Freightliner in Switzerland, 1968

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Bryan Stone

In September 2016 *Swiss Express* (No.127) published my short '*And finally…*' article, with a picture of a brake test train in Switzerland in 1968 that included two Freightliner flat wagons. These had recently been built in Ashford, Kent, and were part of a batch loaned by British Rail (BR) to the newly-formed, jointly owned Intercontainer company in Basel to start its operations on the European mainland. As the BR representative at Intercontainer I only arrived in Switzerland in January 1969 so I missed the trials, but was told of them. In the absence of any other information, I asked if any reader knew of this. I was delighted that two useful sources of information came up. First, there arrived a BR stock book with the title '*Intercontainer Vehicles*' prepared at Ashford in 1968; this included dimensions and descriptions. Secondly, a member very kindly sent extracts from the '*Railway Gazette*' in which the loan and the project were described. With thanks to these kind people I can supply details of a real operating curiosity.

Freightliner in 1968 was new: it had emerged from the Beeching reshaping proposals to set up a network of fast shuttle block trains (liner trains) to carry large containers between strategic container transhipment terminals, where local over-the-road delivery would take place. The concept was revolutionary and promised low costs through high productivity and high reliability, just what had been missing for decades in rail freight. Regrettably the start was long delayed by strikes over demarcation issues. But terminals were built, and some routes were successful. The same concept, introduced into ocean shipping by Malcolm McLean (a US truck magnate), was about to revolutionise the conservative and orderly ocean shipping world, and soon SeaLand, United States Lines and others were in European ports with shiploads of containers carried in converted tankers. Very quickly, the ISO International standards body agreed standard dimensions, a real breakthrough, for now standard containers could be built and pass through ports under standard vertical lift cranes.

The birth of Intercontainer, with its HQ in Basel, and my job for the next 25-years, was a result: European railways realised that this was the end of their traditional harbour wagonloads, and started to react. Jan Posner was CEO of the BR shipping division and saw that containers would also displace train ferries, so ordered two small custom-built container ships for the Harwich-Zeebrugge service. With Freightliner in Britain, a heavy rail traffic to Italy and Germany, and Intercontainer on the Continent, a start had been made. But the only wagons available east of Zeebrugge were flat bogie wagons, formerly steel carriers, slow, inefficient and heavy. Posner obtained authority to get 60 new Freightliner wagons supplied to Intercontainer. They were shipped over in 1968 by the train ferries and comprised 24 'outer' wagons and 36 'inner' wagons. At once trouble started.

Freightliner wagons were totally unconventional. They were designed with low floors, to carry ISO containers within the BR loading gauge limits. They had small wheels of 850mm nominal diameter, with disk brakes. They were coupled in 5 sets, the end wagons having a raised drawbar to accommodate normal couplings and buffers, the intermediate couplings being rigid bars which also contained the air brake pipe. All these features made them exotic. Air brakes were new in BR freight stock (vacuum was British standard, but many BR wagons at the time had no train brake). Disk brakes were only used on the continent in passenger traffic, whilst 850mm wheels meant severe axle load and speed restrictions in UIC international traffic, whereas in GB they were rated at 70mph (115 kph). Everything would have to be tested.

Despite the mistrust, train sets were formed and tested. Intercontainer, which would later carry 1.5m containers per year, only had minimal traffic at this time, and I do not know if the test wagons ever carried paying cargo. The Swiss brake trials got into my collection with a photo by Schneeberger, who was driving Ce6/8 No.14201, the early crocodile prototype used for such tests. There was no danger of anything like 115 kph! But more ominous is a marginal note in the wagon handbook: three 'inner' wagons had derailed in Rotterdam Waalhaven, on 11th November 1968. The five-sets were not flexible enough for normal manoeuvres. It was too late now; the wagons were returned to Britain before the end of the year. Intercontainer would later buy several thousand container wagons, but they never moved to the block train concept of Freightliner. The productivity and performance were never achieved, but the demand was real as any day at Basel or Chiasso would see several train loads of containers, between northern ports and northern Italy.

Time has passed; containers have changed world trade and ushered in globalisation. Freightliner is also conceptually different, but a major freight operator; Intercontainer was liquidated in the late 1990s. Its heavy traffics went mostly to the new Open Access Operators now successfully working trains in Europe. Containers are the main commodity hauled by international rail, but the chance to learn from Freightliner slipped away. The 60 wagons, of which I have the serial numbers, are probably long scrapped, but at least they tried.

6