

NGAPARA BRANCH

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Length: 24.3 kilometres

Opened: Completely April 1877

Stops: 9

Waiareka Junction

Weston

Cormacks

Lorne

Elderslie

Windsor

Corriedale

Queens Flat

Ngapara

Closed:

Stage 1 Cormacks to Ngapara July 1959

Stage 2 Waiareka Junction to Cormacks 1997

Passenger services: Stopped December 1926

The Ngapara branch, and the associated branch to Tokarahi, both have much of interest to the rail explorer. They run through some fascinating countryside, and there is a good range of local historical sites if taking a break from visiting the limestone glories of downtown Oamaru.

The Ngapara branch opened first, in April 1877. It was constructed to provide access to farmland west of Oamaru and to facilitate export of agricultural produce and limestone from along the Waiareka River valley. Big estates in the area generated much of the traffic, including racehorses from the Elderslie Estate where its owner John Reid was a pioneering stock breeder. He was also involved in the frozen meat trade.¹ This is also one of the prime wheat-growing parts of New Zealand, and transport of wheat to the flour mill at Ngapara and of the finished products to Oamaru and elsewhere sustained the line for many years.

In June 1879 construction of a side branch from Windsor to Tokarahi began, and through the economic depression of the 1880s building the line provided unemployment relief. The 19.2 kilometre Tokarahi branch opened on 10 July 1887 to the west of the Ngapara branch and is described later in this chapter.

The Main South Line (MSL) runs through Oamaru, about which little needs to be said because there is a plethora of information available online and elsewhere about its fine limestone buildings and other attractions. Following the lines to Tokarahi and Ngapara can be done in a half day trip from Oamaru.

Head south from Oamaru on SH1 to the intersection with Weston Road, where the turnoff is signposted to Weston and Ngapara. Weston Road crosses the MSL on an overbridge. Look to the right into the deep rail cutting and you will be viewing the station area of Waiareka Junction on the left side of the MSL. There were various buildings and associated infrastructure in this narrow cutting, which together made a unique complex in the New Zealand rail system. There was a narrow wooden platform for the few passengers using the line; a track-level class B1 signal box; an external staircase attached to the signal box and the bank; and a special class station building on the top of the bank. Looking down from the road bridge it is hard to understand how it all fitted into the

narrow space now occupied only by a rough track at the foot of the deep cutting to the left of the main line.

Continue to Saleyards Road and turn right. Just past the yard's parking area the formation is immediately visible on both sides of the road. Continue on Weston Road and just past District Road (on the left) the formation can be seen on the right about 90 metres distant. About 400 metres from District Road, Weston Road forks, and just past the fork on the right-hand side the formation can be seen both left and right in use as a walking/cycling track. Take the left fork – West View Drive – and follow the line as it curves left on an embankment behind a row of blossom trees on railways reserve land on the right to the site of Weston station. When passing Gordon Street there are rails in the ground. Weston station name board is still in place.

Weston is home to the largest Oamaru stone quarry in New Zealand, supplying both local and overseas markets. The quarry lies a further mile inland from Weston, so its daily operation is not noticed by Weston residents². The rail corridor as far as Weston is still owned by KiwiRail pending decisions about whether or not to reopen the line at some time should there be an expansion of limestone quarrying.

At the intersection of West View Road and Whiterocks Road note the rails still embedded in the asphalt. Take Whiterocks Road to Main Street, filtering left as signposted. Less than a kilometre later, somewhere around the intersection with Cormacks-Kia Ora Road, was the site of the Cormacks stop, of which nothing now remains. The line curved from the left to cross the road and run across a small rise and through a large industrial site, now owned by Parkside Quarries. This is the crushing and processing site of the aforementioned limestone quarry, and from the early 1930s was Taylor's Lime, which used the lime dust from the Oamaru stone-cutting saws to make an agricultural lime to enhance soil fertility. The quarry is in the hill behind the crushing plant.

From the works the line ran round the foot of Williams Bluff on the right, studded with distinctive limestone outcrops. The embankment can be made out at an elevation towards the foot of the bluff. It eventually converged with the road on a right-hand bend on the rise at the end of the straight section of the road. This was the site of Lorne station – a simple shelter shed which has long since gone. The road used to run up and over the railway line and down the slope through an S-bend, while the railway line was making its descent on a 1-in-50 gradient to the Waiareka Creek. Tucked under a tree on the right side of the road at the crest of the rise is a set of stone abutments of the overhead road bridge.

