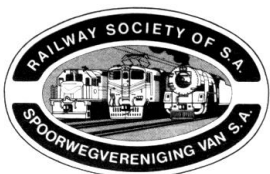


REMEMBERING THE ESTCOURT – WEENEN LINE 1906 – 1983



Bruno Martin



Founded 1960

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“Travelling on this little train of the thorn country is a real experience. It is certainly the only train in the world which gives the right of way to pythons. The inoffensive reptiles are common in the surrounding bush and the train always does its best to stop and allow them to cross the line. Numerous rock rabbits and various antelopes also have their homes along the track.” - TV Bulpin, Treasure of Travels Series, 5: Johannesburg to Durban, 1973.



NGG13 no. 78 about to leave Weenen for Estcourt on 3 March 1979, with Driver Billy Bester in discussion.

Photo: Don Baker

More than a quarter of a century has passed since the narrow-gauge railway between Estcourt and Weenen was closed. The last revenue-earning service departed unceremoniously from Weenen station on Wednesday afternoon, 31 August 1983. On Monday, 5 September, the remaining goods wagons were retrieved from Weenen and the very last working was for weed spraying on Saturday, 5 October.

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SETTING THE SCENE

While South Africa's standard for main line construction was set to a modest three-and-a-half feet (1 067 millimetres) gauge, there were instances where the cost of constructing that gauge was considered too high and the width between the rails was reduced even further. In February 1901, two senior officers of the Natal Government Railways (NGR), JNO W. Shores, Engineer-in-Chief, and W. H. Cobley, Superintendent Engineer of Surveys and Construction, went on an inspection tour of the light narrow gauge railways operating in Natal at the time [1]. Two years later, W. H. Cobley also visited the Cape Colony to view the working of the 2 ft (610mm) gauge railway from Kalbaskraal to Hopefield. He also went to Port Elizabeth to see at first hand the construction of the 2 ft (610mm) gauge railway from Humewood Road to Gedulds River. Following his visit he submitted a report in March 1903 detailing his observations and recommending the Natal (Colonial) Government should also adopt the 2 ft (610mm) gauge in the interests of uniformity, but the practice should be limited to building short feeder lines [2].

The Weenen-Estcourt railway was the first of four 2 ft (610mm) gauge feeder lines authorised for construction by the Natal (Colonial) Government [3]. Its function was primarily to provide the farming community of Weenen with a rail service for transporting produce and livestock before the advent of motorised road transport.

The town Weenen (Dutch for "to weep") was laid out in 1839 [4] on a floodplain along the (Great) Bushmans River, near the site of the massacre of Voortrekkers by Zulu impi during the previous year. A town plan of 1843 by Commissioner Cloete recorded that "72 erven had been cultivated and *bona fide* occupied". With the transfer of the magisterial seat from Weenen to Bushman's River Drift (Estcourt) in 1848, and bypassed by the transport corridor from the coast to the interior, the town was left isolated and has consequently remained a dusty 'dorp' off the beaten track. In 1884, a furrow was built to divert water from the Bushmans River to irrigate 850 acres of farm land, divided into 50-acre blocks, on the outskirts of the town. This scheme proved so successful for growing vegetables, tobacco, lucerne and citrus fruit that another furrow, on a much grander scale, was opened around 1905 to increase area under irrigation. By the early 1970's there some 3,000 acres under irrigation, making Weenen the premier vegetable-growing district in Natal.

Estcourt, the first British settlement in the area, started out in 1847 when Clem Heeley established an inn near the drift where the wagon track crossed the (Great) Bushman's River. The following year, when the Bushman's River Drift settlement became the magisterial seat of the Impofane District, a military post was established on the hill overlooking the drift and by 1860 a bridge was built. In 1863, the settlement adopted the name Estcourt in recognition of the arrival of British settlers under the Wiltshire settlement scheme, sponsored by Thomas Estcourt. By 1866 the town consisted of 12 houses, Heeley's inn, a general store and the Magistrate's office. The Natal Main Line extension from Pietermaritzburg to Ladysmith was opened to Estcourt on 21 December 1885. Estcourt was proclaimed a town in 1905.

SURVEY AND CONSTRUCTION

In 1902, a trial survey was run from Mooi River station along the Mooi River valley and across the intervening heights to Weenen. This route would have resulted in a line of considerable length through broken country.

A route from Estcourt following the Bushmans River to Weenen was also investigated, but considered too costly to build because of the nature of the terrain encountered along the winding valley (see centre-spread map).

The route finally settled on, and subsequently pegged out in 1905, took the narrow gauge line out of Estcourt alongside the Natal Main Line for about a mile (1.6km), before striking diagonally across the valley to cross the Little Bushmans River over a bridge, then veering away to climb the high ground to the north of the town. After five miles (8km) of steady climbing the line reaches Paapkuils, which at 4,116 feet (1 254m) above sea level is the highest point on the line, 283 ft (86m) above Estcourt and 1,275 ft (389m) above Weenen. Up to this point the earthworks were fairly heavy with alternating cuts and banks, with the deepest cut having a centre depth of 22 ft (6.7m) and several reaching a depth of 18 ft (5.5m).

Between Peniston and Haviland the line meanders along the watershed of the Bushmans and Bloukrans Rivers for about 5 miles (8 km) requiring only light earthworks. After Haviland the line begins its 1,150 ft (350m) descent into the Bushmans River valley – a hot and sub-humid tributary valley of the Tugela. At Deep Kloof, a concrete wall, 9 ft (2.7m) high, impounds about 150,000 gallons (681,000 litres) of water which is pumped to overhead tanks while the railway line crosses the stream on an 11 ft 6 in (3.5m) girder. Some 11,000 cubic yards (8 400m³) of hard durable sandstone was excavated for ballast from a quarry at Deep Kloof nearby. Crushed whinstone was used as ballast and also to line cuttings and to stabilise embankments.

Just as Deep Kloof is left behind, the line loops around a bluff on a tight 200 ft (61m) radius curve to turn 180 degrees and then continues to fall on a steady grade to Halfway House (a hotel was located nearby on the Estcourt - Weenen waggon track). Between the Halfway House and Mona the line crosses two sizeable gullies on lattice girders, one over the Inyandu and the other over the Amanzimyama, the only other bridge structures of note en route. The 40 ft (12m) girders were placed in position using a single derrick pole, hand-winch and tackle. At Amanzimyama, two wells were sunk to a depth of 30 ft (9m) into the stream bed and connected by 25 ft (7.6m) cross-heading so that water can be pumped to four 400 gallon (1 800ℓ) tanks. Locomotives need to replenish their water supplies at this point on their upward journey.

