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STEAM

RAILWAY

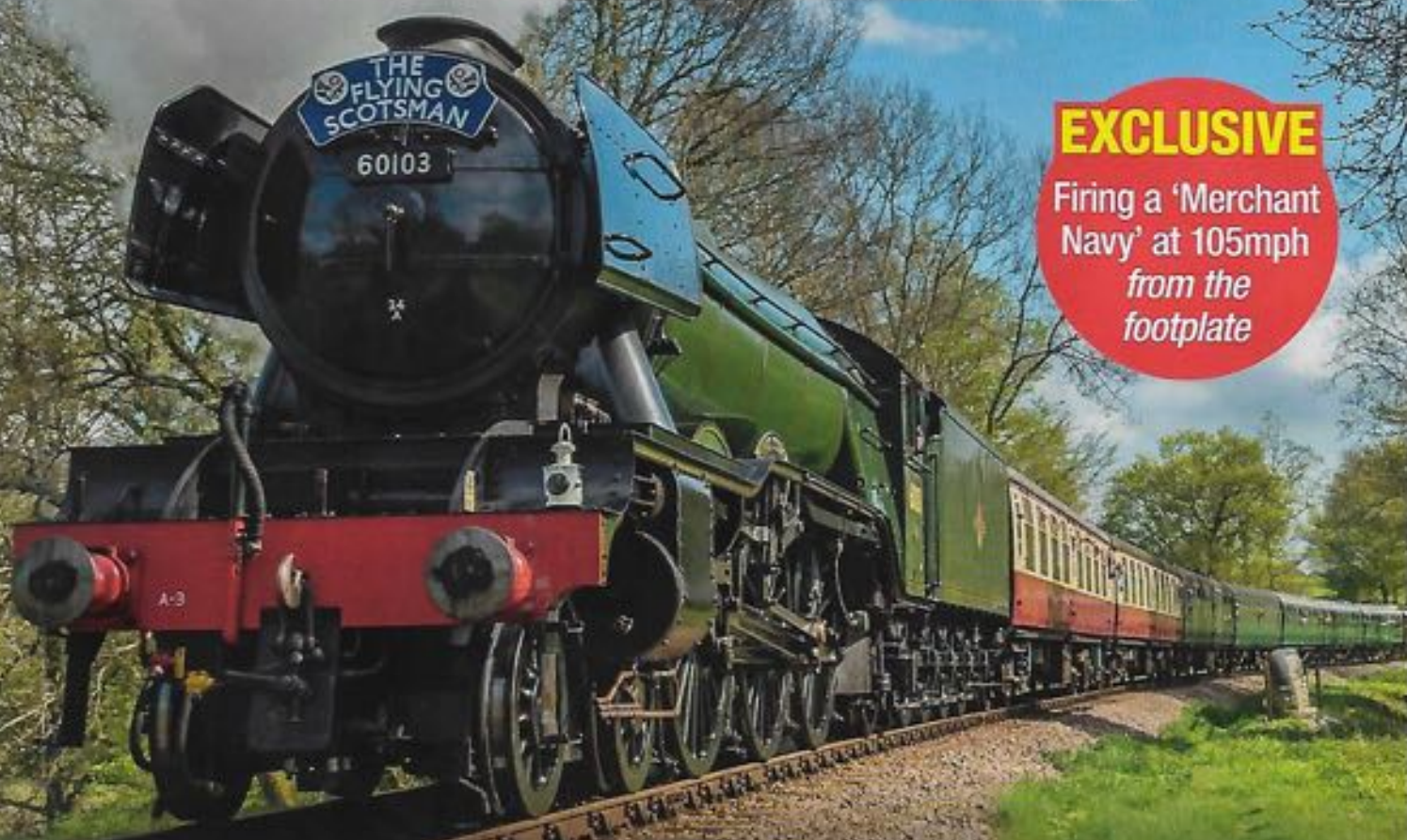
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AUGUST 20 -
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MANAGING 'SCOTSMAN'

