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[Wed, 9 April - Passengers at Boksburg East.](#)

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11th April ☞ Friday ☞ Commuter run to Vailima :



FP04 ☞ Service and Stoking at Fouriesburg at the end of a Free State ☞commuter☞ run.

(Pic by Aiden Mc. Carthy)

Friday dawned clear and crisp, promising to be another beautiful day. It was a bit too cold for the more elderly members of the passengers and crew, but most of us enjoyed the brisk morning. The Friday sunrise saw the Class 15F locomotive coupled onto the train and undergoing final prep for the day's run. (Pic F01 below) The morning run out would be under guest hands as Brendon Anderson, from the Umgeni Steam railway, would have his paws on the regulator. Chris ☞SM☞ Saayman was to fire this round with ☞Swak Hart☞ Viljoen as the trainee fireman, gauge polisher and stoker slide yanker.

People were still adjusting to waking up on a train far away from home and the breakfast was up to its usual high standard. Robbie Macgregor showed the ingenuity and proactiveness that is common to many steam people. Sleeping on the coaches has one disadvantage, you can hear all the spring loaded doors slamming. And even worse, there's the usual hollow-boned chalk-board screech and a thump as the sliding doors are opened for the compartments. Because it was a crew coach, there were people moving in and out all the time ☞ catering staff, the security guards, the engine crew, night shift crew and the house keepers. Robbie Macgregor, of Umgeni Steam Railway, undertook to lubricate those 8 sliding doors the best he could with a can of silicone spray lubricant and it made a dramatic improvement. In Pic F02 below, he looks especially self-satisfied as he paid special attention to our own compartment B door.



F01 ☞ Class 15F No.3052 ☞Avril☞ faces the sunrise, all steamed up and ready to go.



F02 ☞ The Umgeni Steam Railway doorman holding his secret weapon against the metro station sound effects of sliding doors screeching at night.



F03 ☞ A full flop bag awaits removal before being dragged by the train. Probably the most yucky job of a steam tour, this bag has sprung a liquid leak on the top surface.

Coach duties including the inevitable refill of the cylindrical water tanks under the coaches, and removal of the toilet flop bags before we ended up fertilizing the line-side weeds for the next 15 miles. (Pic F03 above) The previous night's curry, lubricated by the sweet banana salad, had its effect and those bags were pretty full. One on a similar topic, we discovered overnight that there was a generous scattering of large animal droppings scattered on the platform. While it was reasonably visible along the length of the train at night, the area around the front of the train and the loco was poorly lit. In my morning rounds, I was amused to see how many of the putty-mines had been triggered in the dark. I hoped none of our guests were wearing sandals. And a lot of people were amused at me for always carrying my oversized torch down that end, but at least I didn't have to scrape MY boots off against the coach steps!

We ended up leaving later than planned as the pilot hadn't pitched up. During the wait, Cliffie Mathee suddenly clicked that we hadn't put the train water tank hose away ☞ so that resulted in a frantic scramble and hose rolling session. (Pic F04 below.) It's a beautiful intact heavy duty hose that runs the full length of a 15 coach train ☞ so its loss (via ☞Affirmative Shopping☞) would be felt when the sinks run dry. See all those tools in the photo? The acetylene torch set, the frame and bogie jacks, fire extinguisher and tool boxes. I'm pleased to say that none of them were needed for the trip.

John Dunnottar Rennie was looking for trouble around the guard's van, and found it in the form of Piet Buffels Steenkamp. (Pic F05 below) They ended up in a playful argument over aspects of train operation. Two strong and vocal personalities coming together in a clash reminiscent of the Boer War. It was Bristol vs. Pofadderfontien. My home town, Coventry, is closer to Bristol than it is to Pofadderfontien, so I silently sided with the Brit.



F04 Shorty breaks the world record for rolling up a single piece train lengthed water hose before the whistle blew for departure.



F05 Train-side re-enactment of the Boer War. Piet Buffels Steenkamp (L) and John Dunnottar Rennie (R) playfully mix it up in front of an amused Tannie (Auntie) Dorie standing in the guard's door.



F06 Can a steam locomotive talk? Oh yes! That's one reason why we love em. And here, she's telling us to please just hurry up already and let's get rolling! Notice that Ficksburg is a curved station.

