

FAIRLIE BRANCH

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Length: 58.2 kilometres

Opened:

Stage 1 Washdyke to Pleasant Point December 1875

Stage 2 Pleasant Point to Albury January 1877

Stage 3 Albury to Winscombe August 1883

Stage 4 Winscombe to Eversley January 1884

Stops: 15

Washdyke

Racecourse

Cartwright's Road Crossing

Levels

Waitawa

Pleasant Point

Sutherlands

Cave

Mawaro

Albury

Tengawai

Cricklewood

Winscombe

Fairlie

Eversley

Closed:

Stage 1 Fairlie to Eversley April 1934

Stage 2 Washdyke to Fairlie March 1968.

A short section between Keanes and Pleasant Point has been used by Pleasant Point Railway since 1973

Passenger services: Stopped in March 1953

The Fairlie branch provides the rail trail explorer with a mixed bag – long, straight, flat stretches with no obvious rail remnants; long, flat stretches with raised embankment and culverts and embankments; long, flat stretches where there is nothing in particular to suggest where the line was; a vintage railway to visit; and a local museum containing an intact railway station and other memorabilia. Built to provide a railhead for sheep stations in the McKenzie Basin, it contributed to farming development in the surrounding areas, particularly those further inland.

Start the journey at the level crossing in Meadows Road, Washdyke, Timaru (off SH1). From here the branch line tracks can be seen alongside the Main South Line (MSL) curving off to the left just north of the crossing. The tracks continue through a weed-filled wasteland for 500 metres but can't be accessed. Return to SH1 and take the next major junction onto SH8, the Pleasant Point Highway. The branch line came alongside SH8 on the right shortly after the junction, but can only be seen on leaving the outskirts of Washdyke and approaching the local racecourse on the right. At the entrance to the racecourse there is a concrete platform edge about 150 metres long for the second stop on the line, known, not surprisingly, as Racecourse. There were no other features at this stop, which was dedicated to depositing and collecting punters and horses on race days. The Phar Lap Raceway at Washdyke is the home of the South Canterbury Racing Club. The raceway is named after Australasia's most famous racehorse, born at nearby Seadown.¹

The railway line and SH8 run side by side for nearly eight kilometres from the racecourse, seemingly flat and dead straight. While for the most part the formation is not really obvious, there are a couple of features that confirm its passage. There is nothing at the next stop – Cartwright’s Road Crossing – but at Levels there is a resplendent shed, as well as some platform and loading bank structures. The shed is the original 60x25ft structure, now painted white and used on its western face as a roadside safety hoarding. There are double sliding doors on the rail tracks side. There was a 20-wagon loop at this stop, which was called Levels after the huge sheep station of the same name, owned and farmed profitably by George Heaton Rhodes, one of Canterbury’s most successful farm developers.

There was another stop called Waitawa somewhere in the next seven kilometres, and there is apparently still a platform and loading bank but these are generally invisible to the road traveller. Just over six kilometres from Levels, where the road makes a slight left-hand curve, the line crossed the road and began its run into the township of Pleasant Point. The crossing is at the junction of Arowhenua Road which enters SH8 from the right on the curve.

On the left around the curve on Keane Road is the eastern terminus of the Pleasant Point Railway & Historical Society heritage railway. There is a storage shed on the left of Keane Road, and on the right a working turntable, water vat and stand, some wagons and other essential railway yard buildings. Back on SH8 the eastern platform and shelter of the society’s working line can be seen. This very active society runs several interesting locomotives, including a replica of the railcars that operated for a short time on the Wyndham and Waikaia branches in Southland. More information is available on the society’s website, reference to which is made at the end of this chapter.

After passing the Pleasant Point railway station, beautifully restored and maintained as part of the heritage railway, continue east on SH8. For the next 7.5 kilometres the road and line continue alongside each other on the flat landscape, in a more or less straight line, with the railway formation on the left of the road. There is almost nothing to identify the corridor until in the paddock just past Sutherlands Road there is the remnant of a loading bay. This marks the site of Sutherlands station, which had a small platform, shelter shed and a 19-wagon crossing loop. In another paddock 700 metres further on the Sutherlands school building bears the name board of Sutherlands railway station.

After Sutherlands school there are a couple of pig farms and formation can be made out, at the foot of the bluff that dominates this area and is the lowest extremity of the Hunter Hills. The formation is also identified by stock track/farm track for some of its length. After eight kilometres there was a railway station at Cave, where in the tree-shaded reserve on the left of SH8 there is a double-sided loading bank. There used to be a 60x30 goods shed, a shelter shed and platform for passengers, stockyards for sheep, as well as a 48-wagon crossing loop and a 39-wagon loop, so this was once a busy place. Cave was originally an outstation of the Levels sheep run and became a small village with the arrival of the railway and the gradual subdivision of the Levels and other nearby sheep runs.²

From Cave the rail corridor is not visible for four kilometres though it was most likely on the left of SH8, or perhaps under the current road alignment. However, from Monavale Road (about four kilometres beyond Cave) the formation becomes visible as a raised embankment on both sides of Mawaro Creek Bridge and set of abutments through the embankment shortly after the bridge. Somewhere in the area was the stop called Mawaro, which in its day had a small shelter shed, platform, 36x21ft goods shed, stockyards and a 24-wagon loop.