Immediately after cresting the rise one can see the formation below and on the left descending to take a straight line across some flats. Before doing so it crossed Waiareka Creek, and there is still a massive abutment visible from the road on the left bank. Passing Coal Pit Road (on the right) look left at what is said to be the old engine shed from Ngapara, or the shelter shed from Enfield, or the station and goods shed formerly sited at Enfield. If they are indeed railway remnants, from wherever, they are in a particularly sorry state and bear only passing resemblance to standard shed designs.

Approaching Enfield, the line converges with the road, which it abuts on a right-hand bend. The Enfield station and yards were in the flat area to the left of the road, tucked against the hillside. In its heyday the station boasted two radial-roofed shelter sheds, plus a men's toilet, a loading bank and stockyards. The formation leaving the station for Ngapara is now a short walking trail.³.

Continue to Enfield itself, a small settlement of neat and tidy houses, an unoccupied primary school, playing fields and tennis courts, a general store, a community hall and not much else. Turn left at Wellington Road to view the level crossing where there is a good view of the formation on both the

left and right. From Enfield road and rail diverge but both follow more or less the same route, set apart (rail on the left of the road) by up to 750 metres, too far away to see if there are any abutments or culverts.

Return to the main road (Weston-Ngapara Road) and continue north. There is nothing to see of a crossing in Elderslie Road (750 metres from the intersection). However, at the end of Pine Hill Road, the next on the left, the passage of the formation along the hillside on an embankment on the left is very clear. This is the general vicinity of Elderslie station, and there are still stockyards on the right. A series of stone buildings on Pine Hill Road are all survivors from the days when Elderslie was a massive working farm and horse-breeding operation: a two-storey Oamaru stone woolshed and yards, men's quarters (wooden) and stone stables. The stables were home to Phar Lap's sire, Night Raid, and dam Entreaty. Phar Lap was one of New Zealand's most famous racehorses. New men's quarters were built in 1908. All of these are registered with Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga and there is a lot of information on their website.⁴

Return to Weston-Ngapara Road and turn left along Pig Island Road to observe the crossing place in a stand of trees 750 metres from the intersection. After another 1.5 kilometres on the main road turn left at the forks and go along Windsor Road to the rail crossing a kilometre from the fork.

Windsor is a tiny settlement but is an important junction linking a comprehensive network of roads that cross the hill country for many kilometres around. The most important street in Windsor itself would seem to be Railway Street, on the left as one enters the hamlet. This led to and from the station and yards which were in a reasonably flat area on the right of Peaks Road, behind a garage/storage facility.

As befits its status as the junction from where the Tokarahi branch was eventually pushed through, the yards have some remnants (at last!!!!) – viz. a loading bank, stockyards and embankment. The station itself was the usual small shelter shed, on a raised platform. There was also a water vat on a stand placed strategically just beyond the junction point of the two lines at the far end of the yard.

While it may seem both sensible and logical to finish exploring the Ngapara branch from Windsor to the Ngapara terminus, and then cross country to trace the Tokarahi branch, it is suggested that a more fruitful journey is to first follow the Tokarahi branch from Windsor, continue via Island Cliff to the Ngapara terminus and from there follow that branch back to Windsor. The description of the final section of the Ngapara branch is therefore at the end of the following description of the Tokarahi branch.

TOKARAHİ BRANCH

TOKARAHİ BRANCH

Length: 19.2 kilometres

Opened:

Completely July 1877

Stops: 4

Windsor Junction

Tapui

Island Cliff

Tokarahi

Closed:

Completely July 1930 (29 years before first stage of Ngapara Branch closed)

Passenger services: Stopped in December 1926

From Windsor the Tokarahi branch had a somewhat precipitous journey across countryside comprised largely of limestone bluffs and plateaux, with sweeping valleys between leading south down to the Kakanui River. For much of the time the formation is out of sight of any of the network of country roads in the area.

To view the best features on the first 12 kilometres or so leave Windsor on Windsor Road, take a right-hand fork and climb up and around the hill on Victoria Hill Road. If this road is not open to traffic simply continue on Windsor Road. The rail corridor climbed gently out of Windsor on a wide left-hand bend and then ran above Victoria Hill Road, picking its way in deep cuttings and on high embankments mostly out of sight of the road, though there will be glimpses from time to time.

