

Protest angers officials and throws spotlight on closed heritage line

By Geoff Courtney

AN enthusiast's novel protest that involved him running a home-made steam-powered trolley on a world-famous heritage line has reignited a fierce debate about the future of the route, which was operated by British-built steam locomotives for much of its service and subsequent heritage life until its closure nearly a decade ago.

Andries Keyser drove his contraption over a stretch of the Knysna to George line in South Africa's Western Cape, to the delight of locals who want to see the world-famous route reopened, but to the anger of officials who stepped in to stop his actions.

The 42-mile railway, named the Outeniqua Choo-Tjoe after nearby mountains, was popular with tourists after it became a heritage line in 1992, at which time it carried 40,000 passengers a year. A decade later this had risen to 115,000, many of them British visitors who loved the steam and the stunning scenery, but in August 2006 it was severely damaged by heavy flooding, leaving sections of the track covered by landslides and other parts suspended mid-air due to the ground beneath being washed away.

The line's owner and operator, state-owned Transnet Freight Rail, who faced a repair bill of about £10 million, closed the line and switched its trains onto another route, from George to Mossel Bay, a distance of 32 miles. However, the following year Transnet announced that the heritage train was not part of its core business and launched a tender process to dispose of it to a new operator.

That failed, and in August 2010, following the withdrawal of trains between George and Mossel Bay, Transnet formally announced the cessation of the line, and politicians became involved due to the loss of this

major tourist attraction. Alan Winde, minister of economic opportunities for the Western Cape Government, spoke during a visit to Knysna of his resolve to revive the service to George, but this was countered by Brian Molefe, then the chief executive officer of Transnet, who said funds were not available for repairs.

Press reports have been highly critical of the inactivity, with one journalist writing of the "distress of the tourist industry" which had played host to travellers from around the world wanting to ride on the line, while a blogger from Sedgefield, whose station was served by the line between Knysna and George, wrote: "Despite rumours and rumblings, the line has been left to deteriorate and the costs to repair it rise by millions each year that passes where nothing is done."

"It is hoped by all that live along the route, and many ardent lovers of steam trains, that this magnificent part of the world will witness the resurrection of this illustrious train journey. However, we are all well aware that the longer it takes to restore the line, the more prohibitively expensive it becomes, and the less the likelihood we'll see it happen."

Delighted crowd

Andries Keyser became so frustrated at the situation that he hit upon his recent protest that involved him driving his trolley on a short stretch of the track between Brenton-on-Lake and Knysna station, where he was met by a delighted crowd.

His plan was to return to Brenton, but according to a local press report he was stopped by a representative of a nearby nature reserve with connections to a tourism group, who instructed him to remove his trolley from the track due to problems with liability. The press report said that Keyser had spent six

months trying without success to obtain permission to ride the tracks, and the nature reserve representative told him: "If the rail regulator has not given you permission, they will not just remove you from the tracks, they will lock you up."

Following this development, said the newspaper report, Alan McVitty, chief executive officer of Classic Rail, a Knysna-based private consortium that hopes to reopen the line, emailed Keyser telling him: "We are in the final stages of concluding all our agreements with TFR (Transnet Freight Rail), so this type of attitude and incident is unacceptable. Please remove your equipment immediately, and I will be in Knysna tomorrow afternoon to make sure you comply."

Keyser emailed an apology, explaining he had been unable to obtain permission from anybody, and McVitty responded: "When we are in charge of the line we will gladly invite you and your brilliant steam trolley to participate in our planned steam train activities."

Subsequent to these exchanges, Classic Rail issued a statement quoting McVitty, who said the company was aware that people wanted to see steam trains running again as soon as possible. Claiming that the revival project was on track, he said: "Transnet Freight Rail accepted our revised business plan during January 2018, and they are now attending to the matter as quickly as they can."

"The processes of awarding the 20-year concession requires support and approval from the various levels of Transnet's governance structure before it goes up to the minister of public enterprises for final approval. You can be sure that we'll invite everyone to a huge celebration when we do finally have the concession in hand."

