

MOSSBURN BRANCH

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Length: 16.3 kilometres

Opened: January 1887

Stops: 4

Mararoa Junction

Castle Rock

Murray Creek

Mossburn

Closed:

Completely December 1982

Passenger services: Stopped in October 1937

The Mossburn branch may be only 16 kilometres long and constructed over more or less flat land, but it took six-seven years to construct during the 1880s when New Zealand was experiencing a major economic depression. Construction from Lumsden began in 1879 and finished in Mossburn in January 1887. It was proposed that the line continue beyond Mossburn, which was regarded as a gateway to Fiordland, but with only light traffic on the line there was no compelling reason to extend it. Unlike other branch lines that faded into oblivion, the Mossburn branch ended its working life in a major burst of activity, providing a vital service for construction and other materials needed for the Manapouri hydro-electric power scheme from the early 1960s onwards. Wikipedia summarises the situation thus:

“....the branch suddenly became very busy with traffic not only for Manapouri but also for other government schemes in the area that centred around the development of farming. Mossburn station and yard were wholly re-organised; a modern station building replaced the previous shelter shed and a station master was appointed. A train ran from Invercargill every weekday, with allowances made for a second when required. As well as relevant freight for the Manapouri project, the line also carried significant quantities of livestock, fertiliser, and serpentine¹ for local fertiliser manufacturing plants. It was not until around 1980 that the various government projects wound down and required the railway less. The line reverted to a twice weekly level of service, with trains running from Invercargill on Tuesdays and Thursdays.”²

Today there is little to see, but a trip to the Mossburn Railway Hotel to view photographs the publican has framed and installed, courtesy of the photographer Chris Bradley, is well worth the trip. The local scenery is beautiful, and of course one is en route to many popular destinations in Fiordland.

Begin this exploration where SH94 crosses the Oreti River north of Lumsden on the modern road traffic bridge. The railway line from Lumsden made its way around the foot of the hill on the left of the bridge, to the point where it rose on an embankment to cross the river on a 195-metre-long wooden truss structure, which crossed at a slight north-facing angle to reach the other bank on the right side of the current bridge. Today, the raised embankment can be clearly seen after crossing the river, indicating the height of the rail bridge above the surrounding land and the river bed itself. The rail bridge also served road transport.

Almost three kilometres beyond the river there is a small four-way road intersection. The first of two stops on the line (other than Lumsden and Mossburn) was located in this area – Castlerock. The major farm in this area -Castlerock Run-has an extensive history, which is presented on a

comprehensive panel a few metres along Saleyard Road, one of 15 such interpretation panels on the Northern Southland Heritage Trail.

Castlerock was a hub for travellers fording the Oreti River, but local businesses were eclipsed once Lumsden began to expand rapidly after the railway had been put through. While driving on to Mossburn note the scenery, and, in particular, the Takitimu Mountain Range which forms an attractive backdrop to the flat farmlands in the foreground. Deer farming was first trialled in the Mossburn area, launching a successful new commercial sector in the farming world. There are many deer farms all round with large herds safely contained by fences too high for skittish deer to leap over.

Where SH94 turns slightly to the left (5.5 kilometres from Castlerock) the railway line crossed from right to left of the road, and the second stop – Murray Creek – was somewhere along this stretch, probably in the vicinity of Sutherland Road. Both Murray Creek and Castlerock were unattended flag stations. From as far as Castlerock the line can be made out as scrubby growth on a slightly elevated embankment. No other artefacts such as abutments over culverts can be seen, though they are bound to be lurking in the undergrowth. The embankment becomes particularly easy to discern once it is on the left-hand side.

The line continued to run parallel with the road, on the left, until veering slightly further left on the outskirts of Mossburn. Turn into the first left-hand road on the outskirts of Mossburn – Bath Street. At the end of Bath Street the aforementioned Railway Hotel commands the scene. The railway station and yards are all long gone, but were to the left when facing the hotel.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Mossburn Hotel:

<http://mossburnhotel.weebly.com/>

Manapouri Hydro Scheme:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manapouri_Hydroelectric_Power_Station

¹ Serpentine is a natural magnesium-rich mineral that offers a slow release of magnesium. As a fertiliser, Serpentine is used for gradually increasing soil magnesium levels or for maintaining levels. Serpentine is most commonly used on dairy, sheep and beef and cropping farms and can be blended with lime and other fertilisers. <http://www.fertco.co.nz/products/organic-products/serpentine/>

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mossburn_Branch