

METHVEN BRANCH

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Length: 35.6 kilometres

Opened:

Completely February 1880

Stops: 10

Rakaia

Hatfield

Somerton

Mitcham

Sherwood

Lauriston

Urrall

Lyndhurst

Cairnbrae

Methven

Closed:

Completely July 1976

Passenger services: Stopped September 1958

A journey along the Methven branch takes one from Rakaia at the centre of the Canterbury Plains to Methven at the foothills of the Southern Alps. The country traversed seems almost completely flat but gently rises from Rakaia, and the line ran almost straight. The Southern Alps form a magnificent backdrop to the road from Rakaia to Methven, which is a busy centre for those wishing to ski at Mt Hutt, so the roads to and from are generally well serviced.

As was usual, the branch was built to provide access to the hinterland. It was built by a private company – the Rakaia and Ashburton Forks Railway – between 1880 and 1885, and then taken over by the state once it became clear that it was failing financially.

Rakaia township, located on the southern bank of the Rakaia River, has long been a place at which the river, said to be one of the largest braided rivers in the country, could be crossed. SH1 and the Main South Line (MSL) cross the river using separate bridges, the longest road and rail bridges respectively, each approximately 1.8 km long. Rakaia calls itself “The Salmon Capital of New Zealand”.

The MSL still runs through Rakaia, and the yards and general rail area are prominent in the centre of the town. Railway Terrace East and Railway Terrace West identify the railway area. From a large roundabout in the centre of town head along Railway Terrace West to Thompsons Track. The formation ran alongside Thompsons Track for the next 17 kilometres in an almost dead straight line. The branch line level crossing where Thompsons Track crosses the MSL and heads due west can at once be discerned in the scrubby reserve immediately adjacent to the road on the left. The line of power poles stretching far into the distance along the Canterbury Plains gives one a good overview of what is to come: no winding, wending, crisscrossing, zigzagging or joggling about. Thompsons Track is sealed for its full length, which is a considerable bonus. Each stop along the line featured only a lean-to passenger shelter, perhaps with a short, low platform for occasional passengers. None of the shelters have survived. However, at both Lyndhurst and Lauriston, there are a couple of other features – goods sheds, and a water vat at Lauriston.

There was a station in the Hatfield area, just over 3.5 kilometres along Thompsons Track, of which not one solitary remnant can be seen today. About 200 metres beyond Hatfield-Overdale Road there is a slight dip in the road in which reasonably sized railway abutments can be seen, showing how the railway elevation was maintained at this point. These are the only abutments to be seen between Rakaia and Methven.

Thereafter an almost imperceptible right curve in the road heralds the arrival Somerton station. About 300 metres after Somerton Road there is what seems to be a goods shed set back 50 metres or so from the road.

The next stop was at Mitcham, 4.5 kilometres from Somerset Road. Just over a kilometre from Mitcham Road a stand of trees obscures the line, for the first and only time. Leitch and Scott claimed that this was an area in which there were "several massive abutments" but if so they are now completely obscured.

After the stand of trees end at Jamiesons Road (on the left) and a further 1.7 kilometres along, there is finally a turn to the right, into Line Road. Somewhere just before the junction there was another small stop, called Sherwood. At the time Leitch and Scott published their volume on ghost railways, there were still rails visible in the asphalt at this crossing point –these have since been covered, and no traces are to be seen anywhere.

Line Road also seems straight, though in fact it does have a very slight left-hand bend before heading into the heart of Methven, some 17 kilometres further west. After 2.5 kilometres an electricity sub-station occupies the yard area at the west end of what was Lauriston station site and a goods shed faintly proclaiming "Lauriston" can be still be seen. There is also a loading bay.

Presumably the next station, Urrall, was close to where Urrall Road crosses Thompsons Track, 2.8 kilometres beyond Lauriston. At the next station at Lyndhurst there are several interesting buildings and a siding crosses the road. There is a red shed on the left which has the look of a railway goods shed about it. There is also a large white shed on the left, an old Dalgety store located for convenience alongside the railway line. Another large shed on the left was used by the National Mortgage Association and had its own siding.

Another three kilometres pass before the next stop at Cairnbrae, during which the formation becomes clear as an elevated embankment (still on the left) as the road dips slightly. The stop was presumably on the left where Cairnbrae Road crosses Line Road.

From here it is less than five kilometres to the terminus of the line in Methven. Where Line Road finally curves right passing the Methven Trucking Company's yards the line continued straight ahead, running through an area now occupied by an array of agricultural/rural servicing companies of all kinds, as well as a large sawmill.

Turn left at the junction of Methven-Chertsey Road. Just after the sawmill the corridor runs alongside the road again and is almost at the station/terminus. The station area is now an open civic facility with nice paving, planting and seating. The station comprised a large passenger shelter with a verandah added after a few years, a single road engine shed with attendant water vat, and large (51x39ft) goods shed with double end doors and a small loading deck. All has now been removed and extinguished by later development of the centre of town, where a complex of information services and cafes services skiers en route to Mount Hutt and travellers coming and going in all directions.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Methven Visitor Information:

<http://www.methveninfo.co.nz/>

Rakaia Visitor Information:

<http://www.midcanterburynz.com/newzealand/rakaia/>