

Issue 521

June 2014

Newsletter from the National Steam Centre

A Whisp of

STEAM SUPREME

Sandstone Report



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Paddle Steamer Sinks





It all started out with Wilfred Mole's love of machinery and in fact goes right back to 53 years ago when as a 17 year old he bought a new short wheel base Land Rover . It is still going today as good as when it was new and while it is not the oldest or biggest item in what has grown to be one of the largest and most diverse collection of working machinery in the world it is his most treasured.

Surprisingly this amazing collection and its annual 10 day Stars of Sandstone heritage festival based around its extensive 2 foot gauge steam railway is not well known . Possibly because it is located on a farm in an out of the way part of South Africa and the collection is not open to the public on a regular basis.

Warwick Bryce was privileged to play a part in the recent 2014 show as a volunteer and shares the experience with you starting with an overview of the event with a more detailed look at some of the machinery in coming issues.

Location

Sandstone Heritage Collection is located on a large 9,000 Ha modern farm in the Eastern Free State about 1/2 way down South Africa about 300 km inland from the east coast . This puts it on the border of Lesotho a tiny mountainous Black African Kingdom and just inland of the continents dividing range. This is very fine farming land and according to Wilf ,better soil than anywhere in England plus good summer rains due to monsoonal influence . It is on a similar latitude to Grafton but avoids searing temperatures due to the altitude . In fact from a visitor perspective part of the attraction is the spectacular scenery with the farm surrounded by sandstone bluffs over 6,000 feet in altitude with much higher mountains in the distance.



Getting There

This is part of the adventure being in a remote area away from major towns and industries left not many options . When inquiring “ are there any buses the answer was “ no , well not that you would want to use anyway “. I understood what was meant later when observing about 20 locals disgorging from a 12 seater mini bus at a police road block, so arrange a rental car it was . Travelling with Robin Gibb from Wangaratta we flew direct from Perth to Johannesburg arriving at 5 in the morning then caught a 1 1/2 hour regional flight to Bloemfontein , the capital of the Free State . Our car was waiting at the airport then, after some debate as to which was the way to go , we set off the 200 km to Sandstone . Fortunately they drive on the same side as we do and although the major roads have been built to a high standard they are being broken up by heavy trucks and you have to watch out for potholes many of which put the Lang Lang proving ground standard killer “Pot Hole Number 3 “ to shame.

Once clear of the city we travelled through generally flat scrubby country with the road bypassing an occasional native village



Above 9600 km of potholes I wonderd if this was a joke but on reflection I think it meant every road in South Africa !



and now and then a shepherd looking after cattle or goats as the road was mostly unfenced . Eventually mountains began to loom up on the horizon and the country became undulating and more productive , getting close now . Spotting an old tractor on the corner of a dirt road we swung down it , when a 2 ft gauge railway crossing and a Welcome to Sandstone sign loomed up it left no doubt we had arrived ! Not too hard really .

Above A double headed agricultural consists holds up the moderns on the way into the farm .

Getting a Job

With excitement mounting we followed the road to the farm security gate, and with guard house formalities over proceeded to the farm office and a welcome by our host Wilfred Mole and a run down on the preparation and running of the event . You see we had arrived several days early to help. Wilf soon announced to Robin “ you are in charge of Mobile Steam “ and I was to attend to the repairs of the Bagnal 25 tonne diesel shunter . It seemed Wilf’s way is a quick accurate assessment of the situation , a decision on the action required and a clear direction on what is required , he then expects you to get on with it . At this point we were left in no doubt that we were part of “ Stars of Sandstone 2014 “.



Above Robin ’s first job was to get the boilers closed up and fires in the Colonial Marshall and McLaren which soon showed up things that needed attention

Farm Complex Overview

Now with somewhere to stay and a job we had to get to know our way around . My initial impression was there were buildings and large sheds everywhere but what on earth was in them ? Apparently it is South African practice to concentrate all the infrastructure associated with a farm in a single secure compound and in this case it was about 1/2 km square. The next impression was how neat and well maintained everything was . All mown grass , landscaped gardens and neatly maintained buildings connected by a paved system of roads.

Left The main farmhouse , our digs for the duration was right beside the 2 foot gauge line



The habitable buildings were attractively constructed with local sandstone blocks and sported painted corrugated iron roofs . These included at least 5 houses, the main office, a conference centre , farm administration centre with weigh bridge , various stores and a farm work shop.



