

## BLACKBALL BRANCH

<b>Length</b>	8.2 kilometres (including Mines Department Fell incline Blackball to Roa)
<b>Opened</b>	Stage 1 Blackball to Roa September 1909 Stage 2 Ngahere to Blackball August 1910
<b>Stops</b>	4 Ngahere, Brunner Track, Blackball, Roa
<b>Closed</b>	Stage 1 Blackball to Roa in July 1960 Stage 2 Ngahere to Blackball February 1966
<b>Passenger services</b>	Stopped November 1940

The remnants of the Blackball branch are now so inaccessible that even the keen ghost-railway hunter will have no joy attempting to follow the line closely. However, those who have an interest in New Zealand's industrial heritage, gold and coal-mining in particular should make the trip to Blackball and further up to Roa. The distances are small and most mine ruins are easily found and accessed.

The starting point is Greymouth, from where one can choose to travel on either bank of the Grey River. On the right-hand bank (going upstream) travel as far as Stillwater, 13.5 kilometres east. Take time to stop at the site of the Brunner Mine, which can be seen on the opposite bank and is accessed by a sturdy footbridge. There are many mine relics and good information on interpretation panels.

Stillwater is a major junction on the Midland line which connects the port of Lyttleton with the West Coast via the Otira Tunnel. Kiwirail's TranzAlpine service<sup>1</sup> passes through Stillwater en route to Greymouth. Freight trains head north to collect gold ore concentrate from mines around Reefton and coal from mines north of Westport, while others head south for dairy products. A road bridge crosses the river at Stillwater.

Ten kilometres further up the Grey River spend a few minutes at Ngahere, once the junction of the Blackball branch. Across the river, Blackball and Roa and their associated mining areas are hidden in the folds of the Paparoa Range. Recent and ongoing alluvial gold mining has stirred up the river landscape so that there is no longer any possibility of picking up any vestiges of the branch line that crossed the river on a road/rail bridge from Ngahere.

Initially, there was an aerial ropeway between Blackball and Ngahere, which started operation on 23 October 1893, easily and efficiently transporting up to 500 tons per eight-hour shift to Ngahere.<sup>2</sup> By the turn of the century the production potential of the mines above Blackball in the Paparoas was becoming more than the ropeway could carry, and plans to build a road/rail bridge over the Grey River were mooted. The first pile was ceremonially driven by Premier "King Dick" Seddon in February 1902. Construction was dogged by failures when the river flooded, and it did not officially open to traffic until August 1910. The bridge itself was then severely damaged by flooding in 1927, 1950 and 1960, each flood washing out several piers. An interpretation panel in Ngahere displays a

photo of the bridge and outlines its history. Return to Stillwater and cross the river on the modern road bridge.

If you choose to travel from Greymouth on the left bank, cross the river on the Cobden Bridge and turn right onto SH6. At the first junction of SH6 turn right again onto Taylorville Road and follow it for the next 9-10 kilometres to where the bridge from Stillwater crosses. The Brunner Mine is of course easily accessed on this bank, and there is adequate, safe off-road parking. About eight kilometres beyond the Stillwater Bridge the road up to Blackball is marked by an information board and some mining relics in a small field on the left, and a "Welcome to Blackball" sign beckons one up Main Road. The river flats are still being worked for gold tailings.

The line came off the bridge from Ngahere and across the river flats to begin the steep climb to Blackball in the valley of Fords Creek, 100 metres west of the interpretation panel. The embankment can still be made out, disappearing into the valley. The road to Blackball – Main Road – climbs steeply up to and then 1.5 kilometres through the small township, turning left at its end into Hilton Street. The railway line is completely out of sight on the valley floor on the far side of Fords Creek to the left of the road. There is no longer any point from which one can view the railway track from a road in the township itself until, at the top end of the town, after passing the two-storey Community Centre<sup>3</sup> building, the road drops steeply into an area surrounded by abandoned mine structures. The railway station used to be in the valley to the left, with its sidings and yards where coal was loaded into coal bins directly from the hoppers above.

The township of Blackball, which began as a small gold-mining settlement towards the end of 1865, is described in a Wikipedia item as "a centre of New Zealand radicalism and workers' militancy. It was the birthplace of the New Zealand Labour Party, which followed the 1908 miners 'cribtime' strike, at ten weeks the longest in New Zealand history. In the 1913 Great Strike, Blackball miners were the last to return to work, in 1914. During the strike they had picketed miners in nearby Brunner and had burnt down the secretary of the 'arbitration' (scab) union's home."