As long ago as June 2016, a local online newspaper carried a report that said Transnet Freight Rail had appointed Classic Rail its preferred concessionaire for the line for a period of 20 years, that Classic Rail had received beneficial occupation of the line on February 16, 2016, that contractors had moved in to repair the line, and said that McVitty hoped to have a dinner train running between Knysna and Keytersnek, a distance of about five miles, by December that year.

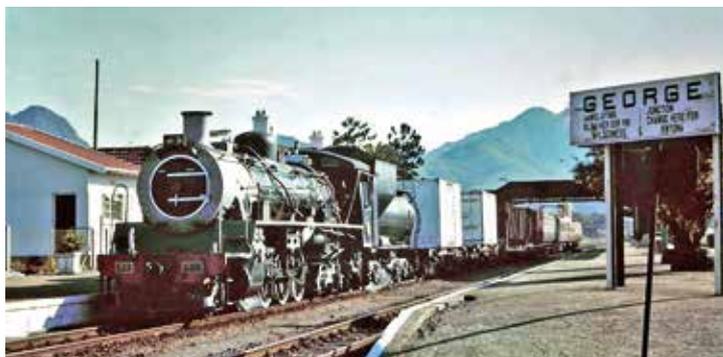
At variance

That report is at variance with a statement issued to *Heritage Railway* by Transnet Freight Rail, whose corporate affairs senior manager Mike Asefovitz said that Transnet Freight Rail had received a proposal from Classic Rail. "This is currently being evaluated and considered, in terms of the corporate government policy and procedures of Transnet SOC (state owned company) Ltd. And so, in short, no concession has yet been awarded." Pressed for further information, Mike said: "There is no more I can say."

Martin Hatchuel, spokesman for Classic Rail, also confirmed that no concession had yet been announced, adding: "We hope it'll be soon."

Colin Jenkins, chairman of the Friends of the Choo-Tjoe, said that the organisation fully supported Classic Rail's bid to reopen the line, and that they were confident it would happen in the near future. The Friends was formed in August 2010 to promote the repair of the line and the return of steam operations.

After Keyser's trolley ride, one blogger asked: "Does Transnet actually have a plan of action to ever open this line again? I remember as a child I rode on that train, and would love for my children to also ride on that train before they are



Mixed reception: Class 24 No. 3627 simmers at George station in South Africa's Western Cape with a mixed passenger and freight train in February 1990, two years before the line to Knysna became a heritage railway. The 100-strong class of 2-8-4s was built for South African Railways by North British Locomotive Company in 1949-50, and one, No. 3675, was the 2000th locomotive built by the Glasgow manufacturer for SAR. Another member of the class, No. 3668, was a regular on the Knysna-George line and is now on display at a Transport Museum in George. KEN LIVERMORE

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Smoke signal: No. 3627 hauls a Knysna-bound freight train at Goukamma on July 23, 1990. The 2-8-4, built by the North British Locomotive Company in Glasgow, was one of the Class 24s that dominated operations on the line in the 1980s and early 1990s. BRIAN SHARPE

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adults. The public is crying out for the line to run again. Millions of tourists are yearning to ride the train again. Please tell me when I can take my father to also realise one of his wishes – to ride the train one more time before he dies.”

Built to the 3ft 6in Cape gauge, the

original line from Knysna to George was opened by South African Railways in 1928, and due to the terrain – which included forests, river gorges, wetlands and lagoons – was said at the time to be one of the most expensive railways ever constructed.

In the 1980s it was worked almost exclusively by 24 class 2-8-4s built by the North British Loco Co in Glasgow in 1949-50, while Class 19D 4-8-2s, also built by NBL at the end of the 1940s, were added to the fleet after the line was declared a heritage railway in 1992.

Bridging the gap: North British Loco-built 24 class 2-8-4 Nos. 3684 (leading) and 3633 head for Knysna with a train from George on July 22, 1990, when the Western Cape line was used by both revenue-earning freight and heritage trains. BRIAN SHARPE



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