

The Basel Hafenbahn. Part 1

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they proved to be one of the SBB trains with the shortest service life. The 'Chiquitas' were officially withdrawn at the end of September 1997 with the first delivered to a scrap merchant just before that Christmas.

These two classes represent SBB's first generation of EMUs at a time when they were otherwise firmly wedded to locomotives and the flexibility of the electric railcars (e.g., RBe4/4) even to the extent of the first S-Bahn trains being a locomotive plus coaches in a push-pull formation. It is intended that future articles will cover the SBB's second generation of EMUs being introduced for seemingly all types of passenger train. 

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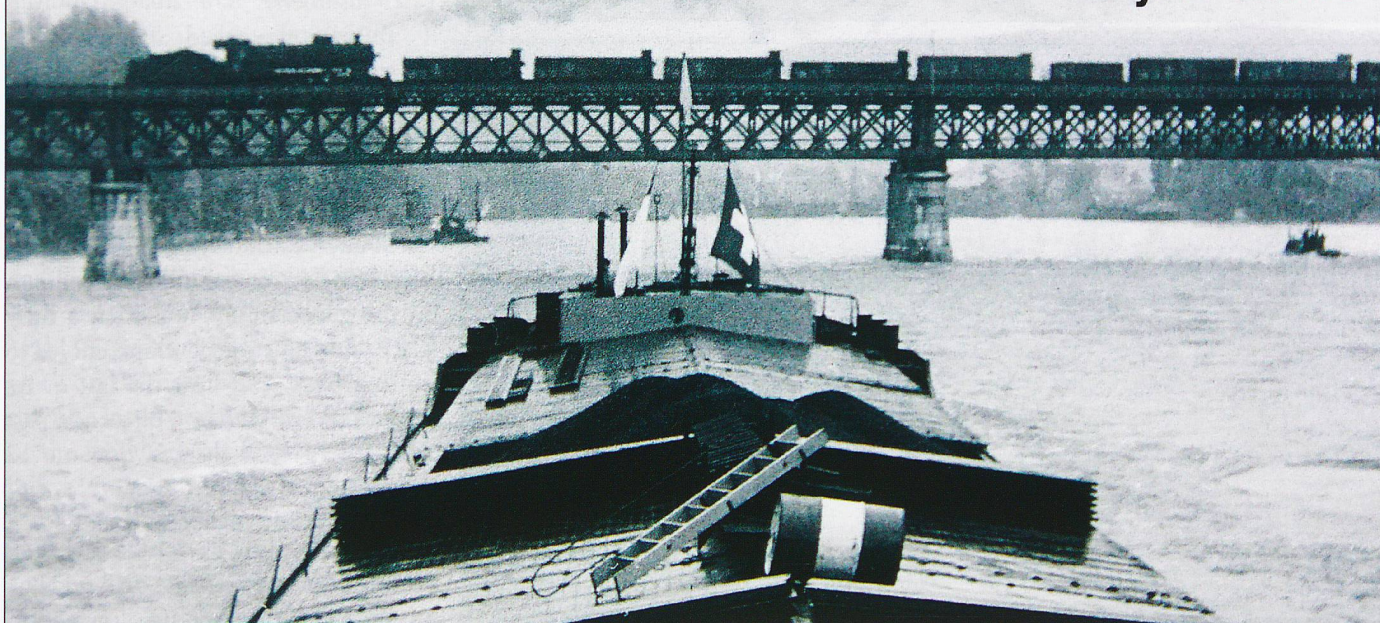
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The Basel Hafenbahn – Part 1

Bryan Stone



A harbour transfer freight with C5/6 on the Verbindungsbahn bridge in the 1940s.

Photo: Basel City Archive

Photos: Bryan Stone except where shown

There is in Basel today a heavily used private railway, which few ever see, that serves the Rhein harbours. It is nearly 100 years old, so it's time the SRS looked at it. But first, the Rhein harbours in Basel: what and where are they? It is a long history, dating from pre-Roman times, but although boats have navigated the Rhein above Basel, and downstream to the North Sea, for at least 2,500 years, the present docks have only a short history. This concerned two principal locations in the city, St Johann and Kleinhüningen, and a further point upstream, at Birsfelden.

