1). INTRODUCTION :

This little 'missive' should never have happened as there are other lumps waiting to be processed on the slowly crawling conveyer of my work schedule. However, a surprise late evening phone call from Lauren 'Smidge' Edgar put me on duty with 48 hours notice as the original rostered crew member turned out to be on leave. I was pleased to be able to try my hand at looking after a 'Mechanical Ef' but was also nervous because I still don't really know the 15F firebox. I haven't had many opportunities on our other 15F's. Furthermore I was wondering how my recently sprung lower back would handle hand-firing through a deeply winged firing portal and over a very intrusive ascending stoker worm tunnel. Adding to the unknowns is the fact that this is a newly commissioned engine and I had physically never worked on this machine before.

As it so happened, I had no real problems. She was a 108 ton sweetie pie.

A bonus for the evening's ministering to the cape-gauge bean-boiler would be the presence of three young people and one photographer. It was quite fun as well as uplifting to see the enjoyment the youngsters got around being involved with a real live, and rather large, steam locomotive. The regulars can sometimes get a bit jaded or even cynical. It has been publically said in one of our official 'Great Steam Trek' move DVD's that the downfall of steam will not necessarily be the lack of spare parts, but rather, the lack of manpower, particularly from the youth.

15F No.3046 behaved well through the night. The boiler is clean n' free drafting and was thus able to pick up heat even from somewhat ashy coal. We cooked our suppers in three sessions on the locomotive's fire so it ended up with three small banks of coal before the main bank for the morning. Spreading the fire resulted in a thin layer of coals with some 'black heat' issues The coals needed some shaking and raking to expose their dark surfaces (already at combustible temperature) to oxygen so that they would actually burn. Such fires are often surprisingly responsive with a bit of scratching and can cause a boiler to overshoot on the pressure if you had a large mass of 'black heat' oxygen-restricted coal. Going mad on the blower isn't the ideal solution on the wide fire-boxes as the air speed is dissipated over the wide area, but the relatively colder air is still going through the boiler. (If the air has less 'dwell time' it doesn't pick up as much heat.)

Unfortunately, the scratching mixes the ashes in with the live coal if you go too deep with the pricker iron. If you're burning cheaper grades of coal, it is a perfect recipe for chunks of clinker to form as the newly disturbed ash fuses in the now-hot fire. Ash at the bottom of the fire, where it should be, is constantly cooled by the upward flow of incoming air and undesirable melting and the subsequent fusion is stopped.

The fundamentals of this locomotive are in great shape. Everyone commented on her power, and the crisp, powerful, evenly spaced exhaust beats. The boiler is a copious steamer and is eager to draft. But a number of issues arose on the Father's Day trip. The brake ejector, although pulling adequate vacuum for the job, wasn't working to best potential. (It turned out to have dirt in it, revealed by some minor field stripping.) The reverser's cataract valve didn't seem to be closing properly either as the lock cylinder wasn't holding. With the loco running, the reverser kept trying to kick off into the back-notch. The driver had to physically hold the reverser's lever in the desired position for the entire trip – an exhausting job.

A cotter pin came loose and thus allowed the entire radius pin for the RHS combination lever to fall out. This disconnected the valve gear on the right side and the whole lot slammed into reverse. The combination lever, still attached to the union link at the bottom, oscillated uselessly and got bent n' cracked in the process. While the driver was glumly looking at the valve gear and pondering tying everything up and limping home on one cylinder, the engineer, riding third man, actually found the missing pin amongst the ballast at trackside. They managed to jury-rig a set up and cautiously got the locomotive home with the normal four beats instead of two.

So, perhaps this wasn't so great an entry into revenue earning service as we'd hoped. But without parts of the valve motion dropping off, the locomotive is a splendid performer and is a welcome addition to our fleet. With the unfortunate derailment of Friends of the Rail's recently commissioned Class 15F No.3117 on the very same day (due to theft of wooden railway sleepers), our No.3046 currently has the sad distinction of being the only Class 15F in running order in the whole of South Africa. It is sometimes difficult to remember that these were once the most numerous class with 255 examples being built.

