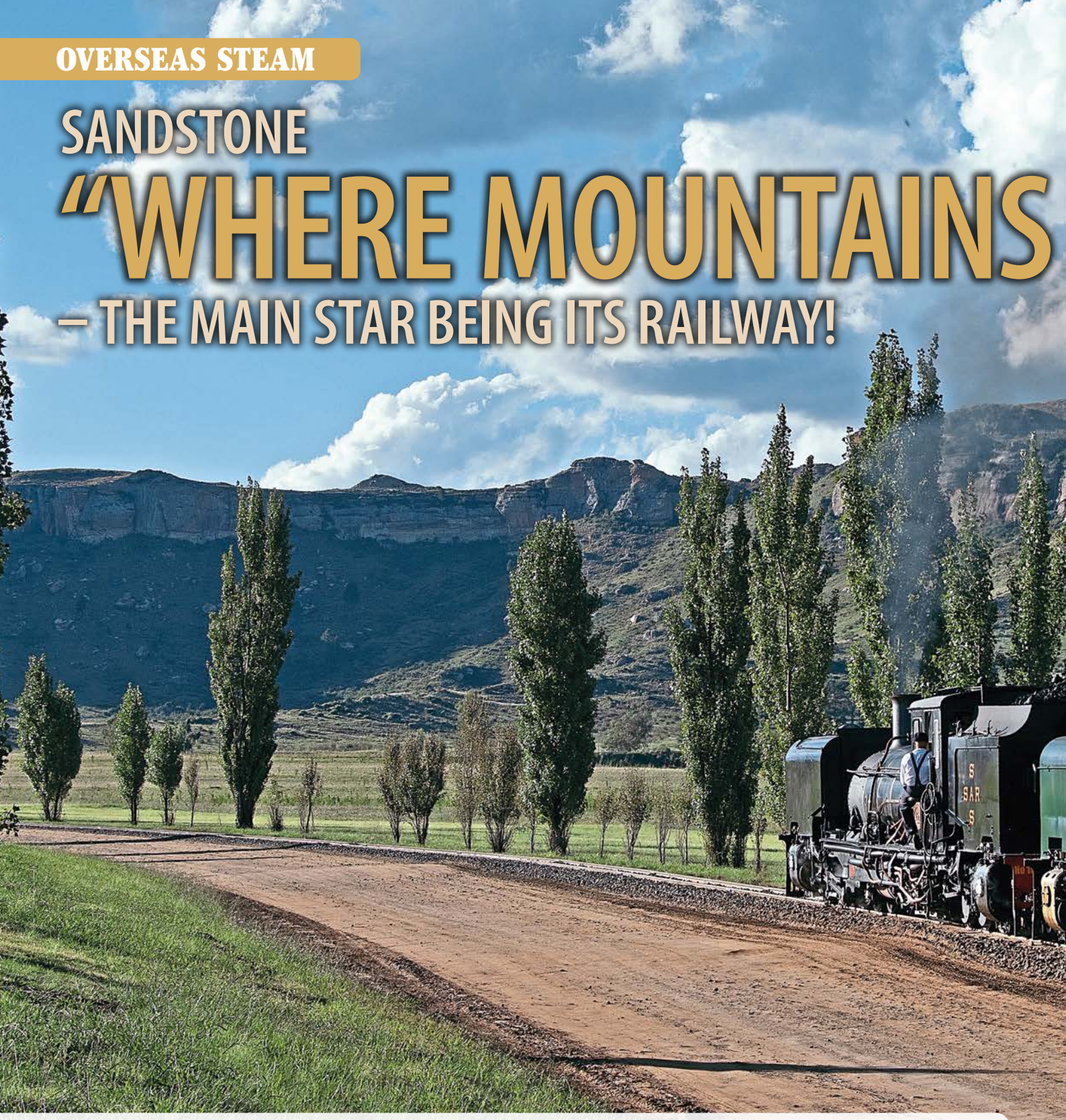
SANDSTONE "WHERE MOUNTAINS – THE MAIN STAR BEING ITS RAILWAY!



John Titlow visited this year's International Sandstone Festival, which was set to be the biggest 2ft gauge event ever held in the southern hemisphere. His verdict: it was the finest in the world! Here he reports in words and pictures on this showpiece heritage railway event to beat all others – and British-built steam certainly made its mark.

