

## SOUTH AFRICA

### Railway Heritage at Risk

Dating back to the 1860s, South Africa's railway system is probably the largest and most sophisticated on the African continent. The few humble coastal lines that emerged in this decade rapidly began penetrating the interior during the 1870s and 1880s, sparked off by the discovery of the world's richest diamond and gold finds and the accompanying industrialisation and accelerated movement and urbanisation of people. When the various railway administrations and departments, a heritage of the times when the country was divided into British colonies and Boer republics, merged in 1910 into a single management system, the basic pattern of South Africa's railway map had been firmly established. During the ensuing decades, accelerated economic development and the peculiarities of the apartheid policy led to the construction of many more railway lines. The zenith was reached in the early 1980s. After that, railway transport began to decline due to various factors, elaborated elsewhere in this report. Today the tangible and also the intangible results of this process are all too clear: unused infrastructure in the form of dilapidated and often vandalised buildings and overgrown tracks, old rolling stock – much of which is no longer used – fewer goods trains, decrease in service standards, increase in accidents, and increased unemployment. In short: South Africa's railway heritage is at risk.

#### **Significance**

Like elsewhere in the world, railway development in South Africa was an essential part of European colonisation in the early days. However, when the country embarked on the road to independence in 1910, culminating in the establishment of a republic in 1961, this type of development did not end. Factors such as the discovery of more minerals, rapid industrialisation after 1910, followed by agricultural development after 1945, the influx of new settlers, urbanisation, the creation of Africa's largest energy-generating infrastructure (coal-based), tourism development and others, led to the expansion of the railway system. Unlike any other country, the apartheid policy of dividing and separating the population also facilitated railway development, intended to transport masses of people over great distances between their places of residence and their places of work.

Railway development in South Africa had to overcome and was shaped by a number of obstacles. The high elevation of the interior, the broken landscape of the eastern coastal regions, lack of water in arid regions and lack of coal in many parts of the country represented technical obstacles. This, in turn, implied that railway construction was expensive. Until South Africa became a single state in 1910, the division of the country into various political entities also presented political problems. Until agricultural development took off after 1945, railway transport was focused on centres of mining and manufacturing, so that the rural areas were relatively under-served with fewer railway lines.

Despite these difficulties, South Africa succeeded in establishing an impressive railway system, characterised by more than 1000 station complexes with station buildings, sheds, workshops and houses and villages for railway staff (including recreational facilities), very large centralised workshops, operating and training facilities, 20,000 kilometres of track with more than 3000 sidings, 10,000 bridges and viaducts and 150 tunnels (many lines are engineering monuments in their own right), some of the world's largest and most powerful steam engines, as well as many electric and

diesel-electric engines specially designed for local conditions, and finally some of the world's longest goods trains and most luxurious passenger trains. Most lines are built according to the 1065 mm 'Cape gauge' track width, which was accepted as a standard in 1873 and has been adopted in most other African countries.

#### **Decline**

The decline of the state of South Africa's railway heritage became evident during the last two decades of the 20th century. A number of uneconomical lines were closed down. The frequency of trains decreased. Staff were retrenched. The phasing out of steam traction resulted in the scrapping of many steam locomotives (a major tourist attraction), while others were bought by collectors and shipped to foreign destinations. A lot of rolling stock, much of it with heritage significance, was scrapped and left to decay.

Today only 10,000 kilometres of railway lines are fully utilised. Of the remaining 10,000 kilometres, 1250 kilometres carry no traffic, 5750 kilometres carry low traffic, and 3110 kilometres only carry light traffic. Many empty station and other buildings have been vandalised, and the tracks connecting these stations are now dilapidated and overgrown. Towns that formerly depended on the railways have lost their subsistence base.

#### **Analysis of Threats**

A number of factors can be held responsible for the physical deterioration of South Africa's railway heritage.

