

LOCOMOTIVES INTERNATIONAL

Issue 88 - February / March 2013

**SPECIAL
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PAGES**



UK Price £4.95



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SANDSTONE STARS - CARIBBEAN TREASURES - BOSNIAN NG**

WORLD HERITAGE - THE STARS OF SANDSTONE

by Iain McCall



History

It was in 1995 that what is now known as Sandstone Estates was founded, with the purchase of Hoekfontein Farm, a large arable farm at the foot of the Drakensberg Mountains in South Africa's Eastern Free State, on the banks of the Caledon River and the border with Lesotho.

The new owners were only the second in the farm's 170-year history. A consequence of this was that the farm possessed a significant collection of vintage agricultural machinery, still in regular use. Arrangements were duly made for these to be included in the purchase, and the beginnings of the major heritage project that is Sandstone were born.

During the 1990s, the Transnet Heritage Foundation operated a museum at Midmar, in partnership with the KwaZulu-Natal Parks Department. This was dissolved in 1997, and the opportunity arose for Sandstone to acquire the stock and materials. At this stage, Sandstone had nothing to do with the preservation of railway equipment, although it was active in preserving heritage machinery as a result of the agricultural machinery in the original sale.

Undaunted, SHT took on the collection, transported it to Sandstone, and commenced tracklaying and restoration activities. When the supply of track materials was running low, there was another fortunate coincidence when the Majestic Highlands reservoir scheme in nearby Lesotho closed, making

available large quantities of 2ft gauge rail and other materials which facilitated the construction of today's 26km line.

A further stroke of either luck, timing or coincidence (take your pick!) in the late 1990s was the availability to rent of the old steam running shed at Bloemfontein, which enabled SHT to establish a steam locomotive restoration facility there. The team at Bloemfontein have now restored over twenty locomotives to working order.

Current Operations

The narrow gauge line at Sandstone runs from Grootdraai at its southern end, northwards to the centre of the agricultural business at Hoekfontein, and then on to the goods depot and sidings at Vailima, on the Bloemfontein-Bethlehem main line. For operational purposes it can be considered in three sections, Grootdraai - Hoekfontein, Hoekfontein - Mooihoek, and Mooihoek - Vailima. The latter section is where the steepest gradients are located, and only rolling stock with continuous braking is allowed on it.

However the scale of operations at Sandstone is perhaps best grasped by reviewing the stocklist on the website, which although now out of date, identifies for the Cape Gauge 28 locomotives, 24 carriages, and 18 wagons across 10 sites, and for the 2ft gauge running line in excess of 50 locomotives, over half of them steam.

Future Plans

The team at Sandstone has now grown the railway to a size which meets the needs of the working farm, and there are no current plans to extend it further. Similarly, with over 20 working steam locomotives, the focus of railway activity has, in recent times, moved towards the rolling stock, with a project underway to create a rake of "Lounge Cars", which will enable VIPs to be entertained in style.

The team at Sandstone have recently relocated the large 150-metre locomotive shed from Ficksburg to provide additional undercover storage for the stock of 1920s era wooden bodied 'Cape Gauge' coaches. As the running line is 2ft gauge, the SHT freely admit that the long term location and future for these vehicles is still to be determined, but, like so much of the equipment at Sandstone (both rail and non-rail), they have at least found a home which is safe and secure.

Other projects currently in hand include the restoration to operating condition of additional DZ-type wagons, some of which will be converted into passenger carriages for use behind the line's smaller locomotives.

Sandstone itself has become a byword for the preservation of South Africa's industrial heritage, of which railways form only one part. The SHT also has involvement in anything and everything from South Africa's last steam tug to agricultural machinery, earthmoving equipment, military vehicles and rare breeds. It has become a landmark centre of excellence for the preservation of heritage equipment, and the railways have a starring role!

Left: What Sandstone is renowned for - iconic South African locomotives in the spectacular South African landscape. NG15 2-8-2 No. 17 on 4th May 2013.

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Below: Hunslet-Taylor built NGG16 No. 153 amongst the Cosmos flowers as it rounds the balloon loop at Grootdraai.

Hannes Paling / SHT

Stars 2014

THE annual Stars of Sandstone (SoS) Steam Heritage Festival takes place this year from 12 to 21 April 2014, when military vehicles, trek oxen, old tractors, steam lorries, traction engines, locomotives, old buses and cars will again be taking centre stage.

The narrow gauge railway forms the backbone of the event and the distinctive autumn light provides a breathtaking vista ideal for photo opportunities of the collection, evidence of which is provided by the photos which accompany this article! With over twenty steam locomotives in service, this is one of the largest 2ft gauge Galas in the world, and is a "must-see" for many NG enthusiasts, most of whom return thoroughly 'hooked'!