Victoria Hill Road makes its way round the south flank of Rakis Table, a prominent hill feature, while the line makes its way round the north flank. After 5.5 kilometres turn right up Tunnel Road, and maintain a vigilant watch for the embankment on the hillside on the left. After just over two kilometres the formation appears in a deep gully on the left, and as this gully disappears into the hillside the top of the northern portal of the first of two tunnels on the line appears. This tunnel was called, not surprisingly, Rakis Tunnel. Continue up the road sufficiently far to look down and see the formation in its cutting ending abruptly at the tunnel.

The other end of the tunnel is not accessible or visible from the road. If you continue up Tunnel Road you will get a magnificent view of the landscape for many kilometres around. However, it is best to return down Tunnel Road to the "main" road, now called Crown Hill Road (passing the intersection with Victoria Hill Road), and turn right.

Take the next road on the right after 2.5 kilometres signposted as Conlans Road (but marked as Peaks Road on Google Earth), and if possible measure 750 metres up the road to be over the second tunnel on the line, neither end of which can be seen from the road. The embankments and cuttings on either side of the ridge it burrows through may be visible, either from the tunnel site or from further up the road where it makes a sharp left-hand bend. This tunnel is not named and very unusually, is not marked on the track diagrams in *The New Zealand Railway and Tramway Atlas*. It is, however, generally referred to as the Tapui Tunnel.

Return again to the main road (now called Tapui-Tokarahi Road) and proceed for nearly 2.5 kilometres. Again, the formation can be seen quite clearly from time to time high on the hills above or in the distance where there are deep cuttings into the hillside. It gradually made its way down to road level, and Tapui station, one of only two stops between Windsor and Tokarahi (Island Cliff being the other), was on a wedge of flat land at the junction with Cants Road. The line then crossed to the left of Tokarahi-Tapu Road, and bits of embankment can be seen for the next kilometre. It then crossed back to the right, and the formation can be seen coming through a cutting on the left and running across through another shallow cutting on the right.

The line now disappears from any roadside viewing opportunity, cutting across country to the right for nearly four kilometres along the valley of Karara Creek between two ridges of the Island Cliff and other limestone formations which provide imposing backdrops. The high point of Island Cliff stands above Tokarahi-Tapu Road on the right, rising to 385 metres and higher than everything else on the local landscape.

Continue to the small settlement of Tokarahi to explore the final terminus of this branch, which the railway entered from the other end of the village. Tokarahi itself has nothing to offer the railway

explorer and is the usual village set-up of a community hall, memorial gates, a church and a few pleasant houses. There is a small limeworks still operating nearby. The railway station and yards were behind the small cluster of houses in the “main” street, accessed via a small No Exit road alongside the pretty stone church. As befitted a modest terminus, the facilities too were modest: a water vat, platform, small shelter shed and an engine shed. There were, however, some houses provided for railways staff.

At the junction of Tokarahi-Tapui Road and Tokarahi-Ngapara Road, take the latter, and soon after view a scrubby paddock on the left. This somewhat forlorn site is the location of the terminus. The road back to Ngapara is initially alongside Tokarahi branch which had come through Island Cliff station and turned back on itself for the final run into Tokarahi. On the left of the road (and rail corridor) is the Awamoko Stream which has formed the “Valley of Whales”. There are shells and rare whale and dolphin skeletons entombed in the limestone all round this area, which is an important remnant of an ancient sea floor. More information about this interesting area is available at the Vanished World Centre only 12 kilometres away in Duntroon (referenced in the Kurow branch chapter).

For just over 2.5 kilometres from the Tokarahi station site there is a small series of rail remnants – a couple of stone culverts and a couple of sets of abutments, all of which are on the raised embankment mostly visible throughout. It is easy to see where the formation eventually crossed the road from the left to pass through the Island Cliff station site which was on the right. Nothing remains of the station. From here the line made its way across country to the crossing place on Tokarahi-Tapui Road already described.

