

TUATAPERE BRANCH

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Length: 72 kilometres

Opened:

Stage 1 Thornbury to Riverton June 1879

Stage 2 Riverton to Colac July 1881

Stage 3 Colac to Orepuki May 1885

Stage 4 Orepuki to Waihoaka Oct 1903

Stage 5 Waihoaka to Tuatapere Oct 1909

Stage 6 Tuatapere to Orawia in Oct 1925

Stops: 23

Thornbury

Otaitai Bush

Riverton Racecourse

Riverton

Windsor Road Crossing

Longwood

Tihaka

Colac

Wakapatu

Printz Crossing

Ruahine

Pahia

Hirsts

Orepuki

McCanns Crossing

Te Tumutu

Waihoaka

Tewaewae

Te Tua

Tuatapere

Piko Piko

Pukemaori

Orawia

Closed:

Stage 1 Tuatapere to Orawia October 1970

Stage 2 Riverton to Tuatapere July 1976

Stage 3 Thornbury to Riverton January 1978

Passenger services:

Stopped June 1954 although no services ran beyond Tuatapere after November 1930

The Tuatapere branch was typical of branch lines built to provide access to natural resources-timber, coal and oil shale deposits in this case. It was also built to promote the settlement of the Waiau Valley. What was not typical was the time it took to build - 46 years from 1879 when the first section from Thornbury to Riverton opened and the opening of the terminus at Orawia in 1925.

Intermediate stations became terminuses for as long as 18 years before the next section was finished. The branch was one of the longer on the system at nearly 72 kilometres. In 1930 a Royal Commission noted that the Orawia branch was losing money. After WWII the fortunes of the line continued to decline, and another Royal Commission in 1952 recommended keeping it under review. The opening of the cement works at Orawia in 1956 provided a reprieve, generating increased traffic

until May 1968 when the cement works closed and closure became inevitable, starting with the Tuatapere-Orawia section in 1970.

There are several good reasons for exploring the Tuatapere ranch in western Southland, not least of which is the survival of some interesting rail artefacts. There are also many kilometres where the line can easily be seen making its way across country. Last, but far from least, is the stunning scenery across the turbulent but beautiful waters of Foveaux Strait hold at bay the pounding of the Southern Ocean and the Tasman Sea from the west. The road network in the area is good, the traffic flows light and viewing points are easy to access.

This description of the Tuatapere branch starts at the small settlement of Thornbury to the north of SH99. The small settlement of Thornbury has little to offer, though if you are interested in vintage tractors this is the place to be on Sunday afternoon or a public holiday. Sheds on both sides of the main street contain the collection of the Thornbury Vintage Tractor and Implement Club, the oldest vintage tractor club in New Zealand.

When the Tuatapere branch line opened in 1879 Thornbury was a “hive of economic activity...the village boasted hotels, a saddler shop, blacksmith, a dairy factory, bank, store, refreshment rooms, churches, a hall and a school”.¹ A tannery which produces high quality skins from New Zealand slink² and calfskins, a pub, school, church, lawn bowling club, Centennial Hall and a volunteer fire brigade today comprise this small rural-servicing village.

The Tuatapere branch started at a junction on the Wairio line, which runs from Makarewa to Nightcaps and Ohai to the north, and hauls coal from Eastern Coal's Takitimu mining operations around those areas to one of Fonterra's coal-fired dairy factories at Clandeboye, near Timaru.

At the northern end of Thornbury, Limestone Plains Road crosses the Wairio line. At the crossing look to the left to see where the junction was, with the Tuatapere branch heading straight ahead for 200 metres from the Wairio line which curves away to the right. There used to be a quartet of railway houses in this vicinity, but they have long since disappeared. In the 1930s a new station was built to the right of Limestone Plains Road crossing, and a loading bank and a platform are still there, though covered by long grass and therefore hard to see. According to a photo in *New Zealand 1950s Steam in Colour*³ the goods or engine shed had a curved roof line, or at least it did in 1958.