#### **Development-related factors**

The closure or realignment of railway lines made old lines obsolete or uneconomical, leading to the closure of stations, retrenchment or relocation of staff and the end of train movement. A major impetus to the decline of railway transport has been the emergence of road transport. Except in a few urban areas, there is limited passenger movement by train. The only goods that are still transported widely by rail are bulk goods. The closure of lines is not peculiar to the past two decades but also happened in earlier years, when more modern and better construction methods led to the replacement of old routes that incorporated many curves and other obstacles with straight shortcuts. In most cases farmers and other local people found a use for the redundant buildings. Bureaucracy and lack of clear policy today prevent the rapid transfer of redundant infrastructure from the railway owners to other parties. Where operating lines are concerned, lack of funds has prevented the regular maintenance and security of buildings and structures. Where stations have been decommissioned along operating lines, demolition by neglect is the case.

#### **Social factors**

Crime, and especially violent crime, is rampant in South Africa. Lack of respect for individual and private property is widespread.

Coupled to rising unemployment, much of the country's obsolete and redundant railway infrastructure has been systematically vandalised. In real terms this means the disappearance of woodwork, roof covers, floor tiles, fireplaces and anything else that can be stripped from structures. Nor have locomotives and rolling stock escaped vandalism, including professional vandalism by collectors of brass plates and other fittings. Another aspect linked to social factors is the urbanisation of the country's population and the decline in the rural economy and population, which has also impacted the railways.

### **Administrative factors**

Railway transport in South Africa has been through a number of transformations, starting in the late 1980s when the then South African Railways was put on the road to privatisation and became the South African Transport Services (SATS). A new parastatal company, Transnet, replaced SATS in the 1990s, which had a number of subsidiaries for railway transportation, including Spoornet (main line transport), Metrorail (urban passenger transport), PX (container transport), Propnet (management and development of properties) and Intersite (management of urban stations). Transnet has also been through a process of restructuring, which has not necessarily led to improved service delivery. The situation regarding rail transportation is often confusing because there are many entities within Transnet that have a say. Coupled to the decline in management efficiency, this has had an overall negative impact on the railway heritage.

### **Weaknesses in the conservation safety net**

The conservation of South Africa's railway heritage is fragmented. On the one hand there is the official Transnet conservation agency, the Transnet Heritage Foundation, that has an archive and documentation centre in Johannesburg, but operates the official Transnet Museum (composed of engines, rolling stock and other objects) in the coastal town of George, far from Johannesburg. On the other hand, there are a number of non-governmental companies and societies that collect, restore and operate vintage engines and rolling stock for tourism and education purposes. Mention must also be made of a few successful private railway companies that either run trains (such as Rovos Rail in Pretoria, which oper-

ates the most luxurious vintage tourist train in the world), or have taken over entire Spoornet lines and stations and operate them on a commercial and tourism basis (such as Sandstone Railway Company in the eastern Free State province). These non-Transnet conservation-oriented institutions are doing work of immense heritage value, but in recent years the Spoornet bureaucracy has hindered their efforts.



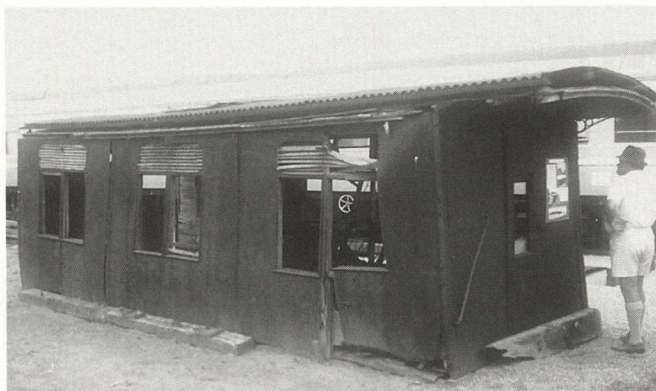
Pretoria's main railway station designed by Sir Herbert Baker and built in 1910–1912. This photograph was taken a few days after the destruction of the roof through fire on 19 February 2001. The fire was started by an angry mob of railway commuters who vented their frustration because of trains running late at evening rush hour. The building has since then been restored. (Photo: R.C. de Jong)

In terms of the *National Heritage Resources Act* (1999), all buildings older than 60 years are automatically protected. A number of station buildings and other railway structures are also formally protected in their own right. This legislation has not prevented vandalism and destruction, since South Africa's official heritage conservation agency is understaffed and under-sourced. Furthermore, the South African Police Services and other agencies (such as the Customs) are in most cases unaware of and uninterested in applying heritage conservation measures that take a low priority when compared to fraud, theft, murder and other crimes.

