

All Aboard for Howick!

Few Maritzburgers would take exception to the sentiments of Mr. C. J. Smythe, member for Lion's River, when he addressed the Natal Legislative Assembly in the capital in 1897.

'Sir', he asserted, 'the inhabitants of this city, who suffer from the heat in the summer time and the dryness in the winter, can have no more agreeable relaxation than a trip to Howick.' Contemporaries of Mr. Smythe, however, might have found his genial proposition not a little loaded, since as member for Lion's River he certainly had a vested interest in the bill under discussion.

This was the Extension to Howick Railway Bill, which had done the rounds as a parliamentary perennial ever since the main trunk line had got through to Ladysmith, and whose 'hardy annual' debate spurred each year its own sort of eloquence. In 1976 the organisers of the train excursion to Howick (heavily patronised, but perhaps owing to the fact that a steam locomotive was more persuasive than the Falls!) might flatter themselves that they were putting into practice the notions of those eminent gentlemen of some eight decades ago, probably the first in any South African House of Government to propose a railway on entirely pleasurable or recreational grounds.

Not that we would share their rather limited view of what Natal had to offer. How much more of the province do we now take for granted, through the private motor car, than did Mr. H. Binns, for example, Member for Victoria County, who claimed:

There are not very many places which offer any big attraction in this Colony, but certainly if there be one locality more than another which ought to be brought within the reach of tourists, it is the locality which will be reached by this railway.

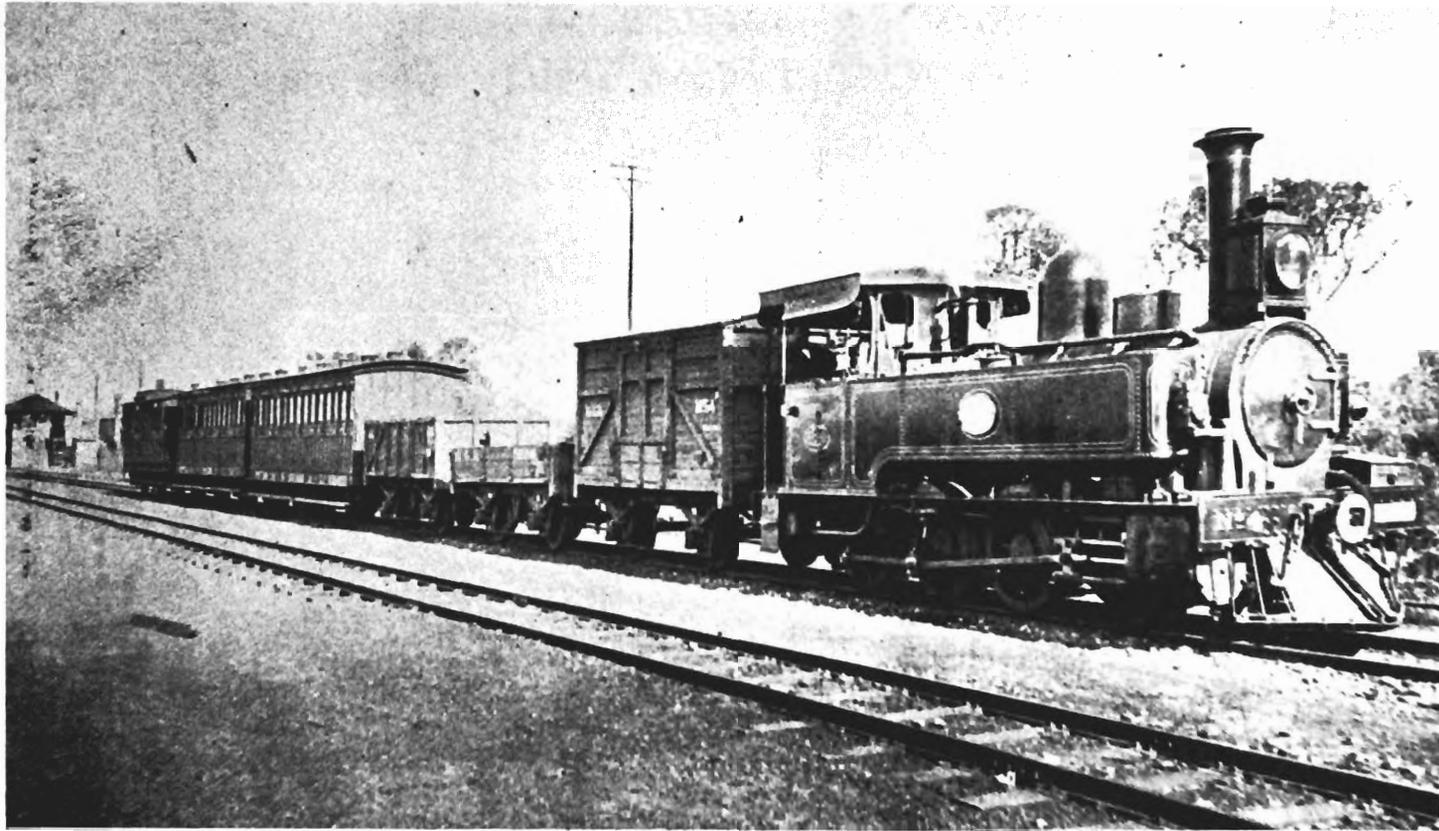
(Mr. Binns was inclined, in fact, to refer to Howick as almost a foreign place, or was he speaking tongue-in-cheek when he said 'I believe that Howick is a most interesting village. There is every reason to suppose that it is . . .'). One suspects, though, that not all the transport amenities in the world would have ever persuaded Mr. G. S. Armstrong, (member for Victoria County) to subscribe to the parliamentary euphoria on the subject of the Falls:

