



The Royal Coaches of Ladybrand. The move to Sandstone.

Early in August this year Sandstone learned that two ex-South African Railways coaches in the Ladybrand area, used as a BnB and believed to be from the Royal Train of 1947, needed to be moved as new developments were to take place on the site and the coaches were in danger of being scrapped. The BnB had been in operation since the late 1990s.

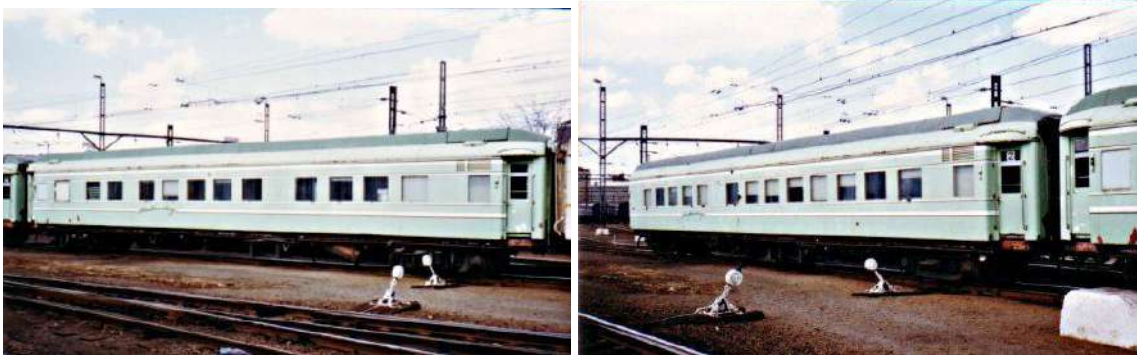


The Royal Coaches as a BnB in 2007. Picture courtesy of Keith Simmons.

Sadly the owner was now unwell and the coaches needed to be moved with some urgency. The theme of the BnB had always been of a "Royal" nature with the coaches converted into large bedrooms and lounge areas. The "Royal" theme came about as the coaches were always believed to be from the Royal Train of 1947. Initial research revealed that they ended their life as part of the, now defunct, Drakensberg Express. This train used the original coaching set from the Blue Train when the "new" Blue Train coaching set was introduced in 1972. The Drakensberg Express ran between Durban and Johannesburg until 1985 when it was discontinued and the entire coaching stock was put up for sale. It is known that after the Royal Train was decommissioned some coaches were transferred to the Blue Train and thus ultimately became part of the Drakensberg Express set.

In 1985 the coaches were sold to a company called Trains Galore but seem to have seen little if any use and were still in Braamfontein yard in Johannesburg in 1996. Sometime after this they were sold to the Ladybrand operation.

This did not negate the Royal Train theory, however, and Sandstone was able to access the South African Transport Services sales information which showed that these coaches, Type C 31-A 8197 and C 31-B 8200, were in fact from the Royal Train set of 1947 and were numbered R2 and R5.



8200 and 8197 in Braamfontein Yard, Johannesburg in 1996. Pictures courtesy of Geoff Pethick.

These type of coaches, which were already in use on the Blue Train, always ran in pairs with an A and a B together as the C 31-B was fitted with a boiler for hot water to serve the two coaches unlike the traditional steam heating system generally used on South Africa Railways. The numbers R2 and R5 indicated that they were the second and fifth coaches behind the locomotive on the Royal Train and were built in 1947 especially for use on the Royal Train together with a third example, numbered R1 which was placed directly behind the locomotive. As neither coach has a boiler fitted now, we cannot, as yet, identify which coach is which but we do know that R2 was a staff coach for South African members of the Royal party and R5 was for Royal staff. Once the Royal Tour was over R2 and R5, together with R1, were repainted in the Blue Train livery and transferred to that service. The current interiors of the coaches, modified for the BnB, are completely changed from the original layouts so more detective work is required although it is believed that the coach numbers are stamped on the centre of the frames as was standard practice in the day. This was to assist identification in case of a fire destroying the body. After years of accumulated dust, dirt and rust this may take a while! We will also check the interior to see if we can identify where the boiler was installed on one of the coaches, the C 31-B. This will ID that coach as 8200.

