



When you read an article which starts like this...

"The Clinker Appreciation Society's Great 2007 Tour of South Africa "

...you know that you're in for a good read.

When us Reefsteamers' took off on our Great Steam Trek 2 (Dave Rogers Tour), we were privileged to have 8 qualified fireman from the Welsh Highland and Worth Valley Railroad come along with us. They were certified with Spoornet, (thanks to the efforts of our Coen Pretorius) and they mucked right in along with our regular Drivers, Firemen and Service Crews. They soon found that our steamers are a handful to run, especially with the dusty clay we had for coal - but they relished the challenge. I was a Service Crew member - and I can testify that it was rare to not see one of these chaps smiling or laughing - even with chafed fingers and sooty faces. (and on one occasion - eating a whole plate of parsley!)

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- Lee Gates -

### The Clinker Appreciation Society's Great 2007 Tour of South Africa

By: Stephen Harris of the Welsh Highland and Worth Valley Railways



Eight experienced footplatemen from the WHR met up at teatime on Wednesday, 23 May 07 at the Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris, bound for Johannesburg and Reefsteamers depot at Germiston, in South Africa. An invitation had been offered some months previously for us to help operate and run a week-long photographers' special organised for Steam Locomotive Safari Tours run by Dave Rogers. We would be primarily running on the little-used Bethlehem to Bloemfontein section of Spoornet (South African common-carrier) in the Eastern Free State. This offer was readily accepted; the opportunity to ride and fire on the mainline being an opportunity of a lifetime and just too good to miss.

Reefsteamers are a voluntary group, who like us, have a passion for steam and have amassed a collection of ex-SAR locomotives and rolling stock which is maintained at the old steam shed at Germiston on the outskirts of Jo'burg. They have an excellent website which I would recommend you visit to learn more about their activities. Currently, they have 5 locos capable of steaming and we were to take 3 of them on the tour : Class 15CA 4-8-2 no. 2056, Class 15F 4-8-2 no.3016 and undoubtedly, Reefsteamers' pride and joy, the Class 25NC 4-8-4 no.3472.

The Thursday of our arrival was spent getting the locomotives prepared and making up the two trains that were being taken. One of the trains would be a rake of 12 passenger vehicles in the old SAR red and grey livery incorporating mostly sleepers (as the photographers would, like the staff, be staying on the train for the duration of the trip), a lounge/bar vehicle, a dining car, a kitchen car and the Reefsteamers' own management vehicle. The other train was composed primarily of support vehicles, being water tank wagons, DZ wagons (44 ton drop-side gondolas) with some 200 tons of coal and a grab, a support coach (The "Caboose") and one day sitter car.



Reefsteamers' Class 15CA does a smokey run-past



John Shawe checking the fire on the Class 15F

All but one of the party were unfamiliar with mechanical stoking, so an M.I.C. was conducted for us on its operation using the Class 15F. Martin Coombs had actually worked for just under a year back in the early 70's as an South African Railways fireman, so he was refreshing his memory. It rapidly became apparent why this fitting improved the locos' performance from the original hand-fired versions: the grate area is 63 square feet!

A belated fish and chip supper preceded bedding down for the night ready for an early start.

After a freezing cold night where temperatures had dipped to about -3C (it is winter time in South Africa), we awoke to the movement of our 860 ton train, endeavouring to leave the yard with the 15CA and 25NC doubled at the head. We were held at signals for a good 20 minutes or so, until we were given the road, giving us ample opportunity to observe the permanent way workers operating in the company of guards with pump action shotguns...theft of materials is rife, hardwood sleepers being one of the targets, even if these are still part of a track panel, it poses no obstacle... and then there's the overhead wire used by the 3000v dc electric trains (!): a long insulated pole carries a tool to cut the wire. The thieves then often wait for a train to run into it, bringing down marketable lengths of copper. We saw evidence of this on our return, with significant damage done to the overhead in a more remote section between Bethlehem and Kroonstad.

