

Building a better route to Canada's west coast

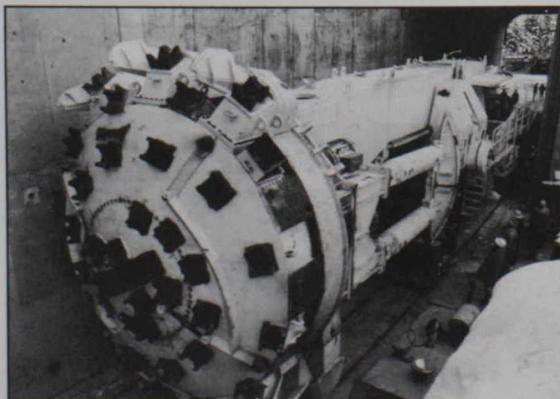
Near the centre of the Mount Macdonald Tunnel are two air tunnels which run to the 350-meter-deep ventilation shaft that travels to the top of Rogers Pass. To the left is the main railway tunnel, while on the right, the lining operation is underway on the western air tunnel. The rails in place are for a narrow gauge railway that was used to transport men and materials in and out of the tunnel.



Photos: CP Rail

While the UK and France continue work on the Channel Tunnel, Canada has announced completion of a similar project: the construction – on time and well under budget – of a 21-mile-long railway line through (and under) the massive Selkirk Mountains of British Columbia.

Assembly of the 302-tonne boring machine, nicknamed the mole, began in 1984. The 6.7m diameter mole was used to remove the top portion of the 14.6km Mount Macdonald Tunnel. In April, 1986, it set a world record for boring over 62m of rock in 24 hours.



When the idea of building a tunnel beneath the English Channel was brought to the fore in the early 1980s, one of the driving forces behind it – at least from a UK point of view – was the need to give British manufacturers direct-rail access to markets throughout the rest of the European Community.

At about the same time, Canada found itself with a similar challenge. It needed to give its eastern manufacturers greater access to its western ports, so they could more easily tap the lucrative markets of the Pacific Rim.

Of course, a direct rail-link joining Canada's east and west coasts already existed – and had done for more than 100 years. However, the CP Rail route involved a steep climb through the Selkirk Mountains of British Columbia, where the line passed through Rogers Pass – 4300 feet above sea level in the midst of mountains that soar to more than 11 000 feet.

To cut westbound journey times, and to boost the railway's capacity to Canada's west coast