CATLINS RIVER BRANCH

CATLINS RIVER BRANCH

Length: 68.4 kilometres
Opened:
Stage 1 Balclutha to Romahapa December 1885
Stage 2 Romahapa to Glenomaru July 1891
Stage 3 Glenomaru to Hunts Road Tunnel March 1895
Stage 4 Hunts Road Tunnel to Tahora December 1895
Stage 5 Tahora to Owaka June 1896
Stage 6 Owaka to Ratanui August 1904
Stage 7 Ratanui to Houipapa December 1909
Stage 8 Houipapa to Tahakopa February 1915
Stops: 17
Finegand
Otanomomo
Romahapa
Glenomaru (x2)
Hunts Road
Tahora
Owaka
Ratanui
Houipapa
Tawanui
Puketiro
Caberfeidh
Maclennan
Stuarts
Campbells Siding
Tahakopa
Closed:
Completely in February 1971
Passenger services: Stopped in December 1958

The Catlins River branch is well worth exploring as it makes its way along tight curves and steep gradients through dramatic and interesting scenery. Though not all of these features can be seen without leaving the car and hiking across country what can be seen from the roadside is noteworthy. There are also a number of significant remnants – tunnels, bridges and of course culverts. Make time for a visit to the museum at Owaka, about halfway along the line, as well as to many other sites of scenic and/or historic interest throughout the Catlins.

The Catlins was heavily forested and the railway was pushed through to access the inland forests. For many decades forestry ensured the line was well used and increasingly the servicing of farms being developed on land cleared of timber added to freight loads. It was also popular with tourists, day-trippers and organised excursion groups seeking to enjoy sites still popular today such as the lighthouse at Kaka Point.

The branch line left the Main South Line (MSL) just south of Balclutha. Today the first kilometre of line south from the junction is in use as an industrial siding to a large meat-processing plant owned by Silver Fern Farms at Finegand. Exploration of the Catlins branch starts on the Owaka Highway at

the intersection with Freezing Works Road at the southern end of the Silver Fern Farms works. The old crossing signs and bells are still in place. Head south on the Owaka Highway, passing another smaller processing plant behind which the railway line ran. It then crossed a drainage ditch and the remnants of a simple trestle structure can be seen from the highway. Another larger structure in the background is not part of the railway.

Just over 1.5 kilometres further turn left into Kaka Point Road. The railway line crossed the road by the entrance to 107 Kaka Point Road before heading straight for two kilometres, then curving slightly to the right. Somewhere round the level crossing was Otanomomo, a flag stop with a small passenger platform. There is now nothing to see other than the formation in use as a farm track heading south on the right of the road.

Return to Owaka Highway and after eight kilometres look to the left while crossing the Glenomaru Stream Bridge to view the distinctively styled railway trestle bridge crossing the stream 150 metres away. Embankment can be seen straight ahead, and the line crossed the road a mere 100 metres further ahead to run in a cutting at the foot of the hills on the right.

Traverse the hill and on the other side look for Romahapa Road on the right which leads to Romahapa, the next station on the line. Romahapa was the railhead for six years from 1885-1891. What is now a tiny settlement was at the time of construction and for many years afterwards a bustling village supplying work gangs with the necessities of life as well as being a depot for construction materials. There were also bush tramways operating in the vicinity in the 1890s which would have added to the busyness. There were many flax and twine mills in the vicinity, and tourists and holidaymakers stopped at Romahapa to journey on by coach to Kaka Point and the Nuggets. Excursion trains ran to Romahapa from Dunedin and Balclutha, and stock sale days at the yards in the area meant special trains to bring farmers, stock and stock and station agents for a day's work buying and selling their animals.

