

RAILWAYS

AFRICA

Issue 1/99

BLAKES • MAPHANGA

ATTORNEYS • NOTARIES • CONVEYANCERS

*Is the South African Government seeking to
wash its hands of the rail industry?*

MINES • NATIONAL • PRESERVATION • SIDINGS

RAILWAYS

AFRICA

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Publisher
Barbara Sheat

Consultant
Helmuth Hagen

Contributors
Douglas Alexander
Paul Ash
Wally Brass
Basil Brink
John Ferraz
Terry Hutson
Ruth Ling
Dave Rhind

Advertising
John Thompson
Alice Milns

Layout and Design
Alice Milns

COMMENT

Railways throughout their history have played a decisive role in the economic and social development of nations, but now they have to operate in a new environment marked by both increasing competition from other modes and cuts in financial support from the public authorities who wish to put pressure on them to improve their financial viability.

The very status and organisation of railways are consequently being called into question. Throughout the world, railways have already launched a process of in-depth restructuring with the objective of putting their finances on a sounder footing, securing greater management autonomy and sharpening their competitive edge. Traffic growth and improved market shares will only be ensured if the railways become genuine business enterprises focusing on their core activities and developing partnerships with other economic players for the supply of services such as infrastructure building, railway equipment, telecommunication, tourism, on-board catering and road-based physical distribution.

This new approach holds clear advantages, including access to fresh capital, to the know-how and technical expertise of specialist firms, and lower railway operating costs. Railways have abundantly proved their firm determination to emerge from their splendid technical and cultural isolation. Forging public-private sector partnerships is just one part of the solution, but there can be no hard-and-fast rules with this type of system, as each partnership requires a customised approach. Similarly, even when privatisation is the chosen formula, the State must continue to hold a relatively tight rein. The degree of financial involvement differs with each case, but the golden rule should be innovation.

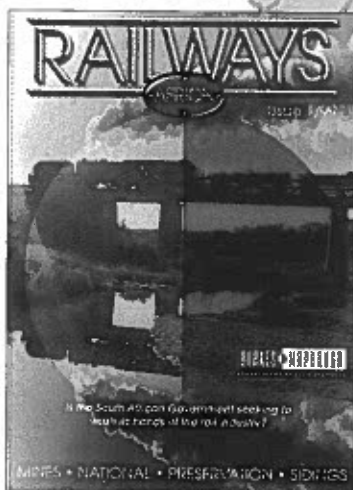
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Send your cheque or
money order to:
Railways Africa
P.O. Box 4794,
Randburg 2125 R.S.A.

Rail Link Communications cc
P.O. BOX 4794 RANDBURG, 2125
Tel: (011) 463-4330 Fax: (011) 463-4244
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"Pontius Pilot..."

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This article outlines the planning and construction history of Esselenpark and shatters some of the myths surrounding its construction.

It examines why such an anachronistic, labour intensive and expensive complex was built in the classical tradition when modernism held sway in South Africa. It describes present uses and possible future developments.

Transnet's main training centre since 1947, the 'Esselenpark Centre of Excellence,' is located at Kaalfontein station between Kempton Park and Tembisa north-east of Johannesburg. It has become one of the largest public sector human resources development facilities in the country. Training and development activities focus on:

- > Functional, technical and tertiary training
- > management development, and
- > adult basic education and training.

Organisational development is aimed at:

- > transformative culture changes
- > an integrated human resources service, and
- > implementing innovative business design processes.

In 1996 Esselenpark entered into a strategic alliance with Wits Technikon aimed at enabling Transnet employees to pursue Technikon accredited diplomas and degrees.

After 1990 the disused railway police dormitory building, and the under-utilised north dormitory block were converted into a "Port Captain's Lodge" (46 bedrooms), and a "Railwaymen's Inn" (160 bedrooms). Each complex has conference rooms, refreshment lounges and restaurants. The refurbishments were done without affecting the external appearance.

These modern "hotels" have given the complex a new lease of life. During 1997 Esselenpark provided 117 000 bed-nights accommodation and served 237 000 meals.

History

In the 1930s the South African Railways was expanding rapidly and the need for basic technical training of employees became so critical that adequate training facilities had to be planned and provided.

