

MT SOMERS BRANCH

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Length: 43.2 kilometres

Opened:

Stage 1 Tinwald to Westerfield April 1880

Stage 2 Westerfield to Anama October 1882

Stage 3 Anama to Cavendish March 1884

Stage 4 Cavendish to Mt Somers October 1885

Stage 5 Mt Somers to Springburn September 1889

Stops: 11

Tinwald

Lagmhor

Westerfield

Hackthorne

Punawai

Valetta

Anama

Cavendish

Mount Somers

Buccleugh

Springburn

Closed:

Stage 1 Mt Somers to Springburn March 1957

Stage 2 Tinwald to Mt Somers in January 1968, noting Tinwald to Frasers Road section reopened in November 1973 as the Plains Railway

Passenger services: Stopped in January 1931

The Mt Somers branch, from Tinwald on the outskirts of Ashburton to Mt Somers to the west at the foothills of the Southern Alps, is one of the few branch lines to avoid exploring. Its passage across the flat Canterbury Plains is devoid of much in the way of infrastructure or construction remnants. The most dogged explorer may wish to zig-zag along unsealed roads dotted with skewed signposts that send one in the wrong direction at intersections, following the journey description provided by Leitch and Scott in their seminal publication on ghost railways of New Zealand which is both detailed and accurate.¹ The artefacts mentioned as standing in the 1990s have all disappeared from view and land use changes have obscured all features. Finally, lines of shelter belts protecting crops and animals from winds across the plains create a myriad of misleading compass points.

It is recommended, therefore, that the explorer bypass this branch and continue to Mt Somers Village from Methven after exploring the Methven branch, to sight a few remnants between Mt Somers Village and Springburn, the western terminus of the branch.

If travelling through Ashburton though, it is worth visiting the Plains Vintage Railway & Historical Museum in Tinwald on the southern outskirts of Ashburton. Their website reference is provided below. Here the Mt Somers branch junction from the Main South Line (MSL) is at the intersection of Anne and Melcombe Streets (both off Laghmor Road). Although the line is no longer active, the tracks are still intact and there is all the paraphernalia of a level crossing.

Mt Somers village, a small settlement near the foot of Mt Somers, unlike other Canterbury settlements has not relied solely on agricultural production for its existence. Coal, clay, sand and limestone have been mined in the hills behind the town, and the branch line was built to service

these industries. Development of the nearby ski field of Mt Hutt has revitalised the town in recent years, though nearby Methven has been the main beneficiary of this development.

The Mt Somers railway station was on the eastern outskirts of town, alongside Arundel-Rakaia Gorge Road, now SH72. A church converted to a private dwelling is at one end of the station yards. A very decrepit goods shed only just managing to remain upright could be spied from the roadside in 2013.

For 68 years the line ran due north eight kilometres from Mt Somers to Springburn. There are a couple of other remnants on the extension to Springburn, the best of which is just over two kilometres north along SH72 from the intersection with Tramway Road. The line crossed the Rangitata Diversion Race and substantial abutments remain on the banks, with one in the middle of the watercourse looking rather like a submarine when water levels are high!

While the rest of the extension to Springburn can be traced on Google Earth, in reality there is almost nothing to see other than a short stretch of embankment leading to the crossing of Bowyers Stream.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Plains Vintage Railway & Historical Museum:
<http://www.plainsrailway.co.nz/index.php>

¹ *Exploring New Zealand's Ghost Railways*, David Leitch & Brian Scott, Grantham House, 1995 rev. ed. 1998