

HEDGEHOPE/BROWNS BRANCH

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Length: 20.6 kilometres

Opened: Completely July 1899

Stops: 8

Winton

Devereux Road

Kings

Browns

Hokonui

Springhills Siding

Mako

Hedgehope

Closed:

Stage 1 Browns to Hedgehope December 1953

Stage 2 Winton to Browns January 1968

Passenger services: Stopped February 1931

From 1899 Winton was a busy railway junction, servicing the Kingston branch between Invercargill and Kingston as well as the branch line to Hedgehope. This branch started as a bush tramway in the 1860s, primarily to service the Hokonui Coal Company's working of coal seams on the Makarewa River. Once it became a standard gauge railway line, limeworks also opened at various points, making it fairly busy for many years transporting coal, lime and other industrial products.

So little remains of this short branch, only 15 kilometres in length, it is hardly worth attempting to follow and track its progress from Winton to the small settlement of Hedgehope. Nearly all traces have been overwhelmed by either natural forces or by intensive farming.

In an article in *New Zealand Railfan* in March 2008 the line and its landscape were described thus:

"Hedgehope Branch traversed in the main an unremarkable landscape of predominantly flat countryside interspersed with modest limestone hills and peat swamplands. Running in a generally southeasterly direction from its start at the rural service town of Winton the railway followed the gently undulating landform with a series of modest grades en route. Although much of the line had grades of less than 1 in 100, there were a few relatively "steep" short sections of 1 in 50 plus one down to 1 in 40 as the line approached Browns."¹

Start this tour on SH6 (Great North Road) in central Winton and turn into SH96 one block north of Railway Street where the branch line left the Winton yards to begin its journey to the east. SH96 runs in a straight line for the next four kilometres or so. There is one set of abutments in a stream on the right just after the intersection with Egerton Road. In the vicinity of Devereux Road (3.5 km from Winton station), there was a station, of which there is now no evidence. Facilities were basic – a shelter shed and a 17-wagon loop siding. The shelter shed and siding were removed in 1957 and the shed became a gangers' hut.

A further 1.3 kilometres on, in the area of a left-hand bend in the road, known locally as Kings or Kings Bend, was the location of the next small station – a 16-wagon loop siding and a passenger shelter shed. W.H. King was the local landowner. This was where lime from the adjacent limeworks was brought via a private siding to the branch line from 1947 onwards. The limeworks were known

as the Awarua Limeworks, and they were owned by J G Ward & Co.² They are now operated by AB Lime.

For the next 13.5 kilometres the line can only vaguely and intermittently discerned. At Browns, a small settlement which served as the terminus from 1953 to 1968 (after the closure of the line between Browns and Hedgehope in 1953) the line ran on the left side of the road. In the early years of the 20th century Browns had two sawmills, a limeworks, brick works and tile works, all using local mineral deposits. From 1898 there was activity all round Browns to extract lime from quarries, which was railed to Winton and beyond. This trade continued for many years and for some of the time 4-5,000 per year were railed all over Southland.

Browns was the most substantial stop on the branch, comprising a number of tracks, a 23-wagon loop siding, two backshunts (one for eight wagons, the other for 29 wagons) and a private 60-wagon backshunt from the Browns Lime Co. works. Passengers again had only a shed for shelter, and there was a goods shed. Stockyards were added in the 1920s, and a high-level loading bank was built in 1961 for expected traffic in grain, which never eventuated.

The remains of a covered conveyor belt system on the left before Browns was used to transfer lime from the quarry in the hills to the kiln and loadout bins on the opposite side of the main road. Its footings and other remnants stand out clearly.

After Browns there were stations at Hokonui, which had a 20-wagon loop, a passenger shed and stockyards, and Springhills which had a 10-wagon loop, stockyards and a shelter shed for passengers. There were also apparently two houses for the use of surfacemen/gangers at Springhills.

There is much folklore about Hokonui and the brewing of “hooch”, an illicit locally distilled whiskey, some of which was apparently concealed (in bottles) in a cream can on the Friday evening train from Hedgehope. The can eventually arrived in Invercargill where the contents were quickly distributed, and those involved were the recipients of a wages supplement accordingly.

Follow SH96 until a three-way intersection is reached shortly after crossing the Makarewa River. At the intersection turn left into Keen Road. After about 1.7 kilometres a farm road on the left leads to a railway line truss bridge across the river, now used by the landowner. While the bridge can be driven over, it should be noted that the distinction between private and public property is rather blurred and erring on the side of caution might be sensible.

Turn and retreat to Keen Road, noting the line running on the right. Somewhere in this area was Mako, the penultimate stop on the line. Facilities here were also modest, with a platform and shelter shed and a 28-wagon loop siding. While Mako seems to be in the back of beyond it served one very important purpose – it was the point at which good quality pipe-clay from pits nearby could be brought on a tramway for sending by rail to Invercargill. The clay was essential to the success of McSkimming Industries, New Zealand’s leading supplier of earthenware pipes and glazed bricks. McSkimmings also became the major producer of white sanitary ware (basins, toilets, etc.) in New Zealand.

After crossing Keen Road the line must have climbed slightly across some rolling country before running down into the yards at Hedgehope, about 2.5 kilometres away. Much searching, and constant reference to David Leitch and Brian Scott’s description of the passage of the line in this area, failed to reveal any sign of it: “...you may be puzzled as to how it got out of this semi-circle of rolling hills, but then a notch in the skyline to your left suggests that it crossed the road and clambered up and over the low saddle”.³

The modern-day explorer is likely to remain puzzled, with no option but to return to SH96 and turn left to drive less than two kilometres to Hedgehope. The New Zealand online dictionary, Te Ara, has this to say about Hedgehope:

“Hedgehope was originally noted for its sawmills, flax mills, coal deposits and dairy factory. Today, milling the forestry plantation at nearby Pebbly Hills vies with dairy and sheep farming in keeping its economy buoyant.”⁴ Apart from a community centre, there are no public buildings or facilities these days at Hedgehope to suggest how lively it would have been during its railway lifetime.

The station and yard at Hedgehope were on the left of SH96 in what is now open farmland before the intersection of SH96 with Hedgehope Hall Road. As the terminal station on the line, the facilities comprised a 7th class station building, a goods shed, a loading bank, stockyards and a toilet block. The yards had a number of loops, sidings and backshunts, and for some time there was even electric lighting so that stock could be loaded in the evening for dispatch on the morning train. There were also locomotive servicing facilities: an engine shed, with an inspection pit, a coal shed and a turntable. There was of course a water supply, gravity-fed into four 400 gallon, galvanized tanks. Finally, there were four locally built cottages for staff accommodation.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Hokonui whiskey:

<http://www.hokonuiwhiskey.com/hokonui.html>

Hokonui Moonshine Museum, 16 Hokonui Drive, Gore, phone 03 208 9907.

¹ “From Tramway to Railway – Southland’s Hedgehope Branch”, Jim Brown and David McCallum, *New Zealand Railfan*, March 2008, pp.61-77,

² J.G. Ward (Joseph George) was a prominent national politician for more than 25 years, holding many ministerial portfolios and becoming Prime Minister after the sudden death in office of Premier “King Dick” Seddon in 1906. He also had a significant commercial life – for further information refer <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/2w9/ward-joseph-george>

³ *Exploring New Zealand’s Ghost Railways*, David Leitch & Brian Scott, Grantham House Publishing, rev. ed. 1998, p.122

⁴ <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/southland-places/page-6>>