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The new BLS Class Re475 'Vectron' Locomotive

Roger Kemp



BLS Vectron class Re 475 No.402 at Spiez depot coupled to No.401, "German" side. Photo: Roger Kemp

Having authored the SRS publication *'The BLS Today'* I had some contacts at the BLS and I was aware that they were to start taking delivery of a multi-voltage variant of the Siemens 'Vectron' locomotive. This is to be known in Switzerland as Class Re475 and the first two were scheduled to arrive in the country on 30th April. Having exchanged e-mails with the BLS before departure I was fortunate to be granted a visit to its Spiez depot on 30th June whilst staying in Interlaken on holiday.

Arriving at the depot I was informed that the locomotive is equipped to work in The Netherlands, Germany and Italy as well as Switzerland. The aim is to enable BLS Cargo to use this traction to haul through freight trains from Rotterdam to Genova in Italy, using the European designated route via Köln, Basel, Lotschberg/Gotthard, and Milano. A number of amendments have had to be made to the locomotive in order for it to use both 'classic' and high-speed lines in the countries through which it passes, plus special features were also added for Italy as there is still a two driver rule for trains there. As far as the cab itself is concerned, whilst the seating is comfortable, it was noted that there were no side windows next to the windscreen. This means the driver has to rely on cameras on the locomotive to see what would normally be naturally visible from looking through a window, added to which the drivers' console is so cluttered with equipment that they cannot see the end of the machine from the seat. The maximum speed of the locomotive is 200kph, and is designed to be used either singly or in multiple. Because of the need to accommodate equipment needed to handle all the different voltages in the countries where it is intended to be used, there was no room to install "Last Mile" technology – the low-power diesel engine for use in un-electrified freight yards. This is a negative aspect, but obviously BLS has obviously weighed up the balance between using this technology against the facility to reduce freight charges and attract business, as no change of locomotive is required on long trans-European routes. These locomotives also have the highest level of ECTS train protection as well as all the various tweaks needed for the individual countries concerned.

Spare parts will be supplied direct from Siemens, and the

contrast between the layout of the locomotive and older more traditional BLS traction is very marked, hence requiring specialists to undertake repairs. BLS has a training programme for the staff that will carry out this work. The intention was to bring this machine into revenue earning service on 1st July, but by early August it was clear that this date was delayed slightly, as various tests had not yet been completed. The BLS hoped to have a further three locos by August with the full order of 15 to be completed by 2018. This order is a major step change for the BLS as their existing multi-voltage locomotives, classes Re 485 and 486 are both by Bombardier (neither class is cleared for operation in The Netherlands) and therefore the maintenance requirement is different. There is therefore a big challenge for the BLS staff at Spiez depot to ensure that all these locomotives, as well as the older Swiss-built machines such as Re 4/4s, are maintained correctly.

I was given a tour of the interior of the locomotive by a BLS Cargo staff member and it was obvious how new the whole piece of equipment looked. It is very different to the old Re 4/4 locomotives that are still being maintained and continue to be used on freight services. It is interesting also that the livery chosen for this locomotive is very similar to that used on some Class 186 machines leased from Railpool, except that the sides read "BLS Cargo. The Alpinists" in English on one side, or "Die Alpinisten" on the German language side.

Looking at the wider picture it is clear that BLS, with the massive investment in these locomotives, intend them to be used across their network and Europe, for many years. They are stressing the convenience of avoiding locomotive changes en-route with this very advanced design that is very powerful, as it needs to be of course. It was interesting that the delivery announcement came just weeks before the Gotthard Base Tunnel opened, so it looks as if BLS had tried to obtain some advance publicity knowing that when the Tunnel opened it would swamp any other rail news. This was a very interesting, and much appreciated, visit that gave a glimpse into the future for BLS Cargo. I would like to take this opportunity to warmly thank Herr Wolfgang Kling for authorising my visit, and also BLS Cargo's local management for their co-operation - especially for providing an English speaking guide. 