After Mona, the alignment curves around Tiger Kloof ('Tierkloof'), a rugged ravine choked with boulders and thornbush, on a 330 ft (100m) descent to bring the line down to the flood plain of the Bushmans River. Extensive earthworks made a deep gash along the hillsides with one rock cutting some 30 ft (9m) high to the top of the batter. A 15 ft (4.6m) semi-circular arch culvert takes the line across the Tiger Kloof Spruit. On the last part of the descent the fertile countryside dotted with farmhouses and cultivated fields come into view. The 1½ mile (2.4km) section from New Furrow to just short of the terminus is the longest straight stretch on the line and runs alongside the main road. Weenen station is located about a mile (1.6km) to the west of the town.



A 'mixed' train departing for Weenen on the Lorne Street frontage of Estcourt station. "Passengers join the train at the back of Estcourt station where the carriages are drawn up without any shelter, or any platform to suggest a starting place" noted by the correspondent for the Natal Witness at the opening ceremony of the railway on 17 April 1907.

Photo: Source not recorded

Originally, a ruling gradient of 1 in 40 (2.5%) compensated for 300 ft (91m) radius curves was proposed, but this was modified to 1 in 33.3 (3%) compensated for curves of 200 ft (61m) radius. The highest point on the line is reached near Scheepersfontein halt on 4,116 ft. (1 254m) and the lowest is at Weenen station 2,841 ft (866m) above sea level.

Under Natal Act No. 41 of 1904, authority was granted to build the narrow-gauge railway from Estcourt to Weenen. Construction of the line was subcontracted in two parcels: work on the first 17½ miles (28km) was started on 11 September 1905 and the remaining parcel at the beginning of 1906. The rails reached Weenen on 11 December 1906. A goods service operated as far as Halfway House as from 4 October 1906 and a temporary service extended to Weenen by the end of 1906. The introduction of the train service was hastened due to tick fever restrictions on the movement of ox-waggons. The length of the line from Estcourt to Weenen was 28 miles 62 chains (46.3km). The initial rolling stock comprised two side-tank locomotives, with a 4-6-2 wheel arrangement (NG 1 & 2, designed by D.A. Hendrie and built by Hunslet Engine Co. of Leeds), two 1/2nd class composite carriages, two 1st and two 2nd class and brake composite carriages, two 3rd class passenger carriages, twelve low-sided goods wagons, two covered goods wagons and two cattle wagons (carrying capacity of 14¾ tons).

STATIONS, HALTS AND SIDINGS

According to the 1906 Report of the NGR Engineer-in-Chief, the following arrangements for made for station and sidings:

ESTCOURT: The Weenen line commences in the Station Road opposite the existing Passenger Station which will be utilised for the accommodation of passengers. A goods and transfer siding has been laid to serve the existing goods platform. A transshipping platform has been laid alongside the standard-gauge siding over which a wood and iron shelter will be built. Double-road engine shed; turntable; coaling platform; platelayer's house (wood and iron; married type); and Indian barracks (three rooms; wood and iron) have been erected.

SCHEEPERS' STOPPING PLACE: (4¾ miles) – Shelter (wood and iron)

PENISTON STOPPING PLACE: (6½ miles) – Shelter (wood and iron); double dead-end siding.

HAVILAND STOPPING PLACE: (10 miles) – Shelter (wood and iron); double dead-end siding; platelayer's cottage; Indian barracks.

OATLANDS STOPPING PLACE: (14¾ miles) – Shelter (wood and iron); double dead-end siding; platelayer's cottage; Indian barracks.

HALF-WAY HOUSE: (17½ miles) - Shelter (wood and iron); double dead-end siding.

MONA: (24 miles) – Shelter; double dead-end siding; platelayer's cottage (single); Indian barracks.

NEW FURROW: (27½ miles) – Shelter; double dead-end siding.

WEENEN TERMINUS: (28¾ miles) – Station building (wood and iron) consisting of booking and telegraph office, ladies' waiting room; goods shed 30 ft x 20 ft (9m x 6m); goods platform, 260 ft (80m); station master's house (brick); platelayer's cottage (married; wood and iron); staff quarters consisting of four bedrooms, dining room, kitchen and pantry; Indian barracks (three rooms); European and Native latrines; triangle; engine shed (single line).

The stopping places comprised an earthen platform with a top dressing of disintegrated whinstone, 200 ft long and 20 ft wide (61 x 6m), a wood and iron shelter, 12 ft by 8 ft (3.6 x 2.4m), with a name board and horse rail. With the exception of Paapkuils (Scheepersfontein), the double dead-end siding extended 150 ft (45m) clear in each direction. None of the stopping places would be staffed and tickets for travel were to be issued by the train guard.

WATER SUPPLIES

ESTCOURT: Gravitation supply with water column from main line supply; **DEEP KLOOF:** Hand pump from dam with concrete wall; **AMANZIMYANA:** Hand pump from well alongside the stream;

WEENEN TERMINUS: Gravitation supply from New Furrow.

LIST OF BRIDGES

Little Bushmans River: 4 spans of 40 ft (12m), second-hand lattice girders from coast lines with masonry piers and abutments.

Oates Spruit: one 40 ft (12m) span, second-hand lattice girders from coast lines with masonry piers and abutments.

Inyandu Spruit: two 40 ft (12m) spans, second-hand lattice girders from coast lines with masonry piers and abutments.

Amanzimyana Spruit: two 40 ft (12m) spans, second-hand lattice girders from coast lines with masonry piers and abutments.

Tiger Kloof: one 15 ft (4.5m) semi-circular arch culvert.

PERMANENT WAY

The rails are B.S.S. 35lbs/yard (16kg/m) in 30 ft (9m) lengths, with a proportion 29 ft (8.7m) long for curves, were laid to break joint. The fish plates are particularly strong, being 2 ft (610mm) long, 2 5/16th in (59mm) deep, six-holed and of the "angled" type.

The original detailed estimate put the cost at £117,000 – this was later revised to £90,000, but the final costing came to £94,130 [*], including the initial rolling stock.

OPENING AND COMMENCEMENT OF SERVICE

A special train, which left Pietermaritzburg at 11.12 pm on 17 April 1907 carrying Government dignitaries and NGR officials, arrived in Estcourt at 8 am. The railway was officially opened on 18 April by Chas Hitchens, Minister for Railways and Harbours.

According to a report in *The Natal Witness* on 19 April, the inaugural train, carrying around 80 passengers, departed at 9.30 am from Estcourt and arrived in Weenen at 11.40 am. *"The station buildings were gaily decorated with flags and bunting, and presented a gala appearance. The cadets of the Weenen School formed a guard of honour on the platform. The train pulled back from the station and proceeded forwards upon a signal to break the ribbon stretched across the track. Chas Hitchens then declared the line open to traffic."*

Invited guests sat down to a luncheon at 12.45 pm to celebrate the opening of the railway at the Weenen school with Magistrate C.G. Jackson presiding. A telegram from the Acting Prime Minister and Colonial Secretary, Dr Gibbons, was read out: *"The Prime Minister desires me to convey to the inhabitants of Weenen and district his best wishes and congratulations on the opening of the railway."* The ceremony ended at 3 pm with guests returning to the train for a 3.30 pm departure and arriving back in Estcourt at 6 pm.