New into traffic for the 2014 event will be Avonside 1624, currently in the final stages of its restoration by the team at Bloemfontein. With 2014 marking the 100th Anniversary of the start of World War 1, it seems likely that the resident 'Brigadelok' will also feature heavily, as well as additional steam / military train consists.

Another attraction this year will be a "Union Limited Memorial". Now that most of the Union Limited rolling stock and traction is being disposed of as a result of the Transnet Heritage locomotive and carriage disposal programme it is highly unlikely that the Union Limited will ever run again. In commemoration of this famous train the 3.30pm passenger train will be branded the "Union Limited Memorial Special", with suitable signage.

Readers wishing to attend the event are advised to contact Geoff's Trains, who are the official tour promoter for the event, see: <http://www.geoffs-trains.com/SouthAfrica/Sandstone14.html>, or follow the link from our website.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Wilfred Mole and the team at SHT for the material from which this feature was compiled.



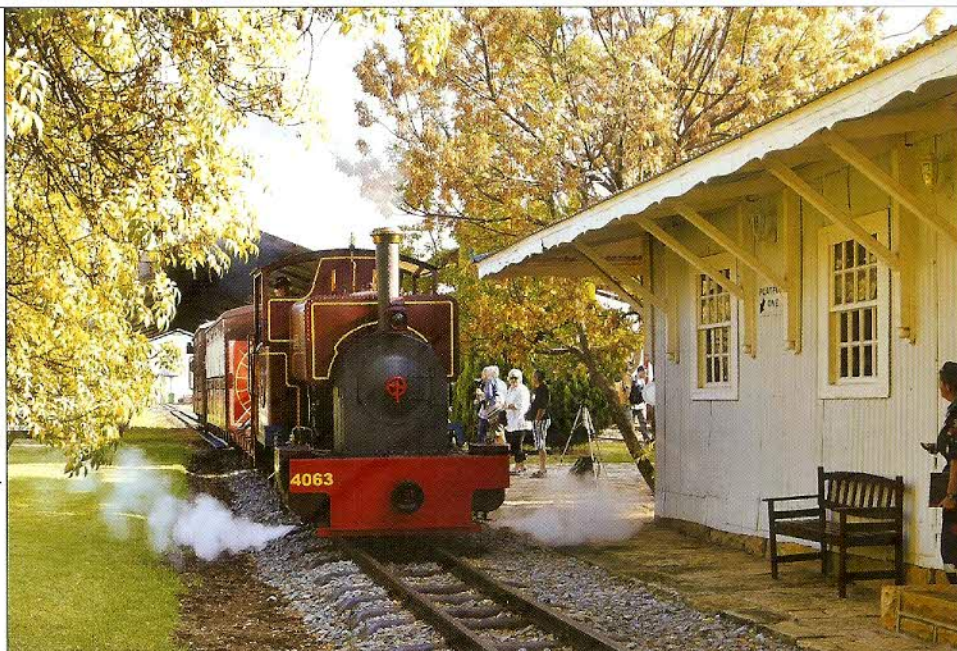


One of Sandstone's popular photographic charters sees a pair of Garratts led by Cockerill-built NGG16 No. 88, sister of the Welsh Highland's 87, in green Alfred County Railway livery. The mountains in the background are inside the neighbouring country of Lesotho.

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Having looked at a selection of the larger locomotives, we now see a pair of small Kerr Stuarts. The first is TAMBARA, built to Works No. 4063, which it now carries as its running number. Built in 1924 as one of the manufacturer's 'Darwin' class, the locomotive's working life was spent at the Illovo Sugar Estates, where it carried running number 3. It was restored at the SHT's Bloemfontein Workshops in 2007.

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The second Kerr Stuart is 'Wren' class LITTLE BESS, Works No. 4031 of 1919. Following industrial service with the Sundays River Irrigation Board, LITTLE BESS was preserved in 1974 in the Eastern Cape, operating a 300m circuit at Willow Dam, near Uitenhage until being plinched and subsequently vandalised in the late 1990s. She returned to service at Sandstone in 2005.

Hannes Paling / SHT



We end where we began - iconic locomotives in an iconic landscape. In this case we see the line's two NG6 4-4-0s (or "Lawleys", after the Beira Railway contractor). The green loco is in authentic Beira Railway livery, and carries its BR Number 7, it later became No. 106 in SAR service before being sold to

Zebedelia Sugar Estates in 1934. It entered preservation at the James Hall Museum in Johannesburg, arriving at Sandstone in 2001, and re-entering service in 2002 for the "Great 400 Working" Event. Its black-liveried classmate is SAR 97.

Both: Hannes Paling / SHT

