

MAKAREAO BRANCH

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Length: 14.2 kilometres

Opened:

Completely August 1885

Stops: 6

Palmerston

Meadowbank

Glenpark

Inch Valley

Dunback

Makareao

Closed:

Inch Valley to Dunback January 1968. Completely June 1989

Passenger services: Stopped in August 1930

In an article in *New Zealand Railfan* in June 2011 Arthur De Maine described it as “a branch line and a siding”, the primary line being the Waihemo, known later as Dunback, from which ran a long siding to the lime quarry at Makareao. This may be one of the shorter branch lines at about 15 kilometres long but it is well worth visiting as it has some different features from those found elsewhere. These are easy to find and worth a short side trip from Palmerston. As was usual, the branch was built to service the transport of agricultural products and livestock to markets. The siding, however, had one major purpose: to take limestone to cement works in Dunedin. Once the Burnside Cement Works closed (after the Clyde Dam had been built) there was no reason to keep the line open. There were proposals to extend the railway line beyond Dunback to link to Central Otago, but as with so many similar proposals the economics did not stack up and enthusiasm for construction waned.

The junction of the branch from the Main South Line (MSL) is half a kilometre north of the Palmerston station on SH1. From the junction the branch ran along the right side of Stour Street, on embankment which is now a street reserve in front of East Otago High School. An old semaphore railway signal stands at the entrance to the school, set back from the road. There are also the remains of a bridge alongside a current road bridge about halfway along Stour Street, well hidden in the undergrowth.

The formation continued straight ahead at the end of Stour Street, across what are now paddocks, and then curved left, out of sight of a public road for about half a kilometre. Turn left into Burraness Street, continue to SH85 and turn right. After 750 metres the formation becomes clear on the right, approaching the road at an angle and then crossing to the left just before Hughs Road.

Immediately after the Hughs Road turnoff there is a set of wooden bridge piers across a stream, easily seen from SH85. About 400 metres later there is another bridge structure in the elevated embankment, opposite Switchback Road. There is another bridge 500 metres further on, but this is positioned behind a house/farmyard and not visible from the road. Road and rail converge on a slight right-hand bend, and the saleyards just after the bend are on the site where a station was located – Meadowbank. The stockyards are emblazoned “Palmerston Saleyards” and appear to be in regular use. The embankment continues steadily on the left, confirmed by yet another bridge 500 metres on, across yet another stream draining into Shag River.

Continue to the entrance to McElwee Road on the left and note the gate still standing, its distinctive design making it very obviously a rail remnant. The next bridge crosses another small stream 250 metres further on, and the embankment/formation continues to be easy to follow until farming flattens it for a couple of kilometres.

Glenpark, the next stop, was just before the entrance to the next farm house, and immediately afterwards there are rather more substantial bridge remains tucked amongst trees, just as the line runs on embankment on a ledge cut into the limestone hillside. As the roadway opens again, the embankment continues to be visible, slightly raised to reveal itself above paddock level. Standing proudly in the paddock opposite the modest accommodation units (which look as if they cater for trout fishers) is a distinct railway crossing gate/fence, a number more of which will be seen along this line.

The formation continues on the left, rising as it and the road both curve left gently. More limestone cuttings identify the rail formation, and just after Craig Road (on the right) look for a sturdy stone culvert under the formation. The embankment/limestone cuttings/gates/fences combination continues, the formation sometimes used as a stock track. After passing Blair Athol Road (left) slow down as you approach Downlands Creek 3-400 metres later, to take a good look at the railway bridge on the left. This is a great example of the use of both wood and local stone in structures on this line.

About 500 metres beyond the bridge is the now unidentifiable site of the Inch Valley station. The top of a stone culvert may be seen if you peer hard at the vegetation, although seasonal growth is likely to disguise this small item. When David Leitch and Brian Scott viewed this site in the early 1990s there was a loading bank and a set of points to assist them in finding the site. Alas, no more!

As the road bends ever so slightly to the left the siding to the lime quarry at Makareao crossed. A very slight hump on the right of the road and a faint trace of separation of line on the right is all that can be made out to identify the level crossing. A variation in vegetation curving across the paddock on the right indicates where the formation curved towards the crossing over the Shag River.