In 1940 the general manager instructed

Esselenpark

- The Railway University in the Veld

This article is based on a paper presented at the Planning History Group's conference in April 1998 by Basil Brink.

The writer, an architect with an MSc in Town and Regional Planning is at present a Manager (Property Development) in Transnet's Propnet Business Unit.

that the erection of a training institute should be proceeded with as a matter of urgency. This training facility became not merely a place where technical skills were acquired, but a "university in the veld".

The farm Witfontein at Kaalfontein was to be expropriated. It was distant from any built-up area at the time and was on the railway line between Pretoria and Johannesburg, but relatively close to Germiston.

This area was to be properly laid out and all classes of men trained. The men would be selected and there would be efficient instructors.

Senior officers would be asked to lecture. In addition to training new men, refresher courses would be arranged.

Neo-classical design

The architects were instructed to proceed, and the first layout plan was produced in February 1941. This layout encapsulated the design concept which was to be adhered to during the next 15 years.

The "Modern Movement" and "International Style" had been imported to South Africa in the 1930s, and were in

Williamson's 'forum Romanum' at Wits influenced the architects a decade later when they commenced with their layout plan for Esselenpark. The classical tradition makes use of symmetry and axis to organize accommodation and landscaping into a layout that is orderly and easily understood:

"The plan is usually symmetrical on either side of a line, or axis, starting at the main entrance and running straight through the building. The symmetry reflects the balance of nature and the human form.

.... When circumstances, such as location or use, make a uniform arrangement possible the accommodation can be organised around linked symmetrical rooms and courts which give a clear order to the plan ...".

The railway architects used symmetry and major as well as secondary axes as basis for the general layout, landscaping and architecture. The 1941 layout plan established the site development concept in broad principle. However, the designs of individual buildings were to be amended extensively as detailed planning progressed.

The north and south dormitory blocks were each shown as three separate buildings in the 1941 layout, but were subsequently re-designed as single

buildings arranged around courtyards. Similarly, the central block was to include a gymnasium, museum and police school in a T-shaped building. Changes to the accommodation schedule, where facilities such as the museum were initially planned but never provided, suggest that the

architects had a poorly defined, open-ended brief which was substantially modified.

The three principal orders of classical architecture, ie. the Doric, Ionic and Corinthian, are well represented in the completed buildings. Ionic columns were

The railways in all its forms have a profound effect on the lives of the people of South Africa. Many workers spend their entire working lives in its employ and scores of passengers and commuters make use of its services. Railway buildings, whether rural or urban, large or small, play an important role in socio-economic development and as a backdrop to historical events.

The Central Training Institute, or "Esselenpark Centre of Excellence", which is the relatively unknown railway "university in the veld" is one such an example. It celebrated 50 years of existence in 1993 and has an anachronistic and politicised planning history.

vogue when the institute had to be designed. However, the planning of the site layout and design of the buildings was undertaken in the neo-classical tradition. An aerial view of the Wits campus in 1930 shows a resemblance to Esselenpark in 1947. One is tempted to deduce that Emley and

EDUCATION

used for the memorial ambulatory next to the central block; Roman Doric columns for the covered walkways in the dormitory courtyards and Corinthian at the main entrance. All buildings have slate roofs at a 30° pitch.

The tympanum in the pediment above the entrance to the dining hall contains a frieze rich in symbolism. The rays of sunlight from the right hand corner symbolise the dawn of railways in South Africa. Figures holding a microscope, test tube and hourglass, and positioned at a drawing board and typewriter, symbolise studiousness and progress.

The four figures on either side of the map of southern Africa symbolise thought,

employment of these prisoners who were soon returned to their camp at Zonderwater.

The Italians only worked on the project from 19 January 1942 until just after 23 July 1942 - a period of approximately six months. The institute was therefore not built by Italian prisoners of war, - a misconception still current in some quarters.

Twenty five local stone masons were then taken on as casual artisans and were later joined by a further 32. An average of 50 local masons assisted by 140 labourers was employed during the 15 year construction period.

The foundation stone was laid by the Minister of Transport, Claud Sturrock, in

disfavour when the railway architects adopted it for Esselenpark. Their design was frowned on and derided by their contemporaries, but they nevertheless implemented it with dogged determination.

