

Interlude in Wassen

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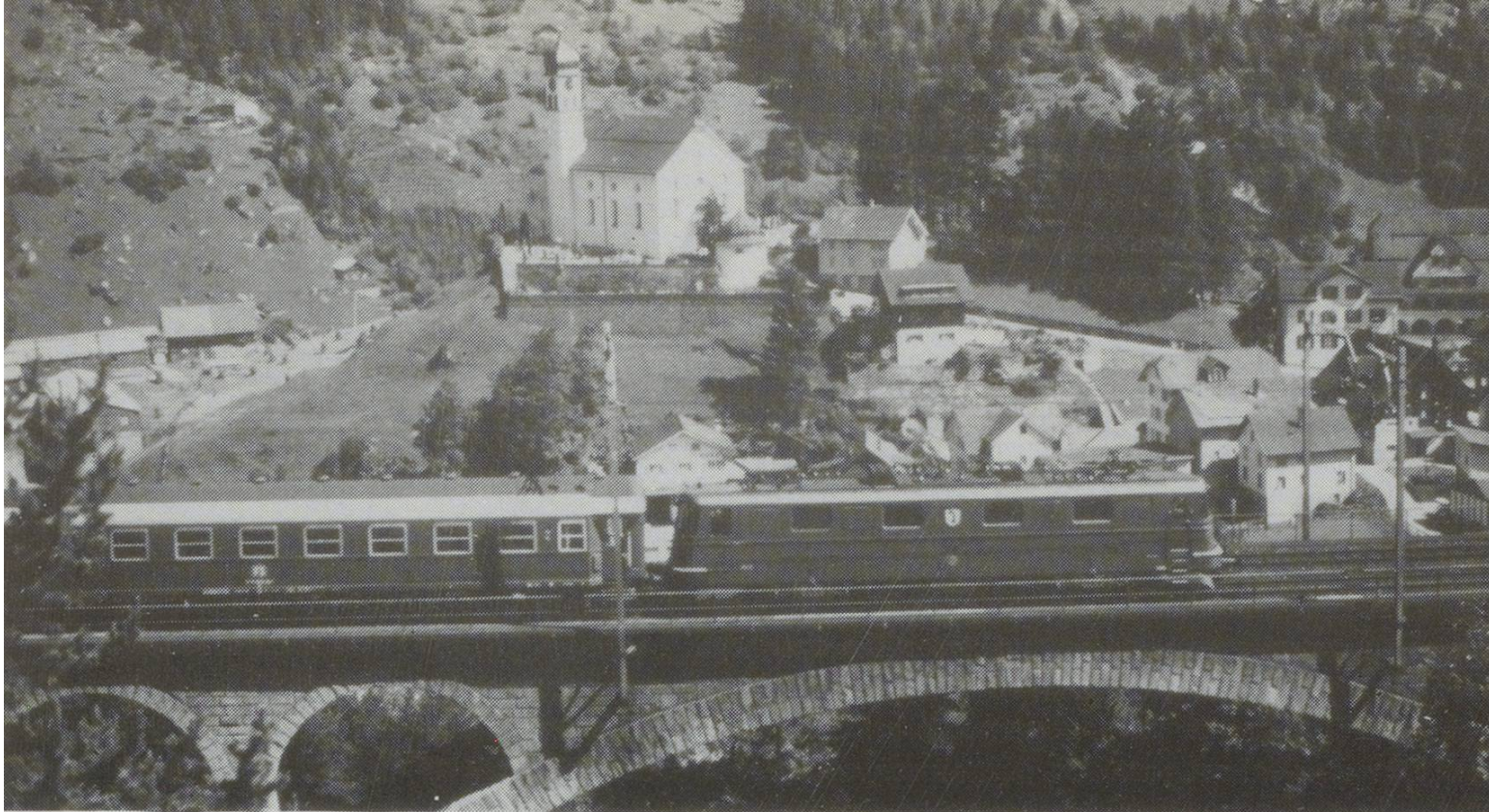
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Interlude in Wassen

by John Jesson

Back in 1974 an assorted group of friends holidayed in Switzerland and, towards the end of our stay we split up to do our own thing and two of us settled on a couple of nights in Wassen. There is probably no Swiss village better known among Swiss railway enthusiasts. So it was that my colleague and I came to arrive at this small community at the junction of the Susten and Gotthard Pass roads. No doubt this fact accounts for the generous sprinkling of hotels, but we chose an inn - cheap and comfortable.

Do you remember 1974? The Re6/6's existed only as prototypes and the *Cantons* still played a major part in Gotthard operation. Two of the three Ae8/14s were still working, as were many Ae4/6s, and *Crocodiles* made an occasional appearance over the Gotthard to and from their repair depot at Bellinzona. The Ruess bridge at Inschi was being rebuilt, with single line working over one span and work was proceeding on that accursed motorway which was to take away much of the pleasure of the scenery for ever.

The motorway was to be the cause of an amusing incident shortly after our arrival. My

Ae 6/6 No 11410 *Basel Stadt* passing in front of Wassen Church.