Paul Hloben kept me busy posing for pictures for his latest media project, so I wasn't snapping many pics of my own. So this unplanned report isn't intended to be a detailed essay on what I did during the night, or even of the locomotive herself, but rather the major events when I was able to get behind a camera. And even then, I was focusing on the people more than the machine.

I trust that you enjoy reading of how we had some spontaneous 3ft 6in gauge fun on a long winter's night.
Lee D. Gates.

01 – Puff. Puff. Pass.

The wheels are barely covered by the discharge of a rather tame blow down.

Because of the tripping hazard, the steel blow down deflector plate that used to be here has long since been removed – so the grass gets burnt off in strips from exuberant blow downs.

I have left a few strips in the embankment myself… ahem!

So, we tend to be careful blowing down the steam on this side of the loco – no need to steam up the salad! Actually the use of the right hand blow down was instinctive as she's far forward enough as not to blow the workshop windows out of their frames on the left side.

02 – Facing the sunset.

Class 15F No.3046 looks a picture facing the westering sun. She is just starting to enjoy a bit of hard greasing while the tender's brake cylinder valve is being inspected.

The front end of the loco still needs a bit of work as the center wind deflector plate is missing – you don't normally see the valve chest covers and castings from between the walkway risers. That shiny black paint on the smokebox door would be starting to peel off already after the first long run home from Magaliesburg the following evening.

The copper stanchions in front are to either be painted in black or covered in loose stainless steel sheathing. Reefsteamers is 'dressing their engines down' partially for authenticity, partially for ease of cleaning and partially to make them less attractive to scrap metal bandits.

03 – Greasing up.

Two youngsters at the grease gun. Luca (Left) shows a potential new member how to use a 'chopper' grease pump. They were battling somewhat as the bearings were already cooling down as the locomotive had stood in the coaling dock for extra yummies before being spotted here.

The double-man operation of an old 'chopper' pump isn't a recommended practice as one false enthusiastic stroke on that lever could cost you the first knuckle of a finger. Luckily, because the weather is chilly, the grease sticks are fairly hard and Luca wasn't having to have his fingers flirt within chopping range of the tapered grease aperture.

04 – Question of scale.

The appy's appy is left to finish the job and he's working on the main driver axle. Actually, this lean but muscular fellow did well although you can see he isn't using the full mechanical advantage of that lever.

The grease droppings are building up and he is leaving them on the eccentric rod.

You really get a sense of scale here, when you work right up against those wheels and the running boards are comfortably above your head.

05 – It's here, feel it.

A common quick check is to feel the hubs of the wheels and the joints in the rods for unusual localized heat. However, if the locomotive has been standing for a while, like this big beastie has, the heat dissipates throughout the large mass of metal and the results can be misleading.

One uses the knuckles as a) It's easier to pull the hand back if the axle end or joint is too hot to touch and b) If the knuckles get burnt after all, they aren't in active use like the finger tips or the palm of the hand. The knuckles are often more sensitive to heat too as they aren't prone to calluses.

06 – Torsion.

Luca Lategan discovers Gate's Law of steam locomotive handbrakes – the thickness of the brake shoes and the length of the adjustable rodding is always as such that the brake handle winds up (pun intended) protruding awkwardly from the tender's tool bunker area.

I've asked Luca to put some grunt on the handbrake stand and he is cheerfully doing his best to twist it off.

That is Andrew King leaning out the windows and keeping in touch with the brake cylinder valve repairs so he'd know which way to throw the ejector lever.

07 – Kicking the cocks.

Yeah, yeah … I know it's another Luca pic … but isn't it cool to see young people so passionate about steam locomotives? Certainly a change from the hoary-headed oil-scented dinosaurs that usually lumber around such environments. Luca is battling with the injector water cock.

The injector and ash pan cooler cocks are badly placed on this locomotive and their handles interfere with each other. Normally one kicks the injector water cock forward and taps it back after opening the injector's steam supply – but on this set up, the ash pan cooler cock gets in the way. Luca didn't realize that the handles and their shafts can be freely withdrawn from their valves and the handles freely rotated through angles of 90 degrees.

