

The face of South Africa

Photograph by Aidan McCarthy

Railways have played a major role in opening up Southern Africa, with its vast distances to be traversed over often arid terrain. For over a hundred years the railways were the mainstay of freight transport, but after World War II that role was gradually taken over by heavy road trucks. The current railways administration has cut services to remote areas, often leaving the once shiny rails to rust in the veld. Steam locomotives, long ago replaced by electricity and diesel, were initially parked out of sight, but more recently have been sold to be cut up for scrap metal.

The preservation and redeployment of steam trains, which has a huge potential for attracting especially overseas tourists and for creating local jobs, is now entirely in the hands of private individuals and organisations. One of the dozens of locomotives that have been saved is the class NGG16 pictured here on the private narrow-gauge line at Sandstone Estates near Ficksburg in the Eastern Free State in April 2006. It was built in Scotland in 1937, entered service at Port Shepstone, and was later stationed at Umzinto for use on the Ixopo–Donnybrook line. After the line was damaged by floods in 1985, two NGG16s were simply left to rust. In 1991 they were moved to the historic village at Midmar, and when that closed in 1998, No113 was brought to Sandstone, where it has since been fully restored.

Sandstone Estates, along with Reefsteamers and Friends of the Rail, recently formed Steam in Action, a grouping of enthusiasts to promote the preservation of steam trains. If you would like to see more steam trains puffing away on our railways again, the website www.steam-in-action.com is a good place to start! – Editor