Drive south through the middle of Thornbury, noting that the first railway station was in the area now occupied by the Volunteer Fire Brigade building and Thornbury Enterprises opposite the pub. It had a triangular formation so that coal from Ohai could be taken to the port of Riverton. The station was a busy one, with about 12 trains passing through daily. The post office and a telephone bureau were contained within the station building. There were also large tearooms on the northwest side of the station area.

The line curved from the station across the road and made its way to the left of the general store, a green building which still bears the proud statement “Established 1863”⁴ on its pediment. Behind this building, now called The Station House, there is a structure that looks remarkably like a railways goods shed. From here the line ran in an almost straight line for the nine kilometres to Riverton and can occasionally be sighted en route. Continuing along SH99 there are faint traces of embankment, but nothing in particular to show its location between 200 and 300 metres to the left of the road. There was a siding on Otaitai Bush Road, but nothing is left of this.

On the outskirts of Riverton there is a small road bridge over a deep cutting just before the intersection with Bath Road. Turn right into Bath Road which runs parallel to the line which gradually

rises as the road proceeds downhill. The station site, as is often the case, is now a layby area for trucks and trailers and piles of road metal. There are lumps of old concrete in the banks that may be part of the station yard infrastructure. An old weatherboard house with two chimneys at No. 93 Bath Road is the old stationmaster's house.

Continue to the end of Bath Road and view the wide expanse of the Jacobs River Estuary. Until 1904 the railway crossed the estuary on a combined rail/road bridge adjacent to the current road bridge, but from 1904 until 2001 there was a magnificent railway bridge comprising a causeway and truss bridge sweeping in a massive curve across the estuary itself. There was an embankment from the end of Bath Road across a sand bank and two spans onto the opposite bank. The structure was demolished in 2001, but it is worth lingering for a moment or two to understand its trajectory and scale.

Turn left at the end of Bath Road to the main street of Riverton. If you have time, make a point of visiting Te Hiko Southern Journey Heritage Museum on the right close to the estuary. Almost out of sight (from the road) alongside the museum is a preserved span of the demolished railway bridge.

Cross the estuary on the SH99 road bridge, and after 750 metres look for the point on the right where the railway came off the bridge, just after Solent Street (on the left). A road safety rail on the right is where the line ran in a cutting. Follow SH99 for nearly a kilometre, and where it veers left continue straight ahead on Longwood Road. The scrubby area alongside the road on the right strongly suggests this was railway land. The Windsor Road Crossing stop has vanished completely.

Just beyond the intersection with Hekeia Road the line crossed from right to left. Ahead, along a rough track, is the area of a siding that serviced the bush tramway system which brought timber from five sawmills on the ranges of Longwood Forest. This is also the site of Longwood station, where there was a platform, stockyards, and loops and shunts of various sizes. The line can be seen in a deep cutting just behind the rusting shed on the rise on the left of Longwood Road. The shed was once a cheese and butter box factory and which also produced other domestic products such as broomsticks, brush backs and rolling pins.

Turn left up Hekeia Road. The small building on the rise on the right used to be the passenger shelter shed at Longwood station, identified by the name board "Longwood". Rejoin SH99. The railway line is out of sight on a curve across the paddocks behind and to the right and, but road and rail converges with SH99 not long after the Hekeia Road junction. If traffic conditions permit, pull off the road into a farm track on the right and look for the deep cutting crossing the landscape on the right, now marked by trees and scrub. It may be best to save this viewpoint for the return journey. There is a somewhat distracting alternative magnificent view on the left across Colac Bay.

Embankment can now be easily sighted, running parallel to and above SH99 for the next kilometre, to the intersection with Thompson Road, marked by a gravel pit on the right. Here the line crossed from SH99 and continued for another 500 metres to Tihaka station. Nothing can be seen of the station these days, but in its time it was a busy place, loading timber from many sawmills in the area. It was also a point where sand was excavated and loaded onto the railway to be taken for use on rail sanding systems. Drivers called Tihaka the "sand pit".

