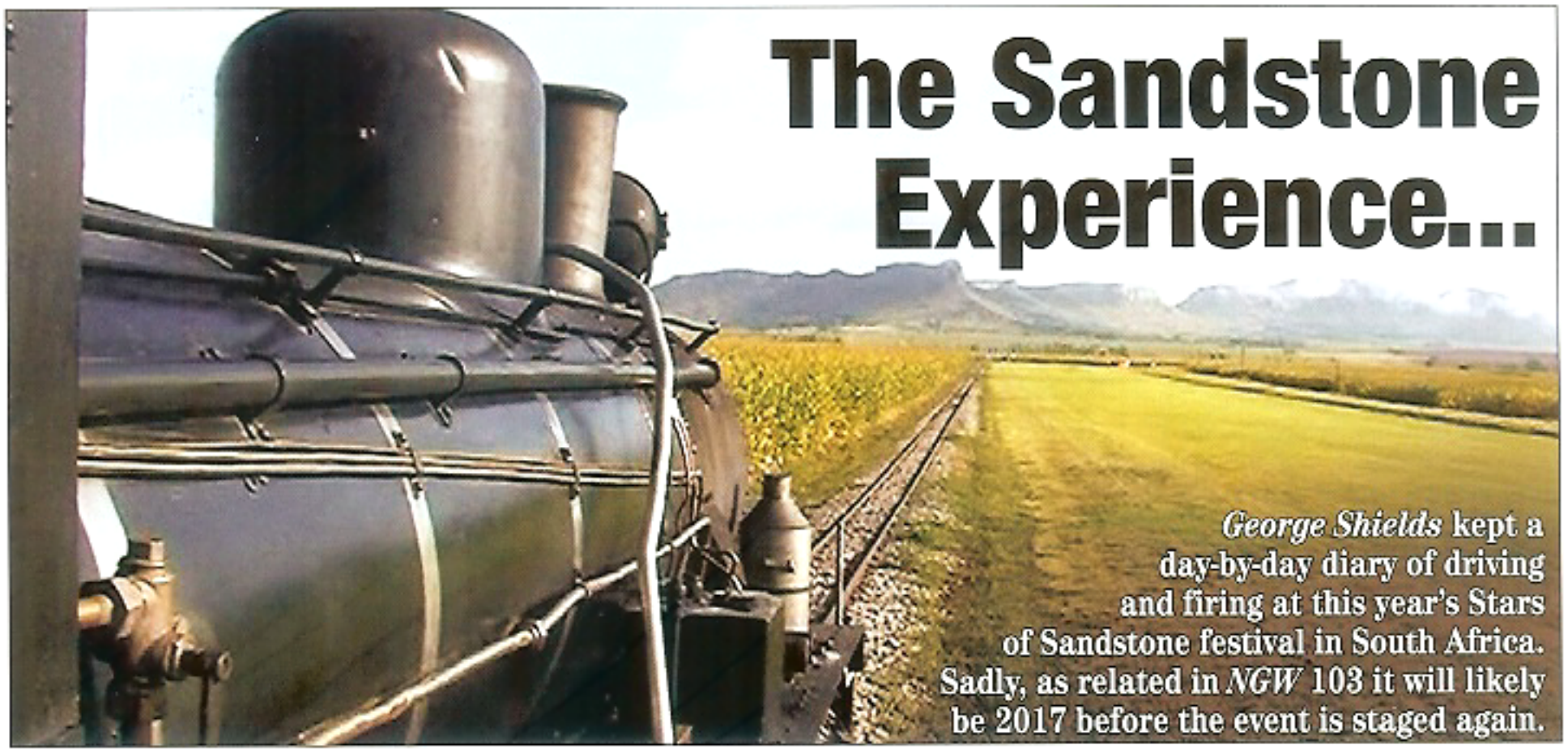
The Sandstone Experience...



George Shields **kept a day-by-day diary of driving and firing at this year's Stars of Sandstone festival in South Africa. Sadly, as related in *NGW* 103 it will likely be 2017 before the event is staged again.**

It is my first visit to Sandstone as a volunteer, hopefully to drive and fire some of Wilfred Mole's large collection of locomotives being used during 'Stars of Sandstone 2015'. But first it is a day in the classroom with Coen Pretorius, the Locomotive Traction Inspector, to see what I know – or have forgotten – about steam locomotives before I am certified to drive them.