HOW BRITAIN'S MOST FAMOUS ENGINE STAYS ON TRACK



EXCLUSIVE

Firing a 'Merchant
Navy' at 105mph
from the
footplate

'4079' TO RETURN
TO STEAM IN UK
August date named



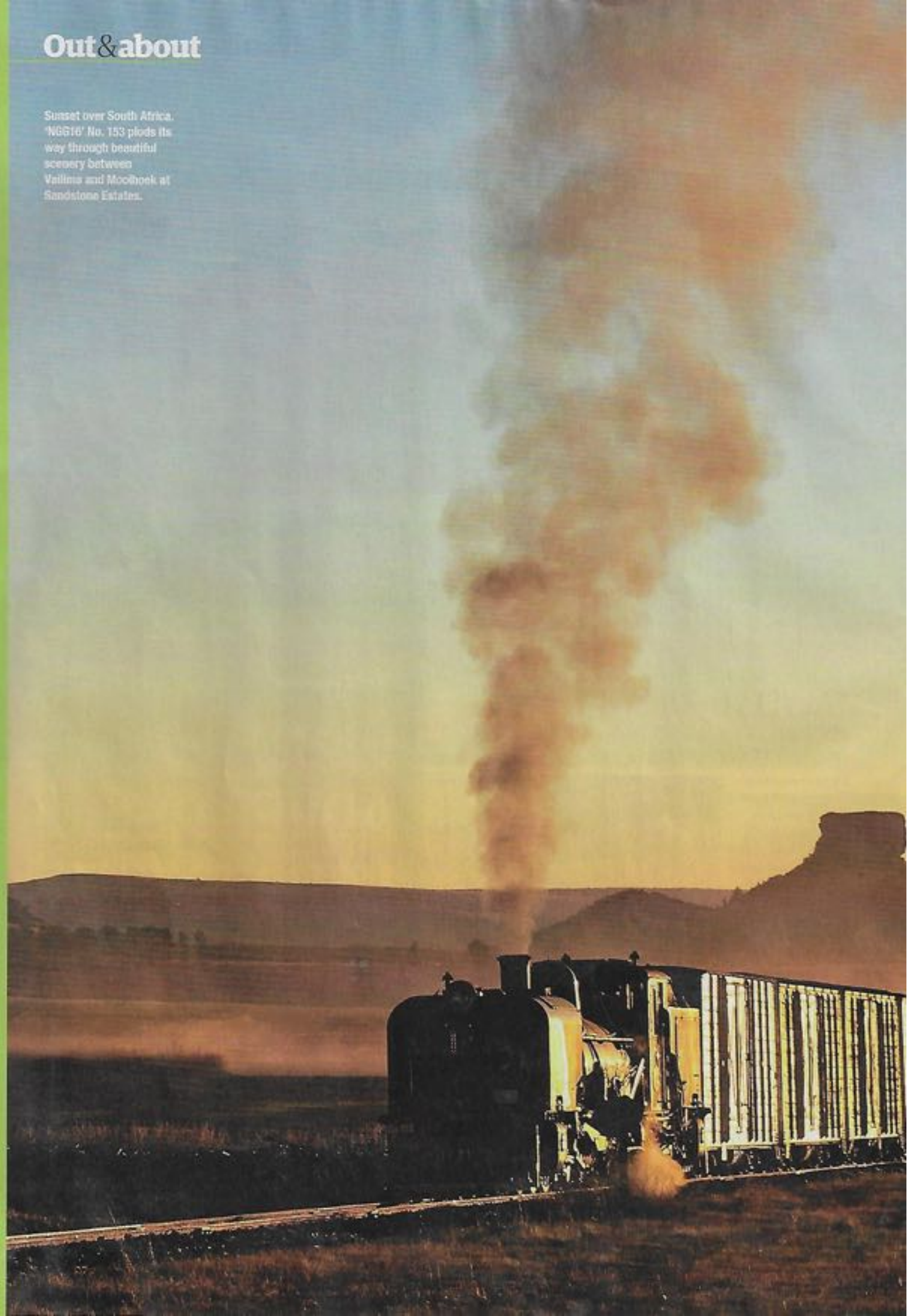
WELSH RAILWAYS
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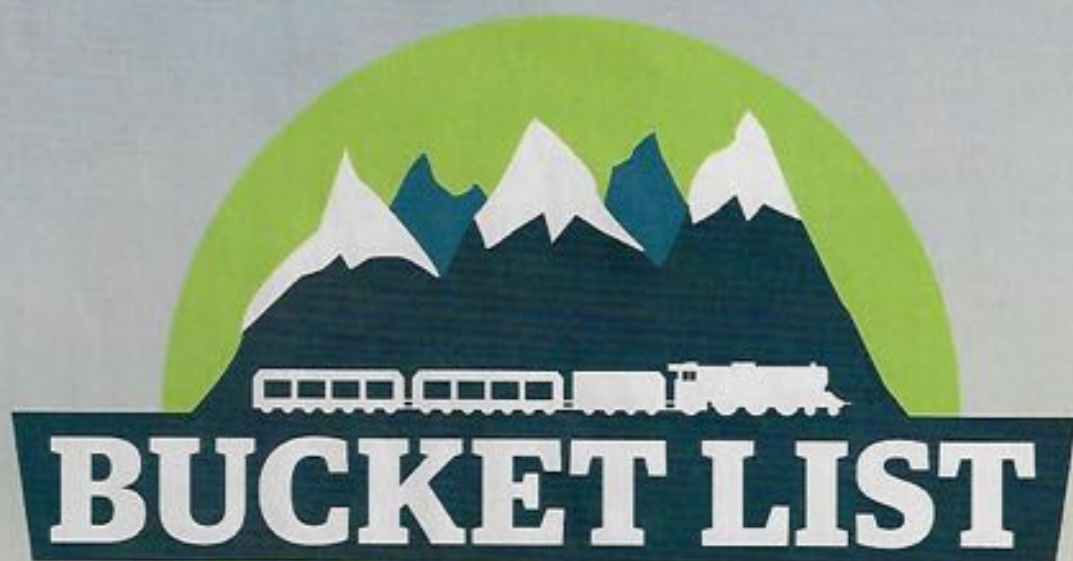