The poor young fellow was getting a ribbing from more than half a dozen jovial hecklers down at cab-side, especially when he made that injector roar rather lustily!

08 – Luca's fan club.

What a motley audience hanging around outside the fireman's cab-side! Luca was getting a bit flustered and let them get away with the teasing. I was thinking that I'd be tempted to haul the blow-down open and just blast these cheeky swabs downside-up and well away. To see their shocked, crumpled carcasses flipped over the hand rails like scruffy, drying socks, with residual steam rising sadly up from their clothing would be worth the eventual repercussions … maybe …

But our Lukey is a really gentle soul and would never even think of doing such things … would he?

Left to right :

Shaun 'Smudge' Ackerman. Peter 'Lappies' Labuscagne (Capped). 'Oom' Attie de Necker. Aidan McCarthy. Alan Lawton (Wearing a brain bucket). Paul 'Hobelbein' Hloben.

09 – Ashy Lepidoptera:

A rarely photographed creature at rest, for once, and a fine specimen too. The ash-winged Shutter Fly thrives in regions of fume and flame, so it is only natural they are drawn to steam locomotives as well as volcanoes, as this one is.
Our pet photographer, Paul Hloben, would spend the night here, taking literally hundreds of action pictures for his latest project. He normally doesn't say much but when he warms up, he has some really interesting and adventurous stories to tell. But steam trains do tend to attract interesting people, whether they are shutter flies or not.

10 – Dr. Smudge attends.

Dr. Smudge T. Ackerman attends to replacing the control valve on the tender's brake vacuum cylinder. Unfortunately, corrosion on the oval flange and on the bolts made this simple two bolt, two pipe and one cable job a bit more complicated than it should be.

11 – Five pots.

It's been quite a while since I last worked on a mechanically stoked 15F, so the sight of a five-pot Detroit lubricator looks a bit strange to me at present. The center port is for the mechanical stoker's donkey-engine.

Class 15F No.3046 is experiencing lubrication troubles. The turret valve leaks and the restrictors aren't functioning properly, so the system is always pressurized and is very prone to blow back.

Not being very experienced (yet) with hydrostatic lubricators I chickened out of trying to drain and service this one when I saw the steam and hot water spray from the top port of the drain valve. It turned out to be a wise decision because this Big Brass Bugger (BBB) tried to blow back over Fireman Dawie Viljoen in the morning. He was alert enough to see this coming and the engine stood for a while with the lubricator lines blowing freely from the front end.

12 – Cooking Class.

I actually prefer to be alone when doing the overnight clinkered-clunker watch but having some more-or-less human company does have it compensations. (The constantly muttering voices in my head don't count.)

It was fun watching these guys learn the basics of the loco and experiencing their first attempt at footplate cooking. They are actually posing for Paul Hloben, who is in the driver's door way. They did well on their first attempt and came up with some primitive but quite edible 'boerie rolls.'

My cooking shovel saw quite a bit of use this evening and now needs wire-brushing as it got a bit overheated.

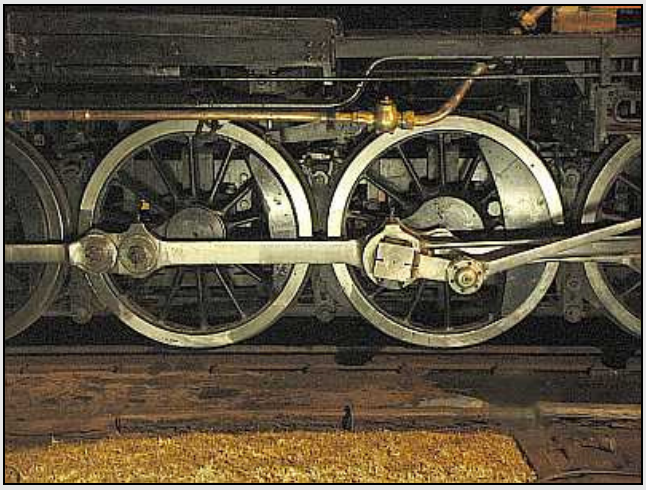
After this session Paul Hloben did six lamb chops in the boerewors fat. When these young people had gone to bed and Luca 'hit the bonk' in the driver's seat and I had kicked the fire forward and re-banked it at 3am – I had porterhouse steaks in pepper sauce.