The following morning we are up on the footplate of a light engine for a test run out to Grootdraai and return to see how I handle a locomotive. I am pleased to say that certification follows and I am allowed to be on the daily roster of a truly international team of loco men. Australian, Belgian, South African and British are all represented, and they are a great bunch of blokes.

Hockfontein station is the hub of the system with its purpose-built station, locomotive depot, restaurant and shop. All movements of locomotives and trains are radio controlled from here and a very professional job has to be made of communications by the footplate crews and train staff as part of this vitally important safety operation.

Out on the line

On my first day proper of the event, I need to familiarise myself with the gradients and contours of the system before I commit to driving or firing. I take a morning's walk to Grootdraai followed by an afternoon aboard the 'Mountain Wanderer' double-headed by two Garratts over the complete system. This certainly helps me ascertain where water in the boiler of a loco must be showing high in the gauge glass, as the downhill gradients are somewhat fierce in places!

Above: Driver's-eye view from the cab of the 'Kalahari' of the long and straight road ahead.

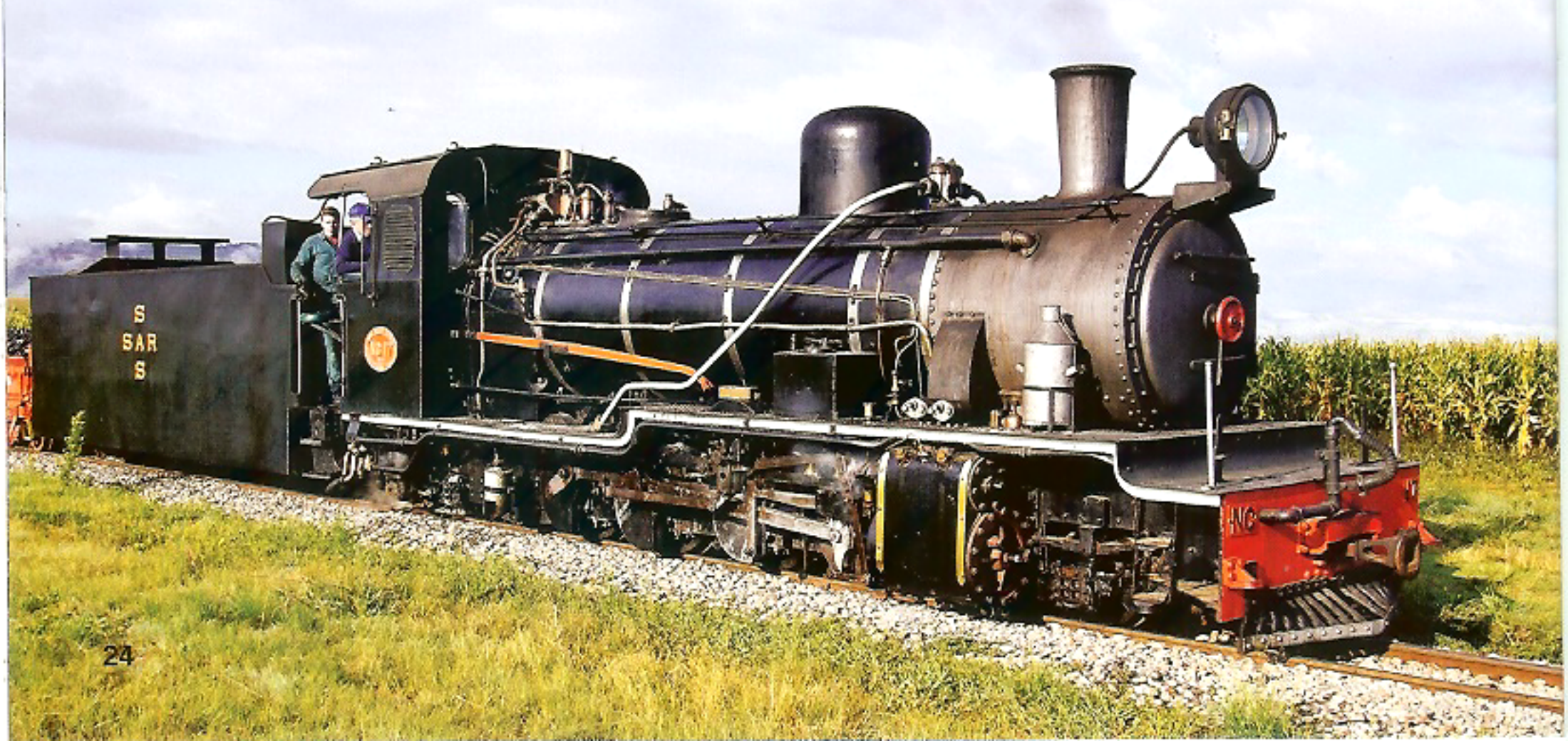
Below: Kalahari no 17 was strong and sure-footed to drive once the sun had dried the dew-covered rails. *Photo: Hannes Paling*

