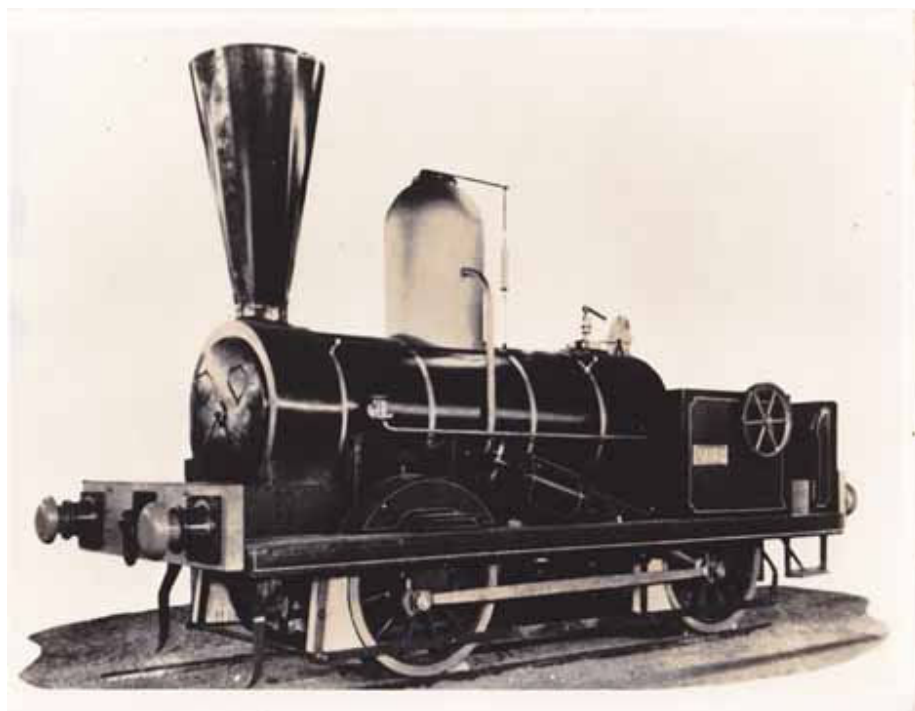


## Happy 150th Anniversary, railways



*The reconstructed locomotive NATAL in the Durban workshops of the SAR&H, shortly after being reconstructed. The loco is now plinthed in a prominent position on Durban Station and carries a plaque which reads: 'The first train in South Africa operated between the Point and Durban on 23rd June 1860. This locomotive is a reconstruction on the original chassis and wheels which were recovered in the Umzimvubu River near Port St Johns. Unveiled by his Worship the Mayor of Durban Senator the Honorable SJ Smith, 9th September 1945.'*

PORTS & SHIPS is devoted to matters maritime, but we will always happily include news of African railways because of the close synergies that exist between the two. In South Africa, as in many if not all other African countries, railways developed outward from the ports and harbours, or in more recent years in reverse order from inland mines and industrial bases towards the coastal harbours or places where ports can be built.

It is therefore entirely appropriate today, being exactly 150 years since the first railway went into operation on the sub-continent, that we focus our attention on this momentous event and what followed.

On 23 June 1860 an engineer with the surname of Jacobs first opened a regulator on a steam locomotive and began a journey along a short track of railway line leading from the town of Durban down to the Point. He was issuing in South Africa's great railway age.

The time was between 3 and 4 o'clock and it was a Saturday afternoon. The place was Durban and the town market square was crowded with people out to enjoy the sounds of

a military band, the 85th Regiment which had come down to Durban from Pietermaritzburg to take part in the official opening planned for three days later, 26 June. But Henry Jacobs, like all good engineers and artisans, was anxious to test his workmanship and that of the locomotive builders in far-off England, so he invited two directors of the railway company to accompany him as he took the train down to the Point where some machinery for the sugar industry could be loaded and brought back to Durban.

The year and month, June 1860 was proving to be an eventful year for Durban. George Russell, that excellent recorder of events in the young town, tells of two earthquakes that shook the foundations and walls of buildings and houses on the evening of 15 June. But the real event of the year was without question the advent of the railway.

