



Friends of the Choo-Tjoe

## *The Loop*

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### **NEWSLETTER NUMBER 10 JULY 2013**

Firstly, I must apologise for the lateness of this edition of the Loop. I have been overseas with your membership secretary and I am afraid my computer suffered a final meltdown, refusing to recognize any of the programmes I took with me.

The reason for the trip was to attend the Great Gathering at York Railway Museum. This was a once off event made possible by the temporary repatriation of two locomotives, one from America, (DWIGHT.D.EISENHOWER) and one from Canada (DOMINION OF CANADA). Along with the Museum's own MALLARD, were three privately owned locos, namely BITTERN, SIR NIGEL GRESLEY and UNION OF SOUTH AFRICA. To say the event was popular would be a bit of an understatement. No less than 140,000 attended over a two week period.



**DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER**



**DOMINION OF CANADA**



**A4s ROUND THE TURNTABLE**





**UNION OF SOUTH AFRICA**

We took the opportunity to visit the North York Moors railway while we were in the area. This has always been a favorite. Unfortunately, it was suffering from a lack of steam power when we were there, but at least steam was on the front of the train for the run over the national network to Whitby. As we had a couple of hours at the seaside, we had a splendid fish and chip lunch!

Another site visited was Didcot, home of the Great Western Society. It was good to see old friends again and to be shown the latest work in progress. As luck would have it, the newly restored Rail Motor and trailer were operating. This takes a bit of getting used to, being half carriage and half locomotive. They were designed to compete with trams and busses in the early part of the last century.



**GREAT WESTERN STEAM RAIL MOTOR**



**STEAM RAILMOTOR DRIVING TRAILER. NOTE ALSO THE APPARATUS FOR COLLECTING AND DROPPING OFF MAILBAGS WHILST ON THE MOVE.**



**THE FOOTPLATE OF THE RAIL MOTOR.**



We also visited the Bluebell Railway. The reason for this visit was to see the new extension to East Grinstead. The line is now coupled to the national network and this has already boosted figures both on the Bluebell and on the national network. It has taken the railway 35 years to complete this last section. There were a number of reasons why it took so long; the principle one being the removal of thousands upon thousands of tons of household waste from a cutting that the local council had used as a land fill site. But there were the usual complaints from local residents. They were worried that house prices would fall and that animals would be upset and that fruit would wither on the vine. But the biggest battle with certain local authorities and a supermarket chain over the use of the redundant goods yard at East Grinstead. Sound familiar? Anyway these obstacles were finally overcome and now the line has a whole new dimension. So do not give up hope on the George -Knysna line, though let's hope it does not take so long!



**THE NEW EAST GRINSTEAD STATION WITH THE NATIONAL NETWORK LINE ON THE LEFT.**



**VINTAGE CARRIAGE DAY**

Julie Jenkins (editor)

The George to Knysna railway was closed by flood damage in August 2006. Since its closing there have been several parties who have endeavoured to see this tourist and heritage icon reinstated but to date there appears to be little favourable news to show for these efforts. It has been now 3 years since 'Friends' were first started to support these efforts to reopen the line. Although efforts continue, one may be forgiven for thinking there appears to be no progress in this regard. This impression of little or no progress should not be taken as indicating that the urge to see the line once again working has in any way diminished. In fact there are several groups working on different schemes to put plans in place to secure the line.

Except for the efforts of the Dutch Delegation, we, as FOCT, are not intimately connected with these initiatives, although we are aware of their existence. Hopefully in the next few months more information on these schemes will become available and that a real and positive outcome towards a reopening can be publicised.

During the past three months we have been invited to speak to a local radio station and to a charity society which has given us the opportunity to 'spread the word' about the line and its current status.

In the meantime it is considered imperative for us to try to keep the importance and memory of the line alive by staying in the public eye. The support of Members is very important as without visual public support the attempts to get the line, or at least a part of it, up and running will be that much more difficult.