13 – Chez de loco.

The spreader table of the mechanical stoker forms a convenient resting place for the heel of the shovel. It also means the shovel gets a lot hotter at the front end so if that is anticipated, you have can use the gradiented heating surface to your advantage.

This fellow has just realized that and has withdrawn the elegant cooking appliance and is flipping his wors around front to back.

Because there is a negative air pressure in the firebox, you actually don't get to smell your food too much (while in situ) with the air flow moving into the firebox door. With the dim yellow-tinted cab light, a thin, easily overheated shovel and a reduced sense of smell, it's easy to overdo your food.



14 – Steel Wheels.

Steel wheels rock! (and roll….)

Paul Hloben and I set up some of Peter 'Lappies' Labuscagne's rather battered workshop fluorescents outside on the tea-green (now brown) lawn for some extra lighting. Then we had fun some experimenting with their positioning and then with the aperture n' shutter speed combinations on our cameras.

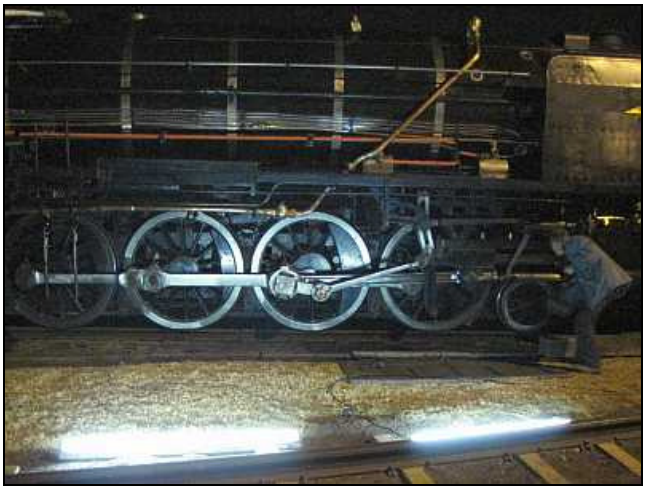
The grubby, dulled white paint has been removed from the rims of the wheels and they've been polished back to bare steel. They are easier to keep clean this way if one takes the effort to wipe them down with oil in between runs.

This is actually safer practice too as built-up layers of paint can hide cracks and defects.

15 – Standing proud.

Here is an attempt at retro night-time photography. It wouldn't win any prizes though as the sky is a bit grainy, amongst other faults. An advantage of taking pictures of black locomotive in industrial areas is that the light-bleed into the sky means that the visually black sky still has a contrast against the densely black form of the engine itself.

Notice that there are no standing leaks on this recently totally re-fitted loco and the chipped, scarred concrete is dry under the cylinders. Not very lively, action packed or photogenic perhaps, but quite desirable from an engineering point of view!



16 – Studio … not.

Mr. Hobelbein has some fun trying to catch a bit of realistic 'glint' on the polished rods and rims The wheels look brighter than they actually were from his point of view, because I'm standing in line with the lights.

One advantage of black and white photography is that the unpleasant colour tint of industrial discharge type lighting, such as florescent, or the HP sodiums of the yard masts, is negated to values of luminosity only.

Paul didn't trust those rickety work lamps either – switching them off before touching them to move them. Work lamps don't last long in the rough environment of a loco depot.

17 – Hot Spot.

Having been just lit up here, the Union No.725 coal burning stove did some brisk business and kept the three enthusiastic youngsters warm in the K-boose. Luca kind of has the hang of this geriatrically ferrous contraption but with the 'assistance' of the other guys, the fire went out two or three times during the night.

Seeing that the whole stove is 100% radiating surface, full black-body radiation none the less, it is a surprisingly effective space heater. It continues to keep the place warm even after the fire has gone out.