The previous year an announcement in the *Mercury* newspaper advised readers that a group of businessmen intended floating a company that would promote a railway, using steam locomotion, between the harbour at the Point and the town centre. Within weeks a prospectus had been issued and by 3 February 1859 half the necessary capital was subscribed. With the blessing of the town council the project got underway and materials including a steam locomotive were ordered from suppliers in Great Britain.

On the harbour side of operations a steam tug was to be placed in service alongside a jetty then under construction that, as the prospectus described things, would "...make the harbour the most efficient in South Africa and bring a large amount of passing tonnage to the port, Natal being situated directly on the route from India."

The prospectus further contemplated the extension of the railway south beyond Congella to the Umhlatuzana River to tap into the growing sugar estates immediately south of the town.

This brave venture for such a young and developing colony was undertaken by a group of businessmen who formed the grand-sounding 'Natal Railway Company.' George Russell himself was appointed as 'Station Agent' at the Durban terminus and a Henry William James, a qualified ship's master, became Station Master at the Point.

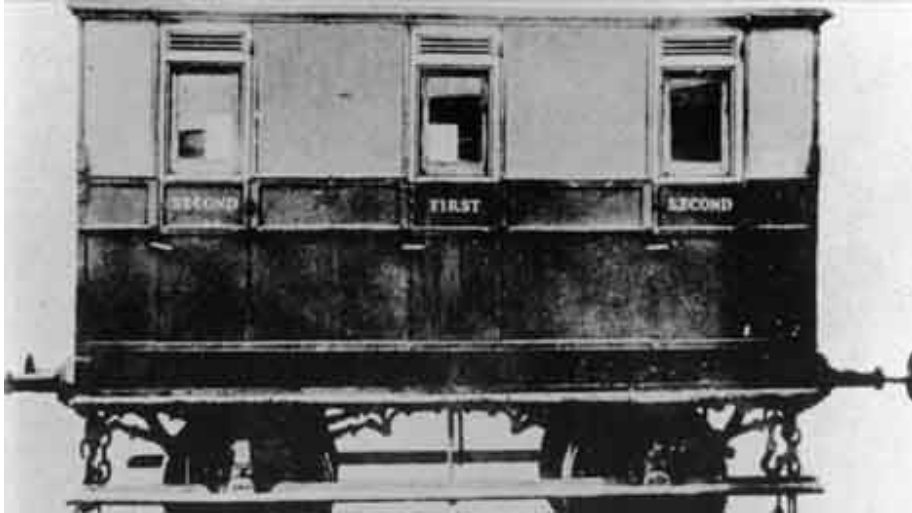


*Notification of the opening of South Africa's first railway. Note they didn't have suitable banner artwork depicting the local scene – image Local History Museum, Durban*

By the end of April 1860 much of the necessary railway line and a number of railway wagons had arrived. Railway track had been laid from the Market Square terminus in Pine Street (opposite St Paul's Church) the few miles to the Point docks, at that time a

smallish area near the present A and B berths, comprising a small wooden quay with most ships still forced to anchor offshore in the bay - the sandbar at the entrance channel permitting.

The Point station platform, we are told, had some of its supports standing in the water at high tide.