Look for formation on the left and right where Romahapa Road flattens to cross the valley. The station and yards were on the flats on the left. The station was a "class 5", one end housing the ticket office and the other a women's waiting room with attached toilet. Men used a toilet shed beside the station. There were small windows either side of the portico for tickets sales. The station building was bought by local farmers and removed in 1973. It has been relocated in the area and can be viewed by returning along Owaka Highway to Port Molyneux Road, and then Cloan Road, a round trip of about four kilometres. There is no guarantee gates will be open to allow access.

The yards had various configurations of loops and backshunts which changed over time as use of the line changed. There was a 40x30ft goods shed. The platform had a wooden edge. The men's toilet shed was removed in 1960.

Resume the journey on Owaka Highway, and look for Twine Mill Road on the right after just 1.3 kilometres. A short distance down Twine Mill Road is a treasure trove of heritage artefacts: stone abutments and ahead some of the twine mill structures. The twine mill was owned by W Begg and Co. and was called Glen Mill. The mill remnants suggest a factory of considerable size and scale. The railway had crossed the stream just before Twine Mill Road and follows the highway for just over half a kilometre before once again crossing the stream.

Continue on the highway for another 2.5 kilometres, noting rail embankment on the far side of Glenomaru Stream on the right. A bridge over the stream has piers of the same construction style as those in the stream at Twine Mill Road. The capstones on top of the piers are also distinctive.

Just over a kilometre further a scattering of ramshackle farm sheds on the right, after passing Glenomaru Valley Road, suggests the location of the next stop on the line – Glenomaru. Nothing obvious remains of the railway line at Glenomaru, but this was the railhead for four years, from 1891-1895, while construction continued into more rugged and difficult terrain through to Owaka.

From Glenomaru the rail corridor ran along what is now Matuanui Road on the right and then climbed up the lower slopes of McDonalds Hill to pass through the tunnel through the saddle. A side trip up Harvard Road (2.3 kilometres beyond Matuanui Road) leads to a crossing which is easy to see as the formation on the right comes through a deep cutting about 300 metres away. On the it left goes straight into a distinct cutting.

Road and rail are separated for the next five kilometres, and there are initially a few tantalising glimpses of the formation high on the right of the road, climbing through some steep-sided cuttings on the slopes. Just before the brow of the hill cross the highway to venture 100 metres or so along a farm access track. There is a good view on the left of the formation in a deep cutting below the road. This cutting is about 200 metres from the northern portal of the No. 1 Hunts Road Tunnel.

Once over the brow of the hill, stop at a car park on the right with Department of Conservation (DOC)[1] signage to explore the tunnel, walking for a few minutes along the formation to the southern portal. There are interpretation panels setting out the history and details of the tunnel. A torch is needed to walk through the tunnel which is 221 metres long. A.R. Tyrrell provides the facts and figures about the tunnel in his publication available at the Owaka Museum:

"It is 807ft in length and includes two small recessed areas for any workmen caught in the tunnel by the approach of a train. At each end is an impressive brick portal, while the interior is lined with stone blocks along the lower walls, and bricks for the arched roof and upper walls. The apex was 12ft 9 inches above rail level and the maximum width 10ft, at a height of 297ft above sea level on a gradient of 1 in 82".[2]

Mr Tyrrell also provides information about the quantities of earth excavated, the amount of lining inserted, etc. Perhaps here it suffices to note further from his publication that "A quarry was opened close to the tunnel and bricks were produced in an adjoining kiln".[3] This is the most southerly tunnel in New Zealand's rail network and possibly the most southerly in the world.

Back on the highway keep an eye to the right of the road where the formation can be seen above the road creating an indentation in the bush and running through deep cuttings. It becomes harder to see as it takes a very tight curve taking it away from the road. However, you can get a good idea of the curve and the general lie of the formation by venturing 1.2 kilometres up Hunt Road, where the crossing and formation can be seen on both sides. There was a work camp at Hunt Road and a station with platform, yards, sidings, stockyards and of course some kind of station building.