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackball, New Zealand](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackball,_New_Zealand)

There was a rail bridge across Fords Creek at the lower end of the yards. The station building was sited on the far side of the yards, as were a water tank, signal box, coal store and engine shed, with another water tank alongside. The creek ran behind the yards. On the near side of the lines were the Blackball Coal Company bins and a weighbridge. A backshunt ran past the coal bins, and for a further 200 metres or so towards the township. A large part of the yard was blasted out of solid stone. The positioning of the station building on the opposite side of the yards from the township meant that people catching the train had to cross the yards, and no footbridge was provided to ensure safe passage. A service road also crossed the yards, and this too was a hazard for both railway workers and for travellers. A gate and stop block were installed to control traffic movements across the road when trains were in the vicinity.

There were five railway houses on the hillside behind the station, and they were often in the shade and subject to severe frosts. The valley is now overgrown and inaccessible by car.

The town grew when the Blackball Mining Company opened the nearby coalfields in 1893 and needed to provide accommodation for miners and other workers. Much has been written about Blackball, mostly about mining and union activity. The main hotel has for many years been infamous after naming itself the Blackball Hilton. Protests from the hotel chain of the same name resulted in it being renamed as “Formerly the Blackball Hilton”, and the dispute has received media attention over the years. Given its proximity to Hilton Street,<sup>4</sup> the use of Hilton in the name is not entirely inappropriate.

The gradient from Blackball to Roa was so steep that centre rail had to be used from the Blackball yards on which additional brakes could be deployed when laden coal wagons were running down from Roa. The climb out of Blackball is now marked by power poles, and the steepness of the incline can be judged by the rise of the tops of the poles. “The grade of the incline was 1 in 40 from the scissors crossing in the Blackball yard to the commencement of the centre rail where the grade increased to 1 in 26.”<sup>5</sup> Just over half a kilometre further up the road remnants of a bridge across Fords Creek can be clearly seen to the left. This is the only visible remnant of the line. Although densely surrounded by trees and undergrowth its height above Fords Creek, and above the Blackball station and yards is evidence of the steepness of the gradient.

Take the left fork at the bridge up Roa Road, through the village of Roa, and after a couple more kilometres enter a flat area with yet more mine structures crumbling into the undergrowth. Coal production continues in the Roa Mine<sup>6</sup>, and there is no public access beyond the open yard area. Retreat downhill, imagining the days when sleepy Roa was an active and busy mining town, with the railway hauling the immense coal production on the first stage of the journey to market.

Nowadays both Roa and Blackball townships seem more or less abandoned although there is in fact a lively community bolstered by an influx of lifestylers and holidaymakers. Local crafts and products provide local occupations, and others commute to work in Greymouth or elsewhere on the Coast. There are lots of walks to take and old mine workings to explore. A brochure suggests a number of activities such as swimming in the river or the local pool, trout fishing all year in the Grey River, possum hunting, heli-hiking and heli-biking as some of the things to do in the area, so once you’ve finished tracking down the railway line it may be worth staying on for a few more hours.

#### **FURTHER INFORMATION**

Department of Conservation (DOC) report on Blackball Coal Mine:

<http://www.doc.govt.nz/documents/conservation/historic/by-region/west-coast/blackball-coal-mine-historic-inspection-and-workplan.pdf>

Blackball Museum:

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

DOC walks:

<http://www.doc.govt.nz/parks-and-recreation/tracks-and-walks/west-coast/greymouth/brunner-mine-site-walk/>

and

<http://www.doc.govt.nz/parks-and-recreation/tracks-and-walks/west-coast/greymouth/croesus-track/>

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<sup>1</sup>TranzAlpine is one of the scenic routes operated by KiwiRail. The others are the Coastal Pacific between Christchurch and Picton, and the Northern Explorer between Wellington and Auckland.

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

<sup>2</sup> The ropeway did not follow the same path as the railway, but ran through the middle of Blackball along Stafford Street.

<sup>3</sup> Originally the residence of the manager of the Blackball Mine.

<sup>4</sup> Named after one of the directors of the Blackball Mining Company

<sup>5</sup> Colin Barry, *New Zealand Railway Observer*, No. 320, August-September 2013, p.104.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.nzcoal.co.nz/pages/16/history.htm>