Gradually the day warmed up as we passed out of the suburbs of Johannesburg, eventually reaching a pleasant English summer's day temperature, and this was to be the pattern for the duration of our stay here - very cold nights with warm daytimes. Certainly for the majority of our stay, skies were cobalt blue with little cloud: ideal for the photographers. The line from Jo'burg to Kroonstad passes through predominantly flat lands with few relieving features in the landscape. Evidence of old steam-age infrastructure was still evident: many loops had balloon water tanks (although these were not operational) and there were some splendid semaphore signals still in use.



Shaun Ackerman in his element, driving the Class 25NC with John Bunch behind him.



The NG16 climbing up from Pandora Dam

Shanty towns came and went, reminding us of the poverty that many have to endure here. Steam having finished in 1991, the passage of our 1970's time capsule provoked curiosity amongst some as we past by, but nothing like it would have done back in the U.K.. During the journey, Coen Pretorius; a member of Reefsteamers, but perhaps more importantly, Training Manager on Spoornet for steam loco staff, had issued us with the necessary paperwork enabling us to ride on and fire the 3 locos.

On arrival at Kroonstad, the locos were removed from the train and headed off to the yards, but not before Andie Shaw; who'd been firing the 25NC, was prised out of the cab with an ear-to-ear smile. The yards resemble Basford Hall in size and an absence of overhead cables meant that fires could be cleaned and coal brought forward without risk of electrocution. We followed on after the arrival of the service train headed by the Class 15F, which took its whole train into the yard. Here, the opportunity was also taken to water the engines; a lengthy process given the low water pressure and enormous water capacities of the tenders (averaging around 10,000 gallons each).

Another essential activity which was carried out was to clean the fires - a lengthy and physically demanding job bearing in mind the 48/63/70 square feet of grates these 3 engines possess. The coal delivered before the start of the trip was supposedly A grade coal; events would subsequently prove it to be closer to D-! A gang of us set about shovelling coal forward in the bunker on the 15CA and got first hand experience of what it means to have a bunker capacity of 18 tons of coal! This is normally a tiring and dirty job anyway, but felt even more so as we were as yet unaccustomed to the altitude: virtually the whole tour operated in regions about 5000 feet or more above sea level.

Once the servicing had been completed, we rode back to the station where the 15CA and 25NC coupled back onto the passenger set and departed, the 15F following on with the service rake. I was invited to ride on the 15F for the run to Bethlehem, our destination for the day. During the journey, I watched and briefly had a go with the stoker controls and injectors under the direction of South Africa's only qualified female fireman, Darlene Reimers who is a member of Reefsteamers. The 15F tore into it's work with gusto and steamed well up the seemingly endless steep gradient out of Kroonstad. Eventually, our pilot, Piet Terblanche, decided that a stop for fire cleaning would be in order some 12 km before Bethlehem before we dealt with some hefty gradients on the final approaches. Fortunately, ex-SAR locos have the equipment to deal with this process in the form of steam operated grate shakers, ash pan coolers and drop grates. Despite this, it still took us about an hour to clean and rebuild the fire, and remove the clinker n' ash from the ash pan before we could get underway again. Not long after getting underway again, Piet noticed we'd set fire to the veldt some distance behind, so the train was stopped and we backed up until alongside it. Here the combined attentions of blow-down valve, spray pipe and firing shovel ensured it did not get too far.

Mechanical stokers are not completely the labour saving devices you might think. At the base of the bunker lies a trough in which operates an Archimedean screw, about 6" in diameter, driven by a steam donkey engine in the tender. Two universal joints in the screw allow relative movement between engine and tender. The screw brings forward and crushes coal prior to bringing it up to a table, on which is a fan of vanes, just inside the firebox doors. Steam jets, aligned with the gaps between the vanes blast the coal to the various parts of the firebox - the fireman is kept busy on the road making sure the coal is properly distributed around the box by adjusting the pressure applied to these jets. These are very noisy!