Plus: 'SUPER Ds' AT BESCOT • NHR DIVIDED BY DISPUTE • PATRIOT 'PLATES FOUND

Out&about

Sunset over South Africa.
'NGG16' No. 133 plods its
way through beautiful
scenery between
Vallons and Moolhoek at
Sandstone Estates.





THE GREATEST RAILWAY SIGHTS AND
EXPERIENCES AROUND THE WORLD

SANDSTONE ESTATES

A well-established player in the world railway scene,
Sandstone Estates is a jewel in the crown of South
African steam.

WORDS AND PICTURES: GEOFF COOKE



The Maluti Mountains shimmer in the distance, warmed by the African sun. They rise over the border in the mountain kingdom of Lesotho, but we are in South Africa. The shrill whistle reminiscent of a Welsh Highland Garratt drifts across the vast fields, emanating from a goods train powered by an 'NG/G11' Garratt that is only slightly younger than the K1 Garratt that resides at the Statfold Barn Railway in England. The similarities between the narrow gauge railways of Sandstone and Britain are legion, but there are also significant differences that make the Sandstone Steam Railway a world-leading heritage resource – and a grand contender for your bucket list.

Southern Africa has a rich history of sub-Cape gauge narrow gauge railways. Some were built as cheaper alternatives to broader gauges across disease ridden swamps, over steep escarpments and across bone dry deserts. Others served agricultural regions that carried fruit and timber. Britain, Germany and Portugal contributed to the original construction and their equipment remains to this day, surviving and thriving at Sandstone thanks to the foresight of one man and the endeavours of a small team of professionals who work wonders on historic railway artefacts rescued from mines, farms, derelict railways and war-ravaged museums.