We were soon off, after the locomotive was re-stoked a bit to cover the delay. (Pic F06 above) To compensate for the loss of the run to fetch the two allocated Class 25NC locomotives at Bethlehem, we had scheduled an early morning trip (Pic F07 below) through to Fouriesburg and back again, with stops at the Vailima Halt for anyone who wanted to get on board the Sandstone choo-choo. People were still wandering in from breakfast as we were rolling, and enjoying the still-green late summer farm land and the dramatic rock formations of the area. (Pic F08 below) The floor cleaning gang got on with their chore of cleaning the floor after departure. (Pic F09 below)



F07 The low light of the fresh dew morning glints from the cleaned engine just before the off. The shadow is from the refrigerated goods shed awning.



F08 Just one of many scenic formations, the timeless rock presiding over a cultivated field of maturing corn plants.



F09 Floor cleaning done right after departure. They even found a large black button that had popped off one of Umgeni's coats.

In amongst the sleeper coaches, the management car and the communal cars, we had two day sitter coaches. These were provided for day-time guests staying locally to come onboard and take a ride, but also for the convenience of our passengers, many of whom could not convert their 6-bunk compartments to the sitting formation with four bunks in use, and the center bunks permanently extended as luggage shelves. These two coaches gradually filled up on the run out. I was amazed by the antics of these boys though (Pic F10 below) playing computer games on board a steam train rolling through beautiful scenery. Oh well.

It was a great run cool country-scented air streaming in the coaches. As a huntsman will tell you, cool moist air is the best medium for the hounds to scent the fox, with naturally wet rhinariums. (The black part of a dog's nose.) You could smell the passing grass, wild cosmos and assorted weeds all mingling with a pleasant herbal scent and then the tantalizing whisps of coal smoke reminding you of just what exactly is up front. The crew went a little faster than necessary concerning the timings (but not speeding), giving the engine a good workout. The light cool cinders were flying, and I was catching many of them even in my sparsely haired arms. (Pic F11 below)

The Sandstone Heritage Trust Garrett NG16 No.153 was waiting patiently with two open air coaches (Pic F12 below) and a scattering of passengers filming us rolling in past the 19D shed. (An isolated shed where 3 Class 19D locomotives are stored under a roof and awaiting restoration.) Most of our guests disembarked and swapped trains, as well as a small number of our crew members. We would have dropped the guests off along the way had we gone to fetch the two 25NC's, but they would have had to come back by vintage bus as it is not permitted to carry passengers when moving dead locomotives. So thier schedules didn't change much. But for the Reefsteamers climbing off, it was a bonus extra few hours at the Steam and Cosmos festival.



F10 Modern diversions. These lads are more excited about the electronic game than about enjoying the ride.



F11 Cinder trap cocking an elbow out of the window when the steam engine working hard is likely to result in a growing peppering of hard carbon fleas.



F12 The Sandstone Guaranteed connection. That white board on the front s the heraldic arms of the SA Armour Museum.

I had my first sighting of the AEC Regal Bus that was laid on by the Sandstone Heritage Trust to take passengers home by road. (Pic F13 below) Why do older vehicles have heaps more character than modern ones? I loved the gracefully out-swept sill panels along the

skirts, the stately old vertical radiator grill, the slightly cockeyed pod headlamp and the half cab arrangement. It reminded me of a field of heavy vehicles that had been literally put out to pasture close to the scrap yard where my dad used to get parts for his salary extender vehicle rebuilds. (The constantly rained on British vehicles of the 50-70s era used to rust out before they wore out and 2nd hand spares were quite viable.) Some of those old busses were of similar vintage to the Sandstone AEC Regal 📷 I remember the Bristols and early Leyland Tigers as well as a single AEC Regent 📷 a precursor to the classic RT Routemaster London bus. It used to be grand fun poking around the seats and climbing up and down those stairs, and sitting in the drivers seats, those old fashioned steering wheels feeling as big as dustbin lids 📷 great fun for a loner 5-8 year old boy with no real friends. Busses and a few trucks settling down slowly amongst the dandelions and butter cups. (And the occasional cow.) Of course, with the ever increasing environmental restrictions on the traditional scrap-yard, and the growing trend of destroying (for materials recycling), rather than dismantling End-of-Life vehicles, those grassy playgrounds full of derelict hulks of all sizes are long gone. What a treasure those busses would be today and would any have survived to be restored?