The trough has a series of telescopic sliding plates which cover the screw. Prior to coaling, these plates must all be pushed back to cover the screw, then as the stoker is put to work, the first plate ( nearest the cab ) is pulled forward to allow coal to drop into it. Once this wedge of coal has fallen, the next plate is pulled forward, and so on.

So much for the theory!

In practice, coal needs to be coaxied into the trough, depending how dirty the coal is with coal dust and so sometimes needing to venture into the bunker...yes, I know...Thus it was on the final part of the trip, Darlene and I were guiding coal that had avoided the attentions of the stoker screw into the trough by the light of a torch. We did at least come out of the bunker before blasting through a tunnel!

Bethlehem was eventually reached at about 21h30, passing the passenger set that was already stabled at one of the platforms. However, we took the whole of our service train straight on shed. Once again the fire were cleaned before putting the loco in charge of minders who would make sure fires and water levels for the 3 engines were maintained overnight (oh, and that no bits of the engines would "disappear"), ready for the early departure the following morning. After a shower, and a meal, bed beckoned.

The following morning dawned bright and very cold (-6C overnight causing water pipes and other fittings to freeze up). With the influx of photographers impending, our party had to remove its effects from the sleeper we had occupied the past two nights to the "Nigel" coach at the other end of the train.

Easy!

Pat Ackerman brought his bakkie (Afrikaans for pick-up) onto the platform into which we loaded our luggage which was then driven to the other end of the train and temporarily put into the management carriage. After a short while, we set off for Fouriesburg where the photographers would join the train.

Fouriesburg is a place in the middle of nowhere, seemingly totally dependent on agriculture for its existence. Despite the four tracks through the station, the station pervades an air of dereliction. Local African children gazed at the arrival with interest and once the two luxury coaches arrived bearing the photographers, the contrast between the two groups was almost surreal: affluent first-world white Europeans mixing incongruously with poor Africans...

Allowing the guests time to settle, we eventually set off back towards Bethlehem, stopping at various localities to allow them to take up positions whilst the train reversed and then proceeded to thrash past them. Usually, this was repeated several times, often accompanied by requests for more smoke... (Eventually, over the course of the next few days the consequences of this became plain to all: more smoke, means over-firing, which means clinker forms readily, which meant more photographic down time cleaning fires). After the final sunset "glimt" shots, the train headed back to Bethlehem for the night.

On arrival at a very cold Bethlehem, Shaun Ackerman and Coen Pretorius used the 15CA to put a lovely old clerestory sleeping coach (The "Nigel") in front of the management coach for our party and once again we got settled in our respective compartments. For me, I'm given my roster for the morrow : up at 03h00 for a start at 03h30 firing the 15F with Driver

Coen Pretorius. With the usual mixture of excitement and apprehension at the prospect of the following day's duties, sleep was fitful; especially with the sub-zero temperature in the train.

The alarm wasn't needed, and I made my way down to the shed, crossing the deserted tracks and down a cinder path (**that** brought back memories of bunking round sheds in my younger days!) to where Coen, my driver was already doing some shunting in preparation for our journey. Climbing aboard, I ran through the usual fireman's checks and assisted with sighting signals as we set back into the station. Our journey to Fouriesburg was to be tender first, double headed with the 25NC and the passenger train plus water tankers, a load in excess of 1000 tons. The gradients out of Bethlehem are fierce, 1:32 for 21 km virtually from the platform end - and we thought the Lickey's tough!

