

WAIMEA PLAINS RAILWAY

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Length: 59.1 kilometres

Opened: Completely in July 1880

Stops: 11

Croydon

Otamita

Mandeville

Pyramid

Riversdale

Waimea

Kingston Crossing

Balfour (Longridge)

St Patricks

Lintley

Lumsden (Elbow)

Closed:

Stage 1 Gore to Balfour April 1971

Stage 2 Balfour to Lumsden January 1978

Passenger services: Stopped September 1945 but Christmas and Easter holiday specials operated until 1959

The Waimea Plains Railway was built by the Waimea Plains Railway Company, one of a group of inter-related companies set up by large landowners such as Robert Stout and William Larnach¹ who were speculating in land settlement. The intention was to open up the large plains surrounded by the Mataura River on the east and the Oreti on the west for development, and to provide a fast connection from Dunedin to Kingston on the shores of Lake Wakatipu. This fast connection was wanted by the commercial sector in Dunedin to compete with their counterparts in Invercargill who had better access to the goldfields via the Kingston branch. The Main South Line (MSL) already connected Dunedin and Invercargill, via Gore.

The Waimea Plains Railway ran from the junction with the MSL at Gore to Lumsden. The engines used on the line were lightweight and American-designed, and could make fast speeds across the plains, particularly as they were dedicated to passenger services. These locomotives were given the name “Kingston Flyer” because they cut journey times significantly. The Kingston Flyer service picked up more passengers at Lumsden and continued on the Kingston branch to its terminus at Kingston on the southern shore of Lake Wakatipu.

The Waimea Plains Railway Company, having constructed the line in only three years, ran it until 1886, by which time profits had vanished and the company failed. The government then stepped in and quickly rationalised timetables so passengers could minimise travel time to Lake Wakatipu whether travelling from Invercargill (on the Kingston branch) or Dunedin via the MSL.

The starting place for exploring the Waimea Plains Railway is Gore. The Gore railway station was in a prime position in the town. Centrally located, close to the river and the original ford over which travellers crossed the river, it occupied the triangular area of land now bounded by the current MSL on the south, Brennan Lane on the east, and the back of the buildings along the main street of Gore. Make sure while in the area to take a look at the Sergeant Dan figure on the wall of the Creamoata factory Gorton Street frontage, described by Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga as follows:

"Few people aged 50 or more would not remember "Sergeant Dan the Creamoata Man" who still stands to attention on the side of Fleming's Mill at Gore. Sergeant Dan was created in the early 1920s as a marketing ploy and this quasi-military figure successfully personified porridge for much of the first half of the century. Sergeant Dan is as well-known an image in popular culture as Buzzy Bee or an Edmonds Baking Powder tin."²

The Waimea Plains Railway line left the Gore yards at the northern end and immediately crossed what is now SH1 and journeyed along the left side of Ordsal Street, which runs parallel to SH94. A wide grass verge on the left of Ordsal Street shows where the line was. At the end of Ordsal Street, at the junction with Surrey Street, the embankment can be seen straight ahead, behind a property that has in recent times been built across the formation.

Turn left into Surrey Street, and turn right at SH94 to head north. A short trip down Denton Street 200 metres away on the right will bring one to the embankment. Further along SH94 the gate across the entry to a large Fulton Hogan yard on the right is on the railway embankment.

SH94 starts turning gently to the left, and at this point the rail formation and road begin diverging. For the next 3.5 kilometres the embankment can be seen making its way steadily at the foot of a small embankment about half a kilometre from the road, on the right.

The first stop on the line-Croydon-was just over four kilometres from the outskirts of Gore. It was located somewhere between Wright Road and Monaghan Road, both on the right. There is nothing on the flat and intensely grazed and cultivated landscape to the right of the road to indicate exactly where this stop, comprising only a small platform and loop, was sited. At Wright Road the line probably crossed about 650 metres from SH94, but by Monaghan Road they had converged somewhat and the crossing point was probably only about 150 metres from SH94. To confuse the unwary, Croydon Sidings Road appears on the left, but obviously led to the station and was not the actual station site.