Uncredited photos by George Shields

On the second day of the event I volunteer to fire one of four Orenstein and Koppel 0-4-0 tanks which are in steam. A triple-header north to Mooihoek House, about one and a half miles away, is great fun for loco men and passengers alike. My loco 'Sandstone No 2' (O&K 4102/1910) is a good engine and steams well. My driver is Grahame, a retired aviator from Australia.

Driving a Falcon

My third day's outing is on a little gem of a loco – a 4-4-0 built by Falcon Locomotive Works (232/1895). Painted green she looks a picture of elegance. My fireman is Niels Winklemans, a 20-year old







Belgian lad who proves very capable. Our job is to take a small freight at daybreak to Grootdraai for an early morning sunrise photographic charter. Although overcast due to it becoming their winter season in the southern hemisphere, I believe we put on a good show for the photographers. Both Niels and myself thoroughly enjoy ourselves on this 4-4-0 tender locomotive.

Coping with a Kalahari

Day 4 is again an early start with another pre-sunrise photo charter, this time to Mooihoek on the northern leg of the system. Kalahari no 17, a 2-8-2 built by Henschel (21905/1931), is our loco today. More modern, larger and heavier than the Falcon, she is a different loco to handle. She is stronger and surefooted, but like the Falcon is not so happy on the early morning dew-covered railhead – but we cope. Again Niels is my fireman and, with our freight train and photographers, we are all in position at Mooihoek just as the sun rises out of the mountaintop layer of cloud. Two run pasts in perfect light and then the sun is gone into the clouds. We return to Hoekfontein for breakfast, then off to Grootdraai for more run pasts as the sun finally decides to come out to play.

I believe some good pictures are achieved by the photographers as the Kalahari thumps up the bank out of Grootdraai's balloon loop. Niels does a great job of supplying me with steam when I need it and keeping the loco quiet when I don't. Certainly a pleasure to work with the lad!

Above: Women cleaners put the finishing touches to Sandstone no 2, an O&K 0-4-0WT, before the author fired it on a triple-header.

Above right: The author preparing to fire up no 113, the NGG16 Garratt built by Beyer Peacock in 1939.

Below: George and his fireman both thoroughly enjoyed crewing the Falcon 4-4-0 locomotive. ***Photo: Hannes Paling***

The last day

On my final day at the event, I help fire up Garratt no 113, a 2-6-2+2-6-2 built by Beyer Peacock (6923/1939). Some shed shunting is followed by some photography out along the line for the rest of the day. Sandstone is famous for its roadside cosmos flowers which come in to bloom at this time of year. It makes for a very colourful picture if you can frame the cosmos within the viewfinder of your camera with a train. It becomes a priority to try and achieve, as the steam photographer in me takes precedence.

All too quickly my time at Sandstone is over. What do I think of the Sandstone Experience? It is most certainly a uniquely enjoyable railway holiday, with unlimited photographic opportunities. Whether you are a volunteer footplate person or train staff, a photographer looking for that 'master shot', or just a member of the public out for a different day's entertainment, you will undoubtedly reap a bountiful harvest. NGW

