

WYNDHAM BRANCH

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Length: 15.2 kilometres

Opened:

Stage 1 Edendale to Wyndham October 1882

Stage 2 Wyndham to Glenham May 1890

Stops: 5

Edendale

Menzies Ferry

Wyndham Racecourse

Wyndham

Glenham

Closed:

Stage 1 Wyndham to Glenham July 1930

Stage 2 Edendale to Wyndham September 1962

Passenger services: Stopped February 1931

The Wyndham branch starts at Edendale on SH1, about halfway between Invercargill and Gore. Edendale is the site of the oldest operating manufacturing plant of New Zealand's global dairy co-operative, Fonterra. The surrounding landscape-the Southland Plains-is more or less flat, rolling pastureland, so the plant towers over everything for miles around. Although modern rail links to and from the plant deal with the milk products being taken to markets, there is still a huge fleet of milk tankers coming and going between farms and the plant every day of the milking season.

"Located in Southland, one of New Zealand's fastest-growing dairying regions, Edendale processes around 15 million liters of milk per day – or about 650 tanker loads – during the peak of the milk production season. Accounting for 25 per cent of Fonterra's annual milk powder production, the site has a total output of more than 300,000 tonnes of milk powder and cream products for export every year."¹

The original intention for what became the Wyndham branch was for the line to be built as far as Toetoes Bay on the south coast in order to open up the land for development in the eastern part of Southland. This grand plan never came to fruition, construction proceeding only 15 kilometres east then southwards to the small settlement of Glenham (just beyond Wyndham) after significant lobbying by local interests.

Edendale was a railway junction on the Main South Line (MSL) for almost 80 years. Today the township provides accommodation and support services for the dairy plant and local agricultural activities. The MSL from Gore to Invercargill is on the left on the northern approach to the town, and at a junction at the south-eastern corner of the milk-processing plant there is a siding servicing the plant crossing SH1 from the MSL yards in Edendale. Turn left off SH1 to cross the MSL and note the yards to the right of the main street of Edendale. However, keep to the left and note Railway Crescent a few metres along Ferry Road.

The station at Edendale was also a post office for much of its lifetime. The Wyndham branch initially headed north, on the eastern side of the main line, crossing Ferry Road which it then ran alongside eastwards for the next 2.7 kilometres. For all of this distance there are only the faintest traces of a low embankment on the left, but the line has been virtually obliterated by agricultural activity. As the road finally deviates from its straight trajectory, curving right and sloping down to the Mataura

River, there is a road on the right to Menzies Ferry. Somewhere in this area there was a train stop, called Menzies Ferry, comprising a small passenger halt with a small platform and a shelter shed. On the left of the main road there is now a farmer's track which looks as if it uses the old railbed, slightly elevated above the road. With no visible abutments or culverts this is hard to verify. There was also a ballast pit in this area, with large quantities of good shingle, and the excavated site on the left side of the road may well be where this was.

The approach to the road bridge across the Mataura is accompanied by a rise in the paddock on the left which is embankment lining up for the run across the river. The nine-span wooden through-truss bridge was 175 metres long and served both road and rail. It had very long piles rising above high-water mark so as to ensure the bridge was well above the river, renowned for its floods. Nevertheless, it was washed away many times before the line eventually closed. The area all round has been prone to flooding in the past and this has presumably contributed to the lack of evidence of the railway line, particularly because stopbanks have been constructed.

There is also no evidence of the railway line in Wyndham itself, which is only 1.5 kilometres from the river. As you enter Wyndham, turn left to drive along Memorial Drive, past the racecourse on the left and sports fields on the right. There was a stop directly opposite the racecourse with a loading bank which was used for the loading and unloading of horses, some of which would have been brought by special trains from Dunedin and Invercargill.

Most streets in Wyndham are named after famous events associated with the Crimean war – Florence, Nightingale, Scutari, Raglan, Inkerman, etc. None give a hint as to the location of the railway station, by conveniently being called Railway Road or Sidings Street, etc. However, at the end of Memorial Drive, turn left into Raglan Street, then turn first left into Balaclava Street. Continue to the junction with Redan² Street and turn left. Turn right once again into Nightingale Street. The railway station and yards occupied the triangle of land bounded by Redan Street, the left side of Nightingale Street and Cardigan Road which intersects with Nightingale Street. The station itself was a "5th class" which benefited from the addition of a veranda sometime in the 1920s. According to a comprehensive article in *"New Zealand Railfan"* in March 2009,³ there were at least 11 families employed on the railway by 1925, including a stationmaster and station staff, gangers, engine crew and a guard. Presumably there were some railway houses somewhere in the area to accommodate them all.

