

REGIONAL OVERVIEW: SOUTHLAND

The main driver for railway construction in northern Southland was to open up the northern hinterland from Invercargill in response to settler demand for land and to meet the mercantile interests of Invercargill.

Railway construction began early in Southland, starting with a wooden rail line from Invercargill in 1864. The earliest lines picked off the easier routes across the plains, and on encountering more difficult terrain further north and west development slowed or ceased entirely. Rail remained a vital part of the Southland transport network until the Mossburn and Kingston branches finally closed in 1982, all others having closed in the preceding decades.

Invercargill was the hub from which a series of lines were built – to the port at Bluff; towards the Catlins on the Seaward Bush branch; round the south and western coast via Riverton and Tuatapere; and to Lake Wakatipu on the Kingston branch; and of course the Main South Line (MSL) terminated (or began, depending on your point of view) at Invercargill.

Other branches were then built from some of these lines – Hedgehope (Browns) and Mossburn branches from the Kingston branch; the Wyndham branch, Waimea Plains Railway, and the Waikaka branch from the MSL. The Waimea Plains Railway formed the third leg of a triangle of railway connections across the plains between the MSL, Invercargill and Lumsden, and in turn spawned a short branch line to Waikaia (also known as Switzers).

The branches serviced extractive industries – gold, minerals, timber – as well as the farming community. The rail network was also essential for tourism with passengers travelling as early as the 1880s to the Great Lakes and the other scenic splendours of Fiordland.

“Northern Southland is an area of majestic mountains, clear skies, rolling hills, expansive lush plains, world renowned trout fishing rivers and friendly people!”

While the above quote from an unfinished website promoting northern Southland may seem to be somewhat overblown, it provides a useful description for the explorer of branch railway lines in the area. Be prepared for big skies, mountain-framed flat farmlands in all directions, straight and easily driven roads (with little traffic), and a wealth of interesting historical and heritage sites to divert those intent on simply getting from A to B.

Lumsden occupies a geographically significant spot in northern Southland, sited on the eastern bank of the Oreti River, one of the major rivers of Southland. Lumsden is the fulcrum for traffic from Invercargill and Dunedin between the tourism destinations on Lake Wakatipu. It is also the junction from where travellers make their way west into the tourism delights of Doubtful Sound, Lake Manapouri, Te Anau and Milford Sound. Lumsden township is located just south of a bend in the river, where it turns from a west-east flow to a north-south flow. The bend in the river meant that in its earliest days Lumsden was called “The Elbow”.

It was almost entirely because of railway traffic that Lumsden developed at all. In railway terms, Lumsden station and yards were the junction for the Waimea Plains Railway (east), the Kingston branch (between Invercargill and Lake Wakatipu, north-south), and the Mossburn branch (west). It was therefore busy every day, with timetables juggling trains in and out to and from all points of the compass.

Lumsden is a great place to use as a base for exploring eastern Southland, and for access to the scenic splendours of Fiordland to the west and the lakes district to the north. It was the junction for the Kingston Flyer on its way between Gore and Kingston on the Waimea Plains Railway, which also provided the link between Lumsden and Dunedin, via Gore. Lumsden was also connected by rail to Invercargill on the Kingston branch. It was at Lumsden that passengers from Invercargill wishing to travel further north, to Kingston and the delights of Lake Wakatipu, transferred to the Kingston Flyer making its way from Gore to Kingston in order to reduce their overall journey time.