ORIGINAL STATIONS AND HALTS

Original **stations** and *halts* between Estcourt and Weenen at the time of opening were listed as follows:-

Estcourt , 0 miles (0km); altitude 3,833 ft (1 168m)

Paapkuils [later renamed Scheepersfontein], 4 miles 71 chains (7.8km); altitude 4,116 ft (1 254m)

Peniston, 6 miles 52 chains (10.7km); altitude 3,910 ft (1 192m)

Haviland, 10 miles 1 chain (16.1km); altitude 3,979 ft (1 213m)

Oatlands, [later renamed Stanley], 14 miles 60 chains (23.7km); altitude 3,689 ft (1 124m)

Halfway House [later renamed Mielietuin], 17 miles 79 chains (28.8km); altitude 3,474 ft (1 059m)

– passing loop

Mona, 22 miles 76 chains (36.9km); altitude 3,302 ft (1 006m)

New Furrow, 27 miles 16 chains (43.8km); altitude 2,975 ft (907m)

Weenen, 28¾ miles (46.3km); altitude 2,841 ft (866m)

LATER ADDITIONS

Broomcliffe, 1 mile 74 chains (3.1km); altitude 3,844 ft (1 172m)

Wondergeluk, 10 miles 77 chains (17.6km); altitude 3,967 ft (1 209m) - Water tank

Water Tank, 15 miles 67 chains (25.4km) - between Stanley and Mielietuin

Water Tank, 22 miles 30 chains (36.0km) - between Mielietuin and Mona

TRAIN SCHEDULES

From the timetables from 1911 to 1965 it can be deduced that the schedule consisted of a return service on weekdays with only minor variations to the times of departure and arrival. At different times during this period trains departed Weenen between 07:00 and 08:30; arriving at Estcourt between 10:15 and 11:30. The return journeys started between 13:00 and 14:30; reaching the terminus at Weenen between 15:30 and 17:00. First and third class passengers were conveyed. In 1971, a total of 626 passengers were carried, but with the granting of a permit to a bus operator, the 1972 timetable entry for the Estcourt - Weenen narrow-gauge line reads:

Passenger accommodation is provided on the following goods trains, when run:

8.15 am Exc. Su., Weenen – Estcourt; 1|15 pm Exc. Su., Estcourt - Weenen

The official Working Time Book, effective 28 August 1978, showed the following services:

WEENEN – ESTCOURT (DOWN)					ESTCOURT – WEENEN (UP)				
	Goods	Goods	Goods	Goods		Goods	Goods	Goods	Goods
	Daily (Cond.)	Sats	Mon - Fri	Daily (Cond.)		Daily (Cond.)	Sats	Mon - Fri	Daily (Cond.)
Weenen	00:15	07:15	08:15	17:15	Estcourt	04:50	12:29	13:29	21:00
Estcourt	03:48	10:48	11:48	20:17	Weenen	07:07	15:16	16:16	23:17

Conditional trains run only when specially announced.

One wonders how often the 'nocturnal' services listed above actually operated?

Other than a 9 kilometre stretch between Estcourt and Peniston which was revamped with heavier rails on a generous layer of ballast, the remainder of the permanent way retained the original 35 lb/yard (16kg/m) rails laid on a shallow layer of 'broken stone' by the NGR. Originally, the train to Weenen departed inconspicuously from the Lorne Street frontage of Estcourt station, without any vestige of a passenger platform or a covering roof. The author has been unable to ascertain when the narrow-gauge line was moved to the other side of the station building and brought in alongside the main line platform, but it is probable that this may have occurred when Estcourt station was remodelled in conjunction with the realignment and doubling of the Natal Main Line during the mid 1950's.



NGG13 no. 77 prepares for departure amidst the immaculate gardens and lawns of Weenen station.

Photo: Lionel Penning

During the 1970's and up to the closing of the railway, Weenen station and surrounding grounds were kept in immaculate condition by Mr Lodewyks, the station master, and his staff, sporting shady trees, neatly trimmed lawns and manicured flower beds. The track in the yard continued for about 180 metres past the station building to the engine shed, pit and water tank. In addition to the run-around loop there was a siding with a covered platform where the passenger coaches were parked.

MOTIVE POWER

Piecing together an accurate account of the classes of locomotive used on the Estcourt – Weenen line without access to the official records (which are probably long gone) and with the limited information available is sketchy at best and open to conjecture.

Whether the second generation of narrow-gauge tank locomotives, Class NG3 (built by Hawthorn, Leslie & Co., Newcastle-on-Tyne, the first two of six being taken into service during 1907 by the contractors, Pauling & Co. Ltd, building the Stuartstown Railway) may have seen service on the Estcourt - Weenen line is not known after the original two locomotives were sold in 1915, reportedly for use in Portuguese East Africa, but this is thought to be erroneous [5]. Photographic evidence, dating from the late 1920's, or perhaps the 1930's, of NG4 No.11 (built 1911-14 by Kerr Stuart & Co., for use on the Alfred County Railway) at Estcourt station, shows that the third generation of narrow-gauge tank locomotives provided the motive power on the line probably until the arrival of the narrow-gauge garratts [6]. When the first garratts arrived on the Weenen line is not known, other than three classes of garratt locomotives were the undisputed work-horses of the railway: the Class NG/G11's (nos. 52, 54 and 55) worked the line until they were transferred to Humewood Road (Port Elizabeth) in 1966. Engine no. 55 was returned to Weenen some time after withdrawal from service at Humewood Road – thought to have been in the mid 1970's – cosmetically restored and plinched in the station grounds [7]. The locomotive allocations for March 1962, list Class NG/G11 nos. 54 and 55 as “out of service” (presumably still staged in Estcourt or Weenen), whilst Class NG/G16 nos. 87, 113, 131 and 139 were rostered to work the Estcourt – Weenen line [8]. During 1966, NG/G11 locos nos. 54 and 55 were withdrawn from Estcourt and two unidentified Class NG/G13's were sent from Humewood Road to replace



Class NG/G11 locomotive no. 55, which originally worked the Weenen branch, now runs on the Paton's Country Railway line at Ixopo. Photo: Robert Maidment-Wilson

them [9]. According to the 1976 locomotive allocation table, five NG/G13 locomotives (Nos. 58 [Hanomag, no. 10549/1927]; 59 [Hanomag, no. 10550/1927]; 60 [Hanomag, no. 10551/1927];