At the end of Nightingale Street veer right along Cardigan Road until Wyndham-Letterbox Road appears. Wyndham-Letterbox Road continues all the way to Glenham, where this branch line terminated. Road and railway line were not always in close proximity, but there are some stretches of road where the line can be clearly seen, across a gully or occasionally alongside the road. The countryside between Wyndham and Glenham is quite hilly, and of course the line follows a route with easy gradients.

Initially the road from Wyndham is flat, passing Water Street and Doctors Road on the left. Just over a kilometre past Doctors Road there is a bridge over the Mokoreta River, a tributary of the Mataura. The railway bridge was on the left of the current road bridge and comprised three 40-ft wooden through-truss spans, sitting on significant concrete piers. No sign of any of this structure remains, though immediately after the river the formation becomes visible on the left, rising from a cutting at the river onto an embankment.

About half a kilometre further on the line runs through a deep cutting above the road which can be clearly seen across the paddock. Road and railway line are following the same contours, though the line soon vanishes from direct sight, occupying a gully/cutting down below road level on the left. As

the road climbs over a hill the line is further to the left, eventually completely out of sight of the road. It then turns back towards the road and crosses from left to right where the road dips, just after Templeton Road.

The road climbs beyond Templeton Road, and to the right across a wide gully the line can be seen as embankment snaking its ways along the slope opposite and rising slightly. As the road continues to rise, the line disappears from view as it too climbs on a less steep gradient. Just before the crest of the hill, note South Wyndham Schoolhouse Road on the right and then a grove of native bush, a DOC reserve.

The rail corridor is completely out of sight from just before South Wyndham Schoolhouse Road for the next 2.5 kilometres or so to Glenham. You will know when you arrive at Glenham itself by the small brick church building on the left of the road which bears remarkable design similarity to a Presbyterian church in Balaclava Street in Wyndham. Just round the bend from the church there are a few neat and tidy houses, and Pollock Road on the right. Turn into Pollock Road to view the site of the Glenham railway terminus. As is typical on this line there are no specific signs of railway remnants, but the flat area on the left of Pollock Road clearly indicates the area occupied by the station and yards. During its operating years the yards contained a standard-size platform and a shelter shed, a goods shed, stockyards and a loading bay, water tanks and coal storage. There was also an engine shed, which burnt down in 1927.

Pollock Road veers left 300 metres from the turn-off, and the line crossed to the right. Shortly afterwards a deep cutting on the right of the road shows very clearly where the formation was. Continue along Pollock Road for about 1.5 kilometres, to the point where it takes a fairly sharp left-hand bend to climb up a hill. Turn at this point, or proceed to the farm driveway on the right up the hill and turn there-if you continue on Pollock Road you will come to a dead end against the Maitua River. Look across the gully and escarpment on the right-hand side of the road (left-hand if you have already turned and are facing back to Glenham). The formation can be made out leaving a grove of trees and running on an embankment across the escarpment face. It has come through the hill in a tunnel about 600 metres behind the trees, and the sharp bend in Pollock Road is in a straight line to the southern portal of the tunnel, albeit nearly a kilometre distant.

Return to the small settlement of Glenham, noting on the left of the road the railway line making its way slowly but steadily down the escarpment face and finally, alongside the road, running through the cutting mentioned above, and then along the flat on the left of the road before crossing Pollock Road into the yards.

Although today the settlement of Glenham appears to comprise but a few souls, there is a well-cared for primary school on the rise above the site of the station yards would indicate there is sufficient population in the area to sustain this important local institution. There are several well-maintained homes in the settlement, and one somewhat decrepit structure which has all the hallmarks of once having been some kind of local store and attached house. This suggests that Glenham was once a busy location, and certainly history tells us that by the mid-1890s it was the centre for flax mills and a sawmill which provided employment and much of the goods carried on the railway line. There was also a dairy factory which opened in 1894 or 1895.