Above Farm visitors are directed to the immaculately presented sandstone Farm Administrative center and Weigh bridge . Behind are some of the grain storage silos

Left Although signed as a "Commodity Store" closer investigation showed it to house vintage cars and light commercials typical of what would be found on a farm in the 40's and 50's ,many still capable of a days work . The aircraft tug is based on a Fordson New Major and has just been loaded with drums of aviation fuel prior to delivery to the grass strip for the vintage planes arriving for the show .



The remaining buildings had an agricultural look with some obviously for grain processing and extensive silos for it's storage . What was a bit of a giveaway that this is more than just a modern large scale farming concern was superimposed on all this was a system of railway tracks and siding many leading into sheds!

Right Narrow Gauge Garret loco passing the seed mill . Consistent with the philosophy of using heritage machinery where practical the railway is laid out so it can be used to move farm produce .





Above Some sheds housed modern tractors for everyday use on the farm, other restored tractors for occasional use.
Below The most amazing shed of all, 5 railway tracks wide and 150 metre long, provided protection for rolling stock recently moved to the property to preserve it from rapid deterioration through the effects of theft and weather.



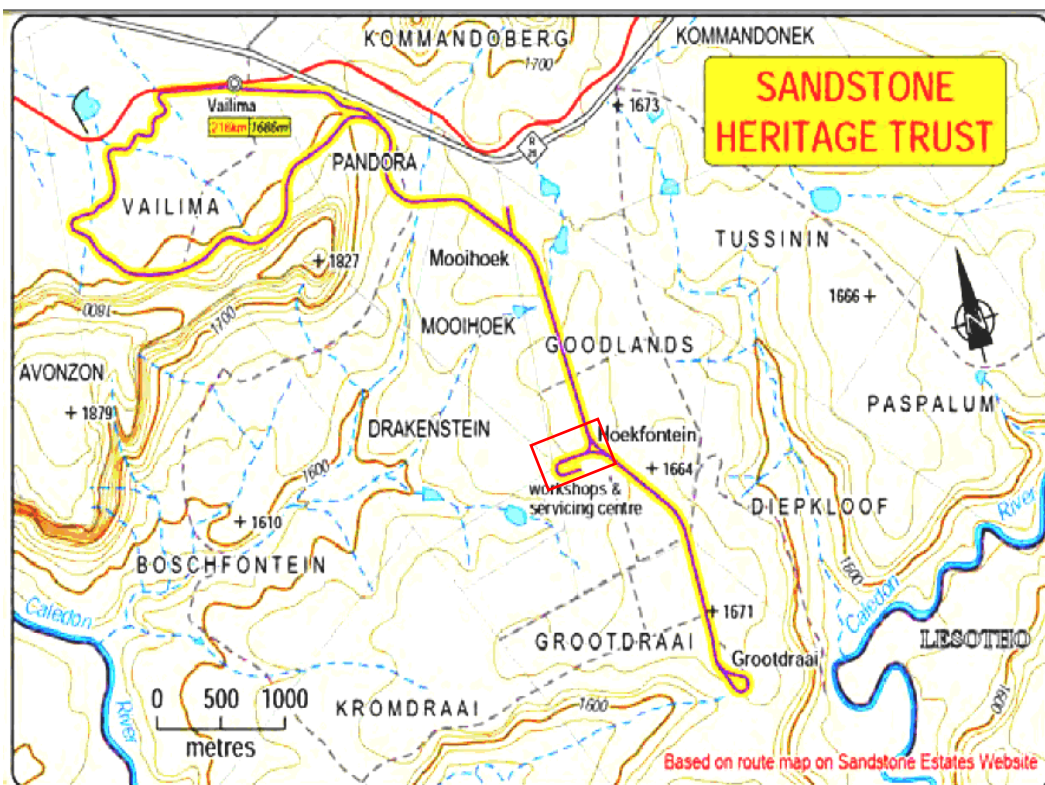
Getting the collection together.

This then raises the question of what brought about such an large and diverse collection. I gather Wilf had been a collector for many years and on acquiring a number of farms in the Sandstone area quite a lot of old machinery came with the purchases as the properties had been in the same families for many years. These were brought to the main farm and the nucleolus of a collection started, restorations were completed and sheds erected and it grew from there. It has always been a private collection but occasionally specially opened for tractor and car enthusiasts enjoyment. About this time steam was disappearing from the rails in Africa with a large amount of narrow gauge railway equipment coming up for auction in 1997. Sandstone was the successful bidder and suddenly found themselves with enough equipment to build a small railway. In the meantime a decision had been made for an innovative attempt to set a world record for the most vintage tractors working in a paddock at the same time so why not add to the fun and set up a short section of 2 foot gauge railway for the event. As it turns

out the record was set at 99 tractors and a new direction set culminating in the 28 km of railway we see today enjoyed by enthusiasts from all over the world.

