

KUROW BRANCH

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Length: 60.3 kilometres

Opened:

Stage 1 Pukeuri to Maerewhenua December 1875

Stage 2 Duntroon to Hakataramea July 1881

Stage 3 Maerewhenua to Duntroon July 1881

Stops: 16

Pukeuri

Papakaio

Gibsons

Peebles

Aitchisons

Uxbridge

Black Point

Bortons

Maerewhenua Siding

Duntroon

Waikaura

Otekaieke

Strachans

Hilles

Kurow

Hakateramea

Closed:

Stage 1 Kurow to Hakateramea July 1930

Stage 2 Pukeuri to Kurow June 1983

Passenger services: Stopped March 1947

This branch line is remarkable mostly for the long stretches of straight line between its eastern terminus at Pukeuri and the western terminus at Hakataramea, across the Waitaki River from Kurow. It runs along the southern flank of the Waitaki River, the traditional boundary marker between Otago and Canterbury. The description of this branch enables explorers to avoid traipsing back and forwards across the landscape to find very few not especially interesting remnants, by sticking to the main road and taking a limited number of short diversions to the viewing spots.

The line was laid on flat land for most of its distance, so there are no spectacular remnants, but there are a few abutments and stretches of embankment. As always the surrounding landscape is interesting and scenic, making a drive along SH83 a pleasure anyway. Do watch out for cyclists though – the road from Kurow to Duntroon is part of the Alps2Ocean cycle trail.

The Kurow branch was no different in its reason for being developed from most other branch lines: to open up the interior to settlement. In the 1930's it was used to transport materials to build the Waitaki hydro dams, this traffic providing a boost to the line's economics which was by then much needed. In the 1960's it was used to carry metal for construction of Benmore and Aviemore dams.

There were two distinct stages of construction of the Kurow branch. The first section, from the Main South Line (MSL), was built by the government. A private company – the Duntroon and Hakataramea Railway Company – built the section from Duntroon to Kurow and across the Waitaki River to

Hakataramea. After operating the line for a short time using rolling stock leased from the government, the company ran out of money and the government took it over.

Start the journey at the junction of the branch with the MSL at the Pukeuri Freezing Works, nearly nine kilometres north of Oamaru on SH1. Celebrations in March 2014 to mark 100 years of operations of this large meat processing plant included the official opening of centenary entrance gates and a plaque unveiling at the main entrance to the plant in Works Road. The plant is owned by the Alliance Group.

The Kurow branch left the MSL a few metres north of the village of Pukeuri and immediately crossed SH1. The crossing place on the west of SH1 is now occupied by an electricity substation and there is nothing of the level crossing to see. It's best to take Georgetown-Pukeuri Road (SH83), which heads west from SH1 at Pukeuri, and continue for 1.7 kilometres to where the line crossed at the junction of Ferry Road. The formation is being used as a stock track on both the left and right of Ferry Road and is dead straight. However, it is hard to discern the actual formation, as the landscape from SH83 to the river has been intensively farmed, and there is a major water race/drainage which uses the same route. It is easy to confuse the two forms on the landscape. This pattern continues for some distance.

Continue on SH83, taking a side trip to the right along Gray Road to find the crossing point, and at Cameron Road to look for the site of the next station on the line, Papakaio. Papakaio is a decision point. Keen explorers can wend their way in a series of dog-legs across the flat Waitaki Plains, often on unsealed roads, to observe faint vestiges of crossing points and one remaining goods shed, plus a few unexceptional abutments and trestles.

Those who choose to be dogged in their pursuit of railway remnants can do no better than to refer to the Leitch and Scott publication which has a particularly good description of the route to be taken, though the remnants they referred to are now almost gone, apart from the few mentioned above.

The alternative is to simply continue on SH83 for 33 kilometres to Duntroon, aware that the line is on the right heading north following more or less the same course as the road, and that there were stops at Papakaio, Gibsons, Peebles, Aitchisons, Uxbridge, Black Point and Bortons, all of which are now pretty well bereft of remnants. A small diversion 1.9 kilometres along Gibson Road will reveal a goods shed. A similar diversion 2.9 kilometres along Jardine Road, then 200 metres along Irvine Road, will reveal remnants of a trestle bridge. Finally, a diversion along Atchison Road to turn left along Uxbridge Road will take one to a deep ford with bridge remnants in the stream and slightly further on the remnants of a set of abutments, both on the left.

Duntroon was the terminus of the Kurow Branch from 1875 until 1881. Initially the station was on the east bank of the Maerewhenua River, only crossing to the township itself after the road/rail bridge was finished in July 1881. There is nothing obvious on the riverbanks to indicate where the original rail bridge was, about 100 metres downstream of the current road bridge. Piers in the riverbed are sometimes exposed, particularly after heavy rain has scoured out the gravel.

Take time to explore some artefacts around Duntroon, all easily accessible on foot. The grass area opposite the Duntroon Hotel is the station area, now providing a good place to stop for a picnic on a fine day. The station was on the far side of the grassed area, facing a radial-roofed 60x30ft goods shed between it and the main street. It was a basic structure with no verandah, originally built as a post office in 1878. The stationmaster was also the postmaster and was responsible for a railway clerk and two post office clerks. He also supervised the adjacent stations at Bortons and Waikaura, so had a busy working life. Part of the old railway station served as a community crafts centre for

some years, and though this is now closed the building remains intact at the west end of the yards. There were also stockyards, a loading bank, an outside toilet for gents and the usual array of backshunts/sidings. The water tank on its stand is still in reasonably good condition. A house tucked alongside the river bank, behind a crumbling stone wall beside the road, may well be one of the two railway houses provided for employees. Across the road, beside the hotel, is the Vanished World Centre, well worth visiting to learn more about the fossils and geology of this part of New Zealand. Slightly further along is the Nicols' Blacksmiths Shop, which is registered Category 1 with Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga.¹ It is a very rare example of what was once a vital service throughout the nation, and it lives on in its original building. Behind the smith's shop is a railway remnant – a single truss span from the old road/rail bridge.