So, a little later than 04h20 planned departure, with a blast on the high pitched single tone whistle of the 15F and an answering chime from the 25NC, we got underway. It was still dark, and with little light pollution, the stars shone unfamiliarly above us, with the carriage lights highlighting the exhaust trails of the 2 engines hanging heavily in the air above them, climbing and curving sinuously behind us, emphasising the steepness of the gradient. The way ahead was illuminated by the tenders' powerful sealed beam headlight, sometimes on the track and at other times on the line-side vegetation as the train swung round tight curves climbing all the time. Even this wasn't sufficient to stop me getting smacked on occasion by the odd bush when I stuck my head out at the wrong time! (A day or so later I was very forcibly reminded that this could indeed be a very serious consideration when introduced to the "Tattoo" bush. This must be a member of the acacia family and grows like the buddleia along the trackside that we have here; only this has thorns at least 2" long in profusion about its stems, a definite warning statement!).

A heavy frost had formed and this ensured that despite having the grunt of 2 very powerful locos, we were down to walking pace with frequent but controlled slips; Coen being kept busy keeping the 15F from slipping to a standstill. Eventually, we reached the first crossing place and settlement of any description at Slabberts, as dawn gradually broke. Shaun Ackerman joined us here for the rest of the trip to Fouriesburg where major fire-cleaning was necessary. I'd never seen clinker quite like this before: approximately 18" thick **all over** the 63 square feet of the grate. Using the grate shaker, we gradually lifted this mess off the fire-bars and broke it up into smaller bits that could be bashed through the two drop grate sections. Precious little clean fire remained, just dead ash.

There is a problem with this process however, in that the grate shaker uses steam and because of the time it takes to clean the fire, steam pressure and water levels in the boiler soon fall. The solution is to partially remake the fire and allow the boiler to recover before carrying on with cleaning the remainder of the grate. The sheer volume of ash and clinker thrown out necessitate the loco being moved forward several times to enable the ash pan to empty its contents on to the track. (this later gets cleaned off of the rails with a shovel) Needless to say, the crew on the 25NC had exactly the same problem.

Eventually, with a clean fire, water and steam pressure back up, we set off from the loop for the mainline, when with an ominous jarring, it's apparent that we're off the road...

Yikes!

Slamming the brakes on, we climbed down to discover that the loco has been derailed by the derailer that was protecting the mainline, which it had been assumed the pilot had removed after he gave us the right-of-way hand signal. Where blame lay for the derailment was neither here nor there, the point was that the 15F had the bogie and leading coupled wheels off the road and needed to be re-railed a.s.a.p. Having previous experience of re-railing locos, John Bunch, Andie Shaw and Shaun Ackerman then discussed how to deal with the situation, leading to a frantic phone call to the Sandstone Heritage Trust a few miles down the road.

Gert Jubileus brought two re-railing ramps to the rescue. Application of these got the drivers and rear bogie wheel sets back on, but despite much packing and backing of the loco the leading set proved remarkably stubborn. Eventually, the loco had backed up to a facing point and could go no further, so there was only one option left ... jack it up. Having scotched the driving wheels securely and applying the tender handbrake, two 50 tons bottle jacks at either end of the buffer beam took the weight off the bogie, which itself was then raised on two smaller jacks. Once the wheel-set was raised sufficiently for the flanges to clear the railhead, it was then packed with a short length of rail to enable the jacks to be removed and the wheel-set to be moved sideways. More packing and the application of a jack horizontally onto the offending wheel-set produced the desired result, and the loco was back on the rails, the whole exercise having taken some 6 hours. A damaged drain cock pipe and sand pipe were removed. Apart from this, after a thorough examination by Andrew King, the Chief Engineer at Reefsteamers, deemed the loco fit to proceed.

Back at the Bethlehem end, John Shawe firing the 15CA had started his turn at 04h00 anticipating being relieved at lunchtime...crawling into Fouriesburg station around 17h30, however, revealed a shortage of steam, and a very tired John with a grin the Cheshire Cat would have proud of. The whole ensemble then set off for Ficksburg where we would then spend the next few nights. John eventually finished his tour of duty round about 22h30, completely knackered but thoroughly chuffed with himself, so much so it became difficult to prise him off "his" engine the rest of the week.

