

TAPANUI BRANCH

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Length: 42.3 kilometres

Opened:

Stage 1 Waipahi to Kelso December 1880

Stage 2 Kelso to Heriot April 1884

Stage 3 Heriot to Edievale February 1905

Stops: 9

Waipahi

Conical Hill

Pomahaka

Glenkenich

Tapanui

Kelso

Heriot

Dunrobin

Edievale

Closed:

Stage 1 Heriot to Edievale in January 1968

Stage 2 Waipahi to Heriot in October 1978

Passenger services: Stopped in January 1934

The junction of the Tapanui branch from the Main South Line (MSL) is almost in Southland but as the line heads north it moves firmly through Otago. Following its route leads one to a range of remnants and artefacts, including a tunnel, as well as interesting local history and pleasant though undramatic scenery.

Pressure from local run holders and Dunedin commercial interests combined to force through the construction of this line to avoid loss of trade to Invercargill. Initially trade did go to Dunedin and on to Port Chalmers, but later some went south, with sheep being taken to the freezing works at Maitai, for example. It had been proposed that the line should be pushed through as far as the Clutha River and thence to Roxburgh, but this plan never reached fruition and instead the line terminated at a tiny settlement called Edievale. This section (from Heriot) was closed first, the rest of the line being sustained by forestry from the Conical Hill State Forest.

The start point is Waipahi, a tiny settlement on what is known as the "Presidential Highway", so called because it references American political figures by linking the towns of Clinton and Gore. The road is otherwise, and correctly, called SH1. The MSL between Dunedin and Invercargill runs through Waipahi alongside SH1. Turn off the highway at Waipahi into West Otago Road and cross the MSL. On the left is a street conveniently called Railway Terrace, so one can easily surmise that the station used to be on the piece of land between Railway Terrace and SH1, which is now used to stockpile metal for road and rail maintenance.

The Tapanui branch line junction was in the north-east of the station yard, leaving the MSL just before the level crossing guarded by bells and lights. Only 200 metres along West Otago Road a road bridge crosses the Waipahi River. Look from the bridge to the right to spot two significant railway bridge piers standing in the river. Though only remnants and not fully intact, they indicate the size of pier needed to withstand the river flows in flood and to carry heavy-laden trains. The bridge had three spans each of 40ft.

A little further along West Otago Road turn into Old Main Road and see where the line crossed from the right after curving away gently from the river. On the left it ran straight for 200 metres before curving left to begin its run alongside the Waipahi River for 3.1 kilometres, and the Pomahaka River for another kilometre. At that point it entered a tunnel under Conical Hill.

Continue on West Otago Road for eight kilometres. The railway line is far to the right adjacent to the river for all this distance, out of sight of the road. As the road descends and crosses the flats leading to the Pomahaka River look for a sign on the left of the road, pointing to a walkway on the formation to the right of the road. There is a Fish and Game sign on the gate. Out of sight past the gate is the northern portal of the one and only tunnel on the line, pushed through rock hard enough to need no lining. It is 71 metres long, and the landowner allows access most of the year, as long as the politely expressed "rules" are observed.

Proceed past the site of the Conical Hill station in the flat land on the left (of which nothing remains) and then less than one kilometre further on the road crosses the Pomahaka River. On the left is a terrific sight – a truss span and trestles of the old railway bridge. This bridge had five spans, one of 11ft, two of 30ft and one each of 40ft and 80ft.

Shortly after the bridge there is a large sawmill on the right, which used to be owned and operated by Blue Mountain Lumber Ltd. Previously it had been owned by the New Zealand Forest Service before such government entities were privatised. There was a private siding which crossed the road to service the sawmill.

The railway line continues on the left of the road, covering nearly 3.5 kilometres from the sawmill to the site of Pomahaka station which is easy to spot just after the intersection with Koi Flat Road as the goods shed is still standing, albeit in a decrepit state.

There have also been vestiges of embankment along the way to confirm that the line was on the left. Continue on Pomahaka Road to the intersection with SH90. Road and rail are together until just after Dalvey School Road, when they separate for 1.5 kilometres to the intersection, the line running straight across the paddocks and the road curving gently away to the right.

Turn right onto SH90 at the intersection. The line crossed the junction and immediately after on the left was the Glenkenich station, of which nothing at all remains. For the next 2 kilometres the embankment is slightly raised, and often covered by gorse. A couple of culverts confirm the passage of the formation. Road and rail begin to diverge after 2.2 kilometres, and the road then bifurcates. Take Duncan Road on the left and pass the large Stuart Timber sawmill site on the right. The rail corridor is down the hill on the left, running along some flatter territory into Tapanui station.

Continue on Duncan Road to the intersection with Station Road and turn left. Less than a kilometre away there is a sign indicating a hump in the road, which is where the railway line crossed out of the station on the left. The station area is a waste ground and there is no access. The goods shed on this site had a round roof line and was quite large at 60x30ft but was pulled down in the late 1990s. An old house across the road at the entrance to the South West Earthmovers Ltd rock and gravel supplies depot certainly looks of the right era to have been a railways cottage though the roof line has been changed.

