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A Class 92 in Basel?

Bryan Stone

My wife and I were in Edinburgh last autumn. At Waterley Station was a large heavy locomotive in the colours of Caledonian Sleepers. It was a Class 92, one of 46 built from 1993 to 1996 for the needs of future Channel Tunnel traffic. This set me thinking. In my diverse collection of photographs I found it: a gleaming, new British Rail Class 92 locomotive, standing in Basel Wolf container terminal, exhibited proudly on a summer day in 1994 with a train of new container wagons. *What was the story?*

Regrettably, it is not glorious. It forms part of the confusion and deeply troubled waters in which Eurotunnel had to survive. To understand, we must go back to the hopes and ambitions of the time. British Rail was heading for privatisation. The proposed high-speed line between Cheriton and London had been blocked from the start by a combination of Government disinterest and NIMBYs*. Eurotunnel was an international French-British project, each having grossly different objectives and these being very different from those of the then British Government. But apart from the tunnel there were real plans to make the transport link work, and these had justified heavy investment, most of which proved later to be in vain. At the time I worked for Intercontainer in Basel (a jointly-owned subsidiary of all the major European railways) and was involved in the joint freight project. Block trains of containers, between British and mainland terminals, were the order of the day. The wildly optimistic forecasts promoted by many of our 'owners' spoke of millions of tonnes of potential cargo. We spent much time and money on trying to agree objectives, operations and marketing plans. We got nowhere, and soon the British side was sending nobody there to worry, resulting in the joint freight planning coming to an abrupt end.

Passenger trains had long been planned. Despite contradictory and costly requirements of all parties, agreement was reached for the first Eurostar trains to be ordered, with TGV qualities for France and third-rail pick-up shoes for the 750 V DC suburban network of the 'Southern' in Britain; they would first run to Waterloo. But there had been much more; plans had embraced a range of sleeping car services and through high-speed trains between major British and mainland cities. Eurotunnel's early publicity shows how hopes had been awakened, but it never happened! The sleeping cars were built, but spent years decaying in store, and the through Eurostar services to Birmingham, Manchester and Glasgow were a pipe-dream broken by insuperable problems of security controls and customs raised by the British Government. So were the freight trains, although BR, SNCF and Intercontainer had commissioned some 1,400 container flats (SNCF 'Multifret' modified to suit BR). At least they could be used elsewhere in Mainland Europe.



Apart from the Eurostar fleet and the vehicle shuttles of Eurotunnel, heavy motive power for freight and sleeper trains was needed to meet the original ambitious plans. Legal impositions, both technical and operational (required to meet tunnel operational and safety issues and British standards) that were out of step with normal UIC interoperable standards, were very demanding: 6-axle locomotives with 5 MW output, and maximum speed 140 km/h. Dual-voltage capacity required 25 Kv 50 Hz AC, (BR and SNCF standard) but also third-rail 750 V DC to run through southern England. These were to be the 46 Class 92s, which were delivered from 1993 onwards. Most would spend years in store.

Just as these plans were visibly falling apart, the then 'RailFreight Distribution' (RFD) arm of BR hit on a great idea: 'let's have a promotional exhibition in Basel'. Intercontainer was commissioned to find a guest list, SBB offered a couple of tracks in the Wolf container depot and RFD sent No.92 008 by train ferry, hauled because it was unable to run under its own power. I had been very ill, and would shortly leave Intercontainer, but I was there to photograph No.92 008 and its new green wagons, and to observe how graciously the prospective clients came, and, unsurprisingly, politely expressed their scepticism.

It would be 20 years before Eurotunnel, apart from fragmentary traffics, would see regular container trains, and now these include the China-Europe 'Landbridge' cargo operations managed by DB-Schenker. But guess what? They are hauled through Eurotunnel by some of the Class 92s still in the UK. These endured years of idleness, and have ended up with DB. Most of the class is now scattered to the winds, including to Romania and Bulgaria. Of those remaining some are now used for heavy freight in Britain, and since 2015, a few haul Caledonian Sleepers. Given one of their original planned tasks, perhaps that's ironic! Seeing one of these in Edinburgh brought this whole comedy of errors, and a sunny day in 1994 at Basel Wolf, back to mind. 

*NIMBYs – The acronym for 'Not-In-My-Back-Yard' objectors on the proposed route.

Editor's Note: Some of the sleeper coaches finished-up with Canada's VIA Rail and are used on the Montreal – Halifax (NS) overnight service. I have travelled on them and although reasonably comfortable the accommodation is cramped by conventional North American standards. Unfortunately, despite massive investment to bring them up to Canadian standards, VIA have found them to be very unreliable. Perhaps, with hindsight, the failure of the planned services in Europe using this stock may have been fortuitous. I was involved professionally with the High-Speed Line proposals in Kent and share some of Bryan's frustrations. The line (now HS1) was eventually built with public money, but the UK Government subsequently sold their interest to the Ontario Government's Teachers Pension Fund – another Canadian connection!