18 – Getting up the nerve.

With their after-supper cokes in hand, (I actually sniffed those drinks to make sure they weren't sneaking any 'dops.') they're psyching themselves up for the chilly job of boiler cleaning. Although the locomotive her own good steel self is a pleasantly warm beast – the sour, mine-dump-tainted breeze of the Germiston Depot can slice that warmth away with consummate ease.

The temps hit freezing point overnight. Even Oom Attie's polish 'muti' had to be warmed up in the firing hole before it was soft enough to be picked up by the polishing rags.

19 – Spyt n' Porlish. (sic)

The young appies are up and enthusiastically wiping down that great porker of a boiler. I was wondering how many burns each one would pick up from the myriad copper pipes and sizzling hot bronze fittings. Didn't hear any complaints anyway.

Even though the engine was doing well banked up on somewhat ashy coal, and the boiler was stable, I was still keeping a very careful eye on the pressure gauge to forestall the safety valves going off and blowing someone's ears in. But she was quite content to drowse a few ticks above 1000kPA.

You don't really realize just how big one of the late era SAR locomotives is until you have to wipe the beast down. But three sets of hands made light and sociable work of the job.

20 – The narrow road.

I was hanging out the driver's seat and watching young Mr. Wehmeyer with interest to see what he would do.

There isn't much walkway left on either side of the characteristically wide Wootten type firebox of the 15F. The diagonal front cab stays are a nuisance and the area is festooned with piping-hot (pun intended) non-ferrous hand traps such as the sellar's valve (with the conical ferrule) and the drifter. (Nearside.)

The trickiest pipe is, of course, the exhaust for the brake ejector as it is painted black and is the right height to be used as a hand rail. Luckily, being pinned down with the handbrake, we didn't need to be drawing off vacuum and that pipe would be relatively cool. Leastways, I didn't hear any four or five letter Afrikaans swear words.

(The whole language sounds like swearwords
to my Anglo-colonial ears … but I digress.)

21 – Dawn Scene.

The great black bulk of the machine looks even blacker being backlit by the morning light. It is about 6:30 and the grate shaker is already running. My fast-set camera shutter makes it seem darker than it is.

I spread the fire out at 4:30am, expecting a 5am arrival for the crew. To my disgust, they only arrived at 6:10am. So I had to baby-sit a thin, sluggish fire on top of a thick-ish bed of ash. I struggled to hand fire to the front with the narrow, winged door of the 15F firebox so I fired to the center n' back, and then pushed extra fire forward with the irons – a hack way to fire but it did the job. I did use the mechanical stoker twice, being very careful not to over-do it, being worried about reduced air draw with the stoker-ground coal.

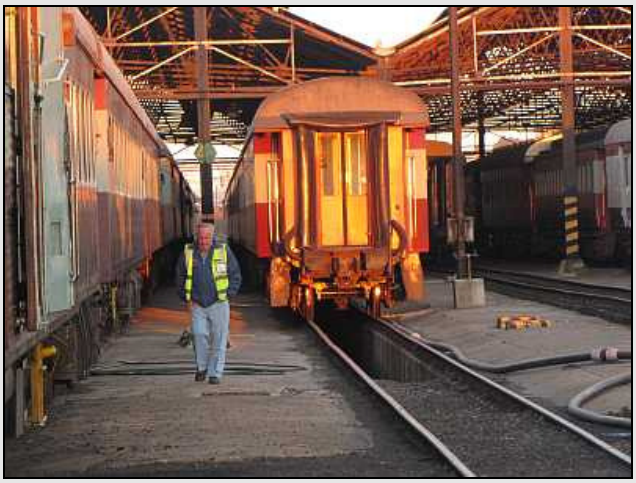
Fire cleaning was quite easy for although we had copious amounts of ash (especially as the shunters never cleaned fire the day before) it was nuggetless, soft n' fluffy stuff.

22 – Hello-o-o-o, Mr. Sunshine!