The embankment disappears for another couple of kilometres or so, reappearing immediately after Whiteman Road, still on the left. From Whiteman Road to Albury it continues at a raised level, and there are abutments through it intermittently, as well as gaps where it has been breached. At Rocky

Gully River there is no evidence of a railway bridge to the left of the current road bridge. From Rocky Gully River the formation is closer to the road and continues to be elevated. The formation then continues on a ledge close to and above the road on the final approach to Albury, just before which it crosses from left to right.

Albury was the terminus of the branch from 1877 to August 1883 and thrived during this time. The station yards were on the left in Albury, and any remaining vestiges such as concrete platform or loading bank have either been removed or are out of sight of the road on private property. In its time Albury had a very large goods shed – 100x30ft – a loading bank and stockyards. It also had three loops.

Immediately beyond Albury SH8 crosses both streams of the Opawa River, which flow directly into the Te Ngawai River, also soon to be crossed. There are no traces of the railway formation immediately after Albury, but after 1.5 kilometres a large embankment remains on the right. There is a fairly large pier standing free in a paddock and then a set of large abutments the embankment. The far end of the embankment, nearest the river crossing, contains a set of posts which may have been part of the trestle that bridged the Te Ngawai River. There is nothing else in the area to convey the scale of the trestle, which was a major feature on this branch. It was 1,128 feet long, consisting of 26 spans of 40 feet and eight spans of 11 feet³ constructed of timber on piles.

Presumably there was embankment on the other side of the river, but there is nothing at all now remaining if this was so. For the next couple of kilometres there is nothing to indicate where the railway ran, and with the river pressing on the right of SH8 it is likely that current road alignment has removed railway formation. By Cricklewood Road (on the left) raised embankment across the paddocks on the right of the road is obvious, and presumably Cricklewood station was somewhere in the vicinity. The goods shed, measuring 40x40ft, is long since gone, and the little station shelter shed was taken to be a garage at one of the railway houses in Albury many years ago.

For the next 1.8 kilometres the embankment continues across the paddocks on the right, with a couple of small bridges and a culvert. Both road and formation then climb a small hill, and the formation can be seen where there are still cutting faces. Road and rail diverge, and then converge briefly again, with raised embankment once again very obvious. The road then takes a large left-hand loop up onto a plateau which affords great views of the Southern Alps. The rail corridor, meanwhile, has also climbed (and then descends) the Winscombe Cutting, with gradients of 1 in 50, out of sight up to a kilometre away to the right of the road. Descending from the plateau to cross Coal Stream look for the exceptionally high embankment closing in on the road on the right. A large mound on the bank of Coal Stream suggests this is a remnant of raised rail formation. In the early days of the branch there was a coal mine by the stream, the mouth of which was only metres from the line.

Winscombe station was in this area, comprising only “a siding and a shingle platform, a small portion of the latter covered over by a lean-to shed- forming a “sixth class, not a first-class station”.⁴ From McLeans Road it is only four kilometres to the middle of Fairlie, and for all of this distance the formation was adjacent to the road on the right, but now only vaguely discernible.

The station area at Fairlie is now nicely presented as a park-like area on the right of SH8. There is a plaque confirming the station site and a small memorial of a couple of wheels mounted on a metre of track on a stone block. The railway facilities at Fairlie were typical of a terminus – a 60x30ft goods shed, stockyards, a 55ft turntable, a 1.5 tonne outside crane and a station building which is now in the local museum. There were also a 52 and a 66-wagon loop and two backshunts.

To find and view the station and other railway memorabilia make your way to the Fairlie Heritage Museum further along SH8, well worth a visit and open every day, which is unusual for a local museum run by volunteers.

Finally, it should be noted that the Fairlie branch actually terminated at Eversley, two kilometres west of the Fairlie station. This section was rarely used until its closure in 1934, but it can be faintly discerned.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Pleasant Point Railway and Historical Society:

<http://www.pleasantpointrail.org.nz/>

Fairlie Heritage Museum:

<http://fairlieheritagemuseum.co.nz/>

¹ <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/photograph/11418/phar-lap-racecourse>

² <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/south-canterbury-places/page-3>

³ 344, 12 and 3.3 metres respectively

⁴ *Timaru Herald*, 31 January 1884, p.3, OPENING OF THE RAILWAY TO FAIRLIE CREEK
(<http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/>)