

OXFORD BRANCH

Length	39 kilometres
Opened	Stage 1 Rangiora to Cust December 1874 Stage 2 Cust to Oxford June 1875 Stage 3 Oxford to Sheffield July 1884
Stops	13 Rangiora, Bells, Fernside, Stoke, Springbank, Cust, Bennetts Junction, Carleton, Oxford East, , Oxford West, View Hill, Bexley, Sheffield
Closed	Stage 1 Oxford West to Sheffield July 1930 Stage 2 Rangiora to Oxford West April 1959
Passenger services	Stopped in February 1931

Although this railway crossed the seemingly flat, intensively cultivated Canterbury Plains for at least two thirds of its distance from Rangiora to Sheffield, there are sufficient railway remnants to keep the explorer interested. In addition, the last third of the line includes a crossing of the Waimakariri River, which is a grand experience in its own right. The line takes the explorer very close to the Southern Alps, and there are sweeping mountain vistas to be enjoyed. For all these reasons this is a line worth driving if in the area. Exploration of the Oxford line can easily be combined with a visit to the Whitecliffs branch, as their termini – Sheffield and Darfield – are only 12 kilometres apart.

The Oxford branch was intended to be part of the main line into the Canterbury interior – the Main Central Trunk Line, which was to run along the foothills of the Alps from Rangiora to Temuka. The depression of the 1880s put paid to this grandiose proposal. The only reason for this line was to provide access to the hinterland, other early proposals for it to be part of a route to link to the West Coast or to Picton having fallen by the wayside.

Rangiora is the largest town in North Canterbury and is a stop on KiwiRail's Coastal Pacific service on the Main North Line (MNL) between Christchurch and Picton. The station services daily trains in both directions during the summer months. The attractive station building occupies a triangle of land between Edward and Blackett Streets.

From the nearby traffic roundabout serving five roads take the exit for the Inland Scenic Route, SH72, and go west along Blackett Street, which is wider than most as it was built to accommodate the railway line. Proceed to the roundabout with an exit to Oxford on SH72, turn left into King Street and take the third exit at the next roundabout into High Street. Just slightly less than a kilometre later at the junction of West Belt (on the right) and Oxford Road (straight ahead) there is a nameboard for Bells, a small stop that had only a platform. In 2002 the Waimakariri District Council re-erected station nameboards along the line as memorials to the railway.¹

Just over three kilometres along Oxford Road the 42x40ft Fernside goods shed stands on the right side of the road, its name still faintly visible at each end. The hump to one side of the shed is the loading bank, and the old stockyards are decaying at the other end.

Cross the Cust River Stoke Bridge fail the name of which suggests the Stoke stop was somewhere in the vicinity, though remnants are not to be found.

Shortly after the bridge the 41x40ft Springbank goods shed appears, on the right side of the road, also with its nameboard standing proud. The loading bank is a little more exposed, and once again there are decaying stockyards. Presumably the platforms and wagon loops at both sites are covered by long grass somewhere nearby. Springbank was initially called Moeraki.

Less than 1.5 kilometres beyond Springbank there is a slight rise in the road where the rail corridor left the roadside and continued on the flat round a gentle left-hand curve on the right of the road. Continue to Cust, a village sprawling along SH72 for some distance and originally named Moeraki Downs. Cust is about midway between Rangiora and Oxford and is a pretty location, slightly elevated and with a number of older and well-preserved buildings. The local museum is open on Sunday afternoon.

Turn right down Swamp Road to spot the embankment continuing to Cust station, which had the usual array of a goods shed, loading bank, platform and stockyards. The station area is a few metres down Mill Road, and the nameboard is in Jack Graham Reserve, on the left. The formation is now occupied by community facilities, and there are railway-style gates near Mill Road.

From Cust to the next stop is six kilometres. The rail corridor is not particularly discernible on the right of the highway. Bennetts Junction is marked by a nameboard and a loading bank, just past the junction with Tram Road (left) and Bennetts Road (right), which became the junction with the Eyreton branch, opened in 1880. The Eyreton line crossed SH72 and ran southeast along Tram Road. There was a larger than usual loop at Bennetts, a 62-wagon one servicing both the goods shed and cattle yard, and a lengthy loading bank. A nameboard and loading bank on the right 200 metres after Carleton Road identify the next stop – Carleton. From here it was an easy run to Oxford, on the outskirts of which the formation curves away on the right of SH72, 200 metres after Barracks Road. The line then ran through the wedge of land bounded left and right by SH72 and Barracks Road and is not really visible from either.

Turn right from SH72 into High Street. The line came through what is now the Oxford Working Men's Club/RSA property on the right. Oxford East station was on land behind the club carpark and bowling green. A Wikipedia article tells the explorer the following about the Oxford East station:

"It was relatively large for a rural New Zealand station and was once kept well-preserved, but it fell into such a severe state of disrepair that it was demolished in 1997 and all that remains now is the almost indestructible station safe and the platform."

Opposite the club a strip of open land defines the rail corridor as it continued through Oxford to Oxford West station.

Follow High Street (SH72), originally called Harewood Forest Road, and continue past the clock tower, old post office, Town Hall and Oxford Museum. The latter is well worth visiting if you can arrange to be around on a Sunday. The railway line ran on the right of High Street and can be sighted along several side roads.

At the West Oxford Hotel on the left turn right into Mill Road. The sawmill on Mill Road is the site of Oxford West station, and there is a shed amongst the buildings on the site which may have been the goods shed. There were once railway houses in the area but these have been built out by new housing development. Nothing else of what was once a fairly substantial terminus can be seen or accessed.

The railway line from Oxford to the Waimakariri² River is almost impossible to trace. It followed Depot Road to the crossing of the Eyre River and then curved out to the right, finding the most level running to gently descend to cross the Waimakariri. There were stops at places called View Hill and, just before the river, at Bexley. It is recommended that the explorer continues on Depot Road/SH72 to the river as there are no obvious railway artefacts elsewhere. At the river the combined road/rail bridge was the most notable engineering feat on this line and is approached from Oxford through the original cutting made for the railway.

After crossing the river the railway formation can be seen on the left of the road, and then, as the highway zigzags out of the gorge, the formation continues slightly curving as it too makes its way quite steeply to the plateau ahead. By the top of the gradient the line is in a deep cutting out of sight of the road but marked by trees growing from the banks of the cutting. Once on the plateau the cutting is marked by gorse and broom until it too levels and is marked only by grassy embankment.

Approaching Sheffield, turn left into Curve Road. The line crossed from the left of Waimakariri Gorge Road to the left of Curve Road at the intersection, and soon after, first one and then a second set of abutments, the only ones seen on this line, confirm this was rail corridor.

Curve Road leads gently onto the West Coast Road (SH73), and the branch line junction was at the intersection of Curve Road and Railway Terrace immediately before the current level crossing of the Midland Line (Christchurch to the West Coast). Sheffield station is still marked by a nameboard but nothing else remains.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Oxford Museum:

<http://www.nz museums.co.nz/account/3246>

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rangiora>

² From the Maori for "cold water"