There is today a busy city corner on the Rhein in Basel, still called 'Schifflande' - the landing-place. This refers not to today's passenger boats, which greet tourists there, but the historic meeting place of road and river, in continuous use since the opening of the Gotthard route to Italy in the 13thC. Archaeology has shown that before that it was a major European crossroads, also for routes to the Roman port. These came from the Alps via Aventicum, present day Avenches, and the Romans had followed the paths of the Celts. But when the first steam paddleboats came up the river in the 1830s they lay

alongside on the left bank further downstream, passenger steamers behind the Three Kings Hotel, colliers in the St Johann district. They were necessarily small, for the river below Basel was not dredged and had many shallows and meanders, making navigation dangerous and unpredictable.

The St. Johann River Quays

The opening of the Strasbourg – Basel railway in 1844 put an end to these ventures. In 1870, with the Prussian invasion of Alsace, the French rail lines became the Alsace-Lorraine State Railway (A-L). The St Johann quarter, northwest of the city centre, on the west bank, soon became an industrial area, with the city gasworks and other premises between the Alsace railway and the river. Inevitably, after 1905 as the river was made navigable above Strasbourg, the first quays were built along the riverbank to handle gas-coal from Germany.

Rail connection to these quays came as an extension of sidings from the A-L line, first built by the Basel City authorities, to develop the industrial area. These were first worked from Basel by locomotives and personnel of the Swiss



Central Railway, although the A-L main line from Mulhouse was worked into the city by that organisation's equipment. The gasworks, connected in 1882 by rail, had its own shunting engine. By 1905, with railway nationalisation, SBB became responsible. However, in 1901 the Alsace line had been diverted over a longer alignment further south into the city's new SBB station, whilst the sidings were then re-connected from a new St. Johann goods station. This included a direct line, in part just inside the frontier to Alsace, into the quayside area. These sidings crossed the city streets, including the then tram route to Hüningen in Alsace, on the level, so proceedings were often disorderly.



Business flourished, and two E 3/3 'Tigerli' steam locomotives from Basel SBB shed (after 1960 usually Em3/3 diesels) were almost always needed. In 1981 some 18,000 wagons were consigned to or from the St Johann harbour. Additionally 26,000 wagons were handled for the industrial sidings, so the goods station was then a busy place. Subsequent redevelopment led to cutting back, and now the last quays have closed with little to be seen of past industry. In 1934 the gasworks moved across the river; the new Novartis Campus mostly occupies the site.

Kleinhüningen Docks

By 1909 the traffic level was over-running the St Johann quay. Moreover, water levels were variable and always a limiting factor on loads. Planning of a new harbour was urgent. Thought turned to the then open land between the fishing village of Kleinhüningen and the Rhein, just inside the frontier with the German State of Baden to the north of the city. In 1873 the Rhein railway bridge belatedly completing the connection Badischer Bahnhof - Basel Wolf, was opened, allowing German trains to run into Basel Centralbahnhof, later Basel SBB. But there was also a complication: the short railway including the bridge east of Basel was



TOP/MIDDLE: Be6/8 III No.13301 pulling a transfer freight out of the harbour at Kleinhüningen Hafen.

LEFT: Be 6/8 No.13303 at Basel in 1976. Nos.13303 and 13305 crocodiles followed the steamers as preferred harbour power.

built by a new company, the Basler Verbindungsbahn (the Basel 'Connecting Railway'), owned jointly by the Baden State Railway and the SCB – from 1901 the SBB. The Verbindungsbahn had its own rules, and a tariff surcharge of 25km to pay for the bridge. Basel City was prepared to develop a harbour at Kleinhüningen where the depth of water was better assured. The SBB however was opposed; a new harbour should neither give traffic to the German railways, nor use the Verbindungsbahn. Their agreement therefore pre-supposed a new Rhein bridge, to connect the new harbour to the existing rail connections in St Johann. This was never built, although plans were drawn up and approved for a new combined road and rail bridge where, since the mid-1930s, the Dreirosen highway bridge crosses the river. Now other events intervened as in 1914 the First World War commenced. Although barge traffic on the Rhein continued, coal deliveries sank to desperate levels. Also the Badischer Bahnhof and the Verbindungsbahn were closed. In 1919 work on the harbour started. In 1922 the first load of coal arrived in Basin 1 of the new harbour, and the Harbour railway was ready.