The Hon. Member has spoken of a National asset. All I have to say is that if that is the only asset Natal has at the present time it is a very poor one indeed. One visit to Howick Falls would, I think, satisfy, anyhow, a man of my stamp.

But Mr. Armstrong lived in a changing world, and one of the surprises in store for any student of these debates is the way that, even in this inaccessible and raw little colony, it came naturally to many members to think in 'mass' terms about the transporting of populations for recreational purposes. No matter how idyllically we might picture the early Maritzburg



A picture of the GMA Garratt steam engine heading the 1977 Azalea Express. It is possibly the most powerful steam locomotive operating in Natal. This may have been its last journey from Pietermaritzburg.



An 1877 photograph showing an early train of the Natal Government Railways. The engine, weighing 26 tons, is pulling freight trucks and passenger coaches. (Photo: *The Pictorial*, 1905).

scene, it could only be in the 'Industrial era' (shall we say) that Mr. C. A. S. Yonge, member for Lion's River, could report:

We all know the difficulty there is for people living in Maritzburg to get to Howick on anything like a holiday, or a Sunday, or a half-day. You see the wives and families of residents of Maritzburg absolutely hemmed in round about the present station at Howick, because they do not possess enough money to get to the Falls.

Reference was being made here, of course, to present-day Merrivale, where the trunk line went through, and where the charge for the 5 km 'bus' ride to Howick proper was one shilling, more than a third of the rail fare to Pietermaritzburg. The Colonial Secretary, Mr. T. K. Murray, was inclined to echo the observation:

I dare say nine out of every ten men give up the trip to Howick simply because of the inconvenience at the end of their journey. The first question people ask is 'Can I get there by rail?' 'No' the reply is, and Howick suffers in consequence.

Hardly a situation to satisfy energetic Victorians! They had before them, after all, the enormous example of Thomas Cook, whose special excursions in the Midlands of England in the 1860s had given the urban masses a new image of what could be done with a Sunday. In our South Africa of the present day there is, for many reasons, an almost evangelical regard for 'tourism', and it comes to us surely as something of a surprise to find how easily the word 'tourist' tripped off the tongue of even the pre-Boer War colonials. Thus, for instance, the Colonial Secretary:

The Howick Extension Bill should be passed because tourists from Great Britain and other countries are coming to South Africa more and more every year, and we want to encourage traffic of that kind.