"The Hunts [sic] Road section was a forerunner of the difficult terrain to the south of the Catlins River. A steep and winding grade with deep cuttings, sloppy clay, and many culverts requiring the employment of stone masons."[4]

From Hunt Road the line moves towards the road and then takes another very tight loop before straightening to run into Owaka. From Hunt Road to Owaka in a straight line is 3.3 kilometres, but the railway line between the two was just over five kilometres.

As well as a stop at Hunt Road there was another (Tahora) immediately where the second curve straightened to run into Owaka. Where road and rail converge embankment can be seen not far

across the paddocks on the right. Tahora station was somewhere in this area. At Dutton Road both road and rail cross the Owaka River, and the embankment can be seen about 300 metres away on the right of the road. If there are any rail bridge remnants, they are inaccessible. There are many drainage ditches with high banks in this low-lying area, and it is easy for the unwary to confuse ditch embankments and rail formation.

Owaka is the largest settlement in the Catlins. It is a hub for the traveller visiting the many scenic sites throughout the Catlins, and is a convenient spot to stop and get information about sea lions, penguins, dolphins, camping sites, bush walks, the best beaches to visit, etc. It also has a fantastic museum which houses the information office and the local library and it is well worth paying the small entrance fee. In addition, the railway line ran across the front precinct of the museum's location, reminiscent of the lyrics of a song by Vaughn Monroe that was popular in the 1950s:

"The railroad comes through the middle of the house; the railroad comes through the middle of the house; the railroad comes through the middle of the house: since the company bought the land."[5]

Owaka was the railhead for eight years, from 1896 until 1904, while work southwards progressed slowly, and debate raged about possible extensions of the line beyond Tahakopa to link with the Seaward Bush branch.

Leave Owaka on the Papatowai Highway and pass Catlins Lake, which is actually the tidal estuary of the Catlins River. The railway line ran on the left of the highway, crossing to the right about a kilometre out of town. As one reaches the shores of the lake look up to the right, and the line reappears as embankments and cuttings, some distance from and above the road. While the highway hugs the shore, the railway line runs further inland, eventually returning to the same level as the road for the run into Ratanui station (originally called Catlins River), nearly six kilometres from Owaka. The station site is 500 metres from the intersection Ratanui Station Road on the right and there is nothing except formation remaining. Ratanui in turn became the railhead as the line was slowly pushed on as far as Houipapa, a distance of less than three kilometres as the crow flies, and four kilometres by rail. For five years, from 1904-1909, Ratanui had a sizeable station, a 41x32ft goods shed, a loading bank, coal supply, water tank and supply. It also had its turn with the turntable which was moved from station to station as the line was extended.

Progress was so slow because the line had to cross swampy land, a bridge had to be built across the Catlins River, adverse weather delayed clearing land, and much soil had to be carted from cuttings to fill the swampy areas. The bridge was completed by the end of May 1907, by which time clearing the site for the station at Houipapa had begun. This required considerable earthworks and levelling, and from December 1909 equipment and structures were provided at Houipapa which became the railhead.

Continue on the Papatowai Highway for 3.5 kilometres from the Catlins River Bridge. The railway line is on the far bank of the river, hugging the base of the hills behind. Turn right along Catlins Valley Road which follows a wide meander in the river, and note the station signboard for Houipapa relocated onto the roadside fence. As hills and river squeeze together embankment can be seen coming round the hillside across the river. In the middle of a paddock between the road and the river stand three wooden piers, remnants of the Houipapa Bridge. Their height – perhaps 5-6 metres – gives some idea of the size of the bridge and how far it had to span what seems to be a not very big river.

The station was on the left of the road, and the concrete platform edge remains to be seen in the long grass if access is available. Because of its status as the terminus from 1909 until 1915, the site

had all the usual end of line equipment and a very long backshunt. There is certainly quite a large fairly flat area cut into the hillside these days. There was a significant work camp somewhere in the locale as well, though this would have moved forward along the line as progress with various aspects of the formation were pushed through.

