

150 YEARS OF RAILWAY HERITAGE FIRSTS

PRESERVATION PIONEERS



Edited by Michael Whitehouse

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MODERN PIONEERS: BRINGING BACK THE BRIGHTON BELLE

On the Farm

The Sandstone Estates Railway story

On the horizon, beyond the Caledon River, stand the snowcapped Maluti mountains of Lesotho. In the foreground, amongst the dry brown grass of

Grootdraai farm, runs a narrow gauge railway with its tracks just twenty four inches apart. A little passenger train of red and white carriages drifts down the grade headed by a delightful elderly and centenarian green liveried 4-4-0 tender engine, originally made by the Falcon Engineering Works in Loughborough, England, for the Beira Railway in Mocambique, the first railway in Africa built to open up the interior. The train runs behind some trees with black smoke pouring from the engine's chimney as the fireman builds the engine's fire for the run back to Hoekfontein, up the steep grade and past the grass landing strip for light aircraft. This scene could be in 1890 but it is actually the 21st century.

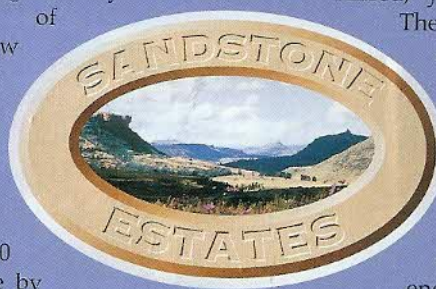
The Beira Railway was re-gauged to 3'6" Cape gauge and all its two foot gauge Falcons sold into industrial and South African branch line service and No. 70 looked like it was to end its days on a plinth at the Rand Society of Model Engineers in Johannesburg, but it was transferred to Sandstone Estates in the Eastern Free State, rebuilt largely by young men, some from the model engineering society, and now runs on the narrow gauge railway from Hoekfontein with one of its sisters.

Between Port Shepstone and Harding in Alfred County, Natal, was a 'no mans' land between the Zulu and the Xhosa tribes, named after Prince Alfred, younger son of Queen Victoria.

The area was developed for farming and timber and a 76 mile long narrow gauge railway opened throughout by 1917. It carried agricultural produce, bananas, sugar, pulp wood as well as timber and, once developed, the traffic was hauled by some of the largest two foot gauge steam engines to run in the world: Beyer

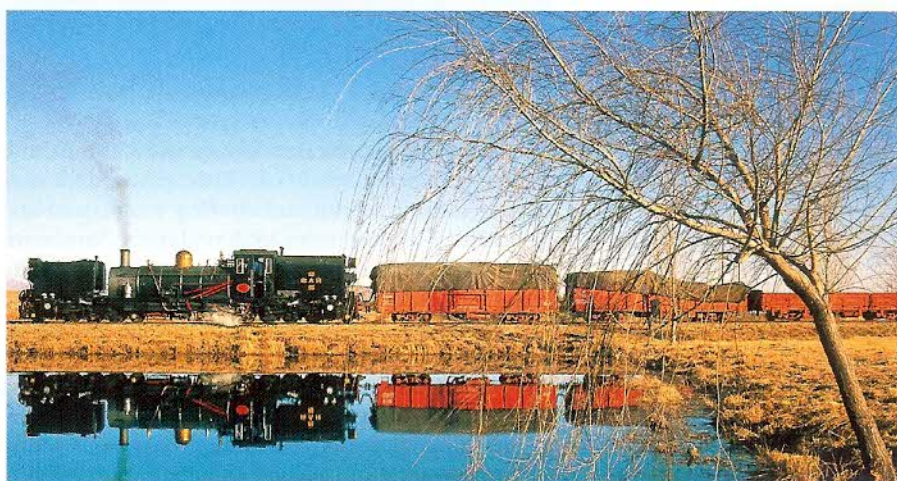
Peacock 2-6-2+2-6-2 Garratt type engines.

Passenger traffic was light and so withdrawn by 1963 and the line closed entirely in 1986. Two well-known photographers, Charlie Lewis and Allen Jorgensen formed the Alfred County Railway to continue running the line and initially successfully sought new business, particularly timber from 1987. A private railway undertaking in South Africa was hitherto unknown. They refurbished eight Garratts and over 160 wagons with help from Phil



Beira Railway 4-4-0 at Vailima Siding with a short freight in July, 2005.





