

## SEDDONVILLE BRANCH

<b>Length</b>	18 kilometres
<b>Opened</b>	Stage 1 Ngakawau to Mokihinui August 1893 Stage 2 Mokihinui to Mokihinui Mine February 1895
<b>Stops</b>	7 Ngakawau, Nikau, Summerlea, Mokihinui, St Helens, Seddonville, Mokihinui Mine
<b>Closed</b>	Stage 1 Seddonville to Mokihinui Mine February 1974 Stage 2 Ngakawau to Seddonville May 1981
<b>Passenger services</b>	Stopped October 1946

Exploring the Seddonville branch provides the opportunity to combine enjoyment of some of the West Coast's loveliest scenery with historical exploration. The line is easy to trace, has sufficient remnants and artefacts to be interesting, and can easily be traversed in both directions in half a day, leaving time to also explore Conns Creek and the Denniston Plateau. Obviously, a fine day is preferable, as the rail corridor and the road hug the very exposed coastline.

This branch was built so that coal from the mine at Mokihinui in the hills behind the small town of Seddonville could efficiently be transported to Westport. The direction for this exploration is south to north, that is, Westport to Seddonville. Start at the former Westport railway workshop near the corner of Adderley Street and Henley Street in the centre of Westport. For more information about the workshop refer to the Cape Foulwind branch description.

Head north from Westport on SH67. After just over four kilometres the road converges with the current railway line which takes coal from Ngakawau through the Otira Tunnel to destinations such as Lyttleton. Road and current railway run side by side for the next 5.5 kilometres, and there is often the opportunity to watch one of the lengthy coal trains heading south full or north empty.

Road and rail re-converge at Waimangaroa, where there is a road overbridge. The narrow coastal plain across which one is driving narrows the further one travels north, until coastline, road and rail are squeezed together. Continue through the small mining settlement of Granity to Ngakawau where one can observe the coal being brought to the railhead on an aerial ropeway from Stockton Mine, the largest opencast mine in New Zealand, high in the hills above.<sup>1</sup> Ngakawau is the terminus of the still-operating Ngakawau branch line, and the yards and associated coal bunkers etc. are tucked away against the hillside on the south bank of the Ngakawau River. Pop into the Charming Creek Tavern and Café on the corner of Tyler Road, to find out what's happening in the local community and to view some photographic memorabilia.

Further along Tyler Road look for the substantial powerhouse building on the right adjacent to Dole Street. This provided the power for seven miles of electric railway between the mines and the top of an incline, and also two lower sections of the incline. The powerhouse is now used for storage and as a repair workshop by the owners of the Stockton Mine, Solid Energy.

At the far end of Tyler Road the Charming Creek Walkway starts (or ends). This walkway follows the alignment of an historic bush tramway and passes several associated historic sites. Information sources about the walkway are provided at the end of this chapter.

The Seddonville branch crossed the Ngakawau River from Dole Street via a road-rail bridge comprising 14 spans of 40 feet each and two spans of 11 feet which opened in August 1893. The small settlement of Hector on the north bank had not existed prior to the bridge opening. Initially (1892), a small station building was set up in Ngakawau. Less than two years later, when the final extension of the line north to the Mokihinui Mine opened, the station was moved across the river and re-erected 400 metres north, retaining the name Ngakawau. No platform was ever built but there was a goods siding loop, and the station building provided the most basic facilities for the traveller. Passengers destined for Ngakawau had to travel across the river and make their way back across the bridge by some means. Some vigorous lobbying rectified this situation in 1896, allowing trains to once again stop in Ngakawau itself. This sorted out the naming confusions – the name Ngakawau was once again rightfully on the south of the river, and the station on the north was finally called Hector, after James Hector, a 19th-century geologist who studied the Buller coalfield. Nowadays nothing remains of the Hector station, tucked away in a reserve area between Corbett and Ives Streets.

The settlement of Hector grew up around the railway station, and it is now the more populous of the two neighbouring hamlets. The rail bridge was demolished when the railway closed in 1891, and there are now no signs of it on either bank of the river.