Neo-classicism was resorted to because it could provide dignity and status, foster pride and build character and place the institute, which focused on basic technical training, on the same architectural par as the Witwatersrand campus which preceded it.

1950 Plan

A layout plan was completed in 1950. This drawing is interesting because it illustrates which buildings had been completed and which were still under construction. "Buildings contemplated" were also indicated, which gave an idea of the final layout.

The central block was to have had a 20 x 60m swimming bath in front of it, and a "hospital" with a formal garden was envisaged to its west but the main hall was completed only 15 years later in 1965.

Besides giving an indication of the progress that had been made up to October 1950, the sketch plan indicates how the architects planned to develop Esselenpark at that stage. They intended that the footprint and aesthetics of any new development should as far as possible acknowledge and reinforce their 1950 layout. Unfortunately, this did not happen. Development could not proceed to the north of the central block because dolomite and poor soil conditions precluded construction there.

The architects were therefore forced to concentrate development asymmetrically in the area to the south of the central block.

Historic Park Station

The railway museum was proposed to the east of the athletics track in almost exactly the same position as "The Junction" which was only completed in 1991. The war prevented the establishment of the museum of transport even though the collection of artifacts was centralised at Esselenpark until 1956, when it was moved to Johannesburg.

In 1952, the historic Johannesburg Park Station steel structure, which had covered platforms 3,4,5 and 6, was dismantled and moved to Esselenpark.

Commendably the chief civil engineer stressed the historic value of the structure and it is fortunate that the roofing was used to house the signal training section before finally being erected in Newtown in the 90s. Unfortunately, its future here is once again uncertain.

Continued on page 20



EsselenPark's striking architecture

learnedness, knowledge and training. The six figures on the left represent track laying, riveting, repairing wheels, surveying, signalling and electro-technical work. The provinces are connected by rail, road, air and sea on the map of southern Africa in the centre of the pediment.

Construction

In 1940 it was decided to proceed with the design of the hostel and dining room block which would house 250 students. The Minister of Transport approved the 1941 scheme at an estimated cost of £270 756. The chief civil engineer said that construction work would commence in February 1942, and that it had been decided to "...do the work departmentally using Italian prisoners of war".

Walls and plinths were to be of dressed stone ostensibly because of the wartime shortage of bricks, and the Italians' skill as masons could therefore be put to good use.

However, in July 1942 the general manager reported that vigorous representations had been made by the Trades and Labour Council and other industrial organisations in regard to the use of Italian prisoners of war. It was consequently decided to discontinue the

December 1943. The resident engineer, Rand New Works, was responsible for the construction.

Training of operational staff had to be undertaken during construction both at temporary facilities in Kroonstad and at the institute. By 1948 the north and south dormitory blocks, the dining hall as well as the kitchen were taken into use. The courses which were provided included catering, guard, shunter, platelayer and ticket examiner's duties, training for drivers, firemen and police constables.

Choice of Architecture

Minister Sturrock visited the partially completed complex in 1947 and was compelled to justify the choice of the neo-classical architecture, which contrasted markedly with modernism already in vogue in South Africa at that time. He said:

"This school can, above all, give to the individual a tangible pride in membership of a great service - a service which will employ him for the rest of his working life and pension him in his old age, a service which is operated for the benefit of the state. The Institute itself should be built on good and solid lines, austere but dignified ..."

Neo-classicism had already fallen into

BOOK REVIEW

Railway Postal History of South Africa

Book Review

by Dr A M Goodbody

The writer of these notes will acquire a book on any aspect of railway philately whether good, bad or indifferent. For those of you who are selective and purchase only publications in the first category this book is a must. The railway postal history of most major countries cannot be dealt with adequately in a single volume. South Africa is an exception because the range of available material, including that from the provinces which preceded the Union, is relatively narrow. The authors have exploited this fact to the full and have produced a book which is concise and yet detailed enough for the most demanding student.

In these few notes some of the highlights can be mentioned but it is, I believe, impossible to convey any sense of the fascination of the subject which is dealt with. This can only come from collecting the material for a number of years. The book will surely do a great deal to enhance that fascination.