Railway Layout

All railway rolling stock, facilities and marshalling tracks are contained in the Hoekfontein farm compound shown in the center of the map. Following the track around the first thing you notice is the quaint neat little corrugated iron railway station adjacent to the visitors hospitality center. Looks can be a bit deceiving though as it is attractively fitted out and being the domain of the Controller is the nerve center of operations. Actually the line is divided into sections and with everyone reporting to the controller by radio no one is allowed to enter a section until it is declared clear.



Left Map from 2014 Program

Right Hoekfontein Station - Altitude 1664 m . The interior is surprisingly attractive with polished wooden floor and pressed metal ceiling . Adorning the walls are large prints of the best of images taken by the top railway photographers who have attended over the years .



Above The track to the left is the through line to the front of the property while the right one leads past the camping area to the marshalling yards where the consists for the day are assembled.

The next center of attention is of course the loco running sheds . It often takes visitors a while to find them at the bottom of the site behind the farm buildings but they are certainly not disappointed .

Right The first shed houses the Garratts and other large locos along with the workshop office and stores .

Below The bottom shed is the home of the smaller and perhaps more cute engines. In total over the 10 days there were 20 locos in steam . Outside are the coaling and watering facilities.



Back to the map and we follow the line through the compound fence to the south for a couple of km through fields of ripening sun flowers before skirting the estates grass air strip and then on to a promontory of land to the balloon loop at Grootdraai . This overlooks the Caedon river and the black Kingdom of Lesotho . A popular short ride operated on demand throughout the day

Right Balloon loop at Grootdraai looking south with the spectacular mountains in the background pushing up to 11,300 feet altitude . The river valley below forms the border with Lesotho .

This front on view of the loco perched on the 2 foot gauge track gives an idea of the size of the NC 15 "Kalahari " monster.

Below The steep pinch back into the compound often gives enthusiasts their first view of an engine working hard. especially with a heavy goods consist often resulting in a bit of slippage .



We then follow the track out of the compound to the north as it runs parallel to the farm driveway for a couple of km after passing through the security gate. This long straight is a favourite spot for photos of the train accompanied by various vintage vehicles .

Right Vintage Chev fire truck pacing the train to the delight of passengers and photographers .

The railway then leaves the road for a short section and passes through the a paddock of cows in front of the old Mooihoek farm house as it works around a low ridge. A set of points leads to a short spur line with a run -around for the engine allowing for shorter journeys.

Below Mooihoek farm spur with rugged 7000 foot high range visible to the north.



Continuing the line then drops down into the small Pandora valley past a heavily reeded pond well populated with bird life .

Below Pandora is considered a special place with the train reflected in the water as it passes through fields of pink cosmos in full bloom . This is specially planted for the show.



Shortly after the pond the line crosses over the road to the highway (photo page 4) before commencing a very steep climb through a cutting around the foot of the table land that bisects the farm . It is then a gentle decent through paddocks of maize to the old disused Vailima siding on the Cape gauge mainline that fronts the Sandstone property. Here there is always a stop to take on water for the demanding climb around the Vailima loop. With its tight curves and sections of 1 in 21 grades it is the domain of the articulated Garratts. The highest point on the line is reached at Vailima village , a native settlement of about 20 compact houses and a small



Garratt N0 113 working just as hard as it can climbing out of Pandora on a crisp morning



Filling up at Vailima Siding

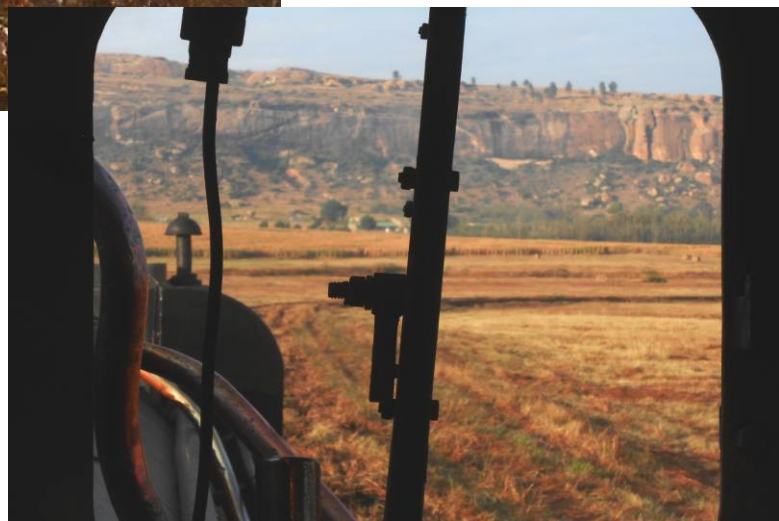
Right Footplate view on the climb to Vailima summit with the native village dead ahead .