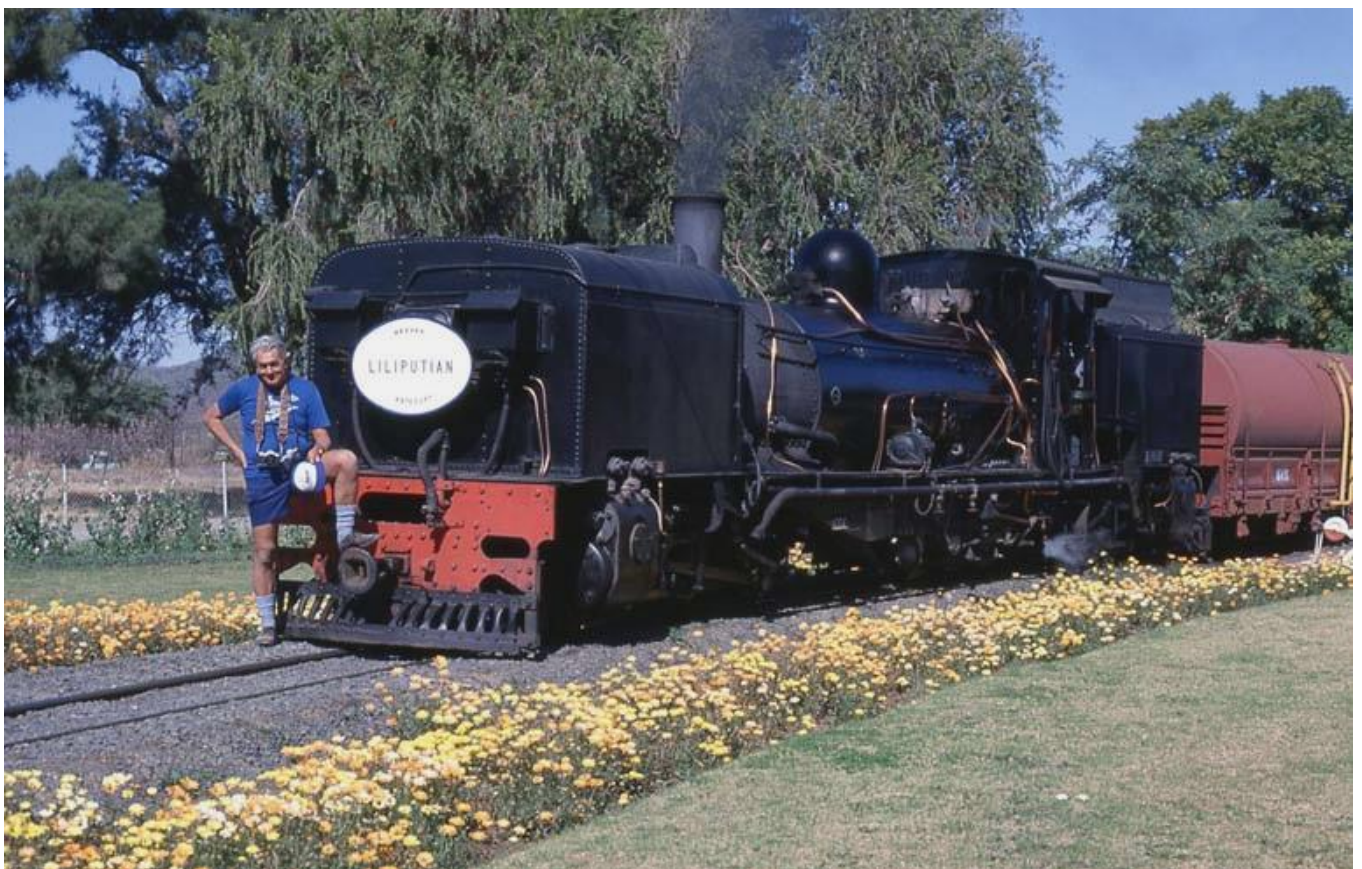
77 [Hanomag no. 10629/1928] and 78 [Hanomag, no. 10630/1928]) were rostered to work the Estcourt - Weenen and Umlaas Road - Mid-Illovo branch lines; these engines being circulated between the lines as they took their turns to the workshops for maintenance and running repairs.[10].

The operative locomotive was stabled in Weenen and the spare shedded at Estcourt. After twenty working days the locomotives were exchanged. Maximum load: 183 tons up a 1 in 33 grade.

The frequency of the train services declined from 800 trips per annum in 1973 to less than 400 in 1982. During 1973 some 21 000 tonnes of freight was carried, but by 1982 this had dropped to 10 000 tonnes. By this stage competition from road transport had taken its toll on the rail service with most fresh produce being carried on trucks directly to the markets. It was reported that during February 1982 the train was operating six days a week with all available rolling stock pressed into service.

MR J. "BILLY" BESTER

Synonymous with the Estcourt – Weenen line was the iconic Mr J. 'Billy' Bester, who spent 21 years of his lifelong career with the SAR as locomotive driver of the railway: "I saw life in Weenen in the early 1920's and grew up in a poor family. In those days nobody had any money. I had my education in Weenen until Standard 8."



Billy Bester posing in front of NG/G13 no. 77 at Weenen station on 27 August 1983.

Photo: Bruno Martin

Billy recalls that as a schoolboy he would go to the Weenen loco shed after school to help clean out the ashpan of engine no. 16 (Class NG4). At fifteen years of age he was sent to Pietermaritzburg, where he started working for the SAR, first in the goods shed, and then as a rail worker offloading goods from the Howick branch line. Two years later he was employed as an engine cleaner at the locomotive sheds. After passing an examination he became a probational fireman and was posted first to Bergville, then to Stanger and Empangeni, where he worked on the Class GE garratts, and thereafter to Eshowe to work on the Class MJ1 compound mallets. After a brief stint in Pietermaritzburg, he was sent back to Eshowe in 1947, as relieving fireman.

Mr Bester recalls: "The British Royal Family was visiting at this time and I was detailed to look after the Royal Train's locos (Class GEA's) and see that everything was in order. After working all through the night we went over to the hotel for a few drinks – we were still in our overalls and very dirty. About midday a big crowd of people had gathered outside the town hall, which was opposite the hotel. The crowd started to clap and shout, and on investigating we saw the Royal Family drive up and stop outside. This was when the challenge started - £5 to the person who would put his arm around a princess. I won the bet and put my arm around Princess Elizabeth! The police arrested me, put me in a police van and took me to the local police station. Only after my friends had walked to the police station and spoken nicely to the sergeant did he let me go without a charge."

From Eshowe Mr Bester did another turn of duty in Stanger, firing on Class HF locos during the sugar cane harvesting season before yet again returning to Pietermaritzburg, where he continued working as fireman on the GE and GEA garratts on the Cape-Natal line until his driver retired and then proceeded to work on locos of Classes GE, GF and GDA on the Greytown line. After seven years as fireman he attended college and passed his fireman's examination in 1952. An opportunity then presented itself for him to return to Weenen by changing places with another fireman.