Just after Monaghan Road SH94 has a slight left-hand bend. This is where the line crossed to the left side of the highway. From here on it becomes visible as an embankment running parallel to the road, and for the next 11 kilometres it runs almost alongside SH94, only occasionally moving slightly further away and into a small cutting, or travelling slightly above the road. Rising gently above and behind is the north-eastern escarpment of the Hokonui Hills.

About 4.5 kilometres from the level crossing there is a concrete loading bank to the left of the road, on the railbed area. This is probably the site of the Otamita station, where there was a 40x20ft goods shed, a platform and a 49-wagon loop. About another kilometre further along SH94 the road again diverges from the rail line (or vice versa, depending on your point of view). While the road takes a bit of a loop before crossing the Otamita Stream, the formation runs straight across the paddocks on the left and then crossed the stream on the outskirts of the small settlement of Mandeville. It then crossed SH94 in Mandeville just before Flour Mill Road, and can be seen at this point coming from the left and heading into the yards of the Waimea Plains Railway Trust on the right. The trust is working to recommission part of the original Waimea Plains Railway, and they have onsite one of the first Kingston Flyers (the Rogers K92), carriages, historic track, a turntable and even a windmill. Mandeville station had the same facilities as at Otamita though it had two loops and a back-shunt.

From the yards at Mandeville the rail corridor continued on the same alignment as SH94, at a distance of about 150 metres from the road on the right. Raised embankment can be seen from the road. It crossed Waimea Stream on a simple and very visible bridge (no trusses) and then

disappeared from sight for a couple of hundred metres or so, before reappearing out of some trees slightly closer to the road. Mandeville Kingston Crossing Road is on the left and, shortly after, Roche Road is on the right. The railway crossed SH94 just before the latter and began a completely straight run of nearly 10 kilometres to Riversdale, on the left of SH94 throughout. SH94 heads slightly to the right, a little closer to the Mataura River, before it veers left and then too straightens to run into Riversdale.

Turn left into Pyramid Siding Road, and after one and a half kilometres there is an intersection with Hardiman Road. It seems likely that this was the site Pyramid, the next stop on the line. There are stockyards, and amongst the undergrowth where Hardiman Road crosses the McKellar Stream (to the left of the intersection) there are visible remnants of a reasonably sized simple truss structure crossing the stream. The line can be seen around this area being used as a stock track.

Continue north on Hardiman Road to rejoin SH94, and visit the site of the railway station and yards at Riversdale. Directly opposite the Riversdale Hotel, on the right of SH94 in the middle of Riversdale, there is an open area for parking adjacent to the new community centre. The original station building was more or less a lean-to, made mostly of corrugated iron, and was opposite the hotel. There was no waiting-room to shelter passengers or those waiting for a connecting coach to or from Switzers. However, once the Waikaia/Switzers branch line was under construction, it became clear that a better station building would be needed. The new one was designed by George Troup, who later became renowned as the designer of other notable railway stations such the station at Dunedin. The Riversdale station design included some fancy ironwork supporting the platform verandah, which was considered "unique, there being nothing similar anywhere else in New Zealand".³ The later more substantial station presented its unadorned back wall to the hotel and main road, as the platform and fancy iron work of course were on the side where the tracks ran.

The new station at Riversdale also had the much longed for waiting room, so shelter for passengers was at last well provided. At the northern end of the platform there was a dock for the branch line trains to Waikaia and a large signboard advising passengers "RIVERSDALE: CHANGE HERE FOR SWITZERS BRANCH". A portion of the later station building was eventually taken to Kingston where it became the waiting-room/ticket office for the reinstated Kingston Flyer in the 1970s, and is still in place.

There was a 60x30ft goods shed and an equally large store for J E Watson Wool and Grain Merchants to the north of the goods shed. There was also an array of loops and backshunts befitting a junction. There were houses for the stationmaster and for other employees, such as the clerk, porter, gangers and surfacemen.