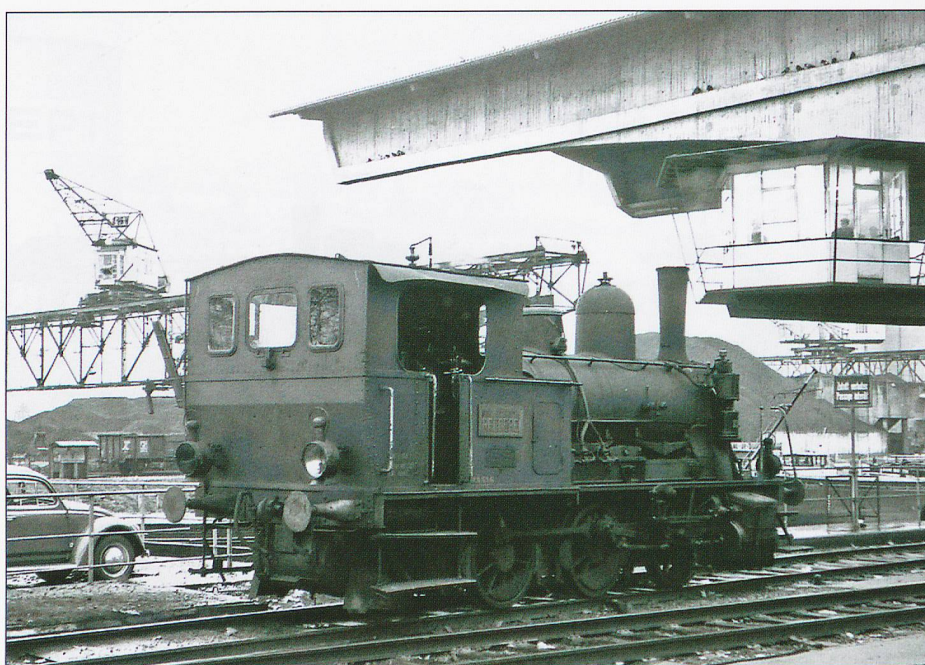
The Harbour Railway

The SBB was prepared to drop its opposition to the new harbour as the city determined that traffic should be charged in parity to that in St Johann. This required that the city compensated the SBB and also the Verbindungsbahn. This was very costly - worse than one might think. This was because the Harbour line also crossed German railway lines in their shunting yards. For this, a penalty charge was raised by the DR (later DB) for interrupting operations and by the 1990s this had reached some CHF500,000 annually. Charges stopped abruptly following a meeting (which this writer attended), where it was observed that as it had greatly reduced its operations and infrastructure

TOP/MIDDLE: Nos.8904 and 11498 at Basel loco. No.8904 was the last E4/4 heavy harbour shunter (and last steamer in Basel, 1968).


RIGHT: E4/4 No.8909, shunting in the harbour yards. Photo: Marcel Broennle





the DB had stopped using that shunting yard! The overall costs are still a most complicated account, because the Swiss Confederation also contributes to the costs of the Harbour and its railway as a national strategic installation.

Basel City owned the dock and had its own harbour department. It owned the dock railway, but contracted with SBB for construction, infrastructure and operation. The access line climbs from the yard on the riverbank to run along the Swiss/German frontier and connects with the DB at the Badischer Bahnhof. It is 2.11 km long, but has to climb from the riverbank, with a grade of 14% since the Badischer Bahnhof is on a viaduct leading to the Verbindungsbahn bridge. Harbour transfers ran at first into Basel Wolf yard, but building of a north to east curve from the Rhein bridge allowed direct access to MuttENZ yard, 7 km from the harbour. For many years this was the method of operation, and mixed wagonload trains for all Swiss destinations were re-marshalled into regular services from MuttENZ. Today incoming cargo is partly worked as block trains without further marshalling. Although in practice SBB personnel, the staff of the Harbour railway are still nominally employed by the City.

From the start the railway operations in the port included a marshalling yard, a group of four tracks for departing and arriving trains; extensive stabling sidings, a turntable, and a small locomotive shed. There are sidings connecting to quays and warehouses, and today serving the extremely busy container quays. There was a large mechanical signal box, which lasted until 2017 before a new electronic panel, paid for by Basel City, as railway owner, took over. 

*We will continue the story of this unique railway in a forthcoming edition of **Swiss Express**.*

TOP: E9102 at MuttENZ. E9102 was a hired DB veteran which hauled harbour freights in the early 70s.

MIDDLE: The Schweizerische Reederei 'Tigerli', shunting the quayside.

LEFT: A block train leaving the Birsfelden/Auhafen docks in May 2004, with Re4/4 and Re6/6 power.