After leaving the loop it is an enjoyable trundle back to Hoekfontein, the whole “ Mountain Wanderer “ experience taking no less than 2 hours .

Initially I wondered why Wilf would bother making a railway in such a demanding place but after several rides in either directions both at dawn and dusk there is no doubt that this is the best place in the world to see doubled headed Garratts working just as hard as they can .

Having talked about the collection next issue will look at some of the events of Stars of Sandstone 2014 itself.

Below Old commercial and military vehicles , agricultural equipment and even oxen operate in conjunction with the railway



Paddle Steamer

goes to the bottom

The Avoca in the Murray. Photo: Harry Rekas



The future of the second oldest paddle steamer on the Murray is now uncertain after it sank at its moorings at Mildura 2 weeks after it was sold at auction . Warwick Bryce

Above Avoca Tarted up as a floating restaurant in recent years Interweb photo

Mildura chef Stefano de Pieri for the last 10 years . Those in the know say the wooden hull has been in a perilous condition for some time with extensive leaks and only being kept afloat by the continuous operation of a number of bilge pumps . It seems the owner had found the boat was too difficult to maintain and although upset his only option was to sell the vessel . The auction took place on April 11 with the only bidder Mildura restaurateur Simon Harrington who offered \$55,000. Two weeks after the auction the vessel sunk when either the pumps stopped working or there was a power failure and no body noticed.

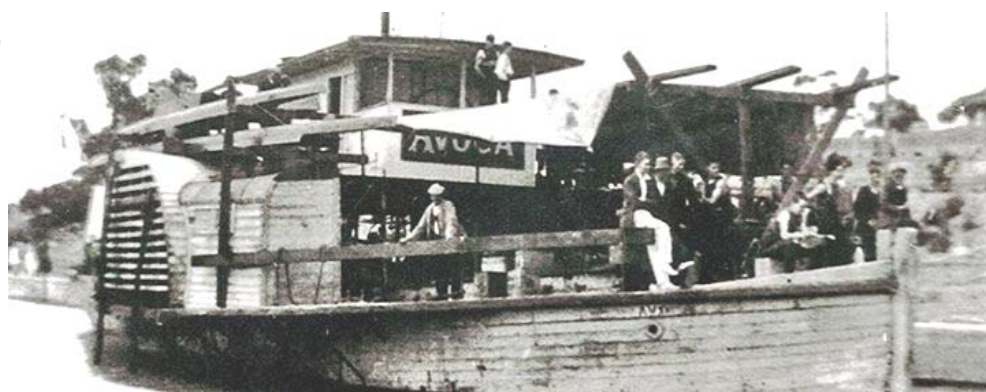
I have been told the situation has not been made any pleasanter when an over zealous official issued a notice demanding the remains be removed from the river in an unrealistically short time. This is the sort of powers usually reserved for the situation where the offending vessel is creating a serious hazard and disrupting river operation . This appears not the case as the vessel is still at it moorings. The word is a Superior has now stepped in and set a more realistic time with the first step being the submission of a salvage plan . It is not all that simple though as it is not completely clear who actually is responsible for the vessel .

Apparently at the time of the sinking the settlement period had not yet passed and only a deposit had been paid . Now the settlement date has come and gone and the process has not been completed . There seems to be varied opinions on who actually has to pay for it's removal .

More recent developments have reported that the Adelaide Nautical College had offered to salvage the historic Mildura show boat as a training exercise if they can buy it for just \$1 there by off setting the cost of salvage . Actually it is expected that salvage will be quite complicated as the boat has rolled over on her side and will need up righting before it can be pumped out . The question is is the hull sound to stand the strain of this winching operation ? It should become clearer in mid July when the river level is lowered with the pulling of the Mildura weir for maintenance work .

I am optimistic the Avoca will be saved when you consider the number of boats that have been salvaged in recent years after decades underwater and then rebuilt from a far worse state . After all this is not the first time the Avoca has sunk !

Acknowledgements Mick Black , Capt Frank Tucker Paddle Boat News , Sunraysia Daily , Sunray , Theage



Above Avoca in its working days . I would rather see it restored to this state and back in steam than tarted up again . Look at those hand rails !