Continue on Tokarahi-Ngapara Road for 7.7 kilometres to the village of Ngapara. This was the terminus of the Ngapara branch from 1 April 1877 until its closure in 1959. Approaching Ngapara from Tokarahi, look for Railway Street on the left at the junction of Ngapara Road and Georgetown Road. The engine shed, turntable and stockyards were located behind the houses on the left along Railway Street. These houses may well have been amongst the five houses provided for railway workers. The station itself was on what is now open land (probably railway reserve) opposite the flour mill in the “main” street.

Rail facilities at Ngapara started modestly, with a small lean-to roof structure for a station and an engine shed plus platform. The station building was upgraded after 25 years or so to become a “Troup-era” class A no. 2 station, which also operated as the post office and a telephone exchange. In 1913-14 the engine shed was rebuilt, and a coal shed, houses for the guard, fireman and driver, and a hut for the cleaner were provided. The engine shed was said to have come from Culverden and the coal shed from Hyde. There was a 12-wagon backshunt to service the flour mill and a 15-wagon stockyard loop. A 50ft turntable was still in place when the line closed in 1959.

Nowadays Ngapara is a very small village, but it has some interesting historical sites which suggest a much larger settlement in bygone days. For example, the splendid three-storey flour mill was built in 1897 of Oamaru stone. There has been a flour mill on the site since the 1870s. The original mill operated in Duntroon and was water powered. Sometime in the 1880s it was moved to Ngapara and converted to be driven by a coal-fired engine. The mill was sited in the heart of what was reputed to be the best wheat-growing areas in New Zealand, and close to the coal mine at the Taratu formation a mere 200 metres to the north. The coal mine site is now owned by the cement company Holcim. There are interpretation panels in front of the mill which is owned by Milligans Food Group Limited, and continues to make flour and other food products. There was a siding from the station which had a wagon turntable to enable wagons to make the sharp right-hand turn needed to line up with and get through the double doors into the mill itself.

The other substantial building is on the junction of Ngapara Road and Duke Street, and this has the appearance of a tavern/hostelry. Its location in relation to Railway Street and the railway station reinforces this possibility.

There is also a well-kept Masonic Lodge building of considerable size at the far end of Railway Street. It seems that this is still an active Lodge, as a board on the building maintains that there are meetings of Ngapara Lodge No. 68 on the third Monday of each month (except January). This information is repeated on their website.⁵

Heading south out of Ngapara the railway formation is in the rough reserve land on the right of the road from the rugby ground onwards until the entrance to a property on the right 1.5 kilometres from the village. This is the location of the Queen's Flat stop, which comprised only a shelter shed and a 14-wagon siding, of which of course nothing remains.

Road and rail now diverge, with the formation running along the far side of Waiareka Stream, up to 400 metres to the right of the road. The formation can be seen as an elevated embankment across the flat paddocks. It can be seen particularly well where it runs along the foot of a slope, creating a clear face on the hillside. Exploration of McEwans Road produces no result, but after passing a stone memorial on the right side of the road commemorating the development of the Corriedale sheep breed, journey along Finlays Road to the site of Corriedale railway station, where, as usual, nothing remains. Corriedale has historic significance in the New Zealand agricultural sector as the place where the Corriedale Estate owner James Little crossbred sparse-grazing Merino sheep with the Romney, which prefers thicker grass cover. The resultant Corriedales are dual-purpose sheep, meaning they are used for meat and wool. Today, they graze in virtually all conditions in New Zealand, Australia, USA and parts of South America.⁶

From Finlays Road the railway curved away across country for 1.5 kilometres to Windsor, inaccessible by road. To get back to Windsor continue along Weston-Ngapara Road, then turn right along Windsor Road to return to the station site to re-orientate and revisit the place where the two lines branched.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Oamaru Steam and Rail:

<http://www.oamaru-steam.org.nz/>

For information on the geology of the area:

<http://www.vanishedworld.co.nz/index.php/home>

¹ Most of the first shipments of frozen meat from Port Chalmers (Dunedin) in 1882 originated from estates around Oamaru.

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weston,_New_Zealand

³ The walking trail is part of the Vanished World Trail, details of which can be found at the Vanished World centre in Duntroon (on the Kurow branch line) or online via their website <http://www.vanishedworld.co.nz/index.php/home>

⁴ <http://www.heritage.org.nz/the-register/details/2420>

⁵ <https://www.freemasons.co.nz/wp/contact-us/lodges/ngapara-lodge/>

⁶ <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/media/photo/corriedale-sheep-monument>