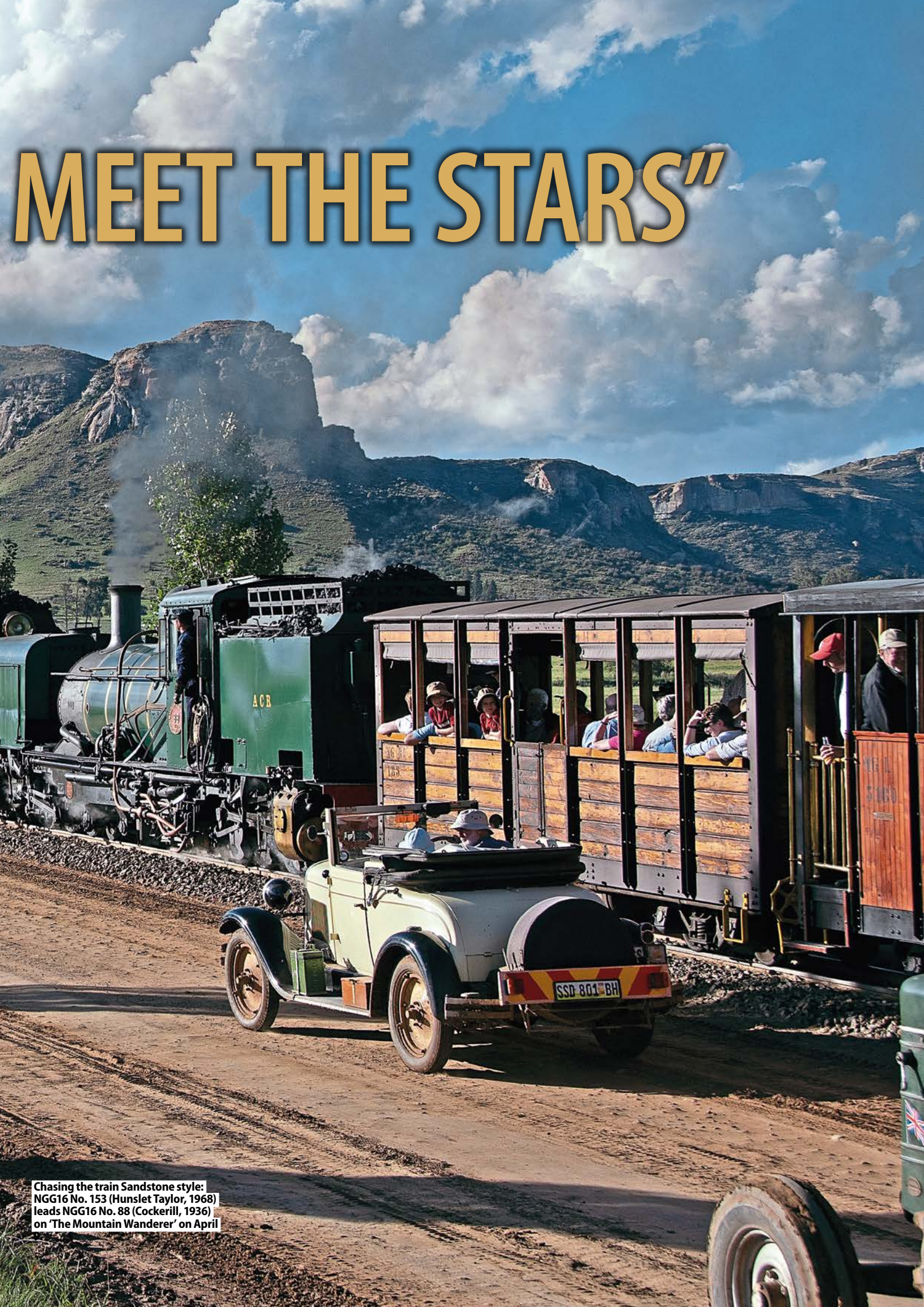
Sandstone is the sort of place that you dream of if you are into any sort of historic transport and machinery. It has been on my bucket list for a number of years and I have watched with envy the photographic opportunities on offer.

If anyone told me it would be that good photographically, questions would have been asked. The International Sandstone Festival must be one of the largest heritage transport events in the southern hemisphere, if not the world and it became too much to resist so biting the bullet the decision was made to go.