FOCT took advantage of the popularity of the Knysna Waterfront during the annual Knysna Oyster Festival. The town was crowded with visitors for these 10 days during July.

We managed to man the trolley for most days of the Festival (when it wasn't raining!) and made use of the opportunity to spread the word about our efforts to see the line reopened. The attitude of visitors towards the railway, and all the attempts by various parties to get the line reopened, was almost 100% supportive. We managed to collect nearly 700 petition signatures and over R1100!

Well done to those that manned our table at the trolley; Jimmy Harkus, Francis Legge, Michelle Nisi, Allan Waterston, Colin Burgess, Dave & Fay Jones, Alistair Gibb, Bernd Rohloff, Kees Estie and yours truly. Selwyne Reed had volunteered but was unable to attend because of sickness. Get well soon Selwyne.

Manning the Trolley. To those of us who are lucky enough to live in Knysna / Garden Route it is apparent that these past few years has seen a steady decline in the fortunes of the town and surrounding areas no doubt caused by many local, national and international factors.

However, it is felt that the closing of the railway between George and Knysna in 2006 has been a huge factor in this decline. It has been pointed out many times that the town of Knysna, apart for some agriculture and forestry, relies for its main income almost entirely on the tourism industry.

The Industrial Area on Knysna gives an immediate indicator of this decline with over 50% of the properties being unused with many of them up for sale.

A revived railway may not help to pick up the fortunes in the Knysna Industrial Area but it would certainly help those other businesses that cater for the tourist be they from SA or from overseas.

It is with the above in mind that I believe we should do all we can to engage with all tourists at our trolley in the Knysna Waterfront in order to inform them about 'Friends' and our aspirations to speak

with these local, national and international visitors on a regular basis. The summer season will, hopefully, be on us shortly and we should take advantage of this opportunity.

If you would like to be involved with such a regular discourse with visitors to Knysna Waterfront and our trolley please contact Fraser on 044 3824012.

Our petition requesting support for the reopening of the George to Knysna line continues to grow; we now exceed 14000 signatures. Special thanks are due to Michelle Nisi and Andrew Stephens for their continuing efforts in Knysna and Cape Town respectively.

During July four Members took time to walk parts of the line in the vicinity of the Kaaimans Bridge. The extent of the slip below the national road was noted together with the effects of the slip has had on the two dwellings that have been severely damaged by the movement of ground in this area.

We were also given a guided tour of the extensive home that has been established in the cave at the west end of the Dolphin Point tunnel.

Our request to TFR in December 2012 for a "no objection in principle" to be allowed to run our trolley between Knysna and Belvidere, a 10km round trip, has not been answered even though we have made several attempts since then to get a response.

We are at a loss to understand why TFR will not engage with us; it seems to us to be a reasonable question to ask before much time and effort is spent on a scheme that may not, for some reason, be acceptable to them.

This part of the railway suffered little structural flood damage that would preclude the use of a light rail vehicle such as our Wickham trolley.

We will continue to try to get an answer to our request.

Fraser Howell (Chairman)

May I say thankyou to all those members who have renewed for this year. I hope you will be able to support us in 2014.

Colin Jenkins (Membership)

**THE GEORGE-KNYSNA LINE PART TWO** Continuing the notes of Boon Boonzaier.

## **THE ROUTE**

From George station (223m) the line descends next to the Meul River to Victoria Bay. The line clings to the cliffs high above this popular seaside resort giving passengers a bird's-eye view over the surfers and bathers down below.

Passing through the first tunnel on the route, the line turns eastwards, still clinging to the cliffs. This section, with the foamy waves crashing on the rocks below the line, offers one of the most thrilling railway experiences to be found anywhere.

The line dips through the second tunnel, where the rock was so hard that very little concrete was used, before the bridge over the Kaaiman's River comes into view. The bridge over the river is probably the most photographed railway bridge in the world, thanks to the N2 route, and the Dolphin lookout point, high above the line.

The Kaaimans River is crossed 30 metres above the water level before the line enters the third tunnel. To the left is the entrance to a cave used in prehistoric times by Khoi beachcombers, which has recently been turned into a restaurant, accessible only by rail.

