

1). DEREK REMEMBERS...

During the recent Reefsteamers Depot Open Day (29th Jan. 2011), I was on board the steam-hauled train to Boksburg East while the train shunted alongside Germiston Station.

Germiston Station and the surrounding rail infrastructure are special places for me because this was where I worked shortly after I qualified as a Telecommunications Electrician with what was then South African Transport Services (SATS). I was posted to the Telecoms Depot to work on the local section, which encompassed the area from President Station right through to the Steam Locomotive Depot, the Goods Cabin, the Stores, Shop 15, the Diesel Depot and up to Natalspruit Station. I had originally trained at the Johannesburg Telecoms Depot, but this had not figured into anything when I was posted.

A part of my regular duties was to tend to the clocks on the Germiston Station platforms. These station clocks were stepped (advanced) by means of a timing pulse that originated from the master clock in the exchange. Each pulse came once every thirty seconds. The station clocks were not free running with an escapement like a conventional 'dial' (analogue) clock. Each platform had a double faced clock, usually close to the stairs.

Every morning, when I arrived, I used to check the clocks against my watch to see if they were running fast or slow. When I went to the depot, I would also check two faces of the tower clock above the station building. If one of the platform clocks was losing or gaining time, I would then have to grab a ladder and a battery, climb up to that clock and disconnect it from the cable. If the clock was slow, I would then manually step it ahead by alternatively connecting and disconnecting my battery until the clock was right. If the clock was fast, I would leave it disconnected and let it miss a pulse (or several) until it was back in time with the other clocks and then reconnect it.

If you tried to 'step' the clock (advance) with the cable connected, you could then upset the other clocks on the same system. I have no idea how old the clocks were, but they were definitely not the latest model. Unfortunately, the wiring within Germiston Station was thickly covered in soot from the many steam locomotives that plied up and down around it. Messing with the wiring was a disagreeable task to be avoided at all costs.



P01 – Germiston Station clocks.

The tower clock was a different ball game. This was situated in the tower on top of the roof and was accessed via a trapdoor that led down a rickety ladder into a passage below. If my memory serves me right, there was one mechanism 'stepped' from the exchange, that drove all four clock faces via a gearbox. But setting the time was a whole different story.

Theoretically, all the four tower clock faces should have been showing the same time. However, because of wear in the hands and shafts, as the minute hand rose from 6 to 12 the faces would lose time, and as the hands fell between 12 and 6 the faces would gain time. (It is an effect called gravity! ☺). Each face was more prone to this than the other and we tried our best to find a way to prevent the hands from doing it, but the whole mechanism was worn out. You could also cheat a bit by physically moving a clock's hand to try render the time more accurate but this could only be done from outside the tower.

If we removed the clock hands or one clock face needed to be removed, we then had to climb onto the station roof and blank that face or aperture off. There was a rusty iron ladder on the one side that gave us access to the ledge around the tower and a rusty chain that was supposed to prevent us falling off. That crummy clock was one of my bugbears because the technical supervisor used to catch the train too and he would check the clocks when he arrived. I would promptly get a call logged to go sort them out if he was not happy.

By the time I left SATS in 1986, they were looking at replacing the platform clocks with digital ones. However, during my steam train trip over 25 years later, I saw that the original platform clocks were STILL hanging, albeit showing different times. I could also see that three of the tower clock's faces had stopped years ago.



P02 – The Germiston Station tower clocks.

I was also responsible for the departure bells. Re-wiring the main line platforms with new bells, cables and bellpushes was the last job that I did at SATS. I recall wading through 6 inches of soot on the roofs of the buildings to access the cables.

We had a .22 powered Hilti gun that we had to use to mount some of the equipment with. We had to notify the Railway Police, aka 'Stasie Blompotte' (English = Station Flowerpots) that we were going to use it ; otherwise they would have thought somebody was letting off a firearm. I also used to be responsible for the PA system, the Signal Post Telephones (SPT's) between the rails as well as the battery chargers in the signal cabins. (There were four signal cabins in Germiston.) I also looked after the foot-switch alarms in the ticket offices as well as all the phones, distribution boards and cables in the whole railway area that was part of Germiston.

The one highlight of my day was arriving at Germiston and seeing the shining station pilot locomotive, Class 12AR No.1535 'Susan.' She was so much nicer to see than the grubby shunters that charged at lines of goods wagons behind the station. I also had the steam locomotive depot as part of my section and going there during the mid-1980's was an amazing but very dirty experience. I did not know at the time that the end was close for those engines. When I left SATS in March 1986, the last glimpse I had of Susan and her fellows was when they uncoupled the Pretoria-bound coaches from the Trans-Natal and shunted them onto a siding.

It took many years to be re-united with that shiny pilot locomotive. And when I discovered she was still around in Germiston, I went to see her at what was now the Reefsteamers Depot. Susan was still under repair at the time, but later, I was privileged enough to see her the day they put her back in steam after so many years.



P03 – Class 12AR 'Susan' being cleaned immediately upon being shedded.
June 1985 – Picture by Geoffrey Dingle.

Today, I still enjoy seeing her, and walking the remnants of the depot after all those years, seeing the high-roofed buildings of the shed where working steam engines once stood and walking along the foundations of the since-scraped coal stage. (Lee's note – *The surviving buildings and infrastructure at the Reefsteamers Depot are about half of what originally existed. There are empty foundations, derelict footings, inspection pits and cut-down pipes scattered all around the depot grounds.*)

I always stop by at Susan and look at her and think back on the old days when she ruled the station. She is the one tangible connection that I still have to those days from so long ago.

Travelling through the station behind our GMAM-hauled Boksburg East-bound train, I once again saw the landmarks from the days when I was a newly qualified staff member and no longer an 'appie.' However, this time around, I remembered that the clocks, bells and the SPT's were no longer my problem.