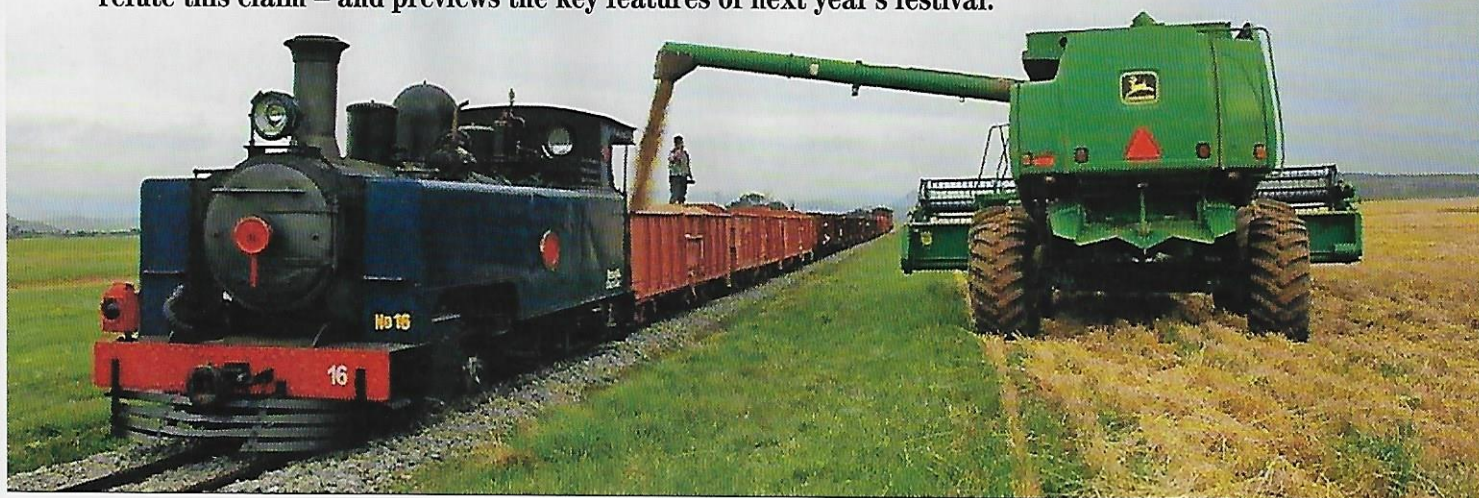


# Replica or Authentic?

Stars of Sandstone 2019 in South Africa will be a highlight for narrow gauge enthusiasts worldwide. Yet one European rail-tour operator won't arrange a visit, stating the venue is 'artificial'. *Wilfred Mole* of Sandstone hastens to refute this claim – and previews the key features of next year's festival.



There are many misconceptions about what we do at Sandstone and hence we are taking this opportunity presented by *NGW* to clarify the position. Otherwise we could become discredited as a falsely presented destination.

We ended up with some locomotives as a result of the unexpected closure of the Midmar Museum in Natal. We were asked by Transnet (*the South African rail company – Ed*) at the time if we'd store locomotives, rail and the like and agreed to help them. After that the railways disowned the assets completely. We negotiated to take them over, built a small section of line and restored one locomotive.

We have always been committed to using the railway for crop movement purposes. Our main grain silos have a 2ft gauge siding which goes right through the complex so we can off-load quickly. It is therefore an industrial and agricultural installation that like so many narrow gauge systems was built with a purpose.

In fact that was the primary reason why we decided to lay rail in the first place. We knew little or nothing about rail preservation and were rather surprised to see the number of people who expressed interest in what we were doing.

Ironically the first two big events at Sandstone, the Great 100 Working in 1999 and the Great 400 working

**Above: Clearly demonstrating Sandstone's agricultural heritage is this January 2009 view of Kerr Stuart NG4 4-6-2T no 16 bringing in the harvest.**

**Below: Found in Angola, this tiny Decauville 0-4-0T of 1899 recently prompted a couple to fly from the USA just to see it. Photo: Thomas Kautzor**

in 2002, were both attempts on the world vintage tractor ploughing record and the train was completely incidental. We actually parked it there so that people could have a better view of the 888 tractors working in one field at one time.

The railway came to the attention of many people because they had an opportunity to ride on it for a short distance and the enthusiasm generated was overwhelming. We therefore decided to keep it going and there is now in excess of 30km of narrow gauge line in use.

Certainly the amount of interest from railway enthusiasts and tourists in general has exceeded our expectations. There are many private charters that come to Sandstone such as the one from an American couple who flew all the way from the USA just to look at our Decauville loco.

