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SWISS RAIL CENTRES, OLTEN

- Part One

By Steve Tinsley



Re 6/6 No.620047 "BEX" emerges from the twin canopy of Olten station on 03/06/17, with a postal train heading to the parcel depot at Härkingen.

All photos: Steve Tinsley

For the tourist or holidaymaker, Switzerland has many gems to offer; the beautiful scenery of the Bernese Oberland, the tranquil waters of Lake Geneva (or Lac Léman) or the Mediterranean climes of Canton Ticino, to name a few. The rail enthusiast is not overlooked either, with many private lines often mountainous and narrow gauge in nature. The standard gauge enthusiast is also catered for with the trans-alpine routes of the Gotthard and Lötschberg, though now both of these routes have base tunnels, by-passing many miles of spectacular scenery. However all is not lost and there are still places to while away the hours (days!) in the name of train watching. One such location is the railway junction station of Olten – one of

Switzerland's ten busiest railway stations.

The medium-sized town of Olten sits on the River Aare, with the old town and its ornate buildings to the north of the river. By rail, Olten is situated almost half-way between Zürich and Bern at 55 km and 62 km respectively, with Basel 39 km to the north. Just over 80% of the town's 18,000 inhabitants are German speaking and one of the chief employers is the railway. The Schweizerische Centralbahn (SCB) established its main workshops here in the 1850s, the site later becoming home to one of the SBB's major workshops, which today is responsible for carriage repair and maintenance. The town is also home to SBB Cargo and SBB Cargo International, co-located just to the north-west of the station.

The railway arrives

The railways came to Olten in the 1850s, electrification, following in the 1920s on all lines, with the exception of the first Hauenstein Line, this being as late as 1953. Olten essentially sits on a crossroads of lines, with the north to south Lötschberg line crossing the east to west Zürich to Genève line. The station was considerably remodelled during the 1980s as part of the Bahn 2000 project, with the

Ae 6/6 locomotive No.11404 "LUZERN" is seen here heading north through Olten with a mixed goods train on 21/06/07. Although the locomotive survives today in preservation, the buildings in the background have long since been demolished.



ultimate aim of creating uninterrupted flows of traffic through the area. To achieve this, an underpass was built to the north-east of the station, allowing the Lötschberg lines to go beneath the Zürich lines and so remove the conflict of crossing “on the flat”. Additional lines were created at Olten Ost, to provide extra paths to and from Zürich on both the Olten and Basel lines. South-west of Olten, a new line was built between Rothrist and Mattstetten, opening in 2004, this provided a high speed link on the important Zürich to Bern corridor, whilst also creating additional capacity for the heavy Lötschberg freight flows. Three further platforms were added to the western side of Olten station on the site of former goods facilities, bringing the total number of platforms to ten, by far exceeding the expectations of a town of this population.

To the north

The station lies on a North – South axis. Heading north, all lines immediately swing north-east before dividing – the Basel lines heading north via the Hauenstein Tunnel and the Zürich lines heading east to Aarau. The first Hauenstein line was opened in 1858 and was routed via the 2495m Hauenstein Summit Tunnel. The line was sinuous and steeply graded and trains using the line often required two or three locomotives. As a result of the difficulties associated with the line, a new line was built, opening in 1916, being routed via a new 8134m Hauenstein “base” Tunnel – the route used today. The first line, originally double track, was singled in 1938 and

TOP: “New” platforms 1, 2 and 3 provided as part of the Bahn 2000 project can be seen in the background as Re 4/4II NO.420270 passes through Olten with a permanent way train on 06/09/17.

MIDDLE: This view of the northern approaches sees Re 4/4II No.11187 bringing the afternoon cement train into Olten on 03/09/17. A train of vans heading north can be seen on the left, whilst a rolling road train can be seen to the right, heading for the Lötschberg.

BOTTOM: As part of the Bahn 2000 project, an underpass was created to allow the Basel lines to pass beneath the Zürich lines. On 06/09/17, No.460105 “FÜRSTENLAND” is seen here propelling a Basel bound train.





threatened with closure several times in the 1990's. The line remains open today and its stations are served by the hourly S9 service, terminating at Sissach, where the old and new lines merge before heading north-west to Basel. The Zürich lines, heading east from Olten, pass through the towns of Dulliken and Däniken before traversing a double track section to the outskirts of Aarau. This 5km section of line creates a severe bottleneck, and a new line tunnelling beneath the town of Schönenwerd is under construction, with an opening date of December 2020. This new line will create a four-track corridor between Zürich and Olten Ost – one of Switzerland's busiest lines.

To the south

To the south of Olten station, there are three pairs of lines. The pair of lines to the left form the alignment of the original lines to Luzern and Bern as far as Aarburg-Oftringen, where the Luzern lines continue south and the Bern lines swing south-west and on to Rothrist, where connections can be made with the high speed Mattstetten lines. Continuing south-west from Rothrist, the original line to Bern is routed via Langenthal and Burgdorf. This line and the Mattstetten line converge once more, some 4km outside Bern. Of the three pairs of lines emanating south from Olten, the middle pair of lines, known as The Born Line, opening in 1981 and being named after the Born Mountain which it passes, heads south, crossing the Aare and forming a direct link to Rothrist for the commencement of the high speed line to Mattstetten. Although the Mattstetten line is a high speed line, with a linespeed of 200 km/h and ETCS (cab) signalling, large volumes of freight are also accommodated. The right hand pair of lines heading south from Olten, immediately swing right and form the lines to Solothurn, Biel/Bienne and Genève (avoiding Bern). This line is very busy with domestic freight trains, feeding Switzerland's largest parcel depot at Härkingen. Other users on this line in the Olten area, with direct rail connections, include the Coop, Migros and Kimberley Clarke. There is also a major railway infrastructure yard – SBB Baudienst, which sees a considerable number of permanent way trains in a 24 hour period. +

(Part Two of this article will appear in a future edition of Swiss Express)

1. The hourly S9 service to Sissach via the Hauenstein summit tunnel and Läfelfingen, is seen here departing Olten on 06/09/2017. The 2-car unit on this occasion is 526742.
2. At Sissach, the Hauenstein summit tunnel line and the Hauenstein "base" tunnel line meet. The summit tunnel line can just be seen at the end of the platform as Re 6/6 No.620 042 "MONTHEY" hurries through the station with a train of tanks heading for Basel on 20/06/18.
3. Re 6/6 11672 "BALERNA" is seen here leading an "Re 20/20" combination at the head of an intermodal train on 20/09/15. The train is entering Olten on the line from Aarburg-Oftringen.
4. Re 6/6 No.620 069 "HAGENDORF" leads Re 4/4II 420 343 on a container train through Rothrist. The train is approaching on the direct line from Olten – the "Born" line. The line in the foreground and the line furthest from the camera are the original lines to Olten via Aarburg-Oftringen.