I actually had no contact with trains of any kind as a kid in England. So the sight of a steam train awakes no childhood memories in me like it does for so many other Reefsteamerers. But that Sandstone Bus, which wasn't even so much as idling, effortlessly took me back down a 32 year time warp. (The first trains I ever had contact with, (at 10 years of age) were the 5E's that were servicing the Kelvin Power Station (Kempton Park) with coal trucks in the late 70s)

The Ficksburg Stop and runaround went without issues and I was a little surprised that we didn't have much of an audience. Normally the local African folk, especially the children, watch our every move with fascination 📷 and wave and cheer enthusiastically at the moving train. The Fouriesburg Station area is derelict, but still easily accessible by road and has several operational sidings. Coen Pretorius took over as driver with Andre van Dyk as fireman. We took a leisurely run back to our home base for the weekend, with another stop at the Vailima siding. (Pic F15 below)



F13 📷 The time machine that took me away both physically and mentally 📷 the Sandstone AEC Regal waits silently in the warming morning past the end of the platform.



F14 📷 Two foot gauge. (Size 11s !)



F15 📷 Heading home from Fouriesburg with a typical view of the outer mountain range and endless miles of green at this time of year.

On the way back, a casual management meeting was taking place in the Management Coach No.42, with the cream of Reefsteamerers society < cough! > being present. (Pic F16 below) They didn't look too productive and it became obvious they were waiting for refreshment. I caught Andrew King arriving with the tea tray. He's not bad looking as a 56yr old male engineer, but he is honestly the ugliest looking waitress that I have ever seen. (Pic F17 below.) Good at his job though, I didn't see a single drop of spilt tea on the tray, even with the train rollicking along her super-elevated path, and he hadn't sampled the box of biscuits either. Good man.



F16 📷 Management meeting. Fred Sewell (extreme right) seems to be more interested in the scenery. Left to right: Mike du Plooy, Shaun Ackerman, Elize Lubbe, Coen Pretorius, Fred Sewell.



F17 📷 Andrew King looks sweet as he brings in the tea and the biscuits.



F18 📷 Security guards on platform duty. I don't know the fellow on the right, but Andries (left) is a regular feature on Reefsteamerers day-tripper trains and also gets involved in the servicing and logistics work.

On the way back, we did another passenger swap at Vailima and this time, a lot more of the Reefsteamerers got off to enjoy a few hours at the festival. By this time, the sky was hazing over. The AEC Regal had gone, and would reappear at Ficksburg in the evening to drop the passengers off. (Many of them stayed on right though to the evening braai and came home on the third night time drop off.)

We shook out the security guards (Pic F18 above) as by now the train was nearly empty and vulnerable to theft. We had a few ugly incidents last year where some personal staff belongings were stolen right off the train. As an added precaution, we locked all the doors at the platform edge, except the guard's compartment of the power van. Anyone leaving or entering the train had to do it track side in full view of the crews at work 📷 we'd see if it was someone unknown was mooching around.

The crew got to work immediately to get the engine re-coaled, as we had been running on one load of the 📷sugar bin📷 so far. Those experienced with the ways of the Reefsteamerers will notice that we did not bring our unique hydraulic coal grab wagon with us. We'd made arrangements to have a front end loader run from Sandstone Estates to do some coaling for us, transferring directly from the drop-sides of the gondola to the tender. The locomotive was uncoupled from the train, run around to the opposite end and then shunted onto the goods platform siding. (Pic F19 below)

But first, some inspection. There had been problems with the cylinder cocks and one of them wouldn't close properly. The rods wasn't achieving full travel either, and the joint was binding. When you remember that these components are operated by a non-power assisted lever way back in the cab, smooth operation and complete travel becomes essential. Andrew completed the repair with the massive tool collection of a ball peen hammer, one adjustable wrench and a pair of pliers 📷 and two new split pins thrown in for free. (Pic F21 below) Apart from one cylinder cock valve that had to be removed and cleaned previously, this was the only repair job required on the engine for the entire trip. Well done Avril!





F19 ☞ It is a pity that water tower doesn't work. No.3052 Avril is easing forward alongside the freight platform for greasing, inspection and coaling. That cliff in the background makes a great natural amphitheatre for steam locomotive echoes!

F20 ☞ Eina! (Ouch!) Coen Pretorius gets a sharp reminder of why it's not a good idea to be barefoot in the cab!

F21 ☞ Andrew King is trying to spread and straighten the U-shaped coupling at the end of the rod in situ. The rod had to be removed to finish the job.

