

Sandstone's involvement in Railway Preservation in South Africa.

It is time that we laid out our stall and tried to explain to our detractors what we are all about.

One should start by saying that we are a Private Sector participant without financial, moral or organisational support from any government, quasi government, or parastatal organisation. In fact, if we have chalked up failures, and there have been some significant failures along the way, then this is generally because we have not been able to break through the significant levels of bureaucratic apathy and even hostility that we have experienced.

History.

In the mid 1990's we started negotiating with the South African Transport Services and then subsequently with its many offshoots, sub-divisions and departments regarding the future of the Eastern Free State railway line from Bloemfontein to Bethlehem. We went into this project with a sincere desire to make things happen and we even operated a number of passenger trains along the line using various locomotives that we had acquired. It was obvious however that the operating management and staff of Spoornet at the time were not enthusiastic about the concept and eventually it became impossible to operate trains. At the time we were large freight users. In one year alone we imported and exported over 50,000 tons of agricultural commodities, fertilizer etc. from our two Sandstone Estates sidings at Vailima and Kommandonek to various parts of the country both inbound and outbound. This was summarily terminated when we were advised that they were no longer interested in this type of traffic and so we were forced to purchase a fleet of heavy vehicles, which we have been using ever since.

It dawned on us in the late 1990's that there simply was not a commitment to rail as a logistical solution to Agricultural commodity movements. Our negotiations regarding the Eastern Free State line simply collapsed when Link Rail, headed by Andre Freemantle, was summarily closed and all the personnel dismissed. It has never been possible to re-open this dialogue despite a number of attempts on our part. The Eastern Free State railway line therefore stands exposed and is at risk with a very strong likelihood that it will be sold for scrap or vandalised like so many other exciting and potentially economically viable branch lines in South Africa.

Because we were pro rail we decided to build our own 2-ft Narrow Gauge railway to provide a home for the various items that we had slowly accumulated from places like the Midmar Museum. Since 1997 Sandstone Estates has been wide awake to the possibility of saving locomotives throughout Southern Africa. Our book 'The Sandstone Steam Railroad – The First Ten Years' chronicles what has been achieved in this regard. Our range of DVD's also describe much of the work that was done in Angola, Mozambique etc. in saving locomotives that are extremely rare, and at least in the eyes of knowledgeable international people were worth saving.

Underpinning this constant process of negotiation and NG logistical relocation was the presence of our fine team of technical personnel in Bloemfontein headed by Lukas Nel. When Lukas and his colleagues were made redundant by Spoornet some time ago we decided that it was time for a private sector initiative. We therefore took on the responsibility for the infrastructure and personnel and have continued to rebuild locomotives at this facility. In fact our 10th anniversary of this constant restoration process is now behind us. The list of locomotives restored by Lukas and his team is as follows:

1. NGG 16 number 113.
2. NGG16 number 88.
3. NGG13 number 49.
4. NGG 11 number 55.
5. NG 15 number 17.
6. Lawley number 106.
7. Peckett number 2161.
8. Decauville number 302.
9. Kerr Stuart Little Bess number 4031.
10. Kerr Stuart number 4063.
11. Feldbahn number 13779
12. O&K number 2510
13. O&K number 12493.
14. O&K number 10311.
15. Miss Brakpan number 626.
16. Class 19D number 2654.
17. NG 4 number 16.



4 NGG's at Sandstone, April 2011. Photo: Gary Barnes.

The following locomotives are currently under rebuild at Bloemfontein:

1. O&K No. 11112.
2. O&K No. 12140.
3. O&K No. 12601.
4. NGG 11, No. 52.
5. Arn Jung No. 847.
6. Avonside No. 1624.

Once each locomotive is completed it is moved to Sandstone Estates for testing and once deemed to be in 100% tip-top working condition is then commissioned to take its place in our Hoekfontein Running Shed. Needless to say our storage facilities at Hoekfontein are bulging with locomotives with many more still to be delivered from Bloemfontein. This has necessitated an expansion in the storage facilities which is currently underway. The acquisition of the redundant PPC Loerie limestone extension to the Avontuur Line which we purchased on the open market last year is helping us to facilitate this expansion. Unfortunately, as always, we were in competition with the scrap industry and had to bid well above the scrap price for the infrastructure.

In 2005 we decided to propose to Transnet that we be considered as a 2-ft Narrow Gauge Centre of Excellence.

