

Avoiding the catastrophes of Railway Preservation

Disasters and disagreement when a state railway declares its narrow gauge redundant have rarely applied in the UK. Yet elsewhere it can still cause major issues. When the Sandstone Steam Railroad purchased scrap 2ft gauge wagons from Port Elizabeth, where the Apple Express has long had reopening intentions for the famous Avontuur line, social media frenzy resulted. It might appear to have only local significance, but as Sandstone's *Wilfred Mole* explains there are in fact worldwide issues.

Amidst the noise and social media frenzy over this issue it is perhaps a good idea to stop, step back, and actually reflect on the progression of events that inevitably led to the current situation. What is ironic is that it mirrors similar meltdowns which resulted for the most part in terminal destruction of heritage railway assets on a large scale. What is obvious is the fact that the reasons for the failures are uncannily similar in each case. It's rather like watching the same horror movie many times over but in each case with different actors.

The Sandstone Heritage Trust established its 2ft gauge railway in the Eastern Free State of South Africa in 1997 on private land, after failing to agree a concession with the authorities for the 300km-long 3ft 6in gauge line between Bloemfontein

and Bethlehem. Our objective has been to build up a comprehensive cross-section of 2ft gauge locomotives and classic rolling stock used in Southern Africa, with the definitive understanding that they must be restored to exactly the condition they were in when they left the works of their maker.

Sadly, despite the fact that we have been moving ahead in a very positive way, we have seen the Alfred County Railway disappear in Natal and we have seen the Avontuur line shut to both commercial traffic and steam tourism. Both the ACR and the Avontuur were globally renowned 2ft gauge railways of the first order. Both of them were lengthy by world standards (at almost 200 miles the Avontuur line was the longest 2ft gauge railway in the world), they crossed magnificent

Above: Dereliction at Humansdorp station following closure of the Avontuur line in 2008. Photo: Dave Richardson

Below: Better days on the world's longest two-foot gauge railway in September 2005 when NG15 no 17 worked a special train over the full length of the line from Port Elizabeth to Avontuur. Photo: Errol Ashwell

bridges, and they had impressive steam traction.

We started out in the shadow of these superb railways but find ourselves today in a position of survival by default. We have been strong supporters of the Avontuur line for many years and if we had been allowed to we perhaps could have played a bigger role in trying to stabilise the position. We applied to lease the part of the Avontuur railway with its impressive Assegaibos terminus midway on the line in the late 1990s and were turned down.

Our idea was to operate on the line in co-operation with the Apple Express, as our current locomotives, once they are rebuilt in the old Cape gauge

railway workshops in Bloemfontein, are stranded and have to be extracted by road. The reasons given to us for refusing this lease had a familiar ring to them and have become the death knell of so many of the former South African Railway and Avontuur line assets; "Don't touch, it's needed... but we have no idea when or how?"

500 wagons for scrap

We pretty much stepped back from the situation until we started to realise that very large scrap tenders, in some cases for more than 500 narrow gauge wagons, were being issued by Transnet (the Government-owned rail custodian – Ed). We started bidding for these and were successful in securing quite a number of them. A large number of very useful wagons were also acquired directly from the scrap industry and not as a result of tenders.

So the sight of Sandstone's Freightliner Argosy road trucks working from the Eastern Free State to Port Elizabeth has been a familiar one over the years. This is a 1,000-mile round trip and since we can generally only get one wagon on a low bed the cost of moving it is often much more than we paid for the wagon. One should appreciate that if we buy a wagon from the scrap dealers for R7,000 (about £330) by the time we get it to Sandstone it has cost us R30,000 (£1,400). This is of course before a total rebuild.

One could ask why we purchased more than we needed because obviously we could probably manage quite comfortably with 100 freight units on our railway, notwithstanding the fact that we have 25 working locomotives. The reason is that we realised this was literally the end of the line. There were no more, not here, not anywhere in the world. We believed that as we built up original consists which were consistent with what we would like to achieve as a preservation railway, mostly for the pleasure of visitors and photographers, then any surplus items would never go unnoticed and could even return to other new or surviving narrow railways in Southern Africa if that came about. The extensive use of former SAR stock on the Welsh Highland railway is an example of that.

The Transnet stance that no assets should be removed from any part of the Avontuur line, as it may reopen with the possibility that the Apple Express will run again, is admirable in itself. It is also potentially terminal for the assets if this doesn't happen.

By the time the tens of millions of Rand have been found to invest in the railway, and the wheels of bureaucracy have gone through the



many required processes, there will be nothing left. That is exactly what happens in these situations. We saw it in Natal with the Port Shepstone/Harding line. We have seen it with many of the other lines reaching into the hinterland of Natal which literally disappeared overnight. Much of this material was actually stolen and quite a lot of it was sold overseas.

The legitimacy or otherwise of these transactions and events is not known to us. However, when the word gets out to the local community or even the preservation community that something is closing, they swoop on it very swiftly to see what they can extract in terms of value. Sadly this is not very often an altruistic interest; it is one that is based on personal financial gain.

Safeguarding assets

Our objective is to assemble a representative sample of all the wagon types that ever existed and we have made good progress but many of the unique types are lost with no survivors. To the extent that it is

Above: Remains of the shed at the once impressive Assegaibos station midway along the Avontuur line. Sandstone tried to lease this section of line to run its locos in co-operation with the Apple Express, but Transnet insisted all assets were needed for future use at an unspecified date.