Gert Jubileus and his team from the Sandstone Steam Railway found that the coaches at the BnB were standing on their original bogies next to a platform but had sunk into the ground over the last twenty years or so as well as taking a slight lean from vertical!



The two coaches as found with a distinct lean angle!

A lot of digging was required to free the coaches and also keep them in an upright position to avoid them from toppling over prior to lifting. A temporary road had to be created for the coaches to clear the platform area and run on level ground to connect with the outside access road.



Building a road out of the Ladybrand site.

How to move them on road was solved as Sandstone still had a pair of road dolly wheels that were fabricated in 2004 to move the coaches bought by Sandstone from the old Train Restaurant in Midrand to Boksburg where they were put back on rail for transit to Sandstone. A search of the truck workshop at Sandstone soon produced the two dollies, although the tyres were in dire need of replacement, not surprising after 20 years! These dollies fit into the rail bogie mountings under the rear of the coaches and enable a mechanical horse to act as a road locomotive by using a special 5th wheel coupling at the front of the coach and pull the coaches along. A special road haulage permit was required and obtained for this special non-standard movement.



Removal of the rail bogie.



The first coach lifted off their front rail bogie and placed on a special 5th wheel mounting on the Sandstone truck.

A 40 ton crane was brought in to lift the coaches clear of their bogies at each end and fit the 5th wheel mount and road dollies. The crane also stabilised the coach until the dolly was firmly mounted on the coach and connected to the Sandstone IH horse, "Geel Mielie" with its driver, Thabiso Makgetha.



The road dolly in position at the rear of the coach



The first coach hauled by "Geel Mielie" arrives at Sandstone.

At Sandstone a decision had to be taken as to where to place the coaches. The current coach collection is in a covered shed below the main complex but this area was unable to provide any space. The solution was to remove two water wagons from the shed near the main gate that houses all the 3'6" gauge locomotives moved from Germiston in 2021. (See the YouTube video of this enormous logistical exercise <https://youtu.be/cUJrVrn3U90>). Additional track was laid outside that shed to simplify access for the crane and unloading process. At this point the coaches were lifted from the road dollies and placed on their original bogies on rail. Once on rail the coaches were moved under the shed and the additional track removed.



After additional track was laid at the end of the shed, the water tankers were rolled out and the coaches placed in front of them by crane and then rolled back under the shed.

The two coaches are now under cover where they will be plumbed in to water and sewerage. The intention is to rehabilitate the interiors into semi luxury accommodation for visitors to Sandstone. Their history will be displayed and they will be safely kept for generations to come.



