14.15		15.07		
	dep	14.20	15.15			16.01
Muttbach	dep	14.45	15.40			16.30
Realp	arr	16.10	16.51			17.40


We enjoyed a good run westward from Realp to Oberwald, in the rear carriage of four, behind HG3/4 No.4, which seemed to handle the train with ease. Despite dry weather the low cloud base prevented us seeing the tops of the higher peaks. The highlight of our trip behind No.4 was the return climb on the rack section from Oberwald up the gorge to Gletsch where the loco has to work quite hard. The

lower section of this stretch is through forest where DFB have installed a unique fire prevention system; alongside the line is a series of vertical water standpipes fitted with spray nozzles, all supplied from a trackside pipe and controlled by radio. Although not needed that day, we did see the sprays working when we passed by on the road a week later.

Arriving at Gletsch we found HG2/3 No.6 'Weisshorn'

already turned and coupled to its train ready for the 15.15 departure. Our enforced wait for this train meant that we had time to photograph the two steam locos together, before watching No.4 depart for Realp at 14.20. Whilst the HG3/4 locos are able to descend running bunker first, the smaller HG2/3 locos, with their smaller boilers, have to be turned at Furka as well as at the end of each journey. Eventually we boarded the three carriage train to which No.6 was coupled. (Here I should explain that passengers are allowed to stand on the open balconies, at their own risk, except when passing through tunnels.) As the train departed I was standing on the balcony of the front carriage with a view through the loco cab's large rear opening. The immediate start from Gletsch is on adhesion only track but the rack section starts immediately after the level crossing and I soon suspected that something was amiss because the beat of the loco became somewhat irregular. It was apparent that the loco crew were struggling to keep the train moving and they even left the cab and went forward along the outside footplate to investigate, more than once, whilst the loco was still moving. Despite their best efforts they had to stop the train part way up the gradient in an attempt to regain steam pressure before reaching the next level crossing. This crossing is on a short stretch of adhesion only track but, once the train reached the next rack section, our driver checked that the train was clear of the road and stopped the train once more. Here we stayed for more than half an hour whilst the loco crew tried to get our train on the move again but without success. Eventually the diesel loco, HGm4/4 No.61, was summoned from Gletsch to push our train up to the passing loop at Muttbach-Belvédère where HG3/4 No. 1 'Furkahorn' was waiting at the head of the 14.30 ex Realp.

No one seemed quite sure when, or even whether, our train would be able to reach Realp, so we were advised to change onto the other train, return down to Oberwald and catch the next available MGB train through the Furka base tunnel back to our base in Andermatt, which we duly did. As we left Muttbach-Belvédère I managed a very quick conversation with the fireman on No.6 who gave me to understand that the problem was that no steam pressure was reaching the rack engine.

Apparently, later that day, HGm4/4 No.61 eventually hauled its delayed train, the 16.10 departure from Gletsch, together with the carriages of our failed train. Consisting of seven vehicles, this is believed to have been the longest passenger train operated through the Furka summit tunnel since reopening. Quite when and where HG2/3 No.6 'Weisshorn' was repaired I do not know, but the loco was available for service the following day. 



1. HG2/3 No.6 'Weisshorn' at Gletsch heading the 15.15 for Realp alongside HG3/4 no.4 which is about to leave with the 14.20.
2. The driver of 'Weisshorn' attempts to restart the train on the rack
3. A few minutes later the puzzled fireman has gone forward along the footplate.
4. Eventually 'Weisshorn' reached Muttbach-Belvédère with diesel assistance.