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Locos make final journey

In a historical first for preservation rail in Gauteng, several 3'6" steam locomotives said their final goodbye to Reefsteamers last week.

Their destination was Sandstone Heritage Trust outside Ficksburg in the eastern Free State.

The locomotive engines are assets of Sandstone Heritage Trust, which were leased to Reefsteamers.

Dave Richardson from Sandstone said there had been growing concerns about the safety of the locomotives and the decision to relocate the locomotives was taken following the liquidation of the Germiston-based club.

"For nearly two years since the liquidation, Sandstone has paid for security to protect the assets. The rail infrastructure around the depot was being stolen at an alarming rate and we were worried about the safety of the assets," Dave said.

What made the journey a first from Gauteng was that the locomotives were moved by road. This is only the second time in SA rail history such a move has been undertaken. The first, also undertaken by Sandstone, took place in August when the trust relocated its assets from Bloemfontein.

The mammoth task will ensure the engines, tankers and a crane are preserved at the Sandstone farm.

The team behind the move planned to hit the roads by Thursday last week, but permit delays meant most of the engines would only reach the farm, some 400km away, on Tuesday this week.

Among those moved was Lyndie Lou, the first locomotive acquired by Sandstone's Wilfred Mole. After the acquisition from Randfontein, the engine was fully restored and lovingly named after his wife.

Weighing in at over 150 tonnes, the Garratt engine was used by Rovos Rail and Reefsteamers for regular trips.

Class 15F 3052 "Avril" NBL 25591/1944, a Rhodesia Railways DE2 Diesel Electric RR No. 1207 English Electric 2238/1955, Cowans and Sheldon steam crane 355/1965 SAR No. 578 also formed part of the move. Avril was gifted to artist David Shepherd in 1991 and, according to Wilfred, was entrusted to Sandstone as one of Shepherd's dying wishes.

"Sandstone is a safe place for these giants, but it is unlikely they will be used again," Dave said.

He explained all the locomotives moved ran a 3'6" gauge and that the farm featured a private two-feet narrow gauge.

Wilfred said while it was sad to see the locomotives leave Germiston, the risk of leaving them was too high.

"I've been coming here for 25 years, but I don't think I'll ever come back now. I have no reason."

He added the stolen rail infrastructure around the depot was deplorable.

"Preservation rail has become all but obsolete and these engines are valuable and rare."

Extensive planning

To get the trains on the trucks, specially made tracks were assembled. Additionally, a section of the road, which leads to the Reefsteamers Depot, snakes through a narrow tunnel. The gravel road through the tunnel had to be dug out to allow for the loaded trucks to pass underneath.

The route was meticulously planned and would take the N3 to Villiers. From there, the trucks would need to connect to old travel routes to avoid bridges. The route then passed Warden towards Bethlehem and finally Ficksburg.

Road vs rail

Dave said to do move by rail would have been nearly impossible.

"The cost to do it is exorbitant and there are sections of the railway that have become impassable due to a lack of maintenance and theft."

Adding to this, the rail lines do not pass the farm directly, which would have meant the use of trucks to move them to the farm anyway.

The assets, which remain at Reefsteamers, are the property of Transnet.



Dave Richardson next to one of the first locomotive engines to be loaded up at Reefsteamers.