From Duntroon one can also explore various nearby locations in which Maori rock art can be seen. These too are registered with the Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga. Care must be taken when visiting these sites to not cause any damage. Both the Presbyterian and Anglican churches in Duntroon are also registered with Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga.

Leaving this treasure trove of historic sites, continue on SH83. The railway line descended slightly after Duntroon station to the river plain and is out of sight of the road at the foot of the rise for just over three kilometres. Road and rail converge on the right opposite one of the rock art sites on the limestone cliffs adjacent to the left of the road (access to which is via a walking path from a parking area slightly further ahead). Immediately beyond the parking area look to the right to glimpse a set of rail bridge abutments in the grass/broom/gorse.

About 600 metres further there was another stop on the line – Waikaura. A stock track coming from a farm on the right picks up the formation. The rail corridor veers away to the right just before the road goes up a small rise at Waikaura Creek. There used to be a splendid bridge over the Creek but all vestiges have now disappeared.

Just over the brow of the hill look carefully to spot embankment and a stone culvert 170 metres from the road. Otherwise the formation stays out of sight for the next two kilometres or so, when it angles back to the road to cross it and run on the left for another 1.5 kilometres to the Otekaieke River.

A stone loading bank just before the road curves right down to the river suggests the location of a stop on the line, but this structure may be of more recent vintage. There are no remnant piers or abutments to be seen on the left of the bridge, but immediately afterwards, in the paddock alongside the road, is the site of the Otekaieke station yard. The somewhat derelict structure on the far side looks as if it may have been a railways property, but this is unlikely unless it was moved to this location after the line closed, as there were only simple shelter sheds at all stops (other than Duntroon and Kurow).

From Otekaieke road and rail ran almost dead straight for nearly 12 kilometres. For the first 1.8 kilometres it provided a convenient base for a stock track on the left. This track turns sharply away from the road. There are three posts in the creek bank immediately after the end of the stock track which look as if they were part of a railway bridge. For the next 2.4 kilometres to the Otiake River the corridor continues on the left, most of the time remaining visible as a raised embankment. Posts of the rail bridge in the Otiake River bed confirm the formation had indeed remained on the left of the current road.

Shortly after the Otiake River the line crossed from the left to the right of the road, and is again seen as a raised embankment. A couple of sets of abutments and posts along the next 500 metres (from

the river) on the raised embankment are clear indicators of the presence of the line. For another five kilometres line and road run straight. Sometimes the embankment is very clear, and at other times it has been eradicated by new vineyard plantings or other agricultural activity. A stop called Strachans was somewhere along this part of the line, perhaps close to the interpretation panel attached to a fence on the left just over half a kilometre past Otiake Road.

Where the road finally dips and curves slightly on the approach to the Kurow River the line arced away to the right, making its way round the slope out of sight and then crossing the road to line up for the river crossing on the left of the road. The crossing point is just after a property called Western House on the left of the road. The bed of the Kurow River is constantly scoured by flooding so changes frequently, and there are no visible remnants of the rail bridge which was at a slight angle curving gently to approach the next station site, Hilles. There is nothing left of Hilles, which was presumably accessed via Hilles Road, about 800 metres from the bridge. From here it is less than 1.5 kilometres to the station at Kurow. The line is about 70 metres from the road throughout and can be seen crossing Ferguson Street which forks off SH83 just as one enters the town.

In the middle of Kurow turn left into Liverpool Street. At the far end is the Kurow railway station, in use in 2013 by Kurow Wools Limited, registered wool and skin buyers. The concrete platform is extant and can be seen at the left (east) end of the building. After nearly 60 kilometres it is a relief to at last be able to see a substantial vestige of this line. You can also view the station from the other side by making your way round to Gordon Street, but this presents a blank wall of corrugated iron and nothing that indicates any rail heritage.

Kurow is a good place from which to go hunting, fishing, canoeing and jet-boating, and is a popular overnight stop for cyclists on the Alps2Ocean trail. It is also the southern gateway to Lakes Waitaki, Aviemore and Benmore. From the station the line curved to cross the Waitaki River on two road/rail bridges to Hakataramea. Although the rail functions were closed in 1930, use of the two bridges continued, with replacements under construction from 2012 onwards; the first opening in 2014. Cross the river to see a bit of embankment on the right on the far side. Nothing is left of the platform, goods shed and stockyards which used to comprise the Hakataramea terminus, about 500 metres from the river on the right of the highway.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Alps2Ocean cycle trail:

<http://www.alps2ocean.com/>

Kurow Visitor Information:

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

The Duntroon Blacksmith Story:

<http://www.duntroon.co.nz/page1.php>

Information about Oamaru and the Waitaki District:

<http://www.atoz-nz.com/intro.asp?Loc=4>

¹ <http://www.heritage.org.nz/the-register/details/9237>