Once out of the tunnel the line enters the popular seaside resort of Wilderness, next to the Touw River. The name of the river is probably of Khoikhoi origin, from the word *dau* (way). According to legend, the lady-friend of a certain George Bennet of Cape Town agreed to marry him if they could live in a wilderness. Therefore he bought the whole area for £500 in 1877 and had to hack his way through the almost impenetrable vegetation to build a house for his bride. The place was aptly named when they settled down in their paradise.

East of Wilderness station the line crosses the Touw River before it swings away from the ocean along the river to Fairy Knowe siding. In earlier days this was an important stop for holiday makers who booked into the nearby Fairy Knowe Hotel.

The line crosses the Touw River for a second time. A stop is made and the whistle sounded to warn any oncoming road traffic before the train proceeds over the bridge. On the left hand side campsite of the Ebb-and-Flow resort lies next to the Touw River while the administration buildings and wooden chalets of the Wilderness National Park can be seen on the right hand side. This park was proclaimed in 1983 to avoid encroachment of the haphazard residential and recreational development on the aquatic wildlife.

From the Biton Bridge the line runs towards Serpentine siding, the name derived from the twists in the Touw River in this area. This area is very popular among bird-lovers and many ornithologist hides can be seen on the edges of the river and the lakes.

On the next section the line skirts Langvlei and Rondevlei before it reaches Duiwe River siding. The section prior to the siding is known as the “Engelse Cutting” after the workers who died here after a rock-fall while excavating the cutting.

Once through Duiwe River the line swings towards the coast again, through plantations and colourful fynbos vegetation. On this section moles are a pest, their burrowing undermining the track and this even led to the appointment of a “mole catcher” on the SAR. One of the solutions tried through the years was the planting of a papyrus-type of reeds with deep matting roots, but the problem persists to this day.

The line meets the N2 again at Bleshoender halt, before it crosses the water expanse of the largest lake, Swartvlei. This bridge is known to move under the weight of the train. During construction of the line tons of rocks were dumped here, but the problem remained and a 5 km/h speed restriction is adhered to. With all the water birds, fishing in the water below, the speed restriction enables passengers a better view as the birds are so used to the trains that they are undisturbed.

Once over the bridge, the train enters Sedgefield. The town was named after the many patches of sedge (water grass) in the area. The town traces its origins back to a siding, established here in 1928 when the line was built and the selling of the first plots by J Moodie. Development of the town was accelerated when the N2 was built in the early 1950s and today it is a vibrant town, very popular amongst pensioners and holidaymakers.

From Sedgefield the line climbs towards Mielierug, next to the only fresh water lake, Groenvlei. This lake is part of the Goukamma reserve and popular for bass fishing.

The line shares the deep cutting at the top of Mielierug with the road and, once around the bend, one of the most beautiful views in the country unfolds before the traveller. There are green fields, with cattle grazing and horses galloping between the wooden fences. A grey, girderbridge spans the Goukamma River and on the hill behind the halt with the same name, the railway line cresting the ridge is clearly visible. This adds to the sense of trepidation as the train descends to the river, lit by the rays of sun filtering through the pine trees, flanking the line.

The line passes over the N2 and the train rumbles over the clear, brown brackish waters of the Goukamma River. The colours of most of the rivers in the southern Cape remind one of Coca Cola, the water being coloured by the tannins from the roots of fynbos vegetation.

Goukamma is most probably derived from a Khoi Khoin word meaning “dark waters”, although other sources believe it can refer to a common succulent creeper on the dunes, called the “Hottentots fig”.

Once through Goukamma siding, the line follows the road to Buffalo Bay for a kilometre or two before it does a 180 degree turn through a horse-shoe bend to climb to the summit, where it meets the N4 again at Keytersnek. Once through Keytersnek siding, where huge patches of *Watsonias* add orange and pink to the



surroundings, the Knysna Lagoon is visible through the trees. The line swings to the right before crossing the road to Brenton-on-sea.

