

REGIONAL OVERVIEW: CANTERBURY

The pattern of railway development across Canterbury was distinctive – all except two branch lines ran on an east-west axis across the Canterbury Plains from a junction with the Main South Line (MSL) from the coast until they encountered obstacles such as the foothills of the Southern Alps or a major river gorge. The exceptions were the Southbridge branch, which ran on a north-south axis from Southbridge on the Plains to a junction on the MSL in Hornby on the outskirts of Christchurch, and the Waiau branch in north Canterbury which also ran north-south, initially as a potential route to connect Christchurch with Picton.

All of the Canterbury branch lines serviced the usual economic drivers, though the focus was more on agricultural development and servicing than on extractive industries.

The other major railway feature of branch line development in Canterbury was the link to the West Coast, on what became known as the Midland Line. This was promoted by a private company of the same name, which obtained beneficial land arrangements to finance construction. They pushed a line into the Alps from Springfield on the western edge of the plains, and did some building where there was easier terrain on the West Coast, but by the turn of the 19th century they had run out of money and could not take on the awe-inspiring task of tunnelling through the mountains. The government stepped in and built the Otira Tunnel, opened in 1923, and finally connected the east and west coasts by rail. The TranzAlpine service operated by KiwiRail from Christchurch to Greymouth is a wonderful way to view the countryside and experience the climb up the lower slopes of the Alps and through the tunnel. The Midland Line is also busy with frequent trains hauling coal from mines on the West Coast primarily to Lyttleton for export, as well as other freight.