Girdlestone who also converted some of the engines to gas producer firing, adopting the Argentinean Porta's steam engine improvement principles and the railway also ran the tourist 'Banana Express'. Sadly transport de-regulation and competition from road caused traffic finally to be suspended in April 2006. Three of the Garratts were bought by the Welsh Highland Railway but several others of the type have found their way to the Sandstone Railway and can now be found hard at work hauling freight and tourist trains at gala events on this 19 kilometre line.

There are no longer any narrow gauge railways in Kwa Zulu Natal and only one precariously remaining in Government ownership running from Port Elizabeth westwards to Avontuur and, in any case, steam hauled trains on either the two foot or Cape gauge lines have long ceased to exist. Whilst Spoornet, the successor to South African Railways, set up a heritage foundation and retained a large number of steam engines of many and diverse types for operation and an eventual museum, not

This spawned the idea to save for posterity and develop a transport and agricultural collection under the Sandstone Heritage Trust, as the owners felt a strong responsibility to secure this remarkable heritage

all the plans have come to pass. A good museum has been established at George on the scenic branch line to Knysna which was dedicated as a tourist line and run wholly by steam engines of the 19th and 24th Classes. This was set to be a pioneering state-owned branch line continuing to run steam trains but, sadly, a huge landfall effectively closed the line. There are several preservation societies which run steam tours, but the days of South Africa being a country flocked to by steam enthusiasts world wide are over.

Sandstone Estates is a significant arable farm in the eastern part of the Free State province. The main farm complex is at Hoekfontein, near Ficksburg. Nowadays, it is a significant modern farming operation utilising the most responsible of agricultural processes, providing good working conditions, first rate plant and machinery, combined with cleanliness and adherence to modern safety practices. But this was not always the case. The current owners bought the farm from a family who had held the land since 1830 and so the farm is only in its second ownership. When the estate was sold,

Top left: NGGI 6 inside the Sandstone Estates workshop. AIDAN MCCARTHY

Top right: Beira Railway Falcon 4-4-0 No. 70 hits the grade with a passenger train alongside the airstrip between Grootdrai and Hoekfontein on a dry and crisp early June morning in 2003.

Above left: German Feldbahn from the Great War restored to original condition and livery. AIDAN MCCARTHY

Above right: NGGI 6 No. 153 reflected in Pandora Pond, August, 2009.

**Diminutive
Decauville 0-4-0T
Bathala, the
smallest of the
Sandstone working
steam engines,
completely rebuilt
in the workshops
from a rusty derelict
wreck. AIDAN
MCCARTHY**



**Peckett 0-4-0ST
No. 2161 rescued
from the
Mocambique Sena
Sugar Estates and
returned to service,
runs alongside the
farm passing a Field
Marshall tractor on
its way from
Grootdraai to
Hoekfontein.
PATRICK POLO**

it came with significant vintage agricultural and related machinery still in use. This spawned the idea to save it for posterity and develop a transport and agricultural collection in 1995 under the Sandstone Heritage Trust, as the current owners felt a strong responsibility to secure this remarkable heritage and show complementary items working together as they would have been seen at times within the previous century all within an appropriate landscape and a real working arena.

During the 1990s the Transnet Heritage Foundation was established to look after the heritage of South Africa's railway system and Alan Clarke was responsible for its operations. One of the offshoots of this organisation was a museum at Midmar near Pietermaritzburg in Natal, which was a joint venture between the Natal Parks Board (part of the Natal Provincial Government) and the National Railway Authority. The museum had an operational two foot narrow gauge railway using two NGG16 Garratts, as well as other equipment on static display, but the

Parks Board had a change of heart and it was clear that it would be necessary to relocate the historic equipment.

Alan Clarke was aware of what Sandstone was already achieving in the field of preserving heritage machinery as he had attended events at Sandstone. He decided to ask the Trust if it had any ideas as to how to move 4,000 tons of steel over an eight-week period, the time frame the Natal Parks Board had given the Transnet Heritage Trust to move the assets, to somewhere that would be safe until a decision could be made as to what should be done with the assets. At this time the SHT had nothing to do with railways but agreed to help. The Trust set about collecting rail, coaches, machine tools, Garratt locomotives, a diesel shunter and all the other paraphernalia that is associated with a typical small narrow gauge railway. The material was initially stored on a piece of open land at Sandstone. Shortly after this gargantuan task had been completed, Alan Clarke was sadly killed in a head on road collision and Sandstone was left with resolving the issue of the cost of transportation.

Following discussions with Transnet, they felt that the items would best be preserved by the Sandstone Heritage Trust and so it was agreed that, in lieu of payment for transport, the assets would be transferred to the Trust and form part of its collection.