"I was then promoted to a driver (second class) and was due to be sent to the Point, in Durban, where I would have driven Class A tank locos, but I decided to forfeit my promotion and stay in Weenen".

Billy Bester then spent almost 3½ years in Weenen before once again moving to Pietermaritzburg, this time to fill a vacancy which arose after a driver was involved in a turnover. In 1961 a vacancy came up for a driver in Weenen and he transferred "back to my home town where I always wanted to be".

Here he operated Class NG/G11 nos. 52, 54 and 55, and Class NG/G13 nos. 58, 59, 60, 77 and 78. Mr Bester recalled: "I painted the first loco, no. 55, blue and got reprimanded for my trouble. Most enthusiasts were in favour of the colour, but some said I had spoilt the loco. When I was at Weenen I found I had to satisfy a lot of people – some wanted the loco black and some wanted it another colour." The operating locomotive was always kept in immaculate condition and carried the name "Liliputian" [sic].

In 1972 Billy Bester travelled to Texas, at the invitation of an American visitor, Mr Robert (Bob) L. Bucher [11]. During December 1978 he travelled to the United States of America again, this time to open the Massachusetts Steam Train Society's season.

"I have met people from all walks of life and my service at Weenen has brought me privileges which I would never have had anywhere else," he said. "I would never have changed my career for anything. I will never regret one moment of all the hard work I did and if I look back to the days when I had to shovel 27 tons of coal from 'Maritzburg to Franklin, it was nothing to me – I was fit as a fiddle!"

All who travelled on the Estcourt – Weenen railway will always remember Billy Bester's friendly welcoming smile and he will be fondly remembered as a man who was really passionate about the job he was doing.

Mr Bester retired in 1982 and passed away on 21 January 2001.

THE FINAL YEARS

In the mid 1970's, William (Bill) Bizley of the University of Natal's English Department in Pietermaritzburg started a campaign to draw attention to the quaint narrow-gauge train's potential as a tourist attraction for the region. Bill's efforts were rewarded as the train started to be 'noticed' by the tourism industry and took on a new life as a major drawcard by being marketed as the "Cabbage Express" on the bi-monthly coach tour through the Natal Midlands operated by the Pietermaritzburg Publicity Association. The train ride was also popular on outings organised by schools, various societies and clubs.

A news item in the June 1978 edition of **SA Rail** stated that the vintage "Cabbage Express" may become the first entire and fully operational railway system in the country to be declared a National Monument. It went on to claim that "the 60-year old narrow-gauge railway, much loved by enthusiasts, was in principle declared a monument by the National Monument Council recently.

The decision would mean that the railway line, the vintage steam locomotive and coaches and the stations at Weenen and Estcourt would all become monuments. The council's decision is subject to the acceptance by the South African Railways, who run the train." Senior (railway) officials could not be reached for their decision on the express and there was not much optimism that the SAR would accept the National Monument Council's suggestion.

The fare in 1981 was R6.40 for a 1st class return ticket; by 1983 it had increased to R8.20. In February 1982, a special train of 'old vehicles' was chartered for a mere R115.00, comprising two DZ trucks, two G cattle trucks (all empty), balcony coach No.4 (with 11 passengers) and hauled by NG/G 13 no. 78.

On 4 January 1982, the first working day after Mr Bester's retirement, engine no. 59 overturned on a sharp left-hand curve just outside the boundary of the Weenen Nature Reserve and claimed the life of the fireman. The wrecked locomotive (Billy Bester's favourite 'blue' engine) was recovered during March, towed back to Estcourt and transported to the Pietermaritzburg workshops where she was eventually scrapped. Engine no. 77 was brought from Umlaas Road as replacement.



Wreck of NG/G13 no. 59 - on 4 January 1982 this loco left the rails on a sharp left hand curve and overturned, claiming the life of the fireman.

Photograph: Taken 13 February 1982 by Bruno Martin

As from 14 June 1982, the train operated out of Estcourt on just three days a week (Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays – usually, when a tourist train was run on a Saturday, there was no train service on the preceding Friday) departing at 07:30, arriving at Weenen at 10:20 and leaving at 11:20 for the return journey.

Arrival at Estcourt was around 15:00. Under the new operating arrangement the loco driver and fireman were driven from Pietermaritzburg to Estcourt by departmental road transport and taken back again after completing their shift.

"Sometimes one driver came on a 1 000cc motor-bike with the fireman on the pillion; we hoped he changed his driving habits radically when he took control of the garratt!" comments Charles Parry in his notes.

Inevitably, the loco crew turned up late because of transport delays and passengers were left waiting, or occasionally, the train was cancelled at short notice because one crew member was unavailable. It should be mentioned that of the fifteen steam drivers left at Mason's Mill depot by the end of 1982, eight were in the process of going over to driving diesels.

More bad news followed when Mason's Mill depot was closed to steam operations on 16 May 1983. This development was brought about by the prolonged drought and falling water levels in the Midmar and Albert Falls dams which restricted the supply of water to Pietermaritzburg.

CLOSURE

A letter from South African Transport Services (SATS) Natal System Manager, Mr W.J. Mitchell, dated 10 August 1983, announced the closure of the Estcourt - Weenen branch and to replace the rail goods service with road transport as from 1 September.

Understandably, the announcement of the withdrawal of the train service at such short notice was greeted with dismay not only by the farming community around Weenen, but by railway enthusiasts, the Natal Parks Board, the tourism and heritage sector and particularly by the Estcourt Lions Club and the Pietermaritzburg Publicity Association, all of which had been actively promoting the railway for many years.

A public meeting was called for 2 pm on 19 August in the Weenen Town Hall. About 60 delegates, representing various interest groups, turned up to the meeting with local MPC, Mr Wessels, presiding. Three senior officials from SATS, Dr Coetzee, Mr Mitchell and Mr Jakobs were also in attendance.

After the formal introductions were made, Dr Coetzee, SATS Commercial Assistant General Manager, spoke about the low traffic base which made the train service no longer viable. With SATS services expecting to post an estimated loss of around R600 million for the current financial year, management was reviewing all of its operations and uneconomic rail services, such as the Estcourt - Weenen line, were to be replaced with an alternative mode of transport. A graph was projected on a screen to illustrate the decline in the volume of goods carried on the line over the past decade, with the average train load having dwindled to just 17 tons in recent months. Not even the revenue generated by tourists, which contributed R3 000 annually, was sufficient to warrant the continued running of the railway. It was estimated that by replacing the rail service with road transport there would be an annual saving of R653 000 in operating costs.

Mr Wessels then invited questions from the floor.

