

It is always a bit of a jolt to see the morning come around after a night's loco minding. I had a feeling we'd get an early start, so I hedged my bets by re-banking the rear of my fire after spreading. It turned out to be unnecessary as our two bake-heads did come early. As the diesel depot had been shut down overnight, we would still need to turn our engine (normally done on arrival) and do a 'heavy' fire cleaning. I say 'heavy' because we had the pilot-ash as well as the overnight residue to clear out. It turned out easy enough to clean.

I was surprised at the paucity of passengers around the loco though – but they were probably tempted to stay indoors for the breakfast seating. That was cereals, yoghurt and toast – accompanied by scrambled egg, beef sausages, chopped fried mushrooms, baked beans, grilled tomatoes and all the juice you can drink. I'm not a breakfast person myself, but I wasn't going pass that one up.

Louis and Johann took us out of Bethlehem in fine style on what turned out to be a pleasant DRY summer day. It was a shame that I went to sleep on the outskirts of Bethlehem. Because I had told Dr. Smudge, who did the rostering, that I don't mind standing back to give the trainees a chance : I ended up with back-to-back midnight loco minding shifts. So, I needed the zeds. It has become a Reefsteamers tradition that I do the general photos on the trip – but as I'm service crew as well, I need to plan the rest periods. But I sure goofed this time! ☹

I never sleep well on the train and I thought I'd wake up parallel to the Witteberge. It was quite disorienting waking up with the train still and quiet at Ficksburg. (Without hearing aids, I can't hear the generator from 'Cmpt A'.) Oh well. At least I got some rest and it was time to go out to snap pictures and record some memories.



P01 – Waking up the big fat lassie for her run to Ficksburg. I had a feeling that Breydenbach would be too restless to sleep and arrive early. He did - 3 hours before departure. I opened up the fire early and had re-banked the rear half. As he didn't make any funny comments, he is still with us!



P02 – Normally I at least drain and fill the lubricator, even if I don't have time to blow down the sight glasses and fill the metering chambers with water. But I chickened out this morning, as I didn't know then if it was a fault on the loco or procedural error, which caused the trainee burns yesterday.



P03 – The warming-up steam chests add atmosphere to a mellow morning as the valves have been set to forward gear to shift the linkages to allow access for lubrication. Nothing like the smell of tallow-n'-steel-scented steam! ☺



P04 – The morning breeze is blowing the steam away from the rising sun. Driver Le Roux was also too restless to stay horizontal and started his oil rounds early, as evidenced by the red 'MH' oil bottle in readiness on the buffer beam.



P05 – The rising sun is at coupler height. It is always astonishing to see how much fresh air and ‘through-gaps’ there actually are in a locomotive’s frames and motion. Louis is adding MH oil to the two crosshead slide oil pots.



P06 – With steam shrouding the locomotive’s front end, ‘Hott-Nutts’ George is in a world of his own, applying ‘soft grease’ to the expansion link trunnion bearing.



P07 – Just some of the paraphernalia required to keep a long distance bean-boiler going. These are spare water transfer hoses with bell couplings, baling wire to tie down the clamps and spanners to operate the transfer valves...



P08 – ... and a barrow quickly stashed at the other end. Naturally, this would NOT be done at the leading end of a vehicle and definitely not within a coupled train. The barrow, of course, is for the shifting of ashes n’ clinkers.



P09 – Johann Beret-bach has re-laid his fire and she’s on the blower, as evidenced by the lifted plume on the stack. Louis is wisely wiping his hands clean at the ‘waste cubby’ before trying to use those handrails with greasy hands.



P10 – Props to the various pilot crews and an, ‘ahem’, brilliant loco-minder. This view shows the relatively little coal consumption so far. This hefty locomotive had been in mainly ‘idle’ steam since 8am the previous morning.



P11 – We left a tanker on the train. We did have to top the tender up. The water coupler blew apart at about 3am and we only got to repair the coupler at day-break. (You can't run a hose through the hatch under the traction wires.)



P12 – Beret-bach has survival skills and knows how to keep the driver happy – with fresh coal-fired coffee. Driver Louis was in a grumpy mood, his gruff voice now merely a menacing grumble, but I would only find out why later.



P13 – A diesel was booking off-shed at the same time we were coming in, so we had to stop and back off from under the bridge and into the station's loop again. So we now had to wait with a middling-to-hot fire and a crowded cab.