Asleep in the clerestory sleeper early Monday morning, we were awoken by a slight jolt, a familiar toot from 3016's whistle and then the comforting rattle of the train as we set off back to Fouriesburg. The photographers were treated to various run-pasts between there and Ficksburg; some, bringing the residents out to see what the commotion was about - interesting to note their bare feet, no paranoia about snakes then! On arrival back in Ficksburg, the fires were cleaned and the locos serviced generally, including watering from an overhead supply pipe fed from a small reservoir on the hillside. Despite the pressure, the huge water capacity of the tenders meant that filling up is not a 30 second job.

James Bunch and I then went with Shaun Ackerman on the 15F out beyond Ficksburg with a mixed train into a very different landscape, somewhat reminiscent of the Cumbres and Toltec in the US. The photographers lined the hillsides as we performed several run-pasts for them, apparently to their satisfaction, before returning to Ficksburg. On entering the station I noticed the social hub of the town (according to local sources), the Bowling Club - I'd never seen crown brown bowling before...Once again the loco had its fire cleaned and was serviced generally after being turned on the triangle available at the Bethlehem end of the station, finally topping up the water in the tender before being left ready for the following morning's work. That evening, we drew lots as to who is to do what the following day at the Sandstone Heritage Trust where an NG4 and a coal-fired NGG16 were provided for us to work for the benefit of the photographers.

So, once again, I was awoken to the sound of the steam alarm clock rattling us down to Vailima where the connection with the Sandstone Heritage base is made. In my case, this was not particularly good news, as Vailima is only some 17km from Ficksburg and I needed to breakfast first. I still had a mouthful of bacon as I left the train (and a sausage wrapped in a knapkin for later) and made my way across to the delightful little NG4 4-6-2T that was waiting for us.

It had been agreed with Sandstone that only John Bunch and Andie Shaw should drive as they were familiar with the line, so the rest of us took turns to fire for them. Initially, Andie and I took the NG4, and John and Martin Coombs the NGG16 for various run-pasts. These proved both interesting and extremely tiring as the gradients on the line are a challenge to say the least - 1: 20's and steeper in places. Producing smoke for the action shots desired proved difficult until the dregs of the bunker were reached, when a good chuck of the shovel in the general direction of the tubeplate produced the desired results.

However, it also meant that we needed to top up with coal, thoughtfully provided in sacks on a flat wagon carrying 2 tractors in our train, and take water from a reduced version of the overhead water supply at Ficksburg. This proved interesting, as despite my 6' height, I could only reach the stop valve by standing on top of the dome and balancing somewhat precariously. Even then, the "bag" was too short to go in the tank and had to be held over the tank filler. Judging by the length of time it took to fill, I can only assume that the tank was provided with something of a domestic-nature water supply. Having done this, I then set about cleaning the fire : yet again thick with clinker all over the grate. Sadly, I had to throw out some good fire just to get some room in the box to be able to move the clean fire out of the way of the clinker.

Some 20 minutes later, having restored the fire to a decent state, I hand over the shovel to Peter Randall, who then fired for the rest of the day.

After various run-pasts with the NG4, we caught up with John and Martin on the Garratt at the farm. The Garratt's fire was badly clinkered (again) and Martin was struggling with this, a lack of water and the heat. Relieving him, I attempted to make some progress with the fire, but was hampered by the lack of suitable fire irons. Eventually, 2 of Sandstone's own staff took over and we made our way over to a barn where our hosts had provided photographers and crews alike, a splendid braai (barbecue), which enabled us to restore our energy and fluid levels.

After lunch, John Shawe and Peter Randall crewed the NG4, leaving the rest of us to take a leisurely tour of the estate's treasures in the back of one of their bakkies, driven by Leon Flynn, the principal truck driver on the estate. Much was seen to delight the eye: for a taste of this I would suggest that a visit to Sandstone Heritage Trust's website is in order.

Catching up with John and Peter on the NG4 at the end of the day found them endeavouring to dispose of the fire, which, surprise, surprise had formed virtually impenetrable clinker. No amount of bashing with a pricker would touch it and eventually John Bunch suggested a little trick with a bottle of water...