Between Belvidere and Brenton halts the Knysna Lagoon comes in full view, with the modern Belvidere Village in the foreground.

Out of sight from the train, lies the original Belvidere village. The village was developed by Thomas Duthie on a tract of land bought from his father-in-law, George Rex, when he married his daughter in 1833. The small, Holy Trinity church, built in the Norman style of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, attracts many visitors to the village. It was built with the assistance of other families in the region when Duthie retired. It was consecrated by Bishop Robert Gray in 1855. During the Second World War the stained glass windows were added, salvaged from the Coventry Cathedral when it was damaged by a German air raid during the war.

From Brenton, named after Sir Jahleel Brenton, the admiral who helped to develop the harbour at Knysna, the line descends towards the lagoon. Almost at sea level, the train swings to the left and approaches Knysna over the bridges and causeways, 2.5km in length. This approach is said to be one of the most dramatic entrances to any town, by rail, anywhere in the world.

Once over the last bridge, the train again swings to the right to reach Knysna station, the terminus of the line.

The first farmers and traders settled in this area in the late eighteenth century. The first farm, Melkhoutkraal (*Milkwood Corral*), was officially granted in 1770 and in 1804 the mysterious George Rex, acquired most of the land around the lagoon. Transport was the main problem with exporting wood from the virgin forests. Rex believed the lagoon was ideal for a harbour, guarded from the treacherous sea by the entrance at The Heads. After the first ship, the *Emu*, ran aground in an attempt in 1817 to enter the lagoon a safe passage was found by the captain of the *Podargus* in the same year. The harbour flourished, even after the railway line was built, despite the hazardous trip through The Heads, which claimed a number of victims through the years.

The town itself grew after 1825, when George Rex presented the Cape governor, Lord Charles Somerset, with 16ha of land on the shore of the lagoon. The village was first called Melville, after Viscount Melville, the First Sea Lord of the time, but the name was changed in 1846 when the towns of Melville and Newhaven were amalgamated. The meaning of the Khoikhoi word, from which the name Knysna was derived, is not clear. Some believe it means “*straight down*” (referring to The Heads) while others think it was derived from a word meaning “*ferns*”, or “*fern leaves*”, or even “*place of wood*”.

In 1869 the 12 members of the Thesen family from Norway settled in Knysna. They started a flourishing shipbuilding industry. For more than a century they built hundreds of smaller vessels, including yachts such as *Voortrekker* and *Albatross II*, South African entries in a number of trans-Atlantic and other races.

When the first narrow-gauge railway line was built to Diepwalle (“*steep slop*”)(?) in 1907, transporting the logs to the harbour became easier. When the railway line was closed 1949, the importance of the Knysna harbour diminished. In 1954, the harbour was deproclaimed and the last pilot transferred to Port Elizabeth.

The Knysna National Lake Area, comprising the Knysna Lagoon, Thesen’s Island, Leisure Island and the surrounding shores was proclaimed in 1985. More than 200 fish species have been identified in the lagoon and it is also where the rare Knysna seahorse is found. The Smith family also developed the Featherbed nature reserve privately on the Western Head. In the hills, between the lagoon and Brenton-on-Sea, a reserve for the rare Brenton blue butterfly has also been established.

The main produce is still timber, but today mainly from the pine and bluegum plantations. Oysters are cultivated in the lagoon while furniture and other wood products of the indigenous forests are still produced. The town depends heavily on tourism to generate jobs and income. The waterfront has been developed in 1998 as a tourist attraction and pleasure trips on a number of boats, including a recently built paddle steamer, depart regularly from it

## **Liesure Island Festival**

We have applied to attend the festival once again. Despite some poor weather last year, particularly on the Saturday, it was quite a successful weekend. We are looking for volunteers to help us man the stall this year. The event is to take place over the weekend 26<sup>th</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup> Oct. If you can help, please ring **Julie Jenkins on 072 075 0057.**