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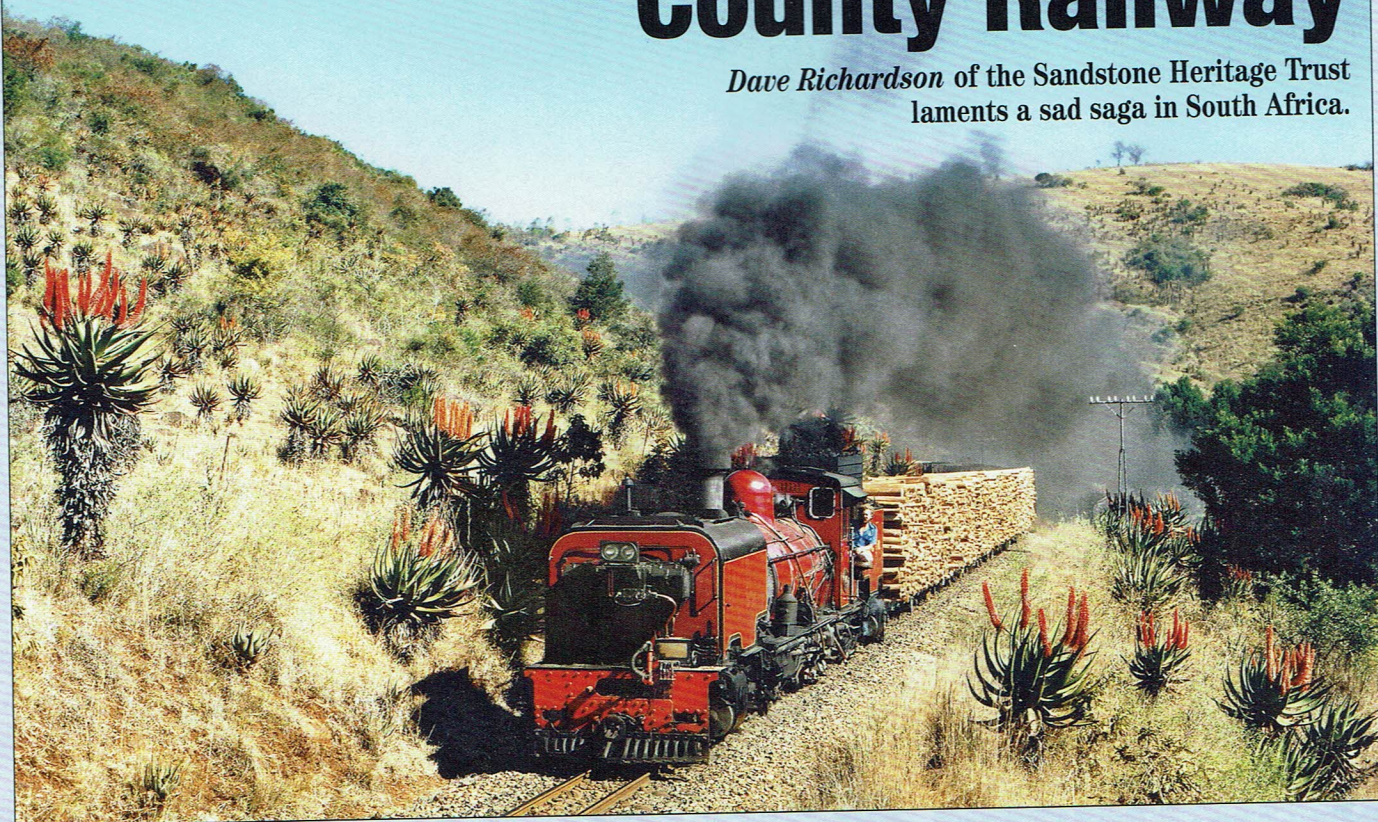
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Last Rites of the Alfred County Railway

Dave Richardson of the Sandstone Heritage Trust laments a sad saga in South Africa.



Originally opened in 1917 to transport sugar cane and bananas between Port Shepstone and Harding in Kwa Zulu Natal province, the 122km 2ft gauge Alfred County Railway was closed by the national operator, Spoornet, in 1986.

Famous for its NGG13 and NGG16 Garratt locomotives from

the early 1970s, the end seemed to have come. However, an initiative by the Port Shepstone and Alfred County Railway (PSACR) saw the Alfred County become the first privately concessioned line in South Africa in 1988, inheriting 25 Garratt locomotives and a host of rolling stock. Initial traffic was good and the

"To choose scrapping rather than preservation defies logic..."

PSACR was Spoornet's second largest customer in Port Shepstone. Unfortunately the early 1990s saw deregulation of road transport which was instrumental in drawing major freight traffic away from the railway along with many other branch line operations in South Africa. Although



Spoornet took a large stake in the PSACR, it was forced into liquidation in 2004.

The line was famous for its two NGG16 conversions to the Wardale principles as used on the 'Red Devil' 26 class. Both of these locomotives (unofficially NGG16A) are now preserved at the Sandstone Heritage Trust in the Eastern Free State. In 2008 a massive flood severed the bridge at Shelley Beach effectively cutting off the line to Harding and leaving only the short section to Port Shepstone in situ. As time has gone the two sections have been claimed by nature.

Dereliction and vandalism soon set in at Port Shepstone and Harding and ultimately the remnants of the ACR locomotives and passenger stock were moved to the Paddock premises of the Claasen family. Some rolling stock was preserved by Sandstone but many wagons still lie along the line in totally overgrown surroundings.

Some locomotives were disposed of for preservation but by 2017 four remained at Paddock together with a number of carriages. After 15 years in the open their condition was critical. In previous years Sandstone Heritage Trust had made a number of offers to take items into preservation and safekeeping but was not successful.

With the deterioration now reaching total destruction, an offer was made by Sandstone in June 2017 for the remaining items. Of particular interest were the engine bogies from NGG16A no 155 (in the Sandstone collection) which were under NGG16 no 142 and were part of a plan to restore this locomotive to its modified form as designed by the late Phil Girdlestone. After no response to the offer, it was revealed in mid-

Facing page, main picture: The Port Shepstone to Harding line in 1982, four years before closure by Spoornet. Heading a timber train near Isingolweni is NGG16 no 129 (Beyer Peacock 7430/1951). *Photo: Dick Manton*

Facing page, top: More timber traffic under the post-1988 private initiative. In this classic image, NGG16 no 140 (Beyer Peacock 7866/1958) is near Bongwana. *Photo: Allen Jorgensen*

Above right: Busy scene at Paddock in 1992. Garratt no 141 (Beyer Peacock 7866/1958) was the first NGG16 upgraded by Phil Girdlestone. *Photo: Allen Jorgensen*

Right: Dereliction at Paddock in July 2016, including the last original narrow gauge passenger carriages in South Africa. *Photo: Conrad Klusener*

Below: NGG16 no 149 (Hunslet Taylor 3894/1967) at Paddock in March 2017. By mid-August it had been cut up for scrap. *Photo: Keith Stevens*



August that cutting had begun on site with NGG16 149 already cut. It appears that the carriages have not yet suffered any scrapping but they represent the last of the original narrow gauge passenger stock in South Africa.

The history of this line has been both emotional and tragic and for

the last rites to be conducted in this way seems only to add to the tragedy. There are still a number of NGG13 and NGG16 locomotives in preservation both in South Africa and around the world so all is not lost but to choose scrapping rather than preservation (with payment) defies logic. **NGW**