From farm to steam

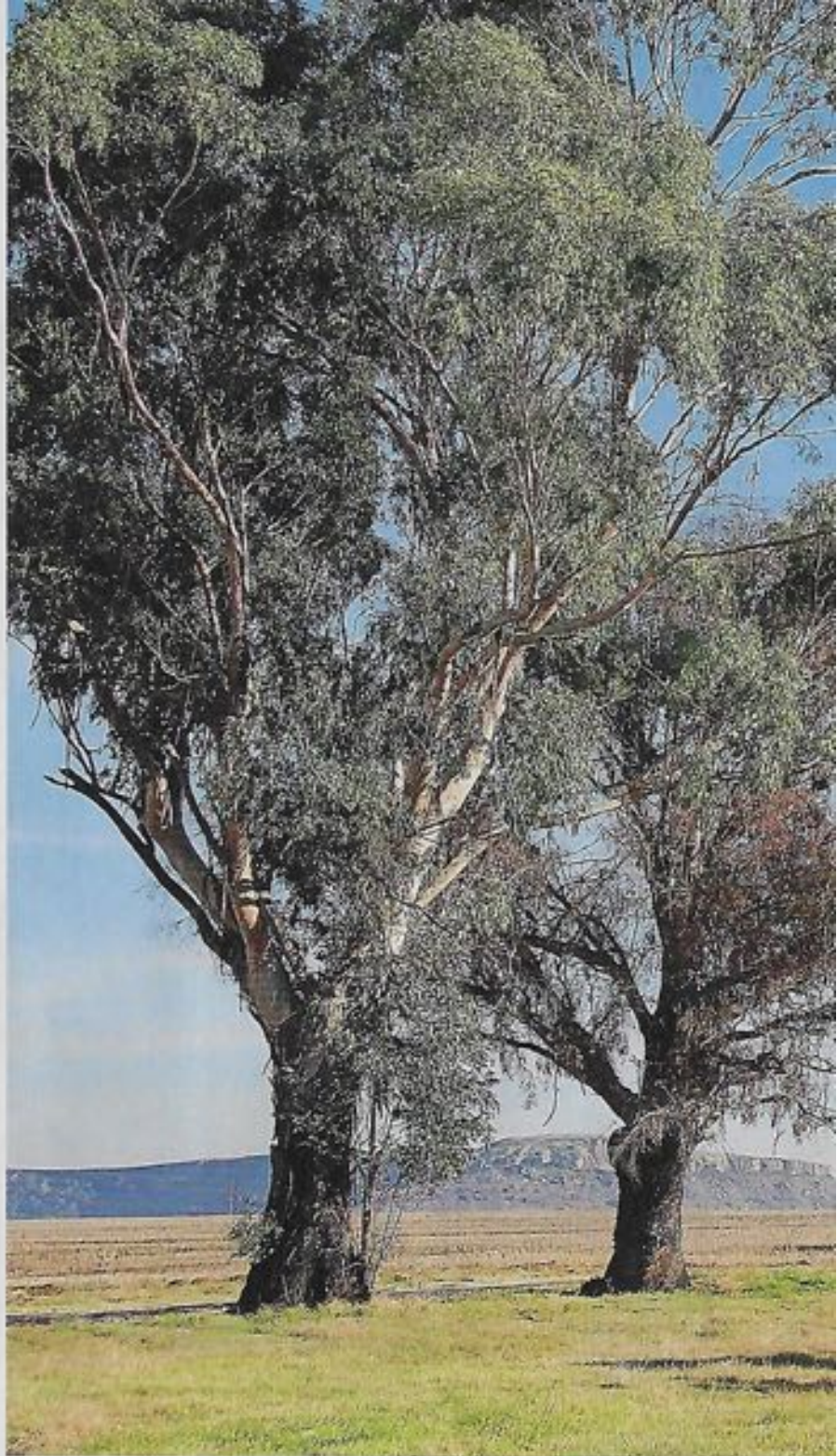
The Sandstone Heritage Trust is a private preservation initiative established on a commercial farm in South Africa's Eastern Free State province. The present owners purchased the farm from the Wille family in 1995, the farm having been in the continuous ownership of the Willes since the 1840s.