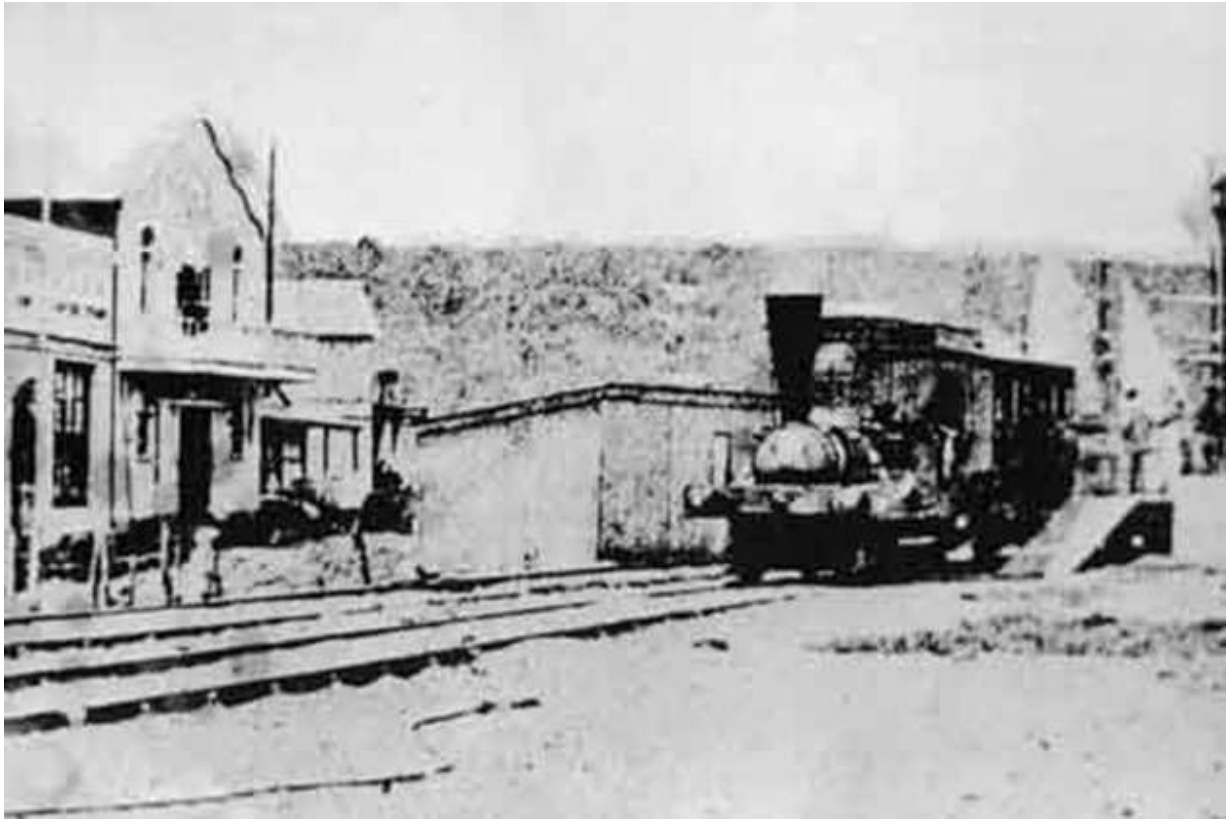
*The first passenger coach in use in South Africa – image Transnet Museum*

Russell tells us that the rolling stock consisted of a single passenger coach, six wagons (primitive things by today's standards, being connected by loose links with coupling chains and having wooden brakes controlled by long iron levers) and two simple rotating wooden jib cranes fitted on four-wheeled trolleys – the cranes having loading capacities of 6 ton and 3 ton respectively. The coach comprised three compartments – one for first class in the centre and able to seat between 8 and 10 passengers comfortably on cane backed chairs, and two second class compartments at either end each able to hold 10 people.

By 13 May the brig Cadiz had arrived off Durban and was able to enter harbour and the offloading of the locomotive began. Broken down into small crates, the loco was taken to the Durban end of the railway on goods trucks propelled by human labour where Henry Jacobs began its assembly. Jacobs' appointment to the Natal Railway Company described him as Chief Engineer, Loco Superintendent, Fitter and Driver. Assisting him was a former marine engineer by name of Alexander Davidson who was Chief Smith, Spring Maker, Platelayer and head of the repair shop, and later a young seaman was taken on as stoker, cleaner and greaser.

These men worked 12 hour shifts, six days a week and Russell tells us they were not paid extravagantly nor did they strike.

When reconstructed the locomotive was finished off in a coat of green paint and named NATAL. George Russell describes it as having 24 horsepower, four wheels (an 0-4-0WT in railway parlance), an American pattern funnel with spark arrestor, a well tank for the water and an open locker on the footplate for the coal. The locomotive also had a small donkey engine to work a pump for the water.



*The loco NATAL and a passenger coach arriving at Point Station during the late 1860s – photographer unknown, image Local History Museum*

For many years credit as loco builder was given to the London company of Robert Legg, but subsequent research shows that Robert Legg was merely the distributor which handled the shipment of the locomotive to Durban. The actual manufacturer was a firm by name of Carrett, Marshall & Co of Leeds and Robert Legg was its London agent.

Further research by a member of the Railway Society of Southern Africa has shown that at least two of these locos were built, the other going to the Caribbean to work in the sugar industry.