Continue to explore the line on to Dunback on SH58. As the road curves left again, the line curves as well but moves away from the road a little. The embankment shows its passage rising to go through a deep cutting as the road goes up a small rise. As the road opens at the top of the rise, the formation reveals itself adjacent to the road exiting the cutting. It is now on one of the outstanding features of this line – a cut-stone retaining wall. This remnant is a fine example of stonemasonry, and the curved capstones on the top add to the neat, tidy and sturdy appearance.

Shortly after a couple of these walls the line continues as raised embankment. At a signpost for a picnic area on the right, look left for another railways gate, and note the line entering a cutting across a small bluff before emerging to cross the road. It comes as a shock to then drive for 1.5 kilometres without any sign of the line, other than scatterings of gorse and occasional lumps beside the road which may be bits of embankment.

At Bowkers Creek slow down again and peer to the left to see McCormicks Stone Bridge, a very early example of stone arch bridge-building. It was built in 1869 and is one of the last examples of the old coach bridges erected during Otago's golden era of prosperity. The bridge has Historic Place Category 2 registration with the Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga.¹ If you pull over on the far side of the bridge, a small layby provides safe parking and access on foot. If passing traffic allows, walk back to the modern bridge and peer through the trees on the other side (from McCormicks) to look for railway bridge remnants.

The formation becomes evident again after the bridge and rapidly turns into a distinct raised embankment. Look closely for a couple of small stone culverts tucked neatly into the foot of the bank. This is the final stretch leading to the terminus at Dunback, which is marked only by a wooden loading bank in the middle of a paddock on the outskirts of the village. The goods shed would have stood in this area. The station building was moved at the end of 1935 to replace one at Lumsden which had burnt down.

The solitary house alongside the approach to the village was a railways house. Just beyond is the Highwayman Hotel, originally called the Junction Hotel, built in 1864 from local schist and limestone. The hotel provided accommodation not only for the living but for the dead too – there is no cemetery at Dunback and people who died locally were taken by train to Palmerston for burial, and perhaps laid out at the pub before departure. The pub would have been a convenient stop for mourners on their return too. There was also a rabbit-canning factory in Dunback from 1891, which employed 30 men and 30 trappers and shooters during the season. In its heyday it processed 2,000 rabbits a day. The canned rabbit was sold as far afield as London.

The final exploration on this line requires backtracking to get glimpses of the siding that went to the Taylors Lime Works at Makareao. This quarry and works have been supplying the South Island with high-grade limestone for over 100 years. The hard, pure limestone (96–98% calcium carbonate) is processed into lime, which is used at nearby Macraes Flat gold mine for processing gold ore. When the Burnside Cement Works at Green Island near Dunedin was operating (1929–88), it used lime from this quarry.² The quarry and limeworks still operate, but these days the product is trucked to various destinations.

There is no convenient road from which to view remnants of the siding, and to do so one has to be somewhat dogged and traverse countryside on rough roads. There are two viewing possibilities, neither of which is connected to the other – most of the siding ran across countryside with no nearby road. To view the line from the limeworks end, return along SH85 to Domain Road, the first on the left. Turn left into Domain Road and cross the Shag River, turning right at the intersection with Grange Hill Road. After 350 metres turn left up Limekiln Road and continue 2.6 kilometres to the crossing over a stream. Once across you will be adjacent to the formation on its final run into the limeworks which are directly ahead and privately owned and operated so unable to be visited.

Returning the same way you should be able to make out the formation as it made its way back down the steep slope, a 1-in-35 gradient. Return to SH85 the way you came, and head back to Mclew Road. Turn left and look for the crossing 170 metres from the intersection, marked by a row of trees on the left. Cross Shag River further along Mclew Road, then turn into a farm road on the left. If this road is open it may be possible to get to the rail bridge site 330 metres away. There was a 15-span trestle bridge for the railway crossing of the river, which was destroyed in the mid-1990s as a military training exercise. If there is no access to the bridge site, it might at least be possible to make out the embankment heading uphill towards the lime works on the right.

¹ <http://www.heritage.org.nz/the-list/details/2405>

² <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/photograph/5228/taylors-lime-works-dunback>