One speaker, representing the farming community, queried whether the road transport service would have the capacity to move large consignments of produce at short notice such as 2 000 bags of potatoes and how much time would be allocated to load twenty tons of fertilizer. Mention was made of transporting 480 tons of fresh produce daily from 15 October to 15 January and again from 30 April to the middle of July where in the past the train was run up to three times in one day to clear the load.

Another speaker voiced his dissatisfaction with the rail service which had resulted in many farmers resorting to having their fresh produce transported more efficiently by road.

Representing the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, Mr R. Haswell outlined the historical significance and importance of the railway and suggested it should be declared a National Monument, or at the very least, the railway administration should consider bequeathing the train, or a portion thereof, to the people of South Africa.

Mr Jones, the Director of the Pietermaritzburg Publicity Association, emphasised the importance of tourism to South Africa and the train's potential as a tourist attraction to bring in revenue and creating employment in the region.

The retired train driver, Mr Bester, spoke about his long association with the railway which had brought him in contact with many people from all over the world and that had given him the opportunity to travel overseas. He urged Dr Coetzee to use his authority to reconsider the decision *"so that in time to come this narrow-gauge railway would be something only South Africa would have as a tourist attraction"*.

Another speaker, Mr Hyde, representing the *Estcourt Gazette*, asked whether the railway was up for sale. The response from Dr Coetzee: *"Mr Chairman, I'm being serious in saying if the Farmer's Co-op or any other association is prepared to guarantee this line and they are prepared to pick up the tab, we are prepared to operate ... so, please, if you people want to guarantee this line against any losses, please do so, then we'll stop the meeting immediately. All I want is your signature for it and your bank guaranteed cheque."* (A figure of R800 000 was mentioned in passing).

Meanwhile, an appraisal was hurriedly drafted and read out by Dr Vincent of the Natal Parks Board: ***“Recognising that the Estcourt - Weenen line runs at a loss to SATS, and also recognising that the Estcourt - Weenen line is of great historical and cultural interest and of considerable tourist potential, it is proposed that SATS be requested through those present at the meeting today to consider seriously the lease or hand over of the line to the community of Weenen or any responsible body to be run by the community for its own convenience and for the benefit of the people of South Africa.”***

The appraisal was unanimously supported by a show of hands and the document handed to Dr Coetzee who responded: *“Mr Chairman, can I please get clarity in my mind about this please... the suggestion is then that we retain the line as it is at the moment and at a later stage a decision will be taken on what is going to happen to the line and what next. We intend to close our operations on the 1st September and following this meeting that is to be held the operations could be re-introduced at a later stage and depending on what we decide at that greater meeting, so to speak, but at this stage then we discontinue the train service and replace it by the road service from 1st September and then we discuss and I will put this - I can assure you this will go direct to the Minister and let them decide when the Minister would be able to come and discuss it with the community. I cannot say that the Minister will come, but I will put it to him – Dr Vincent, is that how I understand your proposal?”*

Dr Coetzee added a management meeting was scheduled for 23 August and that the matter would then go on the Minister of Transport who would make the final decision.

However, despite the protests, there was no last minute reprieve for the Estcourt -Weenen line; it was clear that SATS had made its decision to close the line. [12]

The Railway Society of Southern Africa (RSSA) hastily arranged for a ‘closure’ special train to be run for its members on Saturday, 27 August 1983. As the train entered Weenen station, Billy Bester was holding a black flag and a black plastic sheet was draped between the concrete supports of the station name board to mourn the closing of the railway. On a brighter note, passengers were treated to tea and cake provided by Mr and Mrs Bester.

I did not record the exact time of departure (it was between 1 and 2 pm) on 31 August, but after numerous runs back and forth marshalling the load, NG/G13 no. 77 finally advertised her departure with the mournful sound of several good blasts from the whistle. With a rake comprising thirteen goods wagons, passenger coaches nos. 4 and 959 and guard’s van no. 952 in tow, NG/G13 no. 77 clattered out of Weenen station with the last scheduled train.



The last crew of the Estcourt - Weenen train posing in front of NG/G13 no. 77 on 27 August 1983, including Driver G.P.J. Rademeyer and Fireman J.S. Strydom. Photo: Bruno Martin



The homeward journey begins: NG/G 13 no. 77 leaving Weenen station for Estcourt in the early afternoon with the last scheduled train on 31 August 1983. Photo: Bruno Martin

The reporter for the *Natal Witness*, David Robbins, captured the sombre mood at the arrival of the train in Estcourt: *“There were no crowds or bunting on the station, as there had been in 1907 when the line was opened, when finally we rattled to a halt against the platform. The locomotive was uncoupled. It chugged off a little distance, then returned to the adjoining track. The driver, Mr G. P. J. Rademeyer, stopped opposite our coach. He and the fireman, Mr J. S. Strydom, leaned out of the cab to say goodbye. They were grimy-faced and smiling, yet we felt an affinity with these pleasant and obliging young men which was difficult to define. Did they, too, even though they had worked that route for less than two years, feel the same sense of loss? Ja, well, cheers. It was all that needed to be said.”*



The line was severed for good once the rails were pulled up from the unguarded level crossing over the old Durban – Johannesburg R103 main road, about 6km north of Estcourt, and at the level crossing at Mielietuin – this occurred sometime during 1984. Photo: Bruno Martin

Footnotes:

[1]. The first 2 ft (610 mm) gauge railway in Natal was a private line belonging to Messrs J.L. Hulett & Sons, the Stanger - Kearsney Light Railway, opened in 1901, which conveyed both goods and passengers. Then followed a 20 inch (508mm) gauge estate railway of Messrs Reynolds Bros Ltd, operated from the sugar mill at Esperanza, for some 5 miles (8km) to the sugar cane plantations up the Umzinto Valley. Both railways were powered by steam locomotives.

[2]. David Hunter, the General Manager of the Natal Government Railways (1897- 1906) was not in favour of 'little railways'; in his view they were "quite unsuitable for the conveyance of public traffic" and somewhat sarcastically referred to them as "toy railways". The strong representation of the farming community in the Natal Parliament however ensured a 23-12 vote in favour of adopting a policy of building 'little railways' to open up the agricultural districts of the colony.

[3]. The other lines in Natal were: Stuartstown Narrow-Gauge Railway from Esperanza to Donnybrook, 1908; (with branch line Ixopo - Madonela, 1914); Umlaas Road - Mid-Illovo, 1911 and the Alfred County Railway from Port Shepstone to Harding, 1911-17. The Eshowe branch was originally proposed as a 2 ft line, but in 1917 it was built as 'Cape' gauge. In 1923 the 2 ft (610 mm) gauge was extended from Esperanza to Umzinto with the laying of a third rail.

[4]. Weenen is the second oldest town founded by the *Voortrekkers* in Natal – Pietermaritzburg was the first.