Primarily, Sandstone Heritage Trust is a private preservation initiative established on a commercial arable farm growing wheat, maize and sunflowers covering 20,000 acres near Ficksburg in the Eastern Free State of South Africa. The farm is located under the Maluti Mountains along the Caledon River, which is the border with land locked Lesotho and was bought by its present owner, a British-owned company, in 1995.

Local farmers had been preserving farming machinery and the previous owners were still using older-style vehicles rather than modernising, thus creating a historic time

MEET THE STARS"



Chasing the train Sandstone style: NGG16 No. 153 (Hunslet Taylor, 1968) leads NGG16 No. 88 (Cockerill, 1936) on 'The Mountain Wanderer' on April

warp. The new owner saw a wonderful opportunity to preserve these farming methods, machinery and the essential skills needed to maintain them which are still used daily. It is now essentially a modern working commercial farm, but historic machinery is used where possible.

South Africa had a reasonable number of 2ft gauge lines, and Sandstone Estates under the leadership of Wilfred Mole realised that no one was preserving or restoring them apart from a few items, so they took on the challenge with a vengeance leading up to where it is today.

It all started with a telephone call in 1997 when Sandstone bought enough narrow gauge equipment to build a small railway on a short length of track and returned a NGG16 Garratt to steam.

By doing this, it gained the attention of the public and enthusiasts which spurred the company on to extend the system when stocks became available after other lines closed.

Initially Sandstone did not set out to build a railway – but what a job it has done! Incidentally, Wilfred is not predominately a railway enthusiast, but a preservationist for all things heritage.

During the late 1990s with the end of regular steam on the main line, Bloemfontein shed lay dormant and was offered for rent. Sandstone saw this as an opportunity to create a works for rebuilding steam locomotives.

Lukas Nel, who has just recently retired, was a fitter and with others had worked at the depot for many years. Together they brought their expertise to Sandstone to rebuild over 15 locomotives for use on the farm, some from an extremely sad condition. Their hard work and dedication is clearly seen on the railway. Bloemfontein shed is also home to what is essentially the NRM reserve site, with many standard gauge (3'6" Cape gauge) locomotives preserved there.

> "The estate is not all about railways, with the ever-growing collection extending to tractors, vintage buses, lorries, aircraft, traction engines, cars, military vehicles including tanks and guns, ox wagons, earth moving machinery and stationary engines."

The running line was constructed using heritage machinery and is just over 16 miles long between Grootdraai in the south, reached in 1999, through Hoekfontein station to Vailima in the north, reached in 2001. At either end are balloons so running round is unnecessary – what goes out chimney first returns the same way round.

There are water columns and passing loops at Hoekfontein, Mooihoek and Vailima. Gradients are in excess of 1-in-30. Also, there is Sebs Railway, named after Wilfred's grandson running round a very large loop: this is used for demonstrating the smaller locomotives.

The main station and workshops are at Hoekfontein, where the purpose-built workshops are reached via a short branch off the main line connected by a triangle used for turning the trains.

The station building originally came from nearby Kommandonek on the Bethlehem to Bloemfontein main line. It was moved to the farm by the previous owners for storage, and once its origins were discovered, it was carefully dismantled and moved to its present location where it continues to be used for the purpose it was originally intended.

Also on the main line at Vailima there is an industrial siding that was used for loading the wheat and maize grown on the farm. This year the world renowned luxury Blue Train made an appearance travelling from Pretoria and was stabled at Vailima on the main line itself for two nights. Passengers could hop off straight onto the narrow gauge trains at the nearby adjacent siding created by Sandstone. This gives an idea how little this line is now used, if at all.

Welsh crews amongst an international 'drivers' meet'

Several passenger and mixed freight trains ran daily, but only one train covered the complete line, 'The Mountain Wanderer' departing at 3.30pm. It takes around one and three quarter hours.

When night skies were clear at 8pm, 'The Stargazer' ran up the line, allowing passengers to get off and enjoy the night sky without light pollution.



Sunrise on April 10 behind two attractive 4-4-0s nicknamed 'Lawley's', both built by Falcon. NG6 No. 97 of 1897 leads BR7 of No. 1895.



Service trains pass on at Mooihoek with Garratt NGG11 No. 52 on a mixed and NG6 No. 97 with a short passenger on April 9.