P14 – However, the extra time gave the crew time to sample Dysie's shortbread. They would be eating a luke-warm breakfast out of polystyrene containers in the next hour, so the rest of us didn't demur at the dented supplies.



P15 – As our 15F ignominiously backs off allow the mobile Oil Can to back up under the bridge, George, Andrew and Robert look surprisingly glum. Or perhaps George was noticing the greasing points that he had just missed?



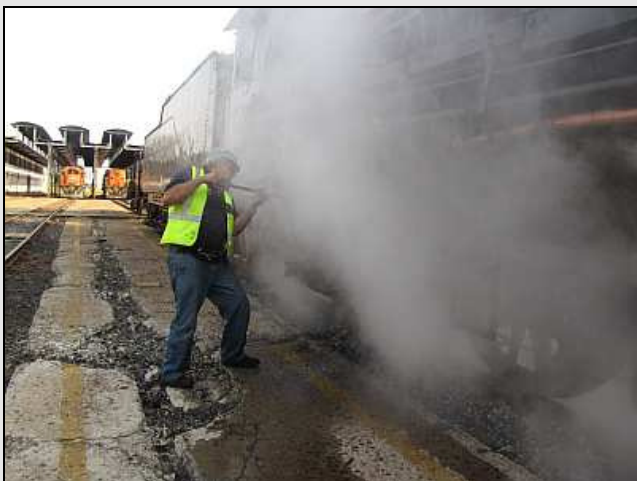
P16 – The Class 34 backs off from the depot-road points. I used to think the sound of a big super-charged two-stroker was quite exciting. But after 5 years of steam involvement, the diesels now sound anemic and whiney to me.



P17 – Finally, we can go 'on-shed' to do our own servicing. Johann had already done some light fire cleaning and even ran the coolers, with the ash chute trap-door closed. So, the poor old girl was literally dripping and 'bursting to go.'



P18 – After a quick turning on the depot's triangle in the back-lot, fire cleaning begins in earnest. Although we started early, we potted around some and then had the delay with the diesel, and time was getting on.



P19 – Driver Louis cleans fire simultaneously with George on the other side. But Louis is stuck with the fire pricker, which tends to snag in the rocker grates' linkages. Johann is doing the raking and Cousin Rob operates the shaker.



P20 – The loco interlinks. From front to rear, RHS Injector Water Feed, Vacuum Brake Pipe, Safety Chain, Stoker Steam (McCaughlin Coupling) and far back, the LHS injector feed. The draw bar is visible above the pipe work.



P21 – The fire shovin' is done and George is just 'shunting' the ash pan kibbles now. We had copious quantities of light ash but little clinker. That fire had been burning for over 24 hours, so we actually did quite well!



P22 – Rerige Blommetjie. He's in a better mood now. It turns out that some 'helpful soul' had reconnected the tender's just-repaired water coupler after I'd disconnected it - and we nearly took the Bethlehem water mains with us.



P23 – Waterboy. Woe betide the service team who forget to top up the crew's water! Rob had done the dromedary run. The convenient tap in the gardens is now plugged, so the camel had to search the workshops for a working tap.



P24 – They are just passing up the water bottles just as Johann starts the second round of fire cleaning to do the rear half of the grate. The 15F's drop grates are in the centerline of the fire and Johan does the front half first.



P25 – A lone pair of 6E1 juice-jacks, their pantos down, watch the steamy action. Unusually for a Cherry Festival steam run, these two were NOT the two electrics that pulled us along on the outbound run.



P26 – Come over to the dark side. We have cookies! (And steam.) The steam wreathed Class 15F is attracting the Transnet staff, until we ended up with nearly a dozen extra people watching the action.



P27 – The non-return valve in the left side boiler delivery pipe. These had been brightly polished by Oom Attie, but were already starting to oxidize with the heat and humidity. Note the decades of hammer n' spanner-blow marks.



P28 – The Bethlehem service areas are drain shafts and not proper ash pits, so the ash has to go elsewhere. These days, you simply don't dare leave ash on Transnet lines – but it makes sense as it gets sucked into traction motors.



P29 – Lee's Tip #38. One way to look busy and involved while expending absolutely minimal effort is to watch the tender (or tanker) water level slowly rising. But three grunts standing around the water hatch spoils the effect. Busted!