From Hector the exploration of the Seddonville “ghost” line really begins. Turn right into River Road after crossing the river. An area adjacent to a small picnic area and a house is where the railway came off the bridge to continue its journey north. After Hector, there were no stops for the next nine kilometres.

Return to SH67 and continue north – the line runs parallel on the right. Leaving Hector embankment on the right can be spotted, faintly, with flax bushes and other growth almost masking it. An abutment or culvert can be seen amongst the undergrowth, confirming the contours are manmade.

About 1.3 kilometres from Hector the line crossed the road and ran on the left (ocean) side of the road for the next six kilometres or so. It can be seen as raised embankment being used as a farm track. Abutments across creeks can be seen from time to time during the half kilometre or so before the line once again disappears, as the road rises to squeeze round a bluff created by material washed down a stream on the hillside. The roadside gravel piles in a layby on top of the rise show how much work needs to be done to keep this stretch of

road from being swept away either by the run-off down the hills or by the relentless movement of the ocean.

The line reappears on the far side of the bluff and can be clearly seen running exactly parallel to the road without obstruction for the next two kilometres. Abutments can be seen from time to time. Where the road rises again slightly, the railway line ends abruptly in a farmyard. At this point the hills, road, railway line and ocean are squeezed together, and the railway line, which used to hug the slopes below the road just above the ocean, is now invisible for about half a kilometre. At times the road and the ocean are so close together it is impossible to see how there was room for a railway line, but presumably both the shoreline and road alignment have changed over the years.

The formation, continuing on the left side for 3.2 kilometres, reappears once a narrow coastal plain opens up. At three kilometres the road takes a slight left-hand bend, to cross Chatterbox Creek and the line crossed from left to right. There are substantial remnants of a wooden bridge across Chatterbox Creek, tucked underneath a large macrocarpa tree up the slope on the right.

The line continued on the right-hand side until turning inland up the Mokihinui River, one kilometre further north. A few houses have been built on the old track, and slightly further along SH67 a collection of sheds, a house and a parking area identify what was probably the location of Nikau station, a simple station comprising only a shelter shed and a loop siding. Nikau was a popular destination for day trippers on the excursion trains that ran for years from Westport and further afield, bringing people to the sheltered waters at the mouth of Mokihinui River. Presumably there was also a small settlement, and people would have camped out during the summer months.

Although there were no stops between Hector and Nikau, from Nikau to Seddonville there were several close together. Half a kilometre from Nikau a station called Summerlea was just past where SH67 turns right to head inland along the Mokihinui River. It comprised only a shelter shed and has long since disappeared, but rail embankment is still visible at the foot of the hill on the right.

The road then narrows for the run along the first section of “gorge” close to the Mokihinui River. At this point all signs of the railway line have been extinguished by roadworks and growth in the bush. After only 750 metres, however, the road enters an area of river flats, and the line can again be seen on the right. Mokihinui shelter shed station was somewhere in the vicinity.

At the end of this short stretch of gorge SH67 takes a left-hand bend to run straight across the river flats to the road bridge, taking the highway further north to Karamea.

*[It is worth travelling on to visit Karamea, which is a micro-climate zone, benefiting from warmer sea temperatures. The 55-kilometre drive over the Radiant Ranges to Karamea through virgin native forest offers splendid scenic viewing. Karamea is also the southern end of the Heaphy Track, one of New Zealand's great walks, and there are a number of other interesting activities and tours to enable exploration of the area around Karamea.]*

The rail explorer should turn right before the bridge to head to Seddonville. Rail embankment can be seen on the right, around a house and various outbuildings, to converge with the road. St Helens station, a mere platform, was located before the railway line crossed from the road just before the entrance to Chasm Creek Walkway, signposted on the left.

There is parking space at the entrance to the Chasm Creek Walkway. It is well worth venturing along this short walk, because it is both on the railway formation and is also scenically entrancing. The walkway is one kilometre long, but can only be explored for half this distance, from either end. The banks alongside the line are covered in cascades of colourful mosses and native bush, and after 300 metres or so there is a tunnel. Only 66 metres long, the tunnel can be walked through without torches or special equipment, but do be prepared for it to be wet underfoot and for drips from the roof. It is cut out of sheer rock and has no lining or structure of any kind to keep it intact. Hidden amongst the bush and mosses, it provides a charming and interesting focal point to the walk.