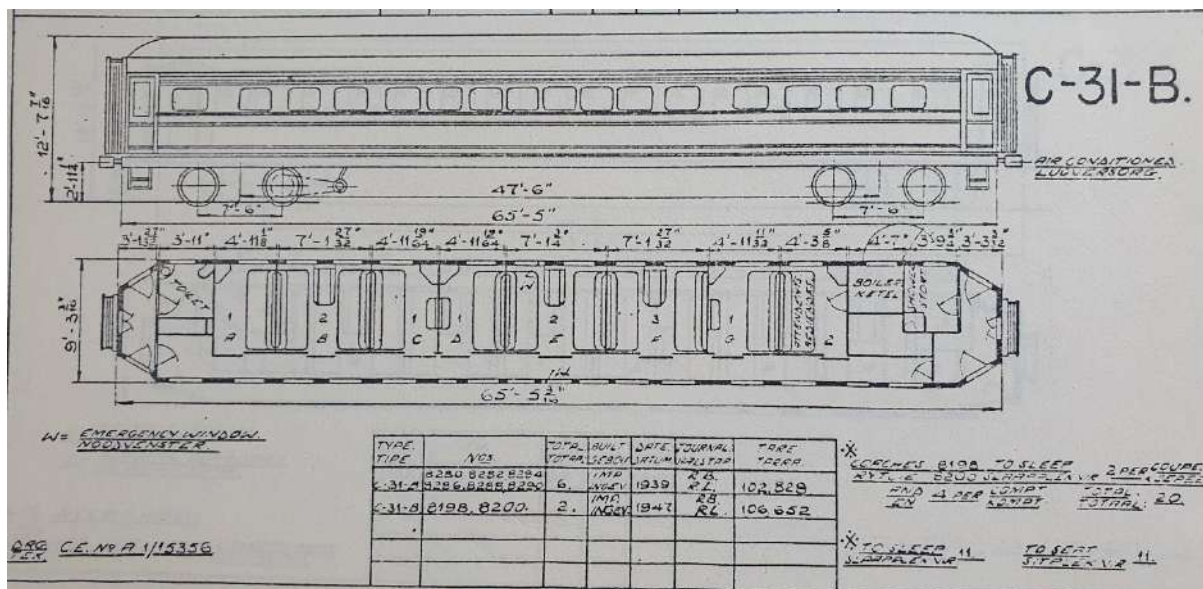
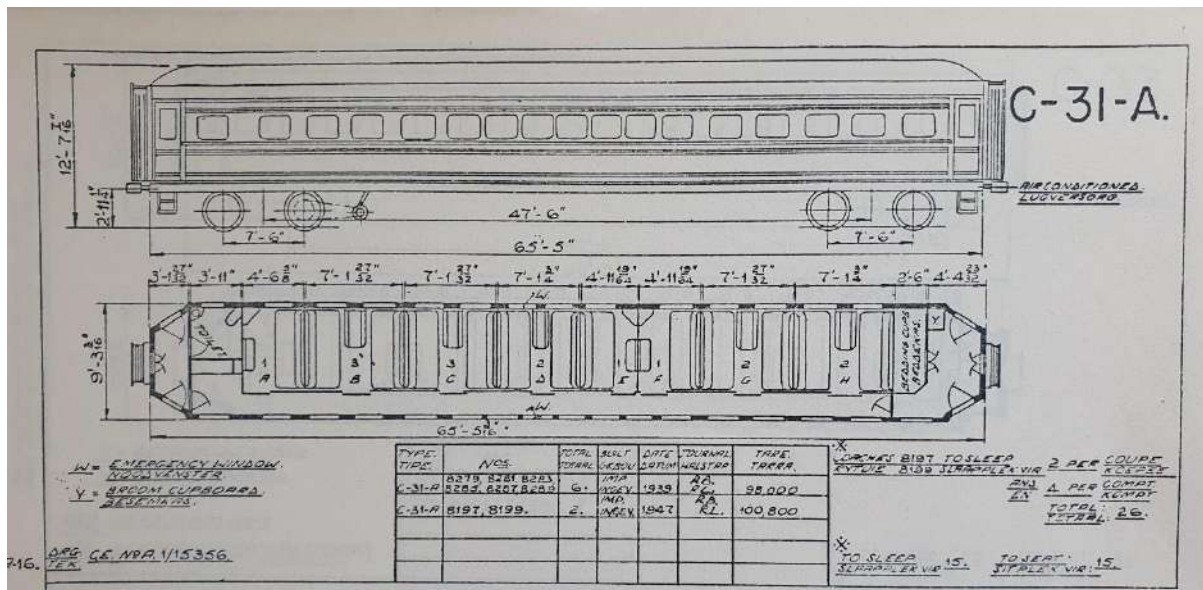
The Royal Coaches under cover after the two week moving operation.



The BnB paid homage to the British Royal family.



Coach R7 from th Royal Train is preserved in the Railway Museum in George in South Africa.



The South African Railways diagrams for the two Royal Coaches from Ladybrand.

All pictures by Gert Jubileus except where otherwise stated.

Our thanks to Franciscus Boshoff for sharing the SATS coach sales records from 1985 with us and to Peter Stow, the acknowledged expert on South African coaches, for his invaluable advice and assistance in identifying the coaches.