

# NG EXPRESS

THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE PORT ELIZABETH APPLE EXPRESS Postnet Suite 124, Private Bag 13130, Humewood, Port Elizabeth www.apple-express.co.za

## GOING, GOING - 100 YEARS - GONE

Or maybe not. Let us hope that the current efforts to save the narrow gauge line to Avontuur will be successful. Although Spoornet is losing Millions of Rand every month keeping the line open they are still making an effort to prevent the complete shut down of the line by putting into place feasibility studies to try and ascertain the value of the line. In recent years Spoornet have been closing down many branch lines around the country that have proved unprofitable to run with the Langkloof line being them under one consideration. To illustrate, at certain times of the year, except during the Citrus season, the Apple Express constitutes the bulk of the traffic on the whole length of the line.

At a recent feedback meeting of the Government instituted feasibility study group, they reported that after meeting with various interested groups in the Langkloof, the feeling was very positive in retaining a reliable train service especially in the area surrounding Humansdorp. It was found that most of the school children in the area attended school in Humansdorp and are being transported by road. Humansdorp also has the biggest hospital and medical facility as well as the main legal entity in the area and anyone wanting to make use of these facilities have to use the roads to get there. In an effort to save money on repairing the

road infrastructure the Government would like to encourage rail traffic.

For the Government to make available for monev upgrading of the line and the reintroduction of a regular rail service, the local community would have to be serious about making use of a rail service. Only then if considered feasible. would the Government be prepared to hand over the maintenance of the line including buildings to Local Government who would in turn lease traffic operation to private enterprise. If this happens, the Apple Express operation has been assured of financial backing by corporate companies and also the National Lottery Fund. The resistance to this funding has all always been that the train is a Government asset and private enterprise refuses to invest into a Government asset.

So it is now up to the feasibility study group to come up with some positive and persuasive arguments to convince the Government to hand over the line.

Among various ideas that have been suggested to boost the argument for the reintroduction of a regular rail service could be the establishment of a Rail Academy that would see the training of railway staff who when qualified could be integrated into the Spoornet rail system. Also because of the vastness and sparsely populated

country the line covers, the possibility exists of a mobile medical clinic and maybe even a mobile library which would be of benefit to the local community living close to the railway line.

# NARROW GAUGE CENTENARIES

December 10<sup>th</sup> 2006 slipped by rather quietly but that wasn't the case 100 years ago when the final railway tracks were laid at the terminus of the Langkloof line at Avontuur. It was a momentous occasion celebrated in grand style.

It had all started 3½ years earlier in Port Elizabeth when construction commenced on a railway line 177 miles in length which was destined to cover formidable terrain consisting of steep gradients, very tight bends and one of the deepest gorges in the world of narrow gauge railways. All in all a magnificent accomplishment and a monument to the engineers and labourers who worked on the line. Let us hope that their blood, sweat and tears will not end up in some scrap

Almost simultaneously and five days later on 15 December 1906 a branch line to the small municipality of Walmer was opened.

The small but expanding community of Walmer desperately required a cheap, reliable transport system to the business centre of Port

Elizabeth. Up until then the only means of getting to the central business district was by wagon or walking.

The line proved very profitable for the more than twenty years that it was operational, running nearly twenty trains a day between the main Port Elizabeth railway station and Walmer with its terminus at Fourteenth Avenue.

It was only when a private bus service was introduced and profits started dwindling, did the railway authorities see the writing on the wall and a few years later in 1928, the inevitable decision was taken to close the line and lift the rails.



The Water Rd. - 14<sup>th</sup> Avenue Walmer terminus as it is today

#### **COACHING NEWS**

The restoration of passenger coach No.58 is complete. Once again Clive Nel, our coach builder, has done a magnificent job. Coach No.58 (Bristol Carriage & Wagon 1904) has joined her sister coach No.57 in time for the holiday season rush making an additional eighteen passenger seats available. Let us hope that all the passengers who travel in the coach will appreciate all the hard work that has gone into restoring this historic coach. The other "sister" coach No.59 will hopefully be brought in for restoration in the near future.



Clive Nel putting the finishing touches to coach 58.



Interior of restored coach No.58

### LOCOMOTIVE NEWS

NGG 16 Garratt No.131 has been performing extremely well lately. She underwent a routine boiler inspection a few months ago and everyone held their breath seeing that the summer holiday season was just around the corner. Besides a few minor faults the boiler past the inspection.

The time is fast approaching though when she will have to undergo a major boiler inspection and service.

It is amazing to note that since she was restored in 1999 she has clocked up over 17 000km. Stripped Kalahari NG 15 No.119 (1939) is awaiting the supply of new boiler tubes. After much searching, both locally and overseas for a company who could supply tubes to the correct specifications and at the best rates, a steel company based in Johannesburg was found that is able to supply a set of tubes. It is hoped that the refurbishing of the locomotive can begin soon after the summer holiday season.

#### **VOLUNTEERS**

Over the years our core base of volunteers who man the train has slowly been diminishing and to prevent a problem over the holiday season, an appeal was made in the local press for volunteers. This resulted in an encouraging response from the locals as well as from a few applicants further afield. The new volunteers have fitted in well and have shown much enthusiasm and interest in the train. Their eagerness to help is much appreciated.

#### **SUMMER SEASON**

The Apple Express has been working hard over the December/January holiday period which ends when schools reopen on 17 January. Thereafter we return to the two or three trips per month schedule unless there is a demand for more trips.

For the record books stats for 2006 show that 52 trains were run, carrying a total of 7365 passengers. This is an increase of 14 trains and 2958 passengers over the 2005 year period. The increase was in part due to the introduction of the short Chelsea Junction trips during the year. Sixteen of these short trips were steam powered earlier in the year, and then diesel power was used for the rest of the year. The Chelsea trips have been very popular with schools, not only from Port Elizabeth but also from Somerset East. Grahamstown and Jeffery's Bay.

#### **NEW WEBSITE**

As mentioned in the last newsletter a new and interesting website of the Apple Express is www.satransport.co.za/trains/narrowgauge/apple express/apple exp ress.html Otherwise www.satransport.co.za and click on the 'trains' button and follow the links to the Apple Express page.

#### **THANKS**

Thanks to Peter Burton for supplying additional information for inclusion in this newsletter.