

# The Sandstone Steam Railroad – the first ten years

John Batwell reviews...

I recall, almost twenty years ago, being told about Wilf Mole, who had a collection of veteran road transport vehicles on a plot in Midrand. Wilf Mole remained a name – an entrepreneurial chap who was not short of a cent or two, having scored the Nokia agency in South Africa at a time when Nokia itself was holding back in coming to South Africa. Today, Wilfred Mole is a household name around the steam world. As UK steam preservationist, David Shepherd, wrote in the foreword to this new book, Wilf Mole “is quite unstoppable; it seems that if there is something buried in the undergrowth relating to steam, he will restore it”. I can remember in the rudimentary days of Sandstone, enthusiasts would quaff their beers and comment about Geoff Pethick wandering the countryside looking for derelict locomotives and broken rolling stock with “Wilf’s blank cheque book”. Everyone pricked up their ears when they heard about a couple of Randfontein Estates Gold Mine GMAMs being secured by one Sandstone Railroad, and so the process unravelled.

Today, the 126-page book on the first ten years is gob-smacking testimony of the energy, passion and far-sightedness of Wilfred Mole. The near-26 km narrow gauge railway on Sandstone Estates in the picturesque eastern Free State has become a must-see for international rail enthusiasts, and many safari tours have built the private railway into their South African itineraries. The late Alan Clarke of Transnet Heritage Foundation – realising the foundation did not have the resources to rescue the collapsing Midmar Museum in KwaZulu-Natal – appealed to Wilf Mole to rescue its exhibits. The embryo was ‘alive’!

The new publication is a concise, well-illustrated, encyclopaedic documentation of every railway asset in the Sandstone camp today. By virtue of its location, the photographs clearly illustrate the beauty of the area in which the railway operates – there are the sandstone cliffs, Pandora Lake and the snow-covered farmlands in the winter months.

Sandstone’s collection has become international. Wilf’s roving

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team headed off to Angola, Sierra Leone, Mozambique and Zimbabwe, for example, to procure locomotive gems that would otherwise have seen the scrapping torch or the pervasive rust of neglect in Africa’s merciless climate. There are the representatives of British and German locomotive engineering out of the Marromeu sugarcane fields; the dinky Decauville locomotive (now on display at Beaulieu Museum in England) and derelict O & Ks from Angola; a veteran English Electric-built DE2 diesel locomotive from Zimbabwe, to rattle off some of the “ex-pats” to be seen.

Wilf Mole has what can only be described as a truly dynamic restoration team, both in Bloemfontein and in the farm’s workshops. No superlatives are too hyperbolic to describe what these experts have done in turning throw-away hulks into glorious, eye-catching, resurrected working locomotives and rolling stock. This book is rightly dedicated to the Sandstone “steam teams”. The Sandstone 3’ 6” gauge, limited collection is housed either on the farm or at Ficksburg along the Bethlehem–Bloemfontein line. Initially, Wilf was hoping to operate this low-density trafficked railway on behalf of Spoornet, but bureaucratic red tape has put paid to that. Subsequently, Sandstone has made two 3’ 6” gauge working locomotives available to other rail operators in the country – a 15F of David Shepherd’s and a GMAM Garratt.

This high-quality book is a must-read for buffs that have already enjoyed, or have yet to participate in, South Africa’s “Sandstone experience”. **3S**