The arable farmland along the little Caledon River which constitutes the official border between South Africa and Lesotho is rich in agricultural potential. It is a particularly beautiful part of South Africa, with sandstone outcrops nestling under the towering Maluti Mountains which sit high above the Drakensburg range. It is an area where farming has used traditional methods for centuries.

Many South African farmers had a great sense of history and continued using machinery that was more nostalgic than commercially realistic. The Hoekfontein farm was already a living museum with Lanz Bulldog and John Deere 720 diesel tractors in daily use when it became part of Sandstone. The new owners recognized this and decided from the outset that they would do everything they could to maintain the facilities, machinery and the skills needed to keep the old farm machinery and farming methods operational.

A pivotal point in the heritage programme's development was the decision by Sandstone to hold an innovative attempt at the World Record

“Sandstone is not a museum. It is a private collection of heritage items on a commercial farm”



for the maximum number of vintage (pre-1960) tractors working in one field at one time. To make the event more interesting for spectators, a short section of railway was built and the Garratt with a few coaches was cobbled together, all obtained when the Midmar Museum was dissolved in 1997 and a selection of narrow gauge equipment and track came on the market. The event was the first attempt of its kind and it took place amidst great international fanfare. 106 tractors participated and it was awarded with a Guinness Book of Records certificate. The rest is history, and the record was subsequently broken in Ireland with over 5,000 tractors in one field at one time. South Africa can be truly proud of the fact that they were the innovators with a vintage agricultural event that galvanized interest in people around the world.

The formative little railway did not go unnoticed,

Making the trip

The Sandstone Estate welcomes independent visitors, but your best option will probably be to join a hosted group tour offered by a specialist rail tour operator. Geoff's Trains Limited, based in England, is Sandstone's international tour consultancy. Visit its website to find out what tours are being offered or how to arrange one for yourself. They can also assist with plans for extending your Sandstone visit to incorporate more railways or other African experiences.

Most visitors to Sandstone will fly to Johannesburg. Flights from the UK and Europe are normally overnight and take about ten or 11 hours. Numerous British and European airlines serve the route and good deals can be found if you shop around. Onward travel from



Johannesburg's O.R. Tambo International Airport to Sandstone will be by road. Groups can use a coach for the five-hour transfer, but self-drive car hire and chauffeur drive services are also available.



and the enthusiasm expressed for its existence encouraged management to extend the line. Rail and sleeper stock soon ran out but the completion of the highlands water scheme in nearby Lesotho came to the rescue. Recognising that there was no one in South Africa encouraging the purchase, transport, and restoration of 2ft narrow gauge assets of historical interest, Sandstone took on the challenge and the collection as it stands today started to take shape.

The cards fell successfully into place when, in the late 1990s, the old steam workshop at Bloemfontein became available for rent. Sandstone decided to establish a steam locomotive rebuild facility with some of the fitters who had worked there for many years supporting the venture. Since then, 24 locomotives have been rebuilt. Some of them were in a parlous state and the technical

ABOVE Sandstone epitomised. One of Sandstone's ex-SAR 'NG15' 2-8-2s arrives at Grootrai where a vintage tractor waits in an adjacent field.

excellence of the locomotives is testimony to the professionalism and dedication of Lukas Nel and his team in Bloemfontein.

Although Sandstone set out to collect agricultural machinery, it did not close its doors to any collector who wanted a safe haven for a beloved old bus or engine, or piece of earth-moving machinery. The 2ft narrow gauge railway is at the centre of activities and it plays a role in the transportation of items on the farm, but it should not overshadow the other fascinating items of interest. Military vehicles, agricultural traction engines, buses, cars, ox wagons with oxen attached are all there.

Sandstone is not a museum. It is a private collection of heritage items on a commercial farm, and the staff do their best to keep everything in tip-top condition and to show visitors around with pride.

Statfold on steroids

Sunrise on the African highveld can be a colourful affair. Cool crisp air and a faint smell of dust complement a horizon of bright purples, oranges and reds as the sky turns from black to cobalt blue. Your feeling of being alone on the African plains is interrupted by the scraping of shovels, the clanking of fire doors, a blast of steam from safety valves and a shrill steam whistle. Your day on Sandstone's steam railway is about to begin.

