

SHAG POINT BRANCH

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Length: 3.0 kilometres

Opened:

August 1879

Stops: 2

Shag Point

Shag Point Collieries

Closed:

Completely in 1934

Passenger services: None (goods only)

Shag Point, about eight kilometres north of Palmerston, is worth visiting, not so much because there are vestiges of a very short branch line, but because it is a scenic location and there are other interesting things to see. The rail corridor on the left runs from the intersection with SH1 to the end of the small settlement and can be discerned for much its length. The line was mostly in the ownership of New Zealand Railways who built and then operated it until 1908, after which it was operated by the Shag Point Coal Company.

There was only one reason for the construction of this branch – to transport coal from a mine which was in operation from as early as the 1830s until final closure in the 1970s. Commercial mining began in 1863. A 140-metre main shaft led to a network of tunnels extended out from the coastline to a depth of about 80 metres. There were numerous owners over the years, and with each came new technology and expertise. By 1880, extraction had peaked at 36,000 tonnes annually and there were more than 170 people employed by the mining company. In 1875 the little coastal steamer *SS Shag* joined the trade, slipping into the narrow harbour to load. It was said miners working beneath the shoreline could hear the throb of engine and propeller. Seawater seepage was a relentless problem. By the time serious flooding forced the closure of the mine in 1902, over 400,000 tonnes of sub-bituminous coal had been extracted. Mining continued on land under various owners till the 1970s. Seams a few hundred metres inland were worked and some relics remain. The broken concrete platform near the southern car park is a return air vent.¹

There are various relics and interpretation panels in a reserve at the far end of the settlement, where there is also a seal colony which is easily accessible. At the right time of the day one may also be able to see yellow-eyed penguins/hoiho. The area is also rich in Maori history and one should note that there are a number of sacred sites and burial grounds in the area, which should be treated with respect, including not picnicking on them.

According to the *Cyclopedia of New Zealand* of 1905, Shag Point had “a public school, post and telephone office, one hotel, and a general store. There is good rabbit shooting for sportsmen, and the Shag River, near at hand, is well stocked with trout.”² Nowadays the small settlement comprises holiday cottages along the cliffs above the shoreline.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Department of Conservation (DOC) information:

<http://www.doc.govt.nz/parks-and-recreation/places-to-visit/otago/coastal-otago/shag-point-matakaea/>

¹ http://www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WM8C0V_Shag_Point_Coal_Mine_Shag_Point_New_Zealand

² <http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-Cyc04Cycl-t1-body1-d3-d12.html>