Backlit glint at sunrise near Hoekfontein April 7 with Baldwin NG10 No. 61 leading Beyer Peacock NGG11 No. 52 on a morning charter.



Geoff's Trains main line charter with the last surviving 12AR, North British No. 1535 of 1919, at Ficksburg station performing a runpast at sunrise on April 13.



Three trains at Vailima on April 4! Garratt NGG16 No. 113 departs, oxen bred on the farm are led past, while the Blue Train sits on the main line.

Crews came from several countries, with the UK well represented by drivers and firemen from the Welshpool & Llanfair and Ffestiniog & Welsh Highland railways. The Ff&WHR crews were of course familiar with the NG16 class Garratts as they have the same class.

Locomotives came from a variety of builders and look like a who's who from around the world. Representing the British were Kerr Stuart, Beyer Peacock, Falcon, Hunslet Taylor, Fowler, Barclay and Avonside, then Oreinstein & Koppel, Hanomag, Henschel, Cockerill, and Decauville from Europe.

Worthy of mention have to be the two attractive 4-4-0s built by Falcon Engine & Car Works in Loughborough, No. 97 from 1897 and BR7 from 1895, known as 'Lawley's'. They get their nickname after the subcontractor who built the Beira Railway line, which ran from Beira in Mozambique to Umtali in Rhodesia – the first 2ft gauge line in Southern Africa.

Also recently returned to steam and launched on April 5 after a heavy rebuild was NG10 Pacific No. 61, a Baldwin of 1915. Indeed, it was impossible to keep track of how many locomotives took place as it varied day by day.

It is not just 2ft gauge that is preserved here because at Hoekfontein station are two 3ft 6in gauge locomotives undercover, 6C No. 544, a 2-6-0 Sharpe Stewart of 1896 and Sandstone No. 8 a 16CR North British Pacific, No. 821 of 1919.

Near the station were two coaches and some wagons. A rake of coaches was tucked out of the way in a long shed, and on top of this there were other industrial steam locomotives, diesels and cranes. At Kommandonek station on the main line there were four more locomotives, a 15F, 15CB and two 25NCs.

The estate is not all about railways, with the ever-growing collection extending to tractors, vintage buses, lorries, aircraft, traction engines, cars, military vehicles including tanks and guns, ox wagons, earth moving machinery and stationary engines. A home is also offered to other collectors. A recent acquisition is the original turntable



Trains were buzzed many times by small aircraft that had taken off from the international airstrip on the site. On April 9, NG6 No. 97 simmers gently underneath.



The guard in full uniform chats to the driver at Grootdraai of recently-restored 1915-built Baldwin NG10 No. 61. Behind is NGG11 No. 52 on a morning charter on April 7.



Two 'Lawley's' 4-4-0s both built by Falcon glint in the early morning sun near Grootdraai on April 10. NG6 No. 97 of 1897 leads BR7 of 1895.



'The Mountain Wanderer' climbs up to Mooihoek.

from Avontuur.

Sandstone operates around 15 times a year for various clubs and the nearby town of Ficksburg has a cherry festival in November when the railway steams. Sadly, this year's Stars of Sandstone could be the last of this magnitude. At other times the railway is used to transport materials around the farm.

Everyone on the farm is very friendly and nothing is too much trouble. Do you want the oxen train in the photograph? No problem, it will be arranged. There are no fences around the railway creating a good atmosphere conducive to photography coupled with wonderful South Africa light and the added attraction of the cosmos in full flower along the lineside.

There is so much to see, so listing all the locomotives and preserved items is impossible in this article. Instead go to the excellent website at www.sandstone-estates.com which is updated regularly. It will also give you information regarding opening days and future events.

"Mind the snakes" they say! High in the hills at one location, the local children warned us about going into the long grass. At one point the train stopped and a highly poisonous puff adder felt the warmth of the locomotive and slithered across the dirt road settling underneath it during the last 15 minutes of daylight looking for a warm place to sleep.

Getting to South Africa is easy with regular direct flights taking 11 hours from the UK to Johannesburg, though many have a stopover taking in excess of 15 hours. I chose a flight taking 11 hours with British Airways for ease, then car hire at a very reasonable price through its website for travelling south.

There is plenty of accommodation in the nearby town of Ficksburg of varying prices; Imperani Guest House was very good with a good restaurant. The border with Lesotho is nearby making it an excellent stopping of place for visiting this scenic country. No visa is required for South Africa and immigration is quick and simple, and a British driving licence is valid.

