

SBB - Thames & Wessex divisions : we live in hope!

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The signing of a cooperation agreement for the bidding on the Wessex and Thames Trains franchises) between the SBB and Laing Investments (Part of the John Laing Group and already the majority shareholder in Chiltern Railways) on the 1st of September created quite a stir in the British media. Trains in Britain could be reliable, clean and punctual again thanks to the Swiss. . .

The Swiss media were more subdued: comments ranged from "An involvement of 100 to 150 million Francs for what?" to "In order to survive in a deregulated environment the SBB must expand and expansion is only possible beyond our national borders". The SEV (railway union) was not impressed: "Hands off this high-risk deal, let's solve our problems at home first" . . .

So what is it all about? First of all, international cooperation contracts involving the SBB are nothing new: freight-SBB/FS, TGV (Ligne de Cour)-SBB/SNCF, Cisalpino-SBB/FS, Rhealis (TGV Est)- SBB/SNCF/DB/CFL, TEE Rail Alliance-SBB/ÖBB/DB and so on. The UK agreement would, however, be a financial and know how involvement. As yet there are no plans for SBB trains from Weymouth to Bern! But there is a great potential for expansion in rail traffic after Beeching, Thatcher and too many others to mention.

Secondly, it is a great chance for the SBB to get experience in an almost deregulated market. Then, contrary to popular belief, there are things we can learn from the British. They actually have lots of good ideas. Sadly, for various reasons, they often fail when implemented. Hopefully, SBB's long experience in running a, mostly, very good railway that most people use and still can identify with may help to avoid some of the pitfalls.

Thirdly, there are the people involved at this stage. At the SBB in Bern there is Andreas

Willich, a 28 year old Bavarian of Swiss ancestry. After he had studied in München and Oxford, Bill Bradshaw (ex BR-GM) convinced him to get some experience with Stagecoach (South West Trains) and Go-Ahead (Thames Trains). He then wrote his thesis on integrated transport in Hampshire and on the Cotswold Line. As Rail Link Manager on the Cotswold Line he set up the plan for a truly integrated line, with coordinated train and bus timetables and with the cooperation of the local authorities. Willich's old boss from Go Ahead, Keith Moffat, is now SBB's "man on the spot" in England. He claims the structures of the SBB and Chiltern Railways are very similar. He also gives the joint venture a good chance in winning the franchises. Chiltern has already been awarded a new 20 year long licence. The Wessex and Thames operations would fit in very well with Chiltern and the authorities want larger networks. Mr Moffat also claims the regulating authorities like SBB's long experience of running a fully integrated railway, matching services as well as the infrastructure with the demand. As far as the bosses go, seen from the almost brotherly greeting of SBB's Benedikt Weibel and Chiltern's Adrian Shooter, the two should get on well. They both like to get things done, but without undue haste or panic.

My own view is that there is more to be gained than lost in this venture. From personal experience I know Chiltern Railways to be a well run railway. I also know some of their people. On the whole they seem to like working there. So I say "lets go for it!". Watch this space.

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