However, not all the members of the Legislative Assembly were ready to subscribe to the transformed Natal Sunday that some of their colleagues proposed. Mr. Baynes, member for Maritzburg City, sounded a qualifying note:

If a Sunday service is granted to Howick, then people living in Camperdown, Richmond Road, or Cato Ridge and other places along the line will also claim a train service on Sunday. The people in Durban will claim a service to Pinetown or Gillitts or for anything that I know even to the Inchanga. They may even want one to Verulam. (Loud cries of 'No'.)

Nor did all members exude quite the touch of 'tourist commercialism' these excerpts might suggest, the same genius that still blows down from Howick borough to this day! Had not the Prime Minister, Sir John Robinson, as early as 1890, entered the 'Extension' debate with 'There is no doubt that Howick, Health, and Happiness are synonymous terms . . .'.

No, the debate on the three miles of railway sometimes took on the Victorian ardour for regeneration that would have a Bentham or a Mill in the background rather than the pecuniary genius of a Thomas Cook.

It was there, for example, in the speech of Mr. T. Kirkman, member for Alexander County:

I have looked upon this railway, and still look upon it, as an educational railway . . . it will take people away from Maritzburg and Durban up-country to see some of the bounties of nature.

At the height of his eloquence Mr. Kirkman was able to make Maritzburg seem as tawdry as an industrial metropolis of the Old Country.

The railway would take them away from this humdrum place in which there is nothing whatever on which to spend their time or to interest them. ('Oh, oh' from several Hon. members, and 'Shame' from Mr. Tatham.)

The moral majesty of his message even reached this optimism:

The railway will enable people to see something more than public houses . . . It will lead to the non-necessity for such places as inebriate retreats . . .

At which point, I conceded, he rather climbs back on to the bandwagon of Mr. Thomas Cook, whose first epoch-making excursions took very much the theme of his 'prohibitionary' enthusiasm. It was in his closing sentence though, and that still on the subject of a branch railway, that Mr. Kirkman finally swept the whole gamut of nineteenth century idealism from Wordsworth to Morris:

And it will be a distinct benefit to the Colony that young men and others from both north and south should have an opportunity of seeing something other than the walls of churches, something which will appeal to them far more eloquently from nature, from the running water and from anything that appeals to one's inner senses, something above the life of a city like this.

The radical secularism in this most unparochial point of view was apparently too much even for the Natal Assembly, and at this point a dumb-founded Mr. Hulett quickly moved closure. Perhaps we see here the ancestry of the Natal Capital's stand on the subject of Sunday Cinema!

It takes even more than idealism, however, to lay down railway tracks. When the Colonial Secretary argued loftily, on the soundest utilitarian principles, that the Howick branch should be built because it would 'increase the sum of human happiness', that pragmatic 'people's man', Mr. O'Meara, member for Maritzburg City, replied

Sir, the increasing of human happiness will have to be a secondary consideration, considering the financial position of the country at the present time.

Financial considerations had already spoilt the Universal Improvement supposed to be ushered in by the advance of the main line to Ladysmith. In its comprehensive design for a better mankind it has signally failed to take in Howick; for, as Sir John Robinson said

the main line ought originally to have gone by Howick, and it is one of the mysteries connected with railway construction in this Colony that a reasonable route was not taken.

Modern engineers might feel somewhat relieved that their forebears of 1883 had decided to make the line cross the Umgeni at its easiest point, there being no Cecil Rhodes available in Natal to insist that passengers should be able to contemplate — as was to happen on the Zambesi — the main cataract of the Falls as they progressed across the bridge!

What would our ancestors in the Legislative Assembly have thought of our recent train excursion, now that the motor car has given the Natal 'bourgeoisie' access to remote points in the province that they wouldn't have dreamed of? One paradox must have struck both the progressive and the conservative amongst them as a distinct curiosity. An electric train runs to Howick every afternoon, along the 'Extension' that was eventually built in 1911, and asks a very reasonable fare for a most scenic ride. It is not noticeable, however, for much 'white' patronage. But couple to that train a decadent, chunky, retrogressive and thoroughly Victorian piece of locomotion, a steam engine, and people vie for seats to travel behind it. Perhaps in running these excursions a little longer while the engines are still with us, we make our small contribution to prevent Pietermaritzburg from becoming — in the words of the doleful Mr. Kirkman — 'an inebriate retreat'!

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