We tracked this little engine down in the bush in southern Angola while looking for military vehicles. However, never in our wildest dreams would we have thought that a man and his wife would fly all that way just to see it. The point here is that he wanted to see the locomotive and we don't think he cared where it was. Its environment is pleasing. It is in the countryside, it's on a rural agricultural railway where it also started life in Angola. If we thought we were creating something false would we have bothered?

If challenged to explain why it was removed from its original habitat we would say that we had no choice, it was a genuine refugee and if it was not moved quickly it was going to die. Ironically that story can be repeated many, many times over with



our fleets of locomotives.

Over and above what we have working in both 3ft 6in Cape Gauge and 2ft narrow gauge we've got a lot of locomotives in storage. We never really wanted them because we needed them, we acquired them because they were endangered.

## Cape Gauge assets

As far as our 3ft 6in gauge equipment is concerned, it's wrong to imply that the Sandstone Heritage Trust is a sort of glorified Disney World or false operating environment. The Bloemfontein/Bethlehem line built in 1907 runs through the farm and we have two sidings at Vailima and Kommandonek. We have four locos stored at Kommandonek, namely 15F no 2910, 15CB no 2071 and 25NC nos 3496 and 3536.

Why don't we operate steam engines on the line since we own more than sufficient genuine South African Railways stock? You could argue that it was worked by 25 class locomotives like those we rescued but because of the cost of operating them and the lack of interest we didn't do so. We weren't trying to be unoriginal – we were just being driven by market demand. Sandstone is working with Derick du Toit of Ceres Rail to move quite a number of our locomotives including a 19D, 24 Class, 15F, GMAM and others down to the Western Cape where they will be more suitable for use on genuine South African lines.

## Lack of authenticity?

What should be taken into account in refuting the claim by this tour operator is how locomotives can migrate from railway to railway in



**Above: Hoekfontein station, originally on the Bethlehem to Bloemfontein main line, dates back to 1907 and creates an authentic picture at Sandstone. Photo: Marc Henri Andre**

**Below: Splendid reflections! At Sandstone exists a unique chance to see a pair of British-built Fawley 4-4-0s in action. NG97 and NG106 were both built by Falcon of Loughborough in 1895. Photo: Rod Hering. All uncredited photos: Sandstone Heritage Trust**

their lifetime. Our two Lawleys started life on the Beira-Umtali line in 1895. This was then re-gauged and members of this class followed a series of paths which took them to a citrus orchard and timber plantations. A few ended up on the South African Railways 2ft gauge systems in the Eastern Cape.

These Lawleys can't talk but we know they have an interesting story to tell. They have had a migratory career and ended up at Sandstone many years ago. One could argue that unless they were operating on the original Beira-Umtali line, anything that happened after that was artificial. In Sandstone's case they're on a railway that's now 20 years old and they have already been here for over 15 years. They only spent three years on the Beira line before it was re-gauged! With them operating happily around Sandstone it is the only opportunity for people who are

interested in this type of locomotive to see them in action.

Why is the operation of our Lawleys on an agricultural railway in Africa not (in the words of our critic) an acceptable compromise? Let's put it this way – if we were in a court defending our position we are very confident that we would have a strong case to put forward on the way our railway has developed, firstly as an agricultural railway and then expanding into tourism. It is a pattern that has been followed by many lines around the world. Sadly many of them get closed and they have unhappy endings.

## Sandstone's vision

Sandstone is not a centrally focused interest but broadly based. We try to present to the public a holistic picture. Imagine a 100-year old steam locomotive pulling out of Hoekfontein station, which was built »





**Left: Highlight of Stars of Sandstone 2019 will be the return of the sole surviving NG10 4-6-2. Seen in better days at Humewood Road depot, Port Elizabeth about 1973, it was built by Baldwin in 1916. Photo: G Barnes**

**Below: Restoration of no 61 was well advanced on 22nd June when this photo was taken for NGW. Crews liked the typically American large cab and were not happy with the more cramped successor NGG13 Garratts. Photo: Lukas Nel**

in 1907 and was originally the station building at Kommandonek on the main line. It was taken down in 1933 when replaced by a brick structure and moved to a local farm where it was used as a store room until we identified what it was. We moved it from the farm (which we owned) to Hoekfontein and it presents a highly

original picture. It isn't at Kommandonek because it was planned for demolition and even its successor has now been pulled down.