Regarding moveable railway heritage, many items, including steam locomotives, have been acquired by collectors and shipped to foreign countries. Local collectors are often unable to compete with the prices at which these items have been bought, with the result that many valuable items are no longer in the country. The aforementioned heritage legislation is also powerless to stop this type of export. In recent years, Spoornet has also begun asking exorbitant prices for scrapped items.

Disused railway bridge in South Africa's Mpumalanga Province, constructed in 1894 as part of the Pretoria-Maputo railway line with bridgeheads and pylons of local sandstone and steelwork imported from Germany. This bridge became redundant when the line was upgraded and a new, stronger concrete bridge was built. (Photo: R.C. de Jong)





Not only is South Africa's railway infrastructure (station buildings, goods sheds, bridges, houses etc.) at risk, but also its historic rolling stock, as illustrated by this derelict railway coach constructed in the Netherlands in the 1890s and used by the Netherlands South African Railway Company until the early 20th century. This coach is the only example of its kind today. (Photo: R.C. de Jong)

Mention must also be made of archives, publications and other media. Many valuable plans and other documents have been lost due to carelessness and lack of interest on the part of railway administrators. Fortunately the Transnet Heritage Foundation has managed to save the entire holdings of the former railway publicity department (including hundreds of films, videos, slides, negatives and photographs), but lack of funding prevents proper storage, documentation and access.

## Countering the Threats

Over the past two or three decades there have been a number of noteworthy initiatives aimed at conserving South Africa's railway heritage. These include:

- the establishment of a Railway Museum in Johannesburg, moved to the town of George in the late 1990s;
- the establishment of the Transnet Heritage Foundation that manages this museum and also the documentation centre that remained in Johannesburg;
- the emergence of a number of private railway conservation organisations, notably the South African Railway and Steam Museum based at the town of Krugersdorp, west of Johannesburg, with a collection of engines and rolling stock that is larger than that of Transnet. Some of these organisations also use their own materials to operate trains for promotion, education, tourism and recreation purposes.
- the complete privatisation of some railway lines in the 1980s and 1990s that in turn benefited conservation;
- the emergence of private or semi-private companies that operate luxurious safari trains for tourists, notably Rovos Rail;
- the formal protection of a number of buildings, bridges and other materials;
- the introduction of better heritage conservation legislation in 1999;
- a number of special events that commemorated the construction of railway lines, notably the centenary of the Pretoria-Maputo line in 1995. These events have managed to focus public interest on conserving the heritage elements of such lines. In some cases vintage rolling stock that was on display for many years was restored and put back on the tracks.
- various videos and publications;

- successful discussions between Spoornet management and trade unions aimed at preventing more job losses and making better use of railway lines.

The most recent initiative is that of the Development Bank of Southern Africa (DBSA). Established in 1983, the DBSA invests in infrastructure development, finances environmentally friendly and sustainable development in partnership with the government and private sectors, and acts as a development facilitator. On 17 May 2002 the DBSA organised a large workshop with many interested parties, during which the use of railway infrastructure for rural redevelopment was discussed. This workshop could result in a much-needed catalyst for boosting the conservation of South Africa's railway heritage at risk.

## Conclusion

The conservation of South Africa's railway heritage, and, for that matter, also all other heritage, can only succeed as a partnership between local communities with specific needs, government and private sector. Conservation will only succeed if it is government-driven, private-sector funded, labour conscious, community based and environmentally friendly. It is hoped that the DBSA initiative will succeed in combining all efforts aimed at heritage conservation and economic utilisation of the railways, and that this report will assist in creating the required greater international and national awareness of South Africa's railway 'heritage at risk' by bringing this matter to the attention of the authorities.

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One of the many small stations along the Pretoria-Maputo railway line, which became redundant in the 1990s through the decline in passenger and goods transportation. The fact that this building is a national heritage site (proclaimed in 1988) has not prevented its deterioration. (Photo: R.C. de Jong)