More is to come immediately after the tunnel, as it quickly becomes apparent why this is called "Chasm Creek Walkway". A bridge traverses a rushing torrent in a ravine about 20 metres deep, the water plummeting into the river. Unfortunately the bridge has been deemed unsafe, and no access is allowed. The return journey affords the opportunity to experience the tunnel and the walkway again, which is no bad thing.

On returning to the car, proceed through the (second) narrow gorge, crossing the one-lane Chasm Creek Bridge (marked) about 30 metres above the tunnel and bridge. Fortunately there is little road traffic in these parts, so you may be able to travel slowly enough to peer over the side of the bridge down into the chasm.

The road soon runs again onto more river flats, and the point where the railway left the riverbank to traverse the river flats is easy to spot where the walkway is once again signposted. Walking from this end means there is no access to the tunnel because of the closed bridge. The tiny hamlet of Seddonville is less than half a kilometre from the gorge, a sleepy hamlet with perhaps fewer than 20 houses. There is though a pub which is worth a visit to examine local maps and information displays. The coal tubs marking the pub parking area are a good reminder of the activity that once created a minor boom town. One side of the pub is the local store, facing the area where Seddonville station used to be, bounded by Queen Street on one side and Gladstone Road on the other. A right turn into Cardiff Street leads one past the pub and across the railway line, though there is no evidence of the crossing these days. As a significant terminus on the line, Seddonville comprised a station on a platform, a goods shed, wagon weighbridge and a loop and other sidings. The station area is now occupied by pines and macrocarpas, and there are no remnants of the station infrastructure visible from the road.

To complete the final two kilometres of this interesting line, continue along Gladstone Road towards the hills. Within a few hundred metres an embankment becomes visible on the left, rising with the road for a final run to the Mokihinui Mine site. The initial length of the line from shortly after it left the station to travel to the mine was a 1-in-55 gradient increasing to 1 in 45, and finally a short stretch of 1 in 33. Unfortunately, these days only the initial

stretch is visible from the road. Also not visible from the road is Coal (Parenga) Creek on the left into which a couple of 1898 vintage Baldwin Wb class steam locomotives were tipped (in 1958 and 1960) to provide river protection. Both were salvaged in 1989 and are under restoration.

The mine site is a flat area with no specific indication of its former busy activities. Charming Creek Road quickly becomes unsealed and wends its way for many more kilometres up and deeper into the hinterland, eventually reaching the beginning (or end) of the Charming Creek Walkway. Walkers can either be collected from this point, if they have set off from Ngakawau, or be dropped off to make their way back to Ngakawau.

There is an excellent article in *New Zealand Railfan*, March 2006, by Colin Barry who has written a comprehensive account called "The Seddonville Branch: With Particular reference to the Ngakawau to Mokihinui Mine Section". This article contains a splendid array of photos, colour and black and white, of steam trains amongst magnificent coastal scenery and passing through the dramatic Chasm Creek section.

#### **FURTHER INFORMATION**

Millerton Incline/Northern Buller Museum @ Granity:

<http://www.nzmuseums.co.nz/account/3386>

Charming Creek Walkway:

<http://www.doc.govt.nz/publications/conservation/historic/by-region/west-coast/charming-creek-tramway-milling-mining-walkway-a-history/>

or

<http://www.doc.govt.nz/parks-and-recreation/tracks-and-walks/west-coast/buller/charming-creek-walkway/>

Coaltown Museum:

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

Karamea:

<http://www.westcoastnz.com/newzealand/westport-karamea/>

or

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

Stockton Mine tours:

<http://www.outwest.co.nz/tours.html>

Old Ghost Road - A long-forgotten gold miners' road recently revived as a mountain biking and tramping trail starts/ends at Seddonville

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

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<sup>1</sup> Solid Energy is the largest coal mining company in New Zealand, a state-owned enterprise. It was formed in 1987 from the former Government department State Coal Mines. The company's annual production is approximately 4 million tonnes, of which about 70% is used in steel making. <http://www.coalnz.com/>