

REGIONAL OVERVIEW: OTAGO

There were three ways in which the rail network was developed through Otago. First, there was easy terrain south of the Clutha River and across the Taieri Plains from Dunedin, allowing fairly rapid construction at least cost in these areas.

Second, the Main South Line (MSL) connecting to Invercargill provided the opportunity for three branch lines to be built – one from Balclutha through the Catlins where there were vast forests of native timber, and a second to Edievale on the basis that it might be extended to Roxburgh with relative ease. The third branch was the Roxburgh south of Dunedin which was built on easy terrain initially and then, over a long period of time, through the much more difficult terrain up to and along the Clutha River to Roxburgh.

The third way was the construction of branches north of Dunedin, each of which had junctions with the MSL and were built to access specific mineral and agricultural products.

Dunedin had large mercantile and commercial interests and was until the turn of the 20th century the wealthiest city in New Zealand. A major branch was pushed from Dunedin deep into the western hinterland to Cromwell, tackling the gorges along the Taieri River, and finally through the upper reaches of the Clutha River to Cromwell. This opened up agricultural lands and also provided access to the gold fields in central Otago. This branch, the Otago Central, is now well known because it has two alternative uses – the Taieri Gorge Railway, a tourist train from Dunedin to Middlemarch, and the Otago Central Rail Trail, well known to cyclists and walkers. The Otago Central branch, at 236 kilometres, was the longest branch line in New Zealand by far. There is no detailed description of the line in this publication because it has been fully developed for alternative uses. There is information about the branch and its current uses available on many websites.