Actually, he's talking loudly on the radio and trying to keep it out the rising wind.

Andrew's repair work was successful and we managed to get dear old Avril's cylinders buttoned up. Sustained running with the cylinder cocks open looks great on action movies, especially westerns ☞ but the escaping jets of steam would eventually cut notches into the valve seats.

The next job was to drop the doors and remove the stanchions on the DLJ type gondola to facilitate access by the front end loader that we were expecting. (Pic F22 below) We are fortunate that this gondola is straight and the doors are in good condition ☞ the U-shaped pins were knocked out with relative ease. After some delay, Shaun decided to be generous and knock down a third door. While we were doing this, the weather suddenly changed. (Pic F23 below) A fretful wind was blowing and the temperature plummeted ☞ as if God had absent mindedly left the refrigerator door open. The wind was cold enough to be uncomfortable but none of us went to the coaches for warm clothing as we'd be working soon. Instead, we took refuge in the cab of the engine, which naturally comes equipped with a built in sold fuel burning heater. Dawie ☞Swak Hart☞ Viljoen, of course, just had to be different and he took refuge between Avril's smoke deflectors and gently toasted his buns in front of the smokebox. (Pic F24 below.)



F22 ☞ Messy service. Two doors of the gondola have been dropped to facilitate access by front end loader. That's steam you see at the bottom left, not coal dust!

F23 ☞ Threatening clouds slump over the Maluti mountains, which are fading into the gloom.

F24 ☞ Dawie keeps warm at the smokebox and is sheltered from the freezing Maluti wind by those great big smoke deflectors.

The front end loader finally arrived and literally set to work as it came swinging into the platform. The reach of the front scoop was enough to get the coal over the tender sides, but not enough to centralize the dump ☞ so a big berm was forming on the right hand side of the tender. Andrew King got to work trimming the coal and spreading it out flat, while I went for a flat shovel in the power van, to help out. We both worked hard but it wasn't an unpleasant job ☞ and the cool air was a boon to our rising core temperature. The dumped coal was loose enough not to make the shovel work a nightmare ☞ unlike occasions when the coal has settled over time, fiendishly interlocking and making penetration with the shovel very wearying unless one has a flat surface to shovel against. The rising coal level eventually prevented the scoop from emptying, and Andrew and I worked double shift ☞ first to empty the raised and waiting scoop and then to spread the coal.

As the trimming work came to an end, other Reefsteamers conveniently came out and started cleaning up the mess on the platform. Brooms, safety shoes and flat back shovels were all in use by the time the loader turned around and hared off as quickly as it came. The locomotive had been allowed to simmer down during this time, so there was plenty of water space in the boiler. The injector was run and Johann Breydenbach got going with the extended spray pipe to wash up the last of the carbon crumbs. (Pic F26 below)



F25 ☞ Running up for the first bite, the Sandstone Loader saved us much work.

F26 ☞ Johann washes down the platform while Andrew smiles at the unfortunate location of the hose pipe. Notice the shine on the tender as shown by Dawie's reflection.

F27 ☞ The second busload of misfits watch the locomotive servicing. Notice that Piet ☞Euffels☞ Steenkamp (2nd from right) is being treated to a set of Umgeni Bunny-Ears.

While the locomotive servicing was being done, the Sandstone bus arrived and dropped off the mixed crew and guests that had taken advantage of the extra strops to spend the afternoon at the festival. (Pic F27 above) They just stayed there, all warmly dressed, and made de-sotto facetious remarks while watching the loco crew. As part of the tour arrangements, the crew and guests had all been given a meal voucher to attend a catered braai at the old Waenhius (Wagon House). So these people were full of food and nonsense in equal quantities. Actually, it had turned bitterly cold at the Steam and Cosmos Festival and they had some rain too.

The locomotive service was a bit unusual. She wasn't to run the following day so instead of cleaning and banking the fire, the fire was cleaned and a very small amount of coal put in, just enough to keep the boiler warm overnight. The steam pressure would be allowed to fall and no loco minder would be required. I had forgotten about the fire dropping and had gone to take a shower to get the coal

trimming dust off ☹️ so no pics. (Much to Dawie's relief ☹️ he hates being photographed!) But I did get a picture of the ☹️core☹️ locomotive crew after Avril had been tucked up for the night. (Pic F28 below) These guys (and myself) had been rostered for a combination of footplate and/or service crew each day of the tour and were often working even when officially ☹️off shift.☹️ It is people like those in the pic who are the ☹️grease☹️ of a train tour ☹️ putting in many hours of often-unnoticed work to literally keep the wheels turning.