What motivates us is the whole picture. If you remove the steam locomotive it would diminish the experience but it wouldn't destroy the outing. What Sandstone does makes

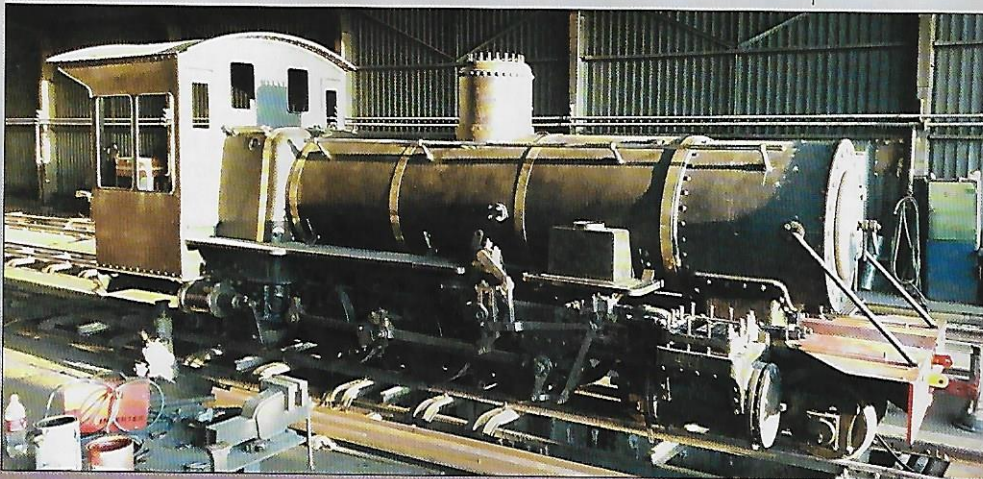
us happy and we are pleased to say that it makes our visitors happy too. This is a massive multi-faceted act of expediency which pleases most of the people most of the time.

We are concerned that a misguided view might be an opportunity lost to those who follow negative opinions. We are doing what we're doing because we like doing it, because we think it's the next best thing we can do after missing the opportunity to book a seat on the time machine. Most importantly we have never claimed to be something we are not. Finally we've had to pay for it so you can say to some extent we've put our money where our mouths are.

We are pleased at Sandstone that this subject has been raised as it has compelled us to explain that we aren't pulling the wool over people's eyes. There is a bigger than acceptable misconception that we are a sort of a theme park and we are glad of the opportunity to define the reality of the situation.

### Stars of Sandstone 2019

You can see for yourself by attending Stars of Sandstone from the 4th to 14th April 2019. It promises to be the best ever and particularly so for rail enthusiasts. The sole surviving ex South African Railways Class NG10 4-6-2 no 61 will return to service at the event after a two-year restoration and having been out of traffic for 58 years. This is a truly remarkable feat as the locomotive was basically written off as unrepairable some 25 years ago!



The ever-popular Stargazer Express will run in the evenings to enable our guests to enjoy the beauty of the African sky after dark and also provide some unique photographic opportunities. Photographers will also be well catered for with limited numbers on early morning photo shoots with selected locomotives and consists.

On the Transnet 3ft 6in network, Sandstone has teamed up with the iconic Blue Train to offer a package to the event from 3rd to 6th April. This includes two days at the Festival on the 4th and 5th April including the launch of the NG10. The train will travel from Pretoria to Vailima (at Sandstone) on the 3rd and 4th and the 5th will be spent at the event as VIP guests. The return journey will be overnight on the 5th arriving in Pretoria on the morning of the 6th. This truly luxury experience will be perfect for those who only wish to spend a shorter period at Sandstone and then have other time to explore South Africa.

The narrow gauge railway is the key attraction at Stars of Sandstone as it basically operates non-stop throughout the daylight hours (and at night with the Stargazer Express). But other heritage attractions will take their turn at centre stage throughout the event. These include military displays, agricultural displays and competitions, modern farming tours, vintage aircraft, classic cars, trucks and buses, traction engines and steam portables. A full food village will be set up to meet visitors' needs together with craft beer stalls

**Top right: NG15 2-6-2 no 17 plays a key role during the May 2004 harvest. When a similar photo was published in NGW the previous year, a reader described it as one of the most encouraging pictures of modern narrow gauge operation he had ever seen.**

**Centre right: The Stargazer Express will undoubtedly be a popular evening train – especially when double-headed by a pair of Garratt locos. Hunslet-Taylor no 153 and Beyer Peacock no 113 in 2015. Photo: Rod Hering**

**This page: Early morning photo opportunities during the unforgettable South African sunrise will again be a feature of next year's Stars of Sandstone. NGG13 Garratt no 49 was heading a tanker train run-past at 06.55 during the 2017 event. Photo: Marc Henri Andre**



and coffee shops. A full South African culinary experience for all!

Stars of Sandstone 2019 will be unique in the world and should not be missed. **NGW**

#### More Information

For enquiries and information on the Stars of Sandstone 2019 festival contact Dave Richardson on [daver@sandstone.co.za](mailto:daver@sandstone.co.za)