We believed that we had enough of an established railway line, together with enough interesting locomotives and items of rolling stock to rank as a genuine player in the 2-ft Narrow Gauge field. The attached document was transmitted to Transnet after a meeting with them. Although we have sent many reminders and have raised it with them on numerous occasions it has fallen on deaf ears and so if we consider ourselves to be a viable 2-ft Narrow Gauge railway operator then that is in our minds rather than in the official domain. We felt that by proposing a Private sector / Government joint venture (where we did all the work and made all the investments) we could stand tall on the global stage as far as 2-ft Narrow Gauge Railway Heritage was concerned. This unfortunately was never achieved for reasons that have never been made clear to us.

In the meantime in order to showcase what we have been doing we have held a number of events over the years including our Cosmos Festivals, various Steam Galas, exclusive events for overseas tour operators etc. The last of these was held in April this year when we hosted a very small number of visitors. In fact interest levels from South Africa were pretty much non-existent with all the real support coming from overseas, particularly from Switzerland, Germany, Belgium, France, and the United Kingdom. However, the numbers of people who subscribed to the event fell far short of what was necessary for us to cover our costs and therefore it became clear that we could no longer justify the maintenance of the line while at the same time satisfying the ever more stringent requirements of the Rail Safety Regulator. In April 2011 it was decided to discontinue the operations on the line.

Most of the people who complain about our wrong actions or lack of action have never been to the Sandstone Heritage Trust Narrow Gauge railway. They are not in a position therefore to assess the security, socio-economic, and political environment in which we are forced to operate. We are on the Lesotho border, a hot bed for crime and for constant attrition of assets from South Africa to Lesotho. In the middle of 2010 we noticed that items

were being stolen from along the line. Steel is an attractive asset to acquire and it is impossible to guard 26 kms of railway line however vigilant one's security force is. It was decided that we should concentrate our security efforts and expenditure on the main complex where locomotives and rolling stock were stored, and this process continues. Line unfortunately has become expendable as a non-economic, non-viable asset which poses a constant security threat. We are however keen to talk to third parties about relocating our 2-ft Narrow Gauge line to an environment that is more secure and which might attract interest as far as passenger numbers are concerned. Some tentative discussions are taking place at present, particularly with respect to opportunities in the Western Cape.

The Sandstone Heritage Trust was never committed to saving Cape Gauge assets. We have however, as a result of our endeavours taken steps to save locomotives that were available and which appear to have no future. A recent example is the donation by David Shepherd of his 15F, No. 3052, which is currently stored at Reefsteamers in Germiston. Sandstone spent over R440,000 in maintaining this locomotive and moving it from unsafe locations, firstly at Masons Mill and then subsequently at Ficksburg. The costs of moving a big locomotive like this are enormous but Sandstone decided to step outside its 2-ft Narrow Gauge mandate and save the loco because of its historic significance and its connection to a well-known international celebrity. The fact that the locomotive is at Reefsteamers does not mean that the saga is over and we are therefore looking at ways and means of assisting Reefsteamers and making sure that we do not wake up one morning and find the axle boxes have been removed from our big locomotives.

In addition to the above we have locomotives stored at Hoekfontein within our security complex which are completely safe but there are concerns about the locomotives at Kommandonek. The locomotives at Vailima have been disposed of and a statement relating to their future has already been circulated to the many people who objected to the fact that we were forced to scrap them.

However, not all the voices were dissident and we fully endorse the comments made by David Richardson in his recent e-mail to the SAR-I mailing list as follows:

From: Dave Richardson [mailto: david.richardson@absamail.co.za]

Hi all,

Before the list members go into their usual condemnation of anything to do with scrapping locos before the fact, let me put the matter straight. Although I am no longer associated with Sandstone in any material way I am a strong supporter of all the efforts made by Wilf Mole and his team. The three locos, ex Lorraine, which were plinthed at Vailima Siding, Nos 2734, 2769 & 3369, were in a shocking condition after a hard life on the mine and have been subject to ongoing vandalism despite Sandstone's best security efforts. No: 2654 was selected as the best of the original four and now stands at Bloemfontein in supershine rebuilt condition with nowhere to run. As usual all the Preservation organisations have made overtures to use the loco but wish to have it free of charge. Not an economic proposition for Sandstone after considerable expense in rebuilding it. Similarly the other three have been offered far and wide (including Selibe Pikwe) but no interested party has been prepared to

pay the asking price. Why is it in general rail preservation wants everything for nothing, is it because they sit on the verge of bankruptcy and want a free lifeline to generate income to survive another month? The Vailima locos have all got condemned boilers which are beyond economic repair. Consideration was given to build one out of three but it was deemed to be uneconomic. All salvageable parts have been removed and some supplied to 19D operators to keep their locos operational. The decision has been taken to scrap the remains and the funds raised will be invested in further preservation efforts being undertaken by Sandstone.