Fortunately one of the Sandstone Estates' employees had previously been a fitter at the Randfontein Estates Gold Mine, which ran a number of steam locomotives. He felt he could refurbish the Garratt locomotives that had arrived from Midmar and get them into steam but that to do this he would need 100 metres of track. In what seemed like no time, 100 metres became a kilometre and then three kilometres.

Then Sandstone began to understand the potential of what it was capable of doing and the Sandstone Railway began to take shape. The Trust was fortunate



that the Highlands Water Scheme in Lesotho, close to Sandstone, had by this time been completed and there was a large amount of 60lb. rail available for purchase. Since then, the Trust has acquired a diverse collection of locomotives, rolling stock and other rail items and continues to work with Transnet to acquire further items for preservation.

The two foot gauge collection is largely intended to be capable of working and is frequently demonstrated in use to both invited audiences and on well managed and significant annual events which attract thousands of visitors and helpers. The Sandstone Estates Railway is now firmly on the World map as a significant collection of operating two foot gauge steam engines and equipment demonstrated in a true African environment and as authentic as a recreation is possible to be. Indeed, it now has 23 working steam engines and each of its four NGG16 Garratts represent a different manufacturer. The railway is sought after by film companies and is twinned with the Welsh Highland Railway largely on account of good personal connections developed over many years as both railways operate similar equipment. Indeed, Sandstone kindly donated a two foot gauge brake van to run in WHR freight trains also utilising SAR narrow gauge bogie open wagons.

The Sandstone Estates Railway is laid largely along the contours of the land on the Estate and passes through several of the individual farms. It has been designed at a ruling gradient of 1 in 20 which makes for interesting operation and requires skilled enginemanship over sections of its 19 kilometre (11.8 miles) route.

The headquarters of both the farm and the railway are at Hoekfontein where several substantial storage sheds have been built to house the collection together with a well equipped running shed for the operational steam engines. From here the railway runs in two directions: southwards down to Grootdraai farm, where there is a balloon turning loop not far from the Caledon River which marks the international border with Lesotho, and northwards to Pandora and Vailima. On this section, which is longer, the line runs either alongside or near the entrance road to the estate. There are two choices for destinations: Mooihoek and Vailima. A spur leads off the main route to Vailima and turns right to terminate in a loop at Mooihoek Farm after 2½ kilometres; this was the original section before the line was extended to Vailima. From the Mooihoek turnout, the main line continues past Pandora Pond, location for some fabulous photographs of trains reflected in the still water and under a steep sandstone escarpment, then turns to run up Pandora bank, where the grade steepens to 1 in 22 following some severe approach curves past Pandora Farm by the main entrance. Once at the summit, the Spoornet line from Bloemfontein to Ficksburg can be seen and the two foot line descends to Vailima siding where interchange traffic is possible between the two

railways and a water column and ashpit to service the engines is provided. For a while this formed the terminus of the railway, but it has now been extended to Vailima village, running round a large balloon loop and climbing up to the village which sits on lower slopes below a formidable cliff face; trains halt here for a while, often attracting African villagers to watch the goings on, before carefully winding back down the steep grade to Pandora and then back to Hoekfontein. Theoretically (and often practically!) trains can continue round the lines' two balloon loops pausing only to pick up and set down passengers and service the engines.

The mastermind behind this concept and the key driving force for its substantial success is Wilf Mole, working closely with Mike Myers and Joanne West, a dedicated paid staff resident at the farm and many willing volunteers.

But the farm would not be able to demonstrate any of its steam engines in operation without

the skills of Lukas Nel and his engineering team based at the former SAR Bloemfontein depot. Here Lukas assesses each restoration project and effects whatever rebuild is necessary to enable a wide range of steam engines to operate on the railway, ranging from small four-wheeled Decauville industrial engines to the enormous NGG16 Garratts from the Natal and Port Elizabeth lines. The Sandstone Estates Railway is subject to the rules and guidelines of the South African Rail Safety Regulator and Lukas readily enables the relevant standards to be met. This can be ably demonstrated by the special run of the Trust's 'Kalahari' 2-8-2 tender engine over the whole of the remaining Spoornet narrow gauge line from Port Elizabeth to Avontuur for a railfan excursion some years ago. Even the Falcon 4-4-0 made an appearance on the train for the first part of the journey. The trust which Transnet and Spoornet have put in Sandstone Estates' people and equipment has been fully justified. ■

Lukas assesses each restoration project and effects whatever rebuild is necessary to enable a wide range of steam engines to operate on the railway

The essence of Sandstone: NGG16 on a mixed train running under the sandstone hills on its way to Vailima.
PATRICK POLO