The sun isn't yet over the yard arm, er, loading arm, and there is already activity in the yard. The winter sun is just peeking out over the eastbound goods lines and although colourful, isn't really putting out much light, when Safety Officer Clifford Mathee is crossing the yard. You can barely see him, but he's there … just under the water tower.

He takes 'old school' pride in coming very early for duty in case there is something wrong and is usually the first of the coaching crews to get set up.

The coal handling wagon, with the secondary arm and the hydraulic ram so prominently silhouetted, is normally stored under cover - usually in the old boiler washout area. However, we've been doing a lot of unusual shunting for the Shongololo Express boys lately as they've been doing coach maintenance and so the coal handling wagon has been temporarily turfed out of bed.



23 – Train Check.

De Necker does the 'Attie-Amble' as he toddles along back to where all the steamy action is. He has just walked the length of the train, eyeing the couplers, brake lines, electrical connections and the under-slung water tanks. It isn't unheard of for a coach's tank to be accidentally left empty or the filler cap to be left hanging on its chain.

'Oom' Attie is now pensioned onto lighter duties. But he has made it very plain that this is his home, amongst the coaches and the locomotives, and amongst his friends of the older 'Spoorie' generation as well as his younger friends of the steam preservation era.

24 – Steam facial.

Dawie's smooth, confident morning and easy session of fire cleaning hits a speed bump when he tackles that bloated lubricator. It is under pressure even with the lubricator's turret valve switched off. An attempt to drain the beast released an arc of blindingly hot water and steam into the cab. Casually removing the filler plug (which I almost did) would result in hot oil being blown into the cab.

A hydrostatic lubricator will continue to operate (somewhat) even with some back-pressure in the oil lines. But it makes the oil-feed rate weak and erratic, requiring constant fiddling during the changing conditions of the train journey.

25 – Frosted Goodness.

As cold as the tax man's heart.

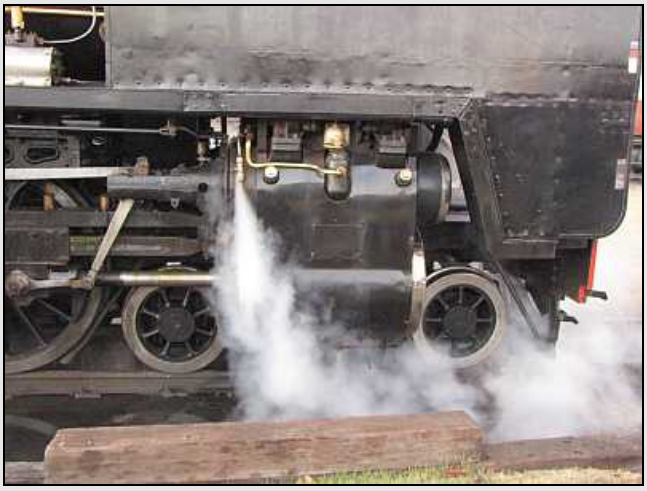
This mid-winter picture will give you a clue as to why Dawie looks so steamed out in the previous picture. The night just past was zero degrees Celsius and all the grass was covered in frost and a thin, sparkling layer of ice crystals had formed on the traverse walkways and on the rail heads. The slightest trace of steam on the locomotive becomes visible – great for the photographers.

June and July are the coldest months of the year here on the High-Veldt and the dry, clear skies let what little heat the earth and atmosphere manage to absorb during the day just radiate away into the icy, diamond-chipped night.

26 – Main switch.

Because the Class 15F locomotive has twin turret manifolds, there isn't a single, large centrally-mounted turret valve in the cab to switch off the steam to all the auxiliaries. The actual turret pick-ups are remotely located from the manifolds and forward of the firebox, and each of them has a square shanked valve stem to shut off steam to that particular turret manifold. (With a spanner or wrench.)

Dawie is shutting the fog down from the right side turret so that Andrew King can work on replacing a sheared split pin in the universal joint of the brake ejector's spindle. It sheared off overnight and needed to be chiseled flush before being punched out – said tools not available to the overnight shift. That particular valve's gland packing was blowing – which made jiggling the crude universal joint a rather warm job!