Continuing on the SH94 from Riversdale the railway reserve on the left is planted with attractive trees and has plaques set in the ground commemorating soldiers from the district. The line followed the same left curve as the road leaving town, and then ran almost straight until finally reaching Lumsden some 25 kilometres further north. The line is initially almost invisible, on the left, its formation having been obliterated by years of intensive agriculture.

The location of the next stop-Waimea-was another flag stop with a platform and two loops. Turn into Dunn and Cody Road, on the left, and look for any vestiges marking the site about 200 metres after the turn-off. Continue on Dunn and Cody Road to the intersection with Mandeville Kingston Crossing Road, and turn right. The railway line crossed from right to left about 4.5 kilometres along this road. The road crossing point was most likely the site of Kingston Crossing, another small flag station with a couple of loops. What looks like the remains of a loading bank sits back from the

roadside on the left, but it is hard to confirm whether this is a genuine railway artefact. Both Waimea and Kingston Crossing had goods sheds, the latter being the larger at 49x23ft.

Continue north to the junction with SH94, drive four kilometres to the small settlement of Balfour, and turn left into Queen Street. Between Mary Street (on the right) and Kruger Street (on the left) is railway reserve land. The yard area is now a children's playground, but if you turn right along Kruger Street some splendid artefacts become apparent. The old station platform is still there, and provides a nice place for a picnic table. Tucked away behind a dirt bike mound is a good example of a loading bank, and on the far side of the reserve land there is a grain store which belonged to one of the local grain and wool merchants. It had its own siding.

Continue following the line (on the right) along Kruger Street north to rejoin SH94, which is where the line crossed. From this point for the next five or more kilometres look for embankment on the right, at times slightly elevated, and at other times forming the base of a farm track. Just to confirm where the line ran, there are a set of abutments rising above the surrounding paddock at 2.7 kilometres (from the junction of Kruger Street and SH94) and another set a further 2.2 kilometres on. Both of these suggest that the embankment was raised about two metres above the surrounding land.

Less than a kilometre away, the loading bank at St Patrick's stands clear in a paddock, and the original name board stands alongside. Nearly five kilometres further on was the site of the next stop in the line – Lintley – and again there is nothing visible to identify its precise location. The line has continued straight from St Patrick's on the right of SH94. There is no settlement at Lintley, and only the presence of a locally crafted signboard, not of railway genesis, announces the location. Shortly after the signboard the road veers to the right, but the line continued to run straight. If so inclined, divert to the left by turning into Kent Road. The railway line would have crossed Kent Road about 100 metres from the intersection, on a straight trajectory towards Lumsden.

Continue on SH94. On reaching the outskirts of Lumsden, and after passing the Lumsden cemetery (on the left), take the second turn left into Laura Street and continue to the T-junction with Pluto Road. Turn right, and proceed to the intersection of Pluto Road with Hero Street. There is a grass reserve on the left, and the Waimea Plains Railway entered Lumsden across this area, converging with the Kingston branch. It then proceeded along the larger grass reserve area adjacent to Hero Street, into Lumsden station on the left of Hero Street in the centre of town.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Eastern Southland Gallery ("Home of the internationally renowned John Money Collection and Ralph Hotere Collection"):

<http://www.esgallery.co.nz/>

Every year for the last 40 years Gore has hosted the New Zealand Gold Guitar Awards. This event attracts artists from around the world:

<http://www.goldguitars.co.nz/>

Waimea Plains Railway Trust:

<http://www.croydonaircraft.com/CAC.html>

¹ Sir Robert Stout was Premier of NZ from 1884-1887. He was also Chief Justice and was active in many other spheres. William Larnach was a politician and businessman of some note.

² <http://www.heritage.org.nz/the-register/details/7470>

³ “The Riversdalians: Centennial Story of Riversdale and District 1873-1973”, compiled by Stanley Slocombe for the Riversdale and Districts Centennial Committee 1973, p.54