Dawn is an excellent time for steam railway photography. Early starts can be difficult to arrange in Britain, but in Africa nearly every day on safari starts with a dawn patrol. Our beasts are made of steel, but the sense of anticipation that accompanies a pre-dawn cup of coffee remains – will the sunrise be spectacular, will the wind blow from the right direction, and will the iron horse put on a grand performance?

A small team will have been preparing the locomotives since the small hours. They may be employed by Sandstone, but equally they may be volunteers from Britain, Europe or Australia. Footplate experiences are not permitted by South Africa's rail safety regulator, but they do allow enginemen qualified in their home countries to volunteer at Sandstone, providing they satisfy professional standards. The locomotives, drawn from Sandstone's diverse stable, may be one or two Lawley 4-4-0s, classic British narrow gauge machines from the 1890s that originally battled over the malarial flood plains and afforested

escarpments of Mozambique. The outline of these machines is well suited to sunrise. They create grand silhouettes backed by the dawn colours. For a more boxy, powerful image, you could choose a couple of Garratts – cross to the other side of the tracks for powerful glint shots of these steamy brutes as they lift a long freight train past the backdrop of maize fields and Maluti mountains.

Between the quaint Lawleys and the giant Garratts you are spoilt for choice. The Sandstone roster includes locomotives made in Britain, Germany, France, the USA, and South Africa among others. Whatever your taste in narrow gauge, there should be something there to please you.

Rolling stock has not been forgotten – a good selection of coaches is complemented by goods wagons of every type. Open and flatbed wagons, hoppers, tank cars, box cars and a few cocopans can make up trains that complement your locomotive of choice. The result is an authentic African train in an authentic African landscape.

After a few hours of fun, with the sun well established and in the tradition of all good safaris, it is time to retire for breakfast. Locomotives to the depot, photographers to the Waenhuis, where a cooked breakfast will be served.

You may be staying in one of Sandstone's diverse accommodation options, all a short walk away from the Waenhuis and Hoekfontein station. Victorian cottages line up alongside the railway, replicas of ganger's accommodation – corrugated iron, ornate verandas facing the tracks, two twin bedrooms, bathroom, lounge and a kitchen. Live like a

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**The
Sandstone
roster includes
locomotives made
in Britain, Germany,
France, the USA,
and South Africa**
”

BELOW 'NG10'
4-6-2 No. 61 and
'NGG11' 2-6-0+0-6-2
No. 52 double-head
through Sandstone's
agricultural landscape
near Hoekfontein.



railwayman and his family would have done when steam was king. You may prefer a railway cottage, terraced rooms typical of the single quarters that could be found at remote railway stations. If you prefer a compartment in a railway carriage to bricks and mortar, Sandstone offers these as well – Cape Gauge main line sleeper coaches that are all varnished wood, comfortable bunk beds and old time character.

Another similarity with a wildlife safari is that the time between breakfast and mid-afternoon tea is more relaxed, leaving time to amble around the farm, explore the diverse heritage collections, ride a train or two as well as a few vintage cars and maybe a Sherman tank. It's a little like the Statfold Barn Railway in Staffordshire on steroids, but without the crowds and set in the heart of Africa. Sandstone's shop is adjacent to the Waenhuis. Drop in for a new sun hat, a few books or videos, or a pack of Sandstone's famous Cosmos flower seeds. On the other side of the Waenhuis is the bar, so if your idea of heaven is to sit under a tree with a



ABOVE Sandstone isn't all about big ex-SAR machines. Visitors will also be treated to locomotives such as Kerr, Stuart 'Wren' 0-4-0ST Works No. 4031 'Little Bess', pictured at Grootdraai with a small train of skip wagons.





cold beer watching steam trains go by, this must be a contender.

