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SLOW AND STEADY WINS THE RACE... RESTORED NG/G16 129 LOCOMOTIVE BACK IN STEAM

What started as an innocent meal table discussion amongst fellow enthusiasts of the Puffing Billy Railway is now a dream realised, with the South African Class NG/G16 129 Garratt locomotive restored to its former glory and rolling from Belgrave station after 23 years of fundraising and restoration works.

Built by Beyer Peacock & Co of Manchester, England, in 1951 for the South African Railways, the NG/G16 was a class of steam locomotive used to deliver agricultural and mineral products across the hilly terrain and tight curves of South Africa's rural railways.

Its purchase in 1996 for the Puffing Billy fleet was spearheaded by two men – Peter Ralph and Alan Gardner – with a dogged determination to obtain a highly regarded Garratt locomotive; one that would support the sole surviving Victorian Railways Garratt, G42, which was being restored at the time.

Having previously saved G42 from the scrapper's torch in 1964, the subject of a second Garratt locomotive would always surface in the lunchroom as a necessary backup.

As luck and a pinch of persuasion would have it, the Alfred County Railway in South Africa had a surplus of Garratt locomotives and in 1995 were persuaded to generously sell one to the Puffing Billy Railway.

Not missing a beat, Peter Ralph took it upon himself to ask the Emerald Tourist Railway Board (ETRB) during an annual general meeting if they would consider the purchase of the NG/G16 129 locomotive, but the Board were unable to invest at the time. Undeterred, Peter knew the Garratt would be a valuable addition to the Puffing Billy Railway locomotive collection and sought, with Alan Gardner, to approach Puffing Billy Preservation Society (PBPS) members for assistance.

It wasn't long before the South African Garratt Appeal was born and with it the idea that if the Society could get 50 of their members to donate \$2000 each, they could raise the funds required to secure the purchase of NG/G16 129. This concentrated effort grew, with Society members committing over \$80,000 in funds over the space of three months. An additional \$30,000 contribution from the PBPS saw this long-term project come to life.

One on-site survey trip to South Africa later and direct negotiations resulted in the purchase for 1,189,525.40 rand (A\$120,000 including shipping costs). Once the locomotive arrived in Belgrave in August of 1996, it was exhibited in Belgrave for the benefit of fundraising contributors and photographers, before being disassembled. There it stayed for 15 years while fundraising and donations continued to build for the estimated \$2.4 million restoration.

It wasn't until 2005 that a feasibility study was requested and Puffing Billy's NG/G project engineering team, John Brady, Harry Hibgame and Russell Hicks, were tasked with conducting this study and later plan the never-before-done re-gauging of a two foot gauge Garratt locomotive to two foot six inches and its complete restoration.

Finally, as momentum built in 2011, a dedicated team of volunteers and workshop crew, including John, Harry and Russell, commenced full re-gauging and refurbishment works.

With its first fire lit on September 26, 2019, and the engine first moving under its own steam on November 6, 2019, final tests are now underway to welcome the polished black Garratt back to the track.

A labour of love for those who persisted with this 23-year-old project has finally paid off, with the NG/G16 129 returning to traffic on December 18, the same date as Puffing Billy's 119th birthday.

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John Brady, who led the feasibility study, says that although it has taken some two decades to get to this moment, he is proud to see it on the track.

“It’s been a long time coming, but I am enormously proud of what has been achieved. It is so important that these locos are kept as they are, which is why it was crucial to get this right the first time. My sincere thanks go to the volunteers, workshop crew, Puffing Billy Preservation Society and the Emerald Tourist Railway Board, but most importantly Peter and Alan, for which this restoration project would not have been possible without.”

With its original wheels and cylinders, silver boiler bands, gleaming polished copper piping and a brand-new enlarged cab complete with windows, doors and seats, the NG/G16 will readily haul 16 full length carriages full of smiling passengers.

“The patience and perseverance of those involved cannot be forgotten. To see it sitting away for so many years while we all lobbied for funds to support its restoration can now be celebrated in full as it makes its big debut on the Puffing Billy Railway,” said Harry Hibgame.

“I wasn’t sure if 129 would be completely restored and returned to service, so this locomotive symbolises our lifelong passion for the railway and our united commitment to see something through from start to finish, despite the odds,” said Russell Hicks.

NG/G16 129 will be spotlighted in a special unveiling moment at Belgrave Station on December 18 at 12.30pm, with all cherished volunteers, workshop crew, contributors and the public invited along to witness its first public appearance in 23 years and give thanks for their generosity.

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Photos and footage of the NG/G16 129 can be found here:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/m667bcqhu4vgvxm/AAA7glSubHtjywF9lwTRTO4ta?dl=0>

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