

DOFFING MY HAT TO THE PRESERVERS OF OUR TRANSPORT HERITAGE



Readers of my "News From The Zoo" column in *Automotive Refinisher* will know that I am a big supporter of preserving worthwhile automotive objects from our past, hence my love of visiting motor and motorcycle museums all over the world. Recently I had the opportunity to pay homage to our wheeled heritage in a variety of forms, firstly at the Sandstone Festival in the Free State and then at the Jaguar Simola Hill Climb in Knysna.

I paid my second visit to Sandstone this year after being there in 2014 and once again I was amazed at the high standard of the various vehicles on show or being driven around the working farm. They ranged from steam trains and trucks to veteran cars, tractors and a range of military vehicles and weaponry as well as historic aircraft flying overhead.

It is overwhelming and obviously a massive organisational challenge. The Sandstone Heritage Trust is a private preservation initiative headed up by Wilfred Mole, the man who brought Nokia products to South Africa and has been an admirer of steam power for many years. He and his wife, Linda, bought the Sandstone Estates near Ficksburg in 1995 and they have transformed it into a haven for steam engines, military and agricultural equipment as well as having a small car and motorcycle collection.

The first of the annual, 10-day Stars of Sandstone Festivals was staged in 2014 and this year my wife, Meg, and I joined up with Ian Groat, the publisher of *Automotive Refinisher*, his wife, Val, and some friends for a memorable day going back into the past.

We drove in military convoys, went on an ox-wagon, and travelled on narrow gauge railway lines in a variety of coaches hauled by steam locomotives, some dating back to the 19th century. We also admired a treasure trove of tractors and other vintage agricultural equipment as well as enjoying the aerial displays by historic aircraft including Harvards and Tiger Moths.

The day we were there saw the unveiling of four, rebuilt, steam locomotives that had been used on sugar plantations in Angola early in the last century. The Angolan Ambassador to SA was on hand for the official launch and had one of the locomotives named after her.

In the afternoon, we watched the military display involving number of tanks and other armoured vehicles being put through their paces over an obstacle course.

Our day at Sandstone ended with a 90-minute trip on the 26.5km railway line where we could enjoy looking over fields of cosmos and sunflowers, a picnic set-up with three Model A Fords and being amazed by the large numbers of photographers positioned alongside our route. (For more information go to: www.sandstone-estates.com).

My next opportunity to pay homage to our wheeled heritage was my trip to the 8th staging of the Simola Hill Climb in Knysna, which

is now sponsored by Jaguar Cars. This was my first visit to this event and I was most impressed by the high standard of organisation considering that all facilities must be erected in the veld and forests alongside the road going up the hill to the Simola golf estate. There was a quiet efficiency about the organisation although they had several delays to deal with as crashed or broken down cars were collected by low bed trucks.

For me the highlight was Classic Car Friday with a wonderful assortment of cars taking part in the race up the hill.

The Southern Cape – Knysna/Sedgefield/George/Oudtshoorn - is a hive of activity in terms of top quality vehicle restoration and several examples of the local motor skills were on display.

A total of 64 classics were invited to compete on the Friday ranging from a 1929 Bugatti and two 1939 Austin 7 racers to an immaculate Jaguar XJ-S driven by American motoring journalist and accomplished racer Randy Pabst, as well as a host of single seaters, sports racers, and modified production cars, including the made-in-South-Africa Ford Capri Perana and Sierra XR8.

In the end the fastest time for these oldies was put up by former two-time winner Franco Scribante in an immaculately prepared Chevron B19 sports racer powered by a Ford BDG engine. This earned him the coveted Classic Conqueror title for another year.

But most of all it was heaven for petrol heads!

The next two days were taken up by 84 more-modern cars, many of them specially modified for hill climbing, blitzing their way up the 1.9km road that is rather bumpy in places and a real challenge when driving the front-running cars with superchargers and turbochargers.

When it was all over the King of the Hill title and a new record went to Andre Bezuidenhout in a Dallara Formula 1 car fitted with a 3.5-litre Ford Cosworth V8 engine. Wilhelm Baard (Nissan GT-R) was quickest of the modified saloon cars, while Reghard Roets took the Road and Super Car title at his first visit to Simola, driving a Nissan GT-R.

There was a sad ending to the weekend for my wife and I as we came across six of these cars – including an irreplaceable March 79B Ford Formula Atlantic single-seater – burning on the road between Knysna and Sedgefield. We were first on the scene but could only stand by helplessly – besides phoning for a fire engine from Sedgefield – and watch as all the cars were burned out. It is hard to believe, but none of the cars and trucks that stopped at the scene had a fire extinguisher!

The cars were being taken back to Cape Town on a car transporter and one of them caught fire, probably due to an electrical short circuit. It was a real tragedy as they all belonged to people who, like me, appreciate keeping our automotive heritage alive.