From here the line is out of sight from any road as it makes its way along the banks of the Pomahaka River to Kelso. There are now two choices for the explorer. If in need of refreshments, or wishing to visit the township of Tapanui, follow Station Road back to and past Duncan Road, and one will be

delivered to the main street where there are several cafes. The alternative is to continue on Duncan Road, bypassing the town centre to rejoin SH90 by the racecourse on the north of the town. Proceed for just over a kilometre to the intersection with Wooded Hill Road (on the left).

Follow Wooded Hill Road (which is hilly, but not in the least bit wooded these days) for just over three kilometres to a bridge across the Pomahaka River, where road and rail converge again. Approaching the bridge the railway line can be seen on the left as a distinct formation, now being used as a private track, and on the right as a scrubby embankment. The township of Kelso was located on the Pomahaka River flats and was prone to flooding. A major flood in 1978 led to the closure of the branch line, and another in 1980 was so devastating that the whole town was abandoned. A very good interpretation panel and a memorial have been erected in a little layby only 300 metres from the bridge, and it is worth stopping to have a look at them. There is a shed behind the memorial which looks as if it might have been a goods shed, but the photo on the interpretation panel shows a goods shed with a round roof, though this could have been replaced by the pitched roof model. The records show that there was a 60x30ft shed and a passenger platform. The photo on the panel confirms that the railway "yard" was more or less around the area of the layby. Kelso was the terminus of the line from December 1880 until March 1884.

Continue from the memorial to where Wooded Hill Road curves left and take a right turn into Cheviot Road, which rises to cross the raised rail embankment. Stop to view the rails embedded in the asphalt on the crest. Return to the T-junction of Wooded Hill Road with Greenvale Road (left) and Ardmore Road. Turn right and proceed 2.4 kilometres along Ardmore Road to turn right again into Park Hill Road. The formation crossed Park Hill Road 500 metres from the intersection, beyond two road bridges across drainage ditches.

Return to Ardmore Road and after 2.7 kilometres turn right into Black Gully Road. The railway line crossed at 420 metres, where a row of trees in a straight line on both the left and right shows the location of the rail formation.

The railway and Ardmore Road converged on the right just after Shanks Road (left) and both then ran straight into Heriot itself. These days the yards are used as a sprawling transport and storage area with stockpiles of gravels, shingle and fertiliser stores. There is nothing to identify exactly where the goods shed, passenger shelter shed and backshunt were located. There was also a 50ft turntable. The house set back on the right side of Roxburgh Street (the main road through town) after passing the transport yard used to be the stationmaster's house, overlooking the turntable and yard.¹ Heriot was the terminus from April 1884 until 1905.

The railway line crossed the intersection at the corner of Roxburgh Street and Mathesons Corner Road, where a war memorial now stands. Turn up the latter road and look for the formation below on the right. It can be glimpsed before vanishing amongst trees, to reappear again for further brief glimpses as the road climbs. As the road bends to the right, a downhill track joins it on the left. If you feel so inclined, and somewhat brave, venture down this track and around the corner until you can look across the paddock to the right. With some luck, and if the sun is in the right position, you will see a set of six piers of an 84ft-long bridge crossing Heriot Burn in the distance. These appear to be of the same design as the piers at Waipahi and Pomahaka. Return to Mathesons Corner Road and decide which of two routes to take to get to the end of the line at Edievale. Neither of these routes affords any views of the line for the final 10 kilometres or so of its route. Sighting the only stop between Heriot and Edievale – Dunrobin – is therefore impossible.

One route option is to continue on Mathesons Corner Road to the intersection with SH90, turn left at SH90 and drive for 5.5 kilometres to a Y-junction, which leads one downhill to a somewhat forlorn collection of old buildings and a couple of modest, more modern houses. This is Edievale.

The other option is to leave Heriot on Roxburgh Street and follow Dunrobin Road/ McHutchon Road along the brow of the hill above the railway line, which is out of sight on the flat tucked against the hillside on the right throughout. This route ends at exactly the same spot described above.

The flat area on the left in Edievale (if coming from SH90) was the terminus of the Tapanui line, occupied by a passenger platform, a small shelter shed, a 40x30ft goods shed, a loading and an engine shed. There was also a water tank and stockyards. There was, however, no turntable and locomotives had to run backwards as far as Heriot. No remnants of any of these structures are visible from the road.

Edievale may not have anything to offer these days, but when the railway was pushed through its location only 10 kilometres from Raes Junction, the “gateway” to the Clutha River, was important. From Edievale one can return to Tapanui and destinations further west or south, or travel on to the scenic and other delights all along the Clutha.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Tapanui:

<http://www.cluthacountry.co.nz/pages/3-5/Tapanui>

Clutha District Heritage Trail:

<http://www.cluthacountry.co.nz/files/340/file/Heritage-Brochure-pdf>

¹ This information is extracted from the caption of a photo by Hugh McCall (Branxholm) on Flickr
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/branxholm/5328382115/in/set-72157614813269199>