Below: One of the C-types included in 500 wagons for which Transnet invited scrap tenders. The rust tells its own story. Saving just a few is vital as no such limestone wagons are preserved in the world. Both photos: Dave Richardson

possible they will be collected from the Port Elizabeth area and taken to a place of great safety. They will all be restored – our current output is a wagon every 14 days. They will then be integrated into the collection and will be showcased at our events. One should remember that we have had groups of up to 100 photographers, both from South Africa and overseas, visiting our railway year in and year out and they expect something new whenever they come.

We try wherever possible to accommodate them. Our steam specialist Lukas Nel will shortly turn out two newly restored locomotives with the NGG 11 no 52 appearing on the rails next year. We have to have period-specific rolling stock for such an event and perhaps with the latest items acquired we are now in this position. We will also continue to make the wagons available to the film industry and of course they can go back to work on their home line if and when it operates again.

None of us own anything in the true sense of the word. We are »





Main picture: When the many photographers visit Sandstone they expect to see period-specific rolling stock, as here with NGG 16 no 153 hauling a train of G type cattle wagons. Preserving such remaining stock on the Transnet disposal list is a priority, especially as any future passengers on the Avontuur line are unlikely to want to ride in cattle wagons. *Photo: Rod Hering*

custodians. We are an open organisation and people can stop by for a cup of coffee and go for a tour of the workshops and the facilities at any time. They only have to phone Leigh Sanders on 051933 2235. Many do and they are mostly generous-hearted people who are very appreciative of the work that has been done.

There is, however, in South Africa a hard core of the permanently disillusioned and uninformed who do not want to go and look for themselves but who would rather sit at home and fire off e-mails or update Facebook. It happens on a fairly small scale but it is also an international syndrome. We receive



Above left: NGG 11 no 52 as rescued in early 2011 from the Krugersdorp site of the South African National Railway and Steam Museum along with three other 2ft gauge locos. In what has been seen as the world's single most significant loss of locos to railway heritage some 80 3ft 6in gauge engines were cut up at SANRASM. *Photo: Sandstone Heritage Trust*

Left: Restoration of NGG 11 no 52 progresses at Sandstone's Bloemfontein base in September 2015. It will return to the rails in 2016 and is set to star at the next Sandstone Steam & Heritage Festival from 30th March to 7th April 2017. *Photo: Lukas Nel*

complaints and criticisms from people who have never been to South Africa let alone been to Sandstone. Their information source is generally another disgruntled individual who almost without exception has never actually done much with respect to preserving anything.

We have often been treated as an organisation interfering in the affairs of cosy local preservationists notwithstanding the fact that many of their railways were in terminal decline. A railway has no future if the essential ingredients of success cannot be identified;

- 1) Management expertise and bold decision making
- 2) Funding
- 3) A well thought-through realistic business plan that will guarantee the long-term survival of the railway
- 4) A core of hard-working employees, volunteers and supporters.

That business plan of course can only be produced if items (1) and (2) are in place.

Once the Sandstone Heritage Trust becomes aware of inexorable forces at work that might bring a struggling heritage railway to a grinding halt, there is only one choice of action left and that is to place the assets in safekeeping so if another day dawns they can go back on the line. Railway track can be obtained, bulldozers can be acquired to open up cuttings, but you will never replace the original working locomotives and rolling stock from the line if they are scrapped.

Where do we go from here?

Firstly, we address the cacophony of mostly rude comments which show a conspicuous lack of 'netiquette'. These are inevitably from people whose names we have never heard of who are currently banging on about what happens when the line reopens without explaining how that will come to pass.

I have seen this 'movie' before. We saw it with the Banana Express and we saw it at SANRASM (South African National Railway and Steam



Museum), which turned out to be the single most significant loss of locomotives to railway heritage in the world. Locos were cut up day in and day out and there was massive theft. The UK media has taken an interest in these events and so it should. They made rescuing engines from Barry Scrapyard look like a walk in the park. The list of names in this South African Railway 'Heritage Hall of Shame' is a long one and it is getting longer.

So let us look back at where the Banana Express is, where the ex-Apple Express is going, what happened to the magnificent collection of locomotives at SANRASM, and stop for a moment and reflect on the trends. People without real expertise but perhaps with inflated egos are doing an awful lot of talking, sending a lot of

e-mails, posting a lot of rubbish on the Internet about what they are going to do. We are having our say as well but at the same time the big rescue vehicles are working through the night to move items to safety. It's called ACTION!

We accept that we have a small railway in the Eastern Free State which is not even an original railway and therefore it doesn't stand alongside the Apple Express or the Banana Express for size or originality. Yet it remains pretty much all there is in terms of a concentrated effort to save items of narrow gauge heritage.

Is it any surprise that the authorities regard the railway preservationist community in the broad sense with absolute disdain? There is usually no money and seldom any unity. They have no continuity and very often are

weekend warriors with no plans. They can be dishonest, as we have seen with the alleged multi-million Rand theft of funds from the sad scrapping of what was left of the collection at SANRASM.

What is much more important is that people should focus on the job in hand rather than being critical of personalities. We are often criticised simply because we do what we do and do it well, and if I were asked to redo what we have done over the last 20 years I would not change a thing.

Railway preservation has many dissenting voices but sadly most of them are from within and they are almost inevitably the serial under-achievers. Ironically the public will always continue to love the old steam engines and what we do today will profoundly affect how many of them will ever see one in the future. **NGW**

Above: A train of Y-type ballast wagons behind NGG 13 no 49 at Sandstone. If not rescued, the remaining wagons of this kind are likely to suffer from thefts of the complex mechanical parts that activate the hoppers. *Photo: David Benn*