F28 ☹️ The usual suspects. These guys had been rostered every day and often worked when officially off duty. Left to right: Andre van Dyk, Andrew King, Johann Breydenbach, Dawie Viljoen and Shaun Ackerman.



F29 ☹️ Did you know that they eat termites in Africa? Avril's Service Crew take a quick after-shift wash and brush up in injector overflow water.



F30 - .Waiting for the start of our marvellous moonlit vintage bus ride. The driver actually sits in a half-cab in front of that right hand front window.

With Class 15F No.3052 ☹️Avril☹️ all greased and buttoned up, and dozing for the night, the crew went off to the showers. The dining coach was strangely empty at this hour, as nearly everyone had eaten at Sandstone, but the bar car was thriving, as always. The free red-skin peanuts probably helped to sell some drinks too, with their thirst inducing salt content. One or two passengers were a bit disgruntled at the lack of food service, but that's simply because they hadn't read their instructions. But they didn't starve. The early evening meal on the train for those feeling peckish, paid for by Reefsteamers Crew, was Kentucky Fried Chicken ☹️ so those passengers got fed anyway. The day's service crew ended the evening by taking the ☹️Patmobile☹️ to Sandstone ☹️ 5 fellows and about two tons of tools in the back of a Toyota Hilux, and 2 fellows up front. The photographer got to ride shotgun due to an omnipresent tool, torch, notebook and camera caddy.

Sandstone Estates was undergoing the de-lights of an ESKOM load shedding, so only the lights in the wagon house and surroundings were on. That didn't seem to hinder the party though and the place was still swarming. The braais (BBQ's) were doing their last load of meat though and we'd arrived in time to get our meal. Oddly enough, we weren't even asked for our meal vouchers, but none of us were brave enough to chance our arms and go for seconds. Because the farm was dark, the exhibits would be hard to see and as most of us would be at the farm the following day anyway, none of us went exploring initially ☹️ contenting ourselves with the wagon house display. Some of the diehards went for a walk later.

As a loner, I'm uncomfortable with a lot of people and was undergoing a strange mixture of claustrophobia and isolation at the trestle benches, something I couldn't quite bury under the potato salad. After the plate was empty and the supply of wagon house exhibits was exhausted when the boarding call came for the bus to Ficksburg, I abruptly and somewhat rudely abandoned the Reefsteamers and took the bus. Hence ☹️ no photographs of the Friday night braai.

In spite of the chilly air, the old diesel bus started up well and took us home in galumphing style, even though the driver was battling with the non-synchromesh ☹️crash☹️ gearbox at times. Actually, there's something to be said for the old-fashioned leaf-sprung Hotchkiss drive and plump high aspect ratio balloon tyres, as it was a reasonably smooth ride up the long dirt driveway of the Sandstone Estates. There was a friendly mood on board which soon lapsed into silence on the way home, everyone's heads rocking in unison. The interior lights were not switched on, so we drove home in darkness and listened to the husky push-rod roar of that engine coupled with the low gear ratios and the heavy load. Everyone on the right hand side of the bus was entranced by the beautiful night-time vista of the bright moon shining through and between a heavenly veil of silvery clouds. This vision was framed by the ghost-painted mountains and topped overhead by a generous scattering of diamond chip stars that scarcely seemed to twinkle.

What a lovely night for a moonlit vintage bus ride!

The Reefsteamers coaches went silent quickly that night with everyone tired from crewing, or from a day of walking at Sandstone. Up front, the shiny tender, the white wheel rims, and the upper brass work, had been silver-kissed by the moonlight, the magnetic Reefsteamers logo and signboard clearly but monochromatically visible. The locomotive dozed too, with hardly a smudge of smoke or heat shimmer above the chimney stack. The gap under the firebox door was a steady dull orange. The pressure gauge was still optimistic at about 900kPa but falling, and the boiler was no longer muttering to itself. The uneven menisci in the water columns were both still, the engine slightly tilted with the characteristic Ficksburg super-elevation cant. The cylinder cocks were gently sibilant rather than insistent, but the turbine driven dynamo was still and the cab dark. Someone had left the coal shovel leaning against the driver's seat, so I slid it gently back under the coal on the shovel plate, and then I quietly left the cab.

All was at rest.

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