Whilst this protracted business was going on, the time to catch our train back at Vailima was getting ever shorter. It was decided that Dave, John and Peter would stop on to dispose properly of the NG4 and return by road, whilst the rest of us were driven down to Vailima by Leon in the bakkie. Here, we were greeted by the sight of the 15F waiting with our train highlighted against a stunning evening sky. Once all were aboard, the loco then proceeded to propel the train back the 17km to Ficksburg with Cliffie Mathee (in the last coach), Reefsteamers' safety officer speaking to the driver on the 15F telling him every 15 seconds that the line was clear to push back.

During the course of the twilight, a photographer, wandering round the yard taking shots of the 3 locos, noticed "an extremely large dog with a beard" - later identified as one of 2 lions that had gone a.w.o.l. from a game reserve nearby. Suitable warnings were issued to the occupants not to become a light supper for the escapees.

John, Dave and Peter eventually returned after what on all accounts was an "exhilarating" run back from Vailima; 6 up in a Vauxhall Astra!

Whilst we had been taking in the joys of Sandstone, Shaun and Elize had been arranging for another delivery of decent coal (Shaun had rung the merchant and stated that they were not paying for the "kak kool" (Shit coal!) they originally delivered and demanded some decent A-grade stuff) This was duly delivered and tender bunkers emptied of the old batch for removal. In view of the length of time the group's coal grab would take to coal the engines and load the rest into the wagons, it was decided to hire in a front end loader. Amazingly, this arrived just 15 minutes later and enabled the job to be completed in just 3 hours.

Gremlins struck again on our return, when the generator providing electricity to the train failed. On the upside, we did have the pleasure of dining by light of oil lamps in the dining car, on food cooked by gas! It was round about this time that I became very aware of the amount of char on the floors in the carriages around the less-than-sealed gangway connections, listening to it crunch beneath my feet every time I walked up and down to our compartment. A regular cleaning job for the cleaning ladies on board!

Wednesday morning started pleasantly to the sound and motion of the steam alarm clock as we wended our way back to Fouriesburg and back for several run-pasts, returning to Ficksburg for servicing for the locos and a packed lunch for us. The photographers were treated to a trip out beyond the town with the 25NC for more photographic opportunities during the afternoon, with the 15CA going out later to head the train back to base. In the evening, the 15CA worked the service train back out as far as Generaalsnek, stopping for photo run-pasts in various locations. It was a wonderful, sunny evening marred only by the 7 line-side fires caused, some more serious than others but luckily for the fire truck hired from Sandstone to assist with the tour (it is very dry during a South African winter). Some friends and I rode back in the caboose lit only by the full moon's light. Magic!

Thursday morning and I was up at 03h00 and firing the 15F with Driver Chris Saayman, and Piet, the Spoornet pilot. We double-headed with the 25NC back to Fouriesburg and proceeded to do some run pasts out towards Slabberts. Local school children looked on with great excitement as we roared over the road crossing leading to their school.

Setting back from one of these run pasts, we were aware of the makings of a substantial bush fire. Fortunately, the locos are equipped with very long spray pipes and these, combined with a severe battering from shovels had the blaze extinguished before it got out of hand.

As the morning wore on and the number of run pasts increased, it became apparent that water was becoming an issue, and that it was imperative we returned to Fouriesburg where the water tank wagons could re-supply us. This section, fortunately was substantially downhill, and the 25NC was not in quite the same predicament as ourselves, so we allowed them to do the bulk of the work. After a long morning's work, fires were very dirty and cleaning them took a long time - yes, the new batch of coal was only fractionally better than the last.

Eventually, both locos were ready for the off and duly departed back towards Bethlehem (the photographers were to leave the train early the next morning on the next leg of their tour). This left the 15CA and the service train sitting in the loop awaiting clearance for the section to Slabberts once the other train had arrived there.