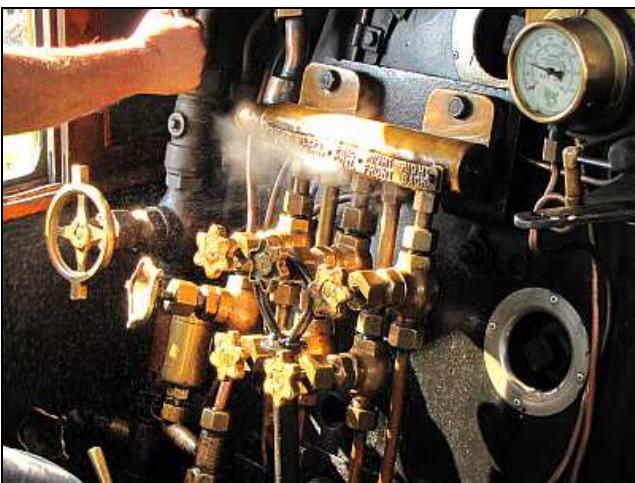
P30 – We do it Garratt-style these days, hauling 1 or 2 31,000 litre water tankers to extend our range. This WAS a Garratt's tank once, hence the fitted lamps. We would use the extra water for the coaches as well as for the loco.



P31 – Servicing is done, the tender tank is almost full and she's about ready to pop with boiler pressure at 1300kPa and climbing. Notice the canopy lamp is still burning and has survived a session of reciprocating fire irons and slices.



P32 – We have established a tradition of paying Depot Staff with a helping of coal to dispose of the ash for us. The coal is especially welcomed in winter! However, it always looks odd to see coal being deliberately shoveled overboard.



P33 – She's getting a leaky at this side of the cab – Johann Breydenbach rolls in the coal towards the front quarter of the firebox, with 400kPa showing on the stoker jet gauge. Note the fine-coal jet valve (center of 5) is disconnected.



P34 – You always kinda wonder how many children the naughtier railway-men have sired in the railway villages across the land. There is really no family resemblance here, so I think we can let Johann off the hook! ☺



P35 – Cab plate collectors are odd. They prefer their plates pristine as possible and yet argue that dents and defects are authentic. I'm sure the traverse distortion visible in this plate has a story to tell! Wuzzn't us!



P36 – I ended up sleeping the entire steam-hauled trip away after breakfast and awoke in Ficksburg. The station is definitely derelict now, but the Ficksburg station sign is still visible. Notice the altitude is still in the Imperial Foot.



P37 – After servicing and turning, the 15F locomotive was parked next to the Power Van until Saturday morning. Normally we'd be at the other end of the yard, where the water gantry is. Not to our surprise, the town had no water.



P38 – The pilot unlocked all the sidings for us and we were able to spread ourselves out a bit with 4 out of the 5 tracks occupied. We were required to lock all the points in between shunting and set the main to 'straight through.'



P39 – The illuminated cross on the silo's grain conveyor headgear is always a landmark for us. It wasn't functioning last year. This year, it surprised us by being lit with incandescents instead of fluorescents - using a 'light hose.'



P40 – Ficksburg always throws my compass off. We are looking West here and I keep thinking it is South. I was surprised at how little festival activity was evident but later remembered that it was Friday afternoon and not Saturday.



P41 – The outer loops and sidings at Ficksburg are still iron-pan sleepers and 4-bolt fishplate joints, except for the newly laid bypass track in the grain yard. Noteworthy here is that the fishplates have all eight bolts intact and tight.



P42 – The old goods shed, now a refrigerated warehouse, was unusually tidy. Then I realized that the platform-mounted refrigerators are missing, although the portable plant was still running. How long does this shed still have?



P43 – It was boring on the train with the kitchen and catering staff fast sleep, passengers dozing in the summer heat and no tea bags at the urn. The catering crew had been up since 4am, so their naps were well deserved.



P44 – Tiring of the company of sonubullistic sapiens and a morose barman, I went looking for the footplate fruitcakes. Not totally to my surprise, I found them socializing next to No.3046 and a lot more lively than the lumps on the train!



P45 – At last Andrew King is dirty, as he should be, and my fragile world is restored to order! An axle grease pad was out of line and was charring at the edges with unloaded-dry friction, although the axle journal itself was not at risk.



P46 – Oh well, time for my arvey walk. I decided to take a stroll around Ficksburg and get some pictures of the sandstone block buildings. I ended up walking non-stop for over two hours, on ½ litre of milk. Great fuel consumption!



This Photo Pack was compiled by Mr. Lee D. Gates on behalf of Reefsteamers Association NPC.
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