As reported above, with the assembly nearing completion the opening day of operation was set for 26 June 1860, but Russell informs us the real opening took place the 23rd. "Mr Jacobs, like all expert workmen, desired to prove not only his own work, but that of others, so invited Captain Smerdon and Mr Tatham (officials of the company) to accompany him up and down the line to test it by bringing up a loaded train," wrote the station agent.

The time was in the mid afternoon and being a Saturday a military band was performing to a large crowd in the market square, when a loud shrill whistle was heard for the first time in Durban's short history. Russell says that for the first time a military band was forsaken for a greater attraction, as the crowd moved hurriedly to see this strange machine at work. "Three prolonged whistles announced a forward movement, steam was turned on and the engine moved off sedately amid the cheers and handkerchiefs of the

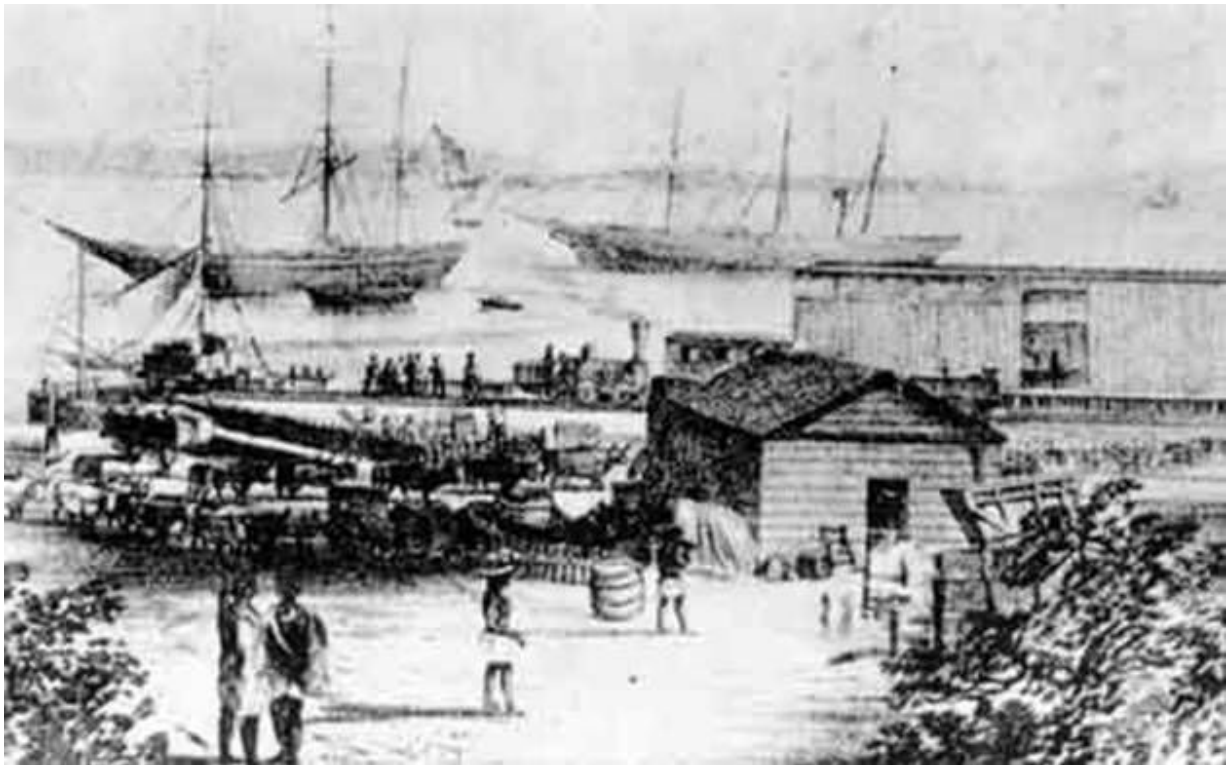
breathless spectators.”