[5]. Paxton, Leith & Bourne, *Locomotives of the South African Railways, A Concise Guide*, David & Charles, 1985; p.111 "were sold for use in Portuguese East Africa, now Angola, 1915".
(**Author's note:** *Angola should read Portuguese West Africa*)

[6]. Refers to a photograph published in **SA Rail**, November/December 1986, p.136. Billy Bester recalls when he was a schoolboy he would go to the Weenen loco shed after school to help clean out the firebox of engine NG4 no. 16. The first narrow-gauge garratt, NG/G11 no. 51, was placed in traffic in March 1920 on the Stuartstown (Esperanza - Donnybrook) railway.

[7]. In 2003, NG/G11 no. 55 was recovered from Weenen in a very poor state by the Sandstone Estates, restored to working order and returned to service in August 2004 on Paton's Country Narrow-Gauge Railway, which operates between Allwoodburn and Carisbrooke sidings on the Ixopo (Union Bridge) - Madonela branch in kwaZulu-Natal.

[8]. *Narrow-Gauge News*, published in the **RSSA Newsletter**, May 1962, Vol. 2 no. 2, p.3. It does seem odd that Billy Bester makes no mention of driving any NG/G16's seeing that he returned to Weenen in 1961.

[9]. Miller, N.S., *Weenen to Estcourt Narrow-Gauge Line*, observed NG/G13 nos. 60 and 78 at Estcourt on 12 May 1972.

[10]. NG/G13 no. 78 was rostered to work the Estcourt - Weenen line in 1982 and appears on the 1983 list of locomotives in the strategic reserve as staged at Estcourt. After the closure of the Estcourt - Weenen line, NG/G13 no. 58 was transferred from Umlaas Road and dumped at Estcourt. In exchange, the still operational NG/G13 no. 77 was redeployed and provided the motive power on the last days of the Umlaas Road – Mid Illovo line in February 1985.

[11]. Former SAR locomotives NG15 no. 18 and NG/G 13 no. 50, were purchased by Robert L. Bucher in 1978, for his $\frac{3}{4}$ mile (1.2km) long Hempstead and Northern Railroad, located on Hempstead Ranch, north-west of Houston, Texas, United States of America.

[12]. It was reported in the April/May 1984 edition of *Natal Newsletter* that a consortium was attempting to purchase the railway. How far the negotiations went is not known. By this stage the passenger coaches had already been transferred to Port Shepstone.

[*]. At the time South Africa's currency units were pounds (£) shillings (s) and pence (d). Whilst in 1961 one pound became two rand, the relevance between past values and present has been lost due to the effects of inflation.

APPENDIX

A FEW DETAILS OF THE ROLLING STOCK

Note: the rolling stock was built to British Imperial measurements - for historical accuracy and uniformity the measures have been retained.

Metric conversions are as follows:-

1 inch (") = 25.4mm; 1 foot (') = 304.8mm; 1 yard = 914.4mm; 1 mile = 1.609km.

1 pound (lb) = 0.454kg; 1 (short) ton = 0.907 tonnes

1 gallon = 4.54 litres

Passenger coach no.4

This was the oldest passenger coach in service. It was placed in traffic by the NGR in 1907. An NGR diagram, NG Class L2, shows no. 4 with balconies at either end, a centre toilet separating the two passenger compartments; one containing seating for 6 and the other seating for 8. Dimensions: Length 26 ft, Width 6 ft 6 in, Height 9 ft 9¾ in.

After a rebuild there was only seating for 11 passengers, all first class.

Passenger coach no. 959

Built SAR 1937, was originally a van and converted in 1980 to form this unusual coach. Toilet facilities were omitted from this otherwise comfortable and smooth-riding vehicle. At 7¼ ft wide it is a big vehicle for the 2 ft gauge. Accommodation: 25 in main compartment, 12 in the other compartments.

Guard's van no. 952

This was a typical old wooden SAR guards van with passenger accommodation. It carried the few 3rd class passengers that travelled on the train.

(With acknowledgement to Rev. Charles Parry's notes)

NGR Locomotives nos. NG1 & 2 (SAR nos NG3 & NG4)

Chief dimensions of the two side-tank locomotives, with a 4-6-2T wheel arrangement, designed by D.A. Hendrie, built by Hunslet & Co. of Leeds (works nos. 892 and 893), placed in service in 1906, a goods service being operated as far as Halfway House from 4 October 1906:-

Diameter of cylinders: 11½"

Length of stroke: 15"

Centre of cylinders: 5' 4¾"

Diameter of leading bogie wheels: 1' 6"

Diameter of coupled wheels: 2' 6"

Diameter of trailing bogie wheels: 1' 9"

Centre of bogie wheels: 3' 6"

Centre of bogie to centre of leading coupled wheels: 4' 3"

Centres of coupled wheels: 2' 10½"

Centre of trailing coupled wheels to centre of trailing bogie 5' 3"

Total wheel base: 17'

External diameter of boiler: 3' 4½"

Length of boiler barrel: 10' 2"

Centre line from rail level: 4' 6"

External length of fire-box: 3' 4½"

External width of fire-box: 4' 4½"

Number of tubes: 124

Diameter of tubes outside: 1¾"

Heating surface of firebox: 39 sq. ft.

Heating surface of tubes: 393 sq. ft.

Heating surface: 632 sq. ft.

Grate area: 11 sq. ft.