South Africa is one of the few countries to have operated a railway letter service, the history of which can be traced back to the Natal Government Railways in 1885. The rules and procedures governing the transmission of such letters are dealt with and a particularly useful table gives

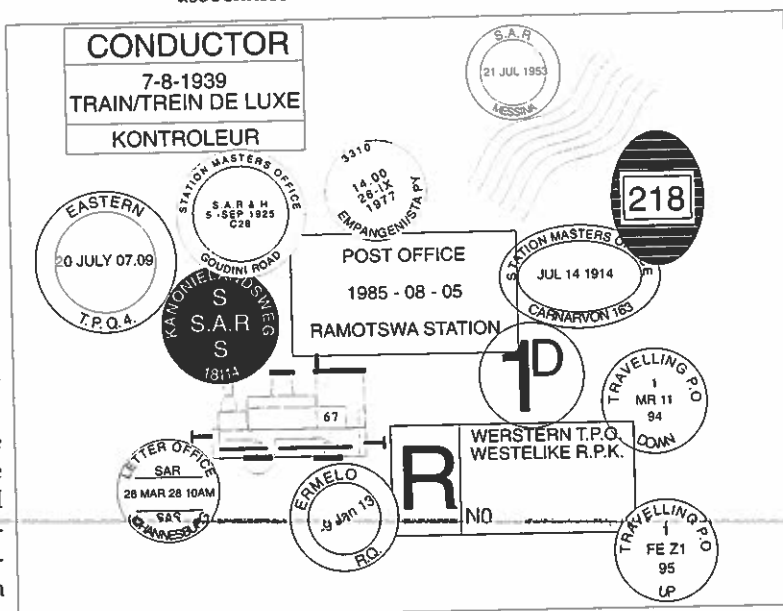
the postage and rail letter fees from 1910 until the suspension of the service in 1994.

The mysteries of railway postal agencies and station offices operated by the GPO are unravelled and there follows a listing of railway stations with postal association not all of which include the

Among the more esoteric subjects dealt with is railway company stationery and how it is franked; and railway associated meter marks. The purist may be surprised at the inclusion of railway official postcards. The decision to treat such material was a bold step and one which I thoroughly applaud. Where is such information available for any other country apart from the U.K.?

A chapter at the end deals with special event postmarks, and appendices include information on the TPO fleets, an official definition of rail letter post and an official pronouncement on 'Postal Duties at Stations'.

The book is profusely illustrated and a joy to behold. The authors, Helmuth Hagen and Stan Naylor, are to be congratulated on filling a gap in railway philatelic literature which has existed far too long.



word 'station' in their datestamp.

Perhaps the most intriguing chapter deals with the travelling post offices, relatively few in number for such a vast country, but no means without complex ramifications. It is said that the last one ran in 1950. The army TPOs and the non-routine special event TPOs (e.g. Royal Train, etc.) are all covered with detailed illustrations of the datestamps.

(This review was first published in the journal of the British Railway Philatelic Group, Vol 33 No 1, December 1998).

The book which was awarded a gold medal at an international philatelic exhibition in 1998 is obtainable from: The Philatelic Federation, P.O. Box 412505 Craighall 2024. Price including VAT, packaging and postage: R445.

Esselenpark - the Railway University in the Veld

Continued from page 18

Trees were planted to replace those removed and the sandstone was restored and cleaned in 1994 at a cost of R1,2 million. This created new appreciation for the beauty of the masonry and the quality of the craftsmanship.

The future

No new buildings are envisaged on the campus in the immediate future.

250ha of the farm have been set aside

for subsidised housing to the north, adjacent to Tembisa.

When demand arises 60ha to the south of the road could be considered as an extension to the Birchleigh residential suburb.

The design and architecture of Esselenpark sought to provide its trainees with an ambience equal to the tertiary educational environment provided by universities. Like universities, Esselenpark claimed to have "magnificent architecture, superb facilities, picturesque setting and a peaceful atmosphere". The layout and design in the neo-classical style could have been influ-

enced by the Wits campus design which preceded it. The design was criticised and derided by architects at the time for smacking of "officialism".

Esselenpark was not completed as originally planned in 1941 and seems doomed to remain asymmetrical. The layout reinforced apartheid by never providing any accommodation for blacks at the campus.

However, to-day Esselenpark is a fully integrated technical and management training facility which is a beautiful, unique asset well used by both Transnet and neighbouring communities.