After Houipapa the line passes the northern shoulder of Table Hill, which required an eight-mile (12.9 kilometres) climb of 500ft followed by a similar descent within a distance of only three miles. Preliminary work was done to drive a tunnel through Table Hill, but this was soon abandoned in favour of the surface route, even with all its engineering and construction challenges in such rough terrain.

At Houipapa the explorer needs to make a decision whether to press on for about 20 kilometres on an unsealed road through winding back country behind Table Hill, or to return to the main highway and travel a mere eight kilometres on a sealed surface to the point where rail and road once again met. The former affords a reasonable number of opportunities to view the line climbing up and around Table Hill, while the latter is far from any possibility of a sighting. The next few paragraphs briefly sketch the former route.

On the other side of the Houipapa station site the formation ran through cuttings along the road side to follow the river around a bluff, and then road and rail follow the same route for over 5.5 kilometres to the next station – Tawanui. The railway line is on the left of the road throughout and can be seen from time to time, but one needs to peer across paddocks to look for embankment or cuttings on the hillside. The only hint that one is in the area of the Tawanui stop is that one passes Morris Saddle Road on the right. A set of white iron railway gates can be seen somewhere around here.

While the formation makes its way around the hill on the left at some elevation, Catlins Valley Road keeps to the valley. An intersection takes Catlins Valley Road straight ahead as if to cross the Catlins River, and a sharp left-hand turn into Tawanui Road is required for the intrepid railway explorer. By this time one is as far away from the main highway as one is going to get, but only half-way through the journey. Continue on Tawanui Road, following the base contours of Puketiro Hill on the right, before cutting across country to join Puketiro Road. The road is on the right of Papatupu River for some of this distance, and the railway line which has been on the hill on the left descends to cross the road just before it starts climbing out of the river valley. The line continues to run along the valley, and the final vestiges of the Puketiro station and yards can be seen in the distance from halfway up Tawanui Road.[6] Puketiro was the highest point on the Catlins railway, being 520ft above sea level.

A.R. Tyrrell describes the sections from Houipapa to Puketiro well:

“From Houipapa to Tawanui the line followed the Catlins River, to climb nearly 200 feet in three and a half miles, two-thirds of this being at a gradient of 1 in 66. Until May 1916 Tawanui station and post office was known as Papatupu. Tawanui had a loading bank and two loops, the first for 43 wagons and the second for 24. The station became an important sawmill centre and also served smallholding settlers. From Tawanui the climb was even steeper. For a mile and a half the gradient continued at 1 in 66, but then increased to 1 in 55. This latter section was ‘compensated’, most of the curves being of seven and a half chains radius. The term ‘compensate’ is used to describe a section of track where the gradient is decreased in the curves to keep constant the workload for the locomotive.”[7]

The station sign for Puketiro has been re-erected on the fence beside the road above the station site. On reaching Puketiro Road turn right and proceed about 800 metres to where the line crossed the road. From here the line climbed steadily on a route that made construction difficult across the final levels of Table Hill. For example, the Matai cutting and a high sweeping cutting were probably the highest and deepest on the line. The cutting is probably 15 metres at its deepest point, and a staging had to be built, with large holes in its floor for the spoil to be dropped through for carting away. A tunnel had to be built to divert Matai Stream, which runs down the hill, and a large embankment built to carry the line over the stream gully.

Puketiro Road continues on the valley flats, but one can, with some difficulty and perhaps by squinting, make out from time to time where the line snaked along the hillside above on the left. Even if not on the formation little imagination is needed to understand what an engineering feat was enacted in these bush-clad hills. Follow Puketiro Road/Kahuika School Road to Mouats Saddle Road, turn left and return to Papatowai Highway. Turn left to find the place where the line finally made its way off the side of the hill at the site of the next stop – Caberfeidh. The name is Scottish Gaelic for stag's antlers, and one assumes there were indeed deer roaming in the area during the construction period.