27 – Side Steamer.

You don't often see a jet of steam at this location. The restrictor (choke) valve for the right side cylinder lubricator line has been opened and steam is being allowed to blow through from the lubricator in an attempt to depressurize the lubricator. This is also done at times to try and blow out a blockage.

The restrictors prevent the back pressure of the cylinder steam from blowing the oil uselessly back up the lubrication line, as well as pressurizing the service 'end' of the lubricator.

28 – First touch of warmth.

Normally, just before the sun rises, a morning breeze picks up, but today was still and expectant.

The old water tower is permanently full and is connected to the water mains. However, the loco minder is tasked to top up the locomotive's tender during the night and this is usually done via a trickle through a heavy hose with a ¾ in diameter bore. (A good loco minder shouldn't be using all that much water anyway.) The auxiliary tanker is usually filled up via the hose set up that we use to fill the coaches. We could top up a loco tender from this tower – but if an auxiliary tanker, of 33 000 litre capacity, is left empty, there is insufficient capacity here and the train would be delayed.

29 – The morning cat's lick.

The fire cleaning was quite easy and Dawie handled it with hardly a single grunt. But the generous layer of ash going down the ash chute meant an equally liberal scattering drifting out from the wide air-slots and being drawn to the locomotive via the strange, implacable magnetic attraction for dirt and grime that all steam locomotives have. Last night's boiler wipe down ended up distinctly greyed out.

The three youngsters, one just dressed and showered in neat clothes for the Sunday run, were tasked to quickly wipe down the locomotive again. There were a few muted grumbles. Luckily it was just a soft dusting of ash rather than the scale of dried boiler water or scum deposits from safety valve discharge. So this was a wiping and flicking operation rather than a scrubbing.

Notice how still the chill morning air is 'flagged' by the perfectly vertical smoke discharge.

30 – A final pic.

The Sunday-dressed, dapper-looking, fresh-out-of-the-shower-stall Luca Lategan takes a few morning sunshine 'glint' pics of the locomotive before heaving a resigned sigh and getting involved in the clean up himself. Luca spent three weeks living at the depot and helping out – and would be going back home to steam-less Stellenbosch within the following two days.

He cleverly stayed on ground level and wiped down the firebox flanks and wrapper plates.

31 – Spirited Start.

Class 15F No.3046 makes a spirited attempt to get up the slight upgrade on slippery, frost coated rails. She's still running on the drifter, but the steam-condensing winter-cold air makes it look as if the regulator has already been opened. She didn't slip once.

That's Luca sprinting towards me alongside the library building, with his energized camera, to try and get a shot of backlit steam. The ash-winged shutter fly Paul Hloben. is off to my right and is chasing off digital photo plates at a high rate of clicks.

32 – False Start.

For all the bluster and dramatically billowing steam of the start, it turned out to be a false one and the wheels had only revolved once before Driver 'Smudge' slapped the drifter closed and dropped anchors. (In a controlled fashion, of course.)

The oil line restrictor for the right cylinder still wasn't operating properly and the hydrostatic lubricator was still blowing back with the steam pressure from the cylinders.

33 – Framed!

Fireman Dawie is beautifully framed by a mixture of steam and the fogging on my camera lens. He's blowing down the lubricator again to get the oil out of the sight glasses. Normally this job is done slowly and carefully with a shovel to catch the spray – but the train is now nearly an hour late to couple to the coaches, although we aren't late just yet for the main line.

Everyone kept their tempers though. We simply have to because this old lady is going to be cantankerous for a while until she settles down into regular, reliable service.

34 – Just a tweak.

Dawie tweaks the left-most stoker blower jet as they run some more coal in during the delay. Even supposedly identical engines sometimes require different adjustments, which is a part of their life-like character.

What is special about this pic is that both the driver and the fireman qualified privately, outside of the railways and after the great Depot at Germiston has already closed to steam.

The fog to the right is condensate on the camera lens – the left side is steam drifting up from the stoker.

35 – Backing up.