According to the *New Zealand Railfan* article mentioned above: "Major celebrations and big functions in the district were often held in the goods shed as were dances...The dances of those times went till 4.00am, by which time it was light enough to see to go home. They had two suppers at these dances, one at eleven, and another in the early hours."

The Wyndham branch is one of two in Southland (the other being Waikaia/Switzers) where a small railcar was introduced in 1926 as a means of reducing the costs of transporting passengers. The railcar was based on a Model T Ford truck chassis. Wikipedia provides a nice description:

“The engine and transmission used for Ford Model T cars served as the basis of these railcars, which came to resemble a red box on wheels. The passenger compartment was a mere eleven feet (3.5 m) long and seven feet (2 m) wide and seated eleven plus the driver. At the front of the railcar, a small front hood extended out from the boxy compartment and housed the engine, and from the bonnet hung large pannier bags for luggage. The railcar weighed two and a half tons, ran on four wheels, and could reach speeds of up to 30 mph (50 km/h), a speed that was relatively fast for country branch lines of the time. It was designed so that one person could operate it rather than three that were required for a conventional carriage train...It was hoped the Model T Ford railcars would rejuvenate traffic and provide some measure of profitability, especially on the section of the Wyndham Branch from Wyndham to Glenham, which was so underutilised that it was facing closure.”

Sadly the railcar failed to generate additional traffic, and the line was one of the first closed only five years later. A replica railcar can be seen on the Pleasant Point section of the Fairlie branch in South Canterbury.

From Glenham, begin the drive back to Wyndham. After 2.8 kilometres, turn left into South Wyndham School Road. This leads to the access way to the tunnel, which cannot be seen from the roadside at any point. For access to the tunnel, see the last paragraph of this description.

The Glenham Tunnel

This structure deserves its own paragraphs, as it is the only one in the whole of the Southland railway district and has at times been thought to be the southernmost tunnel in New Zealand. In fact, it is two kilometres north of the tunnel on the Catlins line, so doesn't qualify for that distinction, although it can appropriately be claimed as one of the most southern tunnels in the world.

The tunnel goes through a spur and is about 225 metres long. It is lined throughout by bricks, the clay for which was dug from a quarry about a kilometre back towards Wyndham and fired in a kiln adjacent to the quarry. Both portals are also fully bricked. The tunnel curves to the right at the southern end.

During construction the workmen who bored the tunnel lived on site in tents. For those who had their families with them the conditions must have been pretty raw. Work started on the tunnel in the middle of 1887 and progressed satisfactorily until there was a major collapse of saturated soil during exceptionally heavy rainfall. The soil fell onto timber framing which then collapsed, killing three of the five men who were buried. Care had to be taken to excavate the area, and by the time the men were reached several hours later, three had died: John Richards, bricklayer, William Malony, labourer, and William Newall, bricklayer. William Newall lived in the area and was well known. He left his widow with eight small children to care for on her own.

This awful event was widely covered in newspapers throughout New Zealand. The coroner's inquest shortly afterwards found that the contractor had been following the specifications in all the tender documents precisely, and that rail experts had advised that the slope of the banks was correctly angled. The deaths were ascribed to the exceptional rainfall, and no blame was apportioned to any party. Nevertheless, Mrs Newall sued the contractor for £1,000 as a "solatium"⁴ and was awarded £150, which would have provided only some small measure of comfort.

The tunnel appears to be open for public access but requires the explorer to cross private farmland, so care should be taken to seek permission from the landholder, who is prepared to be cooperative if asked. You should make sure you have a torch and waterproof footwear before setting off. Organised tours of the tunnel are also arranged from time to time for walking groups, etc. and the Wyndham and District Historical Museum is probably the best way of finding out more about this: Balaclava Street, Wyndham. Hours of operation Thursday, Friday, Saturday 2pm-4pm.

¹ <https://www.fonterra.com/nz/en/About/Our+Locations/NewZealand/Edendale>

² Redan is a French word for projection, or salient of a fortification. "The Battle of the Great Redan was a major battle during the Crimean War, fought between British forces against Russia on 18 June and 8 September 1855 as a part of the Siege of Sevastopol." http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_the_Great_Redan

³ "Southland Railways: The Glenham Branch", Jim Brown, *New Zealand Railfan*, March 2009, pp.59-77

⁴ a form of compensation for emotional rather than physical or financial harm