

## WHITECLIFFS BRANCH

<b>Length</b>	18.4 kilometres
<b>Opened</b>	Completely November 1875
<b>Stops</b>	7 Darfield, Hawkins, Homebush, Coalgate, Glentunnel, South Malvern, Whitecliffs
<b>Closed</b>	Completely March 1962
<b>Passenger services</b>	Stopped March 1949

This branch line is worth exploring not so much for railway remnants, of which there are remarkably few, but for the local history of the last few stops on the line: Homebush, Coalgate, Glentunnel and Whitecliffs. Nudging into the lower slopes of the Southern Alps, around the Malvern Hills, the scenery is spectacular, and as long as one does some research into opening hours of local facilities, there are a few features associated with the development of the railway to explore.

The starting point for exploring this branch line is Darfield, a rural township within commuting distance of downtown Christchurch. Darfield is close to the epicentre of a major earthquake which on 4 September 2010 caused widespread damage to both the town and to surrounding areas, including the city of Christchurch. Darfield is on the route of the Midland Line on which the TranzAlpine scenic railway service operated by Kiwi Rail runs between Christchurch and Greymouth on the West Coast. Coal trains from the West Coast pass through on a steady basis. Darfield is also a gateway to the scenic Waimakariri and Rakaia Rivers and the Southern Alps and is a popular lift-off place for hot-air ballooning.

The junction of the branch line from the Midland line at Darfield can be seen at a set of crossing lights in McMillan Street, on the right of SH73 (West Coast Road). The line crossed SH73 about 250 metres from McMillan Street, after Trinity Church and before the intersection with SH77. Drive along SH77 for 7.5 kilometres towards the Southern Alps. Slight vestiges of embankment can be discerned on both banks of the Hawkins River. Otherwise, there is nothing to suggest that a railway once ran on the left of this road. There was a stop called Hawkins with a 41x40ft goods shed, stockyards and a 33-wagon loop. Presumably there was also some sort of passenger shelter shed, as there was a platform.

Where SH77 and SH72<sup>1</sup> intersect, the railway line curved gently to the left. Continue ahead at the intersection. The highway through Coalgate and Glentunnel, etc. is now both SH77 and SH72, the Inland Scenic Route. Embankment can just be seen at a distance across the paddocks, curving towards the Waianiwi River. Turn left at Yeomans Road and look for remnants of embankment on the left as the road curves left then right. A forestry block on the right conceals any remnants of Homebush station.

Proceed to Railway Street in Coalgate, turning left into Coalgate at the signposted junction on the highway. Although there is nothing to see along Railway Street the line ran along the left side. Station Street, which veers right at the end of Railway Street, indicates the general area of the station and yards, where there was a platform, passenger shelter, 61x31ft goods

shed, stockyards, a 10ft outside crane, a 39-wagon loop, and a 24-wagon backshunt. There were apparently also a log siding, a private loading bank for the Homebush estate's coal, and the remnants of a private line to the mines of Bush Gully behind the Malvern Hills. The station also served as the post and telegraph office.

During the construction of the Lake Coleridge Hydro scheme (1911-1914) Coalgate was an important station for the transportation of building materials to the power plant site on the Rakaia River.<sup>2</sup> On the right of Railway Street the land is occupied by the bentonite processing plant of Transform Minerals Co. Bentonite is a clay product that is mined in the Malvern Hills rising to the west of the town.<sup>3</sup> Coal was mined in the area for well over 100 years.

Continue to Glentunnel, less than two kilometres away on SH77. Once in Glentunnel look for a local store on a four-way junction, and turn right along Albert Street. The railway line, yards and station used to be at the end of Railway Terrace, on the right. Alas, now there is nothing to see. Part of the platform has been incorporated into landscaping of a private property, but this can't be seen from the road. In its day Glentunnel too had a shelter shed and platform, as well as a 24-wagon loop and 44-wagon back shunt. There was a cart road to the passenger platform, which is now an unnamed track from Homebush Road (SH72).

Glentunnel township has a close historical association with local coalmines, potteries and brickworks of the Glentunnel/South Malvern area. This association, which continued until the 1980s, can still be seen in the brick community buildings including the library and stables, both in Philip Street. Many of the miners' cottages are still lived in today.<sup>4</sup> Sadly, the octagonal library/post office building was closed after the earthquakes, and the stables are probably not safe to enter either. Opposite the stables was the Homebush Brick & Tile Co., manufacturing bricks and many other clay products which were not only used locally but also throughout Canterbury. It was owned and run by the Deans family and later sold to McSkimming Industries, who closed it down in 1982. Just beyond the stables there is a walking track to a mine – Surveyors Gully Millennium Track. This was used by pit ponies bringing clay and other materials for the pottery.<sup>5</sup> The stables were part of the pottery, housing the ponies. There was a short private siding from beside the pottery, at the top of Philip Street, which ran into the shunting area of the station. According to Glentunnel School's website, the town was originally named "Surveyors Gully", then "The Glen", then "Glentunnel". There was a tunnel built on the bush track to the coal mine.<sup>6</sup> There is also a museum in Philip Street. The post office was said to be one of the oldest in New Zealand. The Glentunnel Domain was a favourite destination for day excursions for school and other groups from as far afield as Christchurch when the railway was operating a passenger service.

Leaving Glentunnel, turn right up Whitecliffs Road. The formation reveals itself on the right once Whitecliffs Road levels out. Shortly after a set of abutments marking the rail corridor are on the right of the road. Thereafter there is little hard evidence of the formation, though at the end of Hector Street the embankment is visible, and this is repeated at the end of all the streets to the right. Slightly further along the highway there is an area of reserve land on the left of the road, and a shelter-shed type station stands in good order behind a small wooden platform, signalling the probable location of the Whitecliffs terminus. It is nice to

see a well-maintained local reminder of railway times. This terminus was modest, as befitted a modest scale branch, and had only a 21x13ft goods shed, sheep yards and an engine shed, along with a shelter shed and platform. There was, though, a 42-wagon loop and an 8-wagon shunt to the engine shed.

Slightly further along the highway, on the left, there is an old red shed surrounded by equally old vehicles and other mechanical appurtenances. The shed looks very much as if it is the railways engine shed, used latterly as a workshop for a local mechanical engineer. A decrepit skeleton of railway wagons adorns the property another 100 metres or so along the road. If the engine shed is in its original position, the station and yards must have been on the right of the highway, rather than the left as the restored shelter shed suggests.

### **FURTHER INFORMATION**

TranzAlpine scenic railway:

<http://www.kiwirailscenic.co.nz/tranzalpine/?servicename=TranzAlpine>

Homebush:

<http://www.homebushstables.co.nz/tosee%20new.htm>

---

<sup>1</sup> SH77 is also SH72, the Inland Scenic Route, through the Glentunnel and Coalgate area.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/photograph/10259/traction-engines-coalgate>

<sup>3</sup> Coalgate bentonite is used as a binder for foundry sand, in drilling muds, for sealing clay dams and diaphragm walls in construction projects, as a bitumen emulsifier, in fibrous cement and as pellet binder in stock food.

[http://www.nzpam.govt.nz/cms/pdf-library/minerals/publications/Commodity%20Reports/report20a\\_indmins.pdf](http://www.nzpam.govt.nz/cms/pdf-library/minerals/publications/Commodity%20Reports/report20a_indmins.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.selwyn.govt.nz/council/living-in-selwyn/townships/glentunnel>

<sup>5</sup> The title of the pottery varies according to different sources. All, however, refer to the same entity.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.glentunnel.school.nz/WebSpace/35/>