As the sun dips towards the horizon, photography triumphs with colourful sunsets, great glints on stunning steam locomotives and an almost infinite number of creative photo opportunities in the diverse landscapes along the 28 kilometres of 2ft main line. This is the time of day when the big Garratts look their best, particularly when they double-head to tackle the challenging mountain section. Tight curves, steep grades and good sunlight combine to offer classic African railway imagery, often complemented by the residents of the lineside villages who come out to enjoy the spectacle and generally join in the fun.

Sandstone does not stop as night falls. The Waenhuis offers typical South African countryside cuisine, including braaivleis (barbecues) and potjiekos (a filling stew cooked in a cast iron pot). The bar will be open, and maybe a steam train will take you into the darker regions to look up at the stars that fill the African sky. Include some night

photography with the train to complete an amazing day of diverse heritage fun.

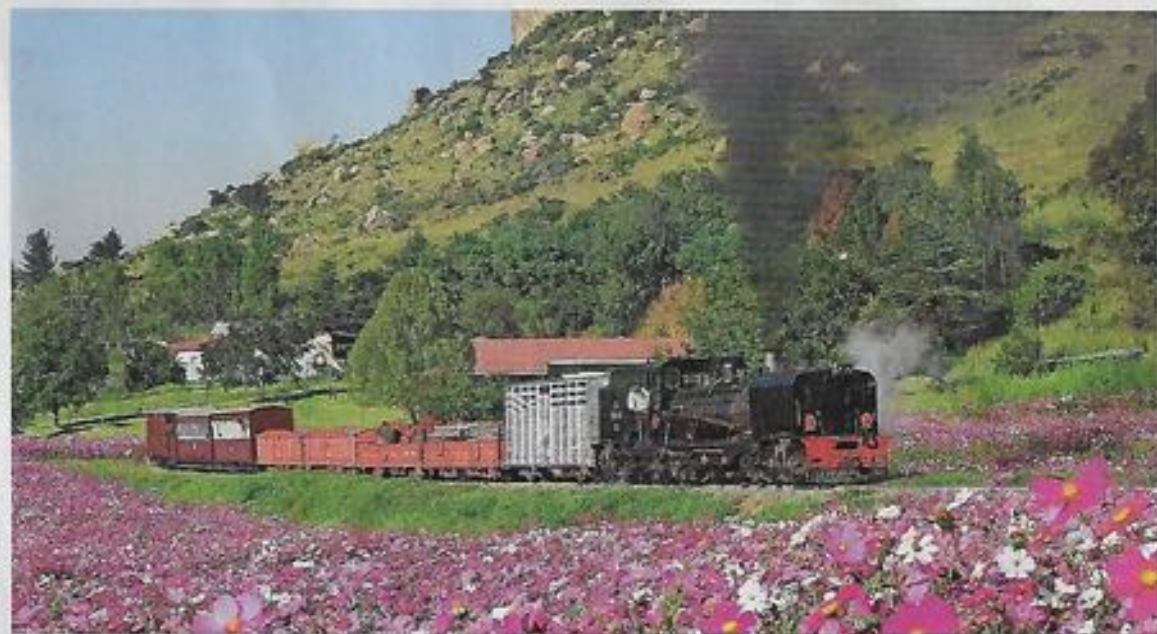
Conclusion

Sandstone may be further from home than the Great Little Trains in Wales, but it is not hard to reach and, even if it were closer, you would want to spend more than a few days there to take in what the estate and its heritage collection can offer.

In one week, you can enjoy days dedicated to British, European and American steam traction, as well as days filled with industrial tank locomotives, Garratts and much more. Every day can be complemented with vintage vehicles, road steam, ox wagons, military equipment and, occasionally, vintage aircraft.

Such a visit makes it easy to justify the overnight flight and you can consider extending your stay in southern Africa by adding a few days at Cape Town or Victoria Falls; both can include steam railway experiences alongside the normal attractions of scenery and wildlife. 🇿🇦

ABOVE A pair of Falcon 'Lawley' 4-4-0s are silhouetted against the sunrise.



LEFT Garratt No. 113 passes a field on Sandstone's famous cosmos flowers in 2005.