Photographs by the Author

friend and I had eaten in the bar of the inn - limited choice, but superb quality - and had replenished our glasses, when a group of local citizens (the only other occupants of the bar) invited us to join them. Friendship was soon established with one of the group, who was knocking back litres at a rate of knots, started berating the construction of the motorway. This built up to a crescendo, with the outraged citizen thumping the table, beating his chest, and demanding to know what the motorway would do for him, a resident of Wassen. As everyone else was roaring with laughter, I am sure the poor man felt most frustrated. Incidentally, the entire outburst was in French. With the Inn proprietor speaking Italian, the other locals German and our English, it made an interesting evening.

Well after dark the two of us went for a stroll and, inevitably, ended up at the station. It was the first opportunity I had had to watch axle counters in operation. They work in pairs, the first registering the number of axles on the train and displaying the result. The second counter reached by the train a short distance on, also does its sums and the two results are



compared. If they are the same, the displays cancel out. Presumably any discrepancy rings the bell. We watched the working for a good hour and there were not many occasions when there was no train on the signalling panel which covers from just north of Pfaffensprung spiral tunnel to about halfway between Wassen and Goschenen.

The following morning my friend went on a circular trip via Andermatt, Brig, Domodossola and Locarno, while I stocked up with victuals and sought somewhere to lounge in the sun and watch the trains go by. My intentions were to keep a record of all the rail traffic passing through Wassen and to find one or two secluded spots from where I could take some photographs from unusual angles. My two aims were, of course, incompatible, as it is usually necessary to lose sight of the railway to find a safe route to a promising vantage point.

I did find a suitable spot without too much trouble, a rock ledge overlooking the Meienreuss bridge, partly shaded, and spent much of the day lounging in the sun and wielding notebook and camera. Apart from the Ae6/6s and Re4/4s, one of the prototype

Unidentified Ae6/6 on freight, with Ae8/8 assisting a little way down the train

Re6/6s (No.11601) made an appearance, as did one Ae4/6 and both of the working Ae8/14s, 11801 and 11851. Good fortune was with me, because I even saw a *Crocodile*, 14282, presumably on its way back from Bellinzona after being overhauled as it was double heading a *Canton* on a local freight. A little variety was introduced for about an hour during the afternoon when the northbound line was blocked by the permanent way gang working with a shunting tractor and a couple of wagons.

The resulting single line working over the southbound line thinned out the train service somewhat and, as the sun angle had become favourable for a change, I took the opportunity to move to a new position over one of the Susten pass road tunnels, from where I had a broadside view of the middle bridge with Wassen church in the background. Despite the scramble up the loose rock there, found it a safer place for photography than standing in the road taking a photograph, through the railway

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the section in the same direction. If we replace the IC and Express trains with , for instance, Pendolinos, then it is quite obvious that due to the high speed differential between the tilting trains and the freight and Regional trains, the expresses will be forced to a stop at signals because the section ahead is occupied by a slower train. Two-way signalling, or marshalling two freight trains into one may help a little, but in such a situation, one train at least has to be cancelled. The reserve must be left open for extra trains and maintenance trains.

As it is safe to expect that transit traffic will double in volume by 2010, we need new lines, such as the Basel-Olten and Berne-Lausanne as well as the improvement of existing lines. Only then will it be possible to exploit the higher speed potential of tilting train technology.

3. Commercial Aspects

Trains with tilting body technology must bring in a good return on investment, the more so because they cost 15-20% more per seat than a train of Bahn 2000 design with tilting body coaches. As we have already seen, the savings in time would be rather small, on the Geneva-Berne-Zurich-St.Gallen run, about 25 minutes. This is by no means sufficient to convince a businessman to use the train, since he can travel the same distance in his own car in about the same time.

Since time saving is the crucial factor in the decision to take the train (look at the TGV, IC and the Pendolino in Italy) then we must look at possible longer runs. There are a number of routes that are of interest:

- Bern-Brig-Milan-Venice
- Paris-Macon-Geneva-Brig-Milan-Rome
- Paris-Belfort-Mulhouse-Basel-Zurich
- Stuttgart-Zurich
- Zurich-Vienna

On all these connections enormous time savings would be possible, provided that the Swiss trains were built with four-current technology and are able to travel at the same, or better speeds as the TGV. Another question

is whether the SNCF would be willing to accept such trains on their high speed lines. As these trains would be a serious competitor to the airlines (in Rome or Paris you need almost one hour to reach the centre of the city), the trains would bring increased revenues to the various railways, the more so as it would be possible to reintroduce very fast night connections.

For normal traffic in Switzerland, trains with the NEIKO tilting system could be used, as it would be possible to obtain the required improvements in the sequential timetable. One of the great advantages of the NEIKO system is the low price, the cost of providing NEIKO on the present standard coaches is about 3% of the price of one coach.

4. Final Conclusions

From the aforementioned it is quite clear that we cannot say there is no need for the Pendolino or that we need nothing but Pendolinos. We should use the spare resources where they bring most in returns. On the other hand we should not neglect the shorter runs in Switzerland, where we may achieve with the NEIKO system lower time savings than at present possible, but at a much lower cost and within the overall Bahn 2000 plan.

In this connection it is interesting to note that both the DB and the OBB are using their Pendolinos on lines with low traffic to improve the net running times. It will be interesting to discover the SBB's decision.

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arch, of the church, as in the Marti and Trub Gotthardbahn book.

After this bit of rock scrambling and dodging the road traffic, retired to a field close to the line until the light faded and then met my friend for the last meal of our holiday (and a few more steins with the locals). All in all, a perfect lazy day to end a most enjoyable holiday.