*The Point circa 1869 showing the goods shed and railway station. Picture Menzies Collection*

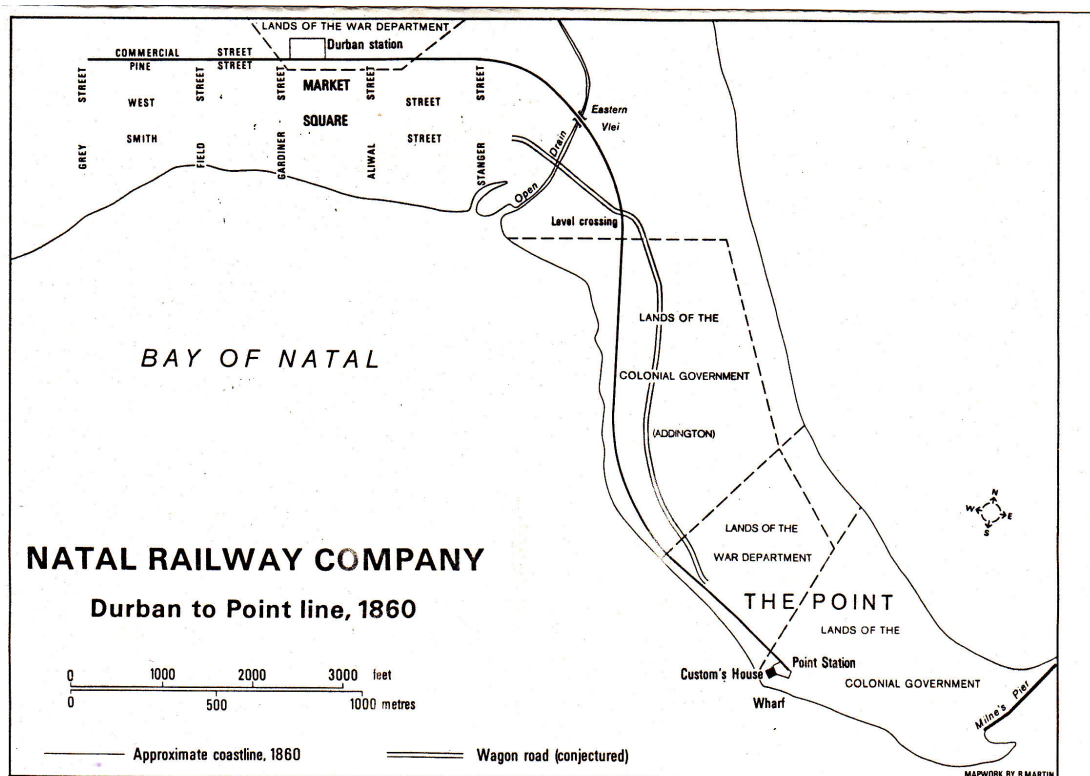
Down at the Point the locomotive arrived to similar cheering from sailors, workmen and general hangers-on and was soon connected to its first train. Quickly the wagons were loaded with 40 tons of sugar mill machinery by all sorts of volunteers who then manned the wagons for the return journey to Durban. All this "...while the face of genial Engineer Jacobs beamed with satisfaction as he received the congratulations of the Chairman and Directors, and utilised a pocketful of 'waste' before shaking hands all round."

Three days later the official opening of the railway took place, with due ceremony before all the special guests and invited VIPs including the Lieutenant-Governor, the Bishop of Natal, and crowds of ordinary people, and several journeys were made to and from the port as everyone tried to get a ride. In the harbour the steam tug Pioneer was pressed into service to provide trips around the bay for visitors and a ball in the evening finally brought the big day to a fitting end. They certainly knew how to do things with style 150 years ago.



*The Point Station, wharf and train in this artist's depiction from the early 1860s. Image Transnet Museum*

So began the saga of rail travel in South Africa. Within a short while the Cape also had its working railway and within the next 20 or so years railway lines were racing inland for the prize of being the first to reach the Transvaal (Gauteng) – political leaders such as Molteno in the Cape and John Robinson in Natal were in this respect as equally far sighted and determined as the directors of the Natal Railway Company – but that's another story.



*The route followed by South Africa's first railway. Map by Bruno Martin*

What started in such humble fashion in Durban was to grow into one of the world's great railway networks, with over 23,000km of track and some of the most impressive engineering feats to be found anywhere. More importantly, the railways reached into every corner while serving to open up the country to progress and development, particularly among the farming communities and the industrial sectors of our young economy.

Then in 1910, exactly 100 years ago, the railways of the various regions of South Africa were united into one, becoming the South African Railways & Harbours – but that's yet another story.