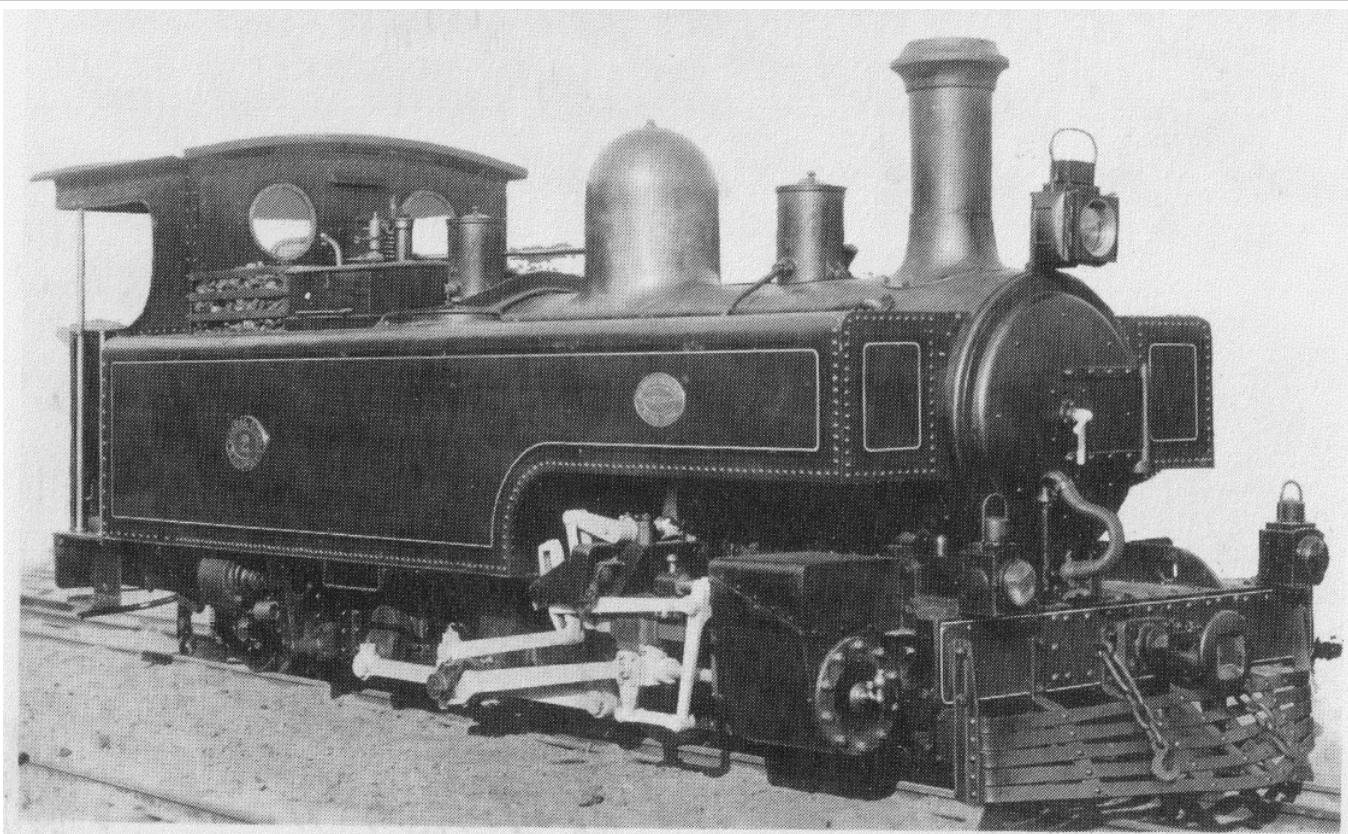
Working pressure of boiler: 165 lb/sq. in.

Capacity of tanks: 750 gallons

Capacity of coal bunker: 45 cubic ft.

Total weight of engine in working order: 23 tons, 19 cwt.

Tractive effort at 75% boiler pressure: 8,183 lbs (36.4 kN).

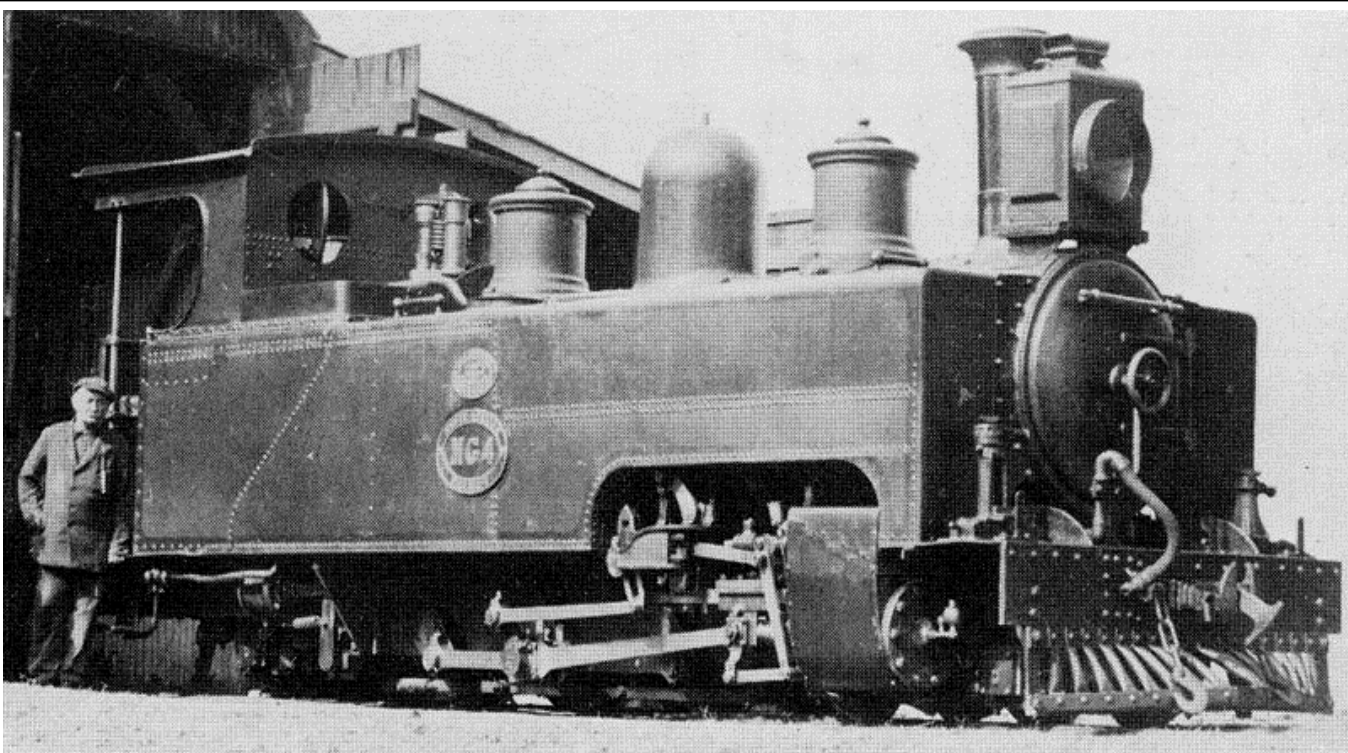


One of the two original locos built by NGR for the Estcourt – Weenen line by Hunslet in 1906
Photo: Leith Paxton Collection

These locomotives hauled a load of 80 tons up the steepest parts of the line at about 8 miles an hour; on the easier sections they reached a maximum speed of 15 miles an hour.

(Information extracted from the Natal Government Railways Magazine, December 1906, p. 547)

Leading dimensions of all classes of locomotives mentioned in this article can be viewed on the sarsteam.co.za website and are also tabulated in Paxton, Leith & Bourne, David, Locomotives of the South African Railways, a Concise Guide, 1985.



Ex NGR 1907-built narrow-gauge tank loco, reclassified to NG3 by SAR.
Photo: Leith Paxton Collection

The spelling of towns, localities and other features used on the map and in this article are as they were at time of the closing of the Estcourt-Weenen line.

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Front cover photograph: Class NGG13 no. 78 waiting to depart Weenen on 13 February 1982.

Photo: Bruno Martin