In the western yard now, Class 15F No.3046 backs into the siding where the waiting coaches stand. The Class 15F's weren't designed for shunting in particular, but proved to be quite effective as heavy shunters in their own right – if rather too large to be truly economical. They just aren't tolerant of rough track with their high pitched boilers and of tight curvatures with their long wheel bases. 15F's were also known for rough riding when running in reverse at speed and this is a situation that we try to avoid.

Their 18.5 ton axle load provides sufficient adhesion for tough starts. Of course, in the old days, you wouldn't have seen locomotives backing up to coaches in the running shed, but it was entirely probable that a loco would be backed up by a shed man onto several 'dead' locos to haul them into the workshops or for boiler washouts and such.

The building in the background is a substation building.

36 – Closing in to couple.

Now is the tightly controlled shunting to close up to couple to the lead coach and it takes a bit of welly to get the 180 ton locomotive and tender combination moving again.

37 – Hookai.

The characteristic shunter's 'hookai' has been called and there is a muffled, dull clank as the buck-eye couplers close. Now is the wait while the vacuum brakes are tested.

No matter how late we are, as in today's situation, the brake test is always done. Fortunately for us today, there were no nasty surprises lurking amongst the vacuum system.

38 – Backlit jewel.

The wing light on the leading coach is perfectly backlit by the nearly horizontal rays of the morning sun. This is one of a pair of functioning lamps that show red towards the rear and white towards the front – the white light being a spotting guide seen looking back from the loco cab, to ensure the last coach is still attached to the train. (!)

Because this is the lead coach on the outbound journey and will be the tail coach on the way back, this wing light is currently back-to-front.

39 – Show off!

A quick toot and we're off. Our old 14-wheeled time machine does her best to steam out the world around her.

She's showing off alright – but there is
only me and Paul Hloben as the audience.

What struck both of us is that in many other countries, noticeably England, when a long-out-of-service-steam locomotive makes a first revenue earning run, they make a big fuss and the photographers come out in adoring droves.

In South Africa, nobody really cares except the small steam-touched minority. Truth be told though, the first trip of this engine wasn't advertised. And maybe this is more realistic of Reefsteamers to just put locomotives back to work without fanfare and hordes of photographers flocking to the site. Working steam … worthy to be preserved.

Who can fail to be intrigued by such a sight as this? Must have a heart of cold, damp, moss-furred granite otherwise!

40 – The banner of steam.

For now, steam lives on at the old Germiston Depot and the banner of steam is still lofted amongst the empty tracks.

But for how long? Everyone enjoys steam engines but not many are willing to sacrifice of their own time and possibly their money, even in transport costs, to actively participate in preservation. I see literally dozens of people via FaceBook who claim to be interested in steam but are they really? I wonder how many really are in terms of sacrifice.

The sacrifice, the frustrations and the inconveniences bring their own reward. To witness these characterful machines come back to life and to be able to work on them and operate them is fine enough. But not only are the senses gratified, but also the sense of uniqueness and achievement of meeting the inevitable challenges. But more subtle and harder to describe, is the bonding between those who have stood together to fight for steam's survival and the friendships and camaraderie that results.

41 – The load.

This is the last full set of operatable steel main line coaches in the country still painted in traditional SAR colours. Today's load is 485 tons on 44 axles (11 vehicles) and the train would be taking families to Magaliesburg for a Father's Day run.

I was messing around with a 2500th/second high shutter speed for this picture, hence the dramatic deep-hued blue sky … pity about that shadow on the front coach.

That overhead line is a 3000V DC traction feed to the main tracks – hence the unusual thickness of the dipole wiring.

42 – Parting Shot.

I say farewell to our as yet un-named old lady, and wished her good fortune as she takes the south track of the western lead and chunters out alongside storage sidings for the commuter sets.

This would be her first revenue-earning run in 22 years. The locomotive had run the day before to Springs with a light load of a four vehicle test train. She passed her test, although the journey was delayed by more than five hours because of problems with signaling and points. This would be the acid test – the first sustained run under load.

This Depot Report was compiled by Lee D. Gates on behalf of Reefsteamers
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