If you find yourself at the car park at the start of a DOC walkway to Matai and Horsehoe Falls you have gone too far uphill. You may though of course wish to take the walks, the former of which is only 30 minutes return and the latter 35 minutes. About 250 metres downhill from Burnt Flat Road (on the left) look on the right for a small layby where road metal is stockpiled which marks the level crossing. The stop and yards at Caberfeidh were on the left of the road slightly further downhill. Around the next bend the original station name board stands slightly above the road on the left.

From Caberfeidh to the next stop at Maclennan the line dropped sharply to river/sea level on some of the steepest gradients in the South Island, reaching 1 in 40 at one point. The road equally drops steeply down to cross the Maclennan River on a one-way bridge. Continue past Mouats Saddle Road, and in about four kilometres as one enters Maclennan look to the left for a small shed about 200 metres away across a shallow gully. This is the back of the Maclennan station building. Continue for another 200 metres and pull off the highway into an untidy layby to venture as far as possible down the track, which is on the formation, towards the station yards. Access is barred by gates around some stockyards, but one can, with some difficulty, peer through the fencing to sight the station and its platform. It seems to be in a reasonable state of repair and still bears the distinctive railways red and cream paint colours and the station name.

The final section of the line now begins. From Maclennan the highway crosses the Tahakopa River and continues on around the Catlins coast. However, to follow the line turn across the highway before the bridge into unsealed Centre Road. Road and rail proceed together with the line on the left of the road for the final 7.9 kilometres to the terminus. The going for all this distance was comparatively easy – flat and only requiring "fascines" to secure a foundation across the swampy area along the river. A fascine is a rough bundle of brushwood or other material used for strengthening an earthen structure or making a path across uneven or wet terrain.[8] The route can be seen quite clearly from time to time, particularly in the last straight into Tahakopa itself.

The hamlet of Tahakopa is hard to miss – there isn't any other settlement in the area. A scrubby area of open land in the settlement identifies the station area. Given its status as the final terminus of this line, it had all the usual facilities such as goods shed, engine sheds, various sidings, stockyards, etc., as well as being the final resting place for the 55ft turntable. Amongst the long grass and gorse is the saddest sight of all – an almost completely derelict station building, with sagging verandah, holes in the walls, lots of missing boards, and occupied these days only by birds and any other wildlife that

might wander by. It is obvious that the whole structure is unsafe and it would not be wise to attempt to look inside.

There were a number of tramways from Tahakopa servicing sawmills in the area, including one to the extensive farming, logging and goldmining complex of Sir Truby King, the man best known for founding the Plunket Society[9] and developing an infant formula which is still the basis of milk powder for bottle fed babies today. Sir Truby, who was Medical Superintendent of Seacliff Lunatic Asylum north of Dunedin from 1899 until 1921, decided to develop farming interests more than 100 kilometres south of Seacliff when the Catlins branch was still under construction. Access via the railway system was critical to these interests.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Catlins Visitor Information:

http://www.catlins.org.nz/index.php?/site/visitor_info

DOC information:
http://www.doc.govt.nz/parks-and-recreation/tracks-and-walks/otago/coastal-otago/

Catlins Museum and Information Centre (Owaka):
http://www.nzmuseums.co.nz/account/3021

Sir Truby King
http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-ChaStra-t1-body-d7.html
http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/2k8/king-frederic-truby

---

[1] Department of Conservation www.doc.govt.nz
[2] *Catlins Rail: The Story of the Catlins River Branch Railway 1879-1971*, A.R. Tyrrell and Catlins Historical Society Inc., fourth printing 2005, pp.10-11
[3] Ibid, p.11
[4] Ibid, p.13
[5] http://www.lyricsmode.com/lyrics/v/vaughn_monroe/in_the_middle_of_the_house.html
[6] A video about Puketiro station can be seen on http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZCiyeT3Ej5I
[7] Ibid, p.22
[8] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fascine
[9] https://www.plunket.org.nz/