Geoff's Trains is the international booking agent for the Stars of Sandstone festival and through it various organised tours from the UK took place offering varied itineraries. Some of the pricing from other tour companies was confusing as to what was on offer, with one company higher in price for less days for little extra – it is left to readers to do the maths. This was an international event with people from as far away North America, Europe and Australia.

An ultimate accolade

The morning photographic charters were organised exclusively by Geoff Cooke of Geoff's Trains: these were absolutely fantastic and a must if you do Sandstone. The website is www.geoffs-trains.com and it also organises tours to other countries.

Coinciding at the end of the event was a main line tour with the last surviving and recently restored 12AR, No. 1535 built by North British in 1919, running from Bethlehem to Bloemfontein over several days.

The locomotive belongs to Reefsteamers in Germiston. It was towed down with the stock from Germiston to Bethlehem on the main line by diesel as Transnet, the equivalent of Network Rail, would not allow it to run under its own power on the main lines, and full dining and sleeping accommodation was provided on board. This trip again was organised by Geoff's Trains.

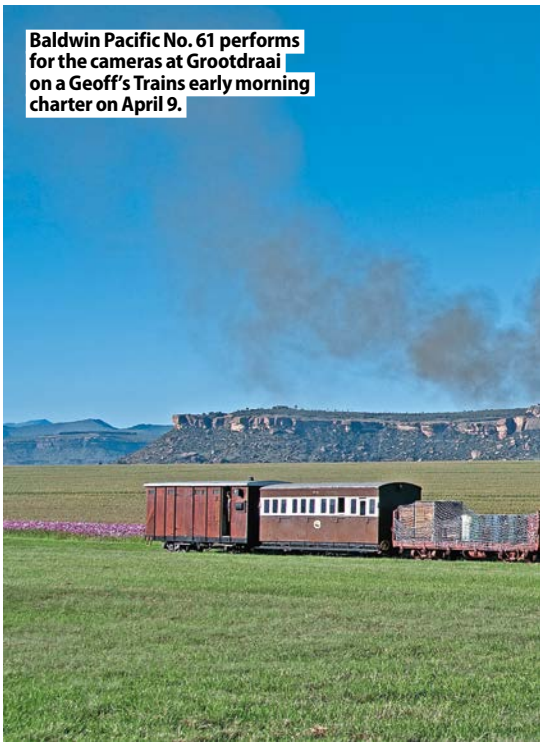
It is hard to understand how difficult and complex the Sandstone event must have been to organise, especially getting the necessary crews. With so much going on, credit has to be given to all involved, particularly Wilfred Mole, who allowed the event to take place also Dave Richardson and the team at Sandstone, who started work over a year ago to put the event together.

Did it live up to expectations – no, it excelled them! Photographically, this is the best event I have ever attended.

Summing up is adequately left to Sandstone itself and quoted on its website: "Finally, by way of clarification we are not a museum; we are simply a private collection of heritage items on a commercial farm. The staff do their best to keep everything in tip-top condition and to show visitors around as appropriate." What a wonderful statement and keep up the excellent work. HR



Diminutive Kerr Stuart 0-4-0ST *Little Bess* looks perfectly at home with its small train on the Sebs Railway.



Baldwin Pacific No. 61 performs for the cameras at Grootdraai on a Geoff's Trains early morning charter on April 9.



On April 8, NG4 No. 16 a 4-6-2T built by Kerr Stuart in 1913, climbs away from Hoekfontein station passing the oxen train.



At Hoekfontein level crossing, an Avonside 0-4-0T of 1924 is checked over before the next duty on April 9.





NG4 No. 16, a Pacific tank built by Kerr Stuart in 1913, backs through the repositioned Hoekfontein station on April 8.



A railcar constructed at Sandstone from a 1913 BSA car body.



Peckett No. 2161, built in 1957 at Bristol, is uncoupled at Mooihoek before running round to return to Hoekfontein on April 6.



Outside Hoekfontein shed on April 11 rests 1922-built Orenstein & Koppel 0-4-0T *New Machavie No. 2* and *Little Bess,* a Kerr Stuart of 1919.



Cape (3ft 6in) gauge 16CR 4-6-2 No. 821 renumbered Sandstone No. 6 under cover at Hoekfontien.