To make much comments on Sandstone as have been posted on this list is simply out of order. Imagine rail preservation in South Africa without the benefit of Sandstone, they have touched virtually every group in South Africa to their benefit and rail preservation would be much poorer without them.

These are my personal comments after ascertaining the facts and not in any way a statement from Sandstone.

*Kind Regards,
Dave Richardson*

Although it only involved moving these locomotives a distance of some 5kms from their vulnerable position at Vailima to the main complex the cost of bringing 100-ton low beds down from Johannesburg from Transcor to achieve this objective was beyond our capabilities. The fact that a large number of the parts from these locomotives have gone to Sappi (who continue to operate 19D's commercially), is encouraging because obviously we have helped to extend the lives of operating locomotives. Sandstone has an impeccable record of saving locomotives and trying to haul them to safety but the network of thieves who are involved in cutting these locomotives up for personal gain continues to tighten and we now accept that any asset we own must be inside a guarded enclosed compound with both a physical human and technological advanced security presence.

Where do we go from here?

While we certainly receive words of encouragement from people, particularly those who have been to visit our railway, we don't receive any **meaningful** material support. Our biggest challenge is to keep our Bloemfontein Works operating so that we can continue to convert rusty relics into operating locomotives. The fact that we are restoring 2-ft Narrow Gauge locomotives which have no operating future may seem an exercise in futility but one should remember that we are gathering the parts and implementing the traditional engineering expertise that still exists in order to make these locomotives fit for use. It costs us in excess of R100,000 per year just to keep the boiler certificates valid with regard to these locomotive but thus far we have continued to make this investment. Any monies sent to us can be designated for the purposes of restoring a specific locomotive and we will always ensure that money is channelled in the right directions. The inventory of parts in South Africa has all but been depleted and we have recently placed a large order for new parts to be manufactured in the UK for the ex SANRASM NGG11, which is in a very sorry state. As always, we will eventually commission this locomotive and provide an opportunity for it to be seen and photographed by interested parties to the best of our ability.

As far as our outreach projects are concerned we have had little response from Transnet regarding our offer to assist to move threatened 2-ft Narrow Gauge assets such as plinthed locos etc. away from places like Humewood road etc. to a place of safety. Time is not on our side, and inevitably the scrap dealers will be called in to cut up rare Narrow Gauge assets such as those which were recently sold for scrap at Humewood Road. Our good relationship with the scrap industry has once again been beneficial because we were able to negotiate to remove parts from those locomotives for preservation before they were actually cut up. It is often not recognised that even when locomotives are scrapped, Sandstone has on numerous occasions been able to reach an accord with the scrap industry to stock our main stores house with items of value. In fact our warehousing facilities are bulging at the seams as the flow of parts continues to come in. Obviously none of this includes brass fittings etc. which have long gone from any locomotive that is standing unprotected, and it is these parts we are now having to import from overseas.

We have also had no response from Transnet to our offer to train apprentices (Job creation?) as well as a number of other well meaning initiatives.

Summary

There is no doubt that we have not attracted the positive approval that we might have hoped to have attracted. We have always been heartened by the constant encouragement of a very small group of active enthusiasts who come to our events and who are always there to assist us where possible. Many of them have not been able to assist financially but their moral support has been encouraging. It is however the silent majority who suddenly explode into print if we do something that they disapprove of, who have we believe, been an embarrassment. Not only do they give encouragement to a dismissive and hostile administration by their actions but they also accentuate the non-commercial viability of Rail Preservation by remaining firmly rooted behind their computers without attending events and paying entrance fees, and without buying the books and DVDs that are available from the various clubs and heritage organisations who are trying to make a difference. Our detractors appear to be ignorant of the practical and realistic considerations that must be dealt with on a minute by minute basis by people like us, with operating infrastructure and real assets to protect. This is probably due to lack of commercial expertise, naivety, and lack of railway operating expertise.

A recent survey revealed that over 90% of the people who are vocal with respect to anything and everything that happens with respect to Railway Preservation in South Africa, have never been to the Sandstone Heritage Trust. Our survey revealed that they listed time pressures, work, family, pets, ill health, and lack of money for fuel as reasons for their non-attendance.

Is it any wonder then that the South African Railway Preservation movement has failed? Is it any wonder then that Sandstone's directors, shareholders and investors who have committed substantial funds over the years to try to make a difference in this particular Heritage sector for moral rather than financial reasons, now view the investment climate as being inappropriate?