Peter, Martin and I decided to ride back on this train, and what a splendid decision it turned out to be! It was like a journey back into the past - no artificial displays of smoke or unnecessary stops, just a mixed train as might have been seen 40/50 years ago, chugging its way through the lovely, old landscape of the Eastern Free State. Even more astounding; we overtook the main train at Slabberts and headed onto Bethlehem ahead of it!

On arrival there, the 15CA drew the whole train into the depot and proceeded to shunt off various vehicles that had been hired from Spoornet to make up a decent looking mixed train. This gave us opportunity to have a look around the virtually deserted depot, which had originally been the steam shed for the Bloemfontein to Bethlehem line. Despite steam having finished in 1991, 2 class 25NCs were to be found gathering dust in the old repair shop, work seemingly just having been abandoned when the decision was made to stop steam. Outside in the yards, a further 20 or so 15F and 25NC's lay awaiting the cutter's torch - Classes 15F and 25NC made up the last of SAR's steam fleet - quite remarkable to think they are still there all those years later.

Friday morning the sound of the steam alarm clock was replaced with the sound of carriage doors slamming as the photographers leave the train. In a way, it was nice to get the train back to ourselves again. We left about 07h00 and headed back to Kroonstad double-headed by the 15CA and 25NC, the 15F had already left with the service train.

From the Bethlehem side, we went straight into the yard for servicing the 2 locos. Peter, who'd been firing the 15CA was to hand over to me here and I duly set about helping him clean the fire of the inevitable clinker and getting the fire ready for the 3 hour run back into Jo'burg. However, Att de Necker, the driver for this leg, when asked if I'd fired the loco before (the answer was no), decided it was too much of a gamble, in view of the prevailing uphill gradients, length of journey and the fact that the pilot couldn't take over the driving in the event of problems as he was not qualified with steam.

Somewhat crestfallen, I made my way back to the train, little realising what was in store. Sitting in the lounge car listening to the 2 locos tearing into the gradients, I began to think that perhaps Attie's decision wasn't so unwise after all!

At Dover (not a white cliff in sight anywhere), the 2 locos came off the train and requested the signalman to put us into one of the 2 goods roads that did not have overhead power lines...sure enough we were put back into the one that did. Here, fires were cleaned again, with cautious handling of fire irons in view of the proximity of the overhead. Shaun who was driving, then invited me to ride on the 25NC back into Jo'burg along with John Bunch who'd been on earlier.

About 30km or so from our destination, Flip Reimer who'd been firing, asked me if I'd been watching what he'd been doing, to which I said yes. This seemed to have been the desired response, for he promptly directed me to the fireman's seat and left the cab for the comforts of the train!

The stoker controls are identical to those on the 15F but the injectors are self-starting, unlike those on the 15F which need the water valves adjusting to get them to start. Settling into the task, Shaun was quick to point out that we'd some 12 km of 1:50 to deal with and that I'd need to "keep her hot".

Obviously, I must have been doing something right as I got the thumbs up from across the cab as we launched into the climb. The 2 locos tore into the bank with noise like I've never heard ... it was AWESOME - the 25NC packs about 3500hp. John, standing behind Shaun, noticed that despite this, the regulator wasn't fully open as the steam chest pressure was only around the 150 psi mark. As I mentioned earlier, the stoker needs attention at all times, and this journey was no exception! If I made one trip into the bunker, I must have made 8 to pull coal into the stoker trough. Eventually, after passing through busy Friday night suburbs (and getting a stone through one of the carriage windows), we stop-started our way back into the depot at Germiston with all the colour light signals at play. Here we reversed the rake of carriages into the main shed and then went over to where the fire could be cleaned (sound familiar?) prior to disposal. Backing into the shed afterwards, the boiler was topped up before I got off, absolutely blown away by what I'd just experienced.

Andie remarked: "Smile Steve then we can see where you are!" Enough said - well, it was dark by then!

- Steve Harris 2007 -

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