Continue on SH99 to the settlement at Colac Bay where there is a well-known surfing beach described thus on the NZ Surf Guide website:

"Colac Bay is a sandy beach break offer[ing] good fun waves, nothing too gnarly, suitable for all levels from beginners up. It gets colder down this area, so wear plenty of rubber."⁵

On entering the small settlement from SH99 (there is a larger settlement at the beach) turn left to pass the local sculpture of a surfer riding a board confidently down a wave. Less than 100 metres further the Colac Bay Tavern sits alongside the railway line, and the station and yards were directly opposite. The station had a reasonably sized passenger shelter shed for those coming to enjoy some time on the beach, as well as local farmers and other residents. There were also two loops and a backshunt.

Manuka Street, opposite the tavern, runs alongside the route for nearly three kilometres, and if you feel inclined to drive over an unsealed road to a dead end, and then another three kilometres to return to the township, feel free to do so. A better plan is to return to SH99 which curves gently inland while the railway line heads towards the shoreline. From Colac Bay the line skirted Lake George and a large swampy area, pocked with smaller water-ways created by sluicing to extract gold. SH99 passes by Round Hill which is more famous for its history than for scenic or other attractions, particularly the Chinese village called Canton.

“Gold was first discovered in the area at Round Hill about 1868, this being the gold rush period of New Zealand's history. Round Hill became a settlement in 1874 when Italian miners discovered gold there. When Chinese miners arrived in the early 1880's they discovered that the Europeans had not been successful because they had been working on a false bottom. Beneath this 'false bottom' was a large quantity of gold. Canton, the Chinese village boasted a hotel, as well as the requisite opium and gambling dens to cater for the needs of the many miners who flocked to the area in search of their golden fortune. The hills were home but for a short time, when with fortunes made-considered in those days as anything between 300-500 pounds-most of the miners returned to China to marry and live out their lives in comfort. Gold mining remained a feature of the Round Hill area for more than 100 years.”

[\[http://www.westernsouthland.co.nz/pages/viewentity.php?entity=422\]](http://www.westernsouthland.co.nz/pages/viewentity.php?entity=422)

Take the signposted turn-off to the right to a car park on Round Hill Road where there are some interpretation panels and the entrance to a couple of interesting bush walks.

From Colac Bay there were four flag stations: Wakapatu, Ruahine, Pahia and Hirsts. These can be located by winding across country through the network of local roads, but there is nothing much to see. If determined to track them turn left into Wakapatu Road, turn right into Wakapatu Beach Road then right again into Pahia-Wakapatu Road. Continue to Ruahine Road intersection to Pahia Road then turn left into Dillon Road which eventually joins Frentz Road. Follow Frentz Road to SH99. The railway line approached on the right side of Frentz Road towards the junction with SH99. It crossed Frentz Road at the junction and SH99 just after wards and was then on the right of SH99. Another flag stop – Hirsts – was to the right of Frentz Road before the intersection with SH99.

For the next couple of kilometres along SH99 farming has removed most obvious vestiges of the line, though with imagination one can make out snippets of embankment or shallow cuttings across the undulating landscape.

Approaching Orepuki, the embankment becomes obvious, albeit briefly, around Falls Creek Road on the right, and there is then a shallow ditch on the final run into what used to be the Orepuki yards, which is now an open grassy space. The water tank can be seen standing tall above the surrounding houses, emblazoned with “Orepuki” in standard railways lettering style. It has been moved from its original position, and all other station relics have disappeared. According to various sources, the original station building is still standing somewhere on a farm not far from the town. It used to be sited about where Dover and Oldham Streets intersect. There was initially a 50ft turntable and there were resident staff while Orepuki was the terminus from 1885 until 1903.

Leaving Orepuki embankment can be seen on the right, until after 700 metres it runs through a cutting, reappearing as a high embankment on the other side of the small hill the road surmounts. The embankment continues alongside the road until King Road where it starts to curve away inland and is out of sight of the road traveller. Continue to Waimeamea Road (on the right) and decide whether or not to venture nearly a kilometre further to find the crossing just before the junction with Young Road. This was the site of McCanns Crossing stop, of which nothing remains. However, from the crossing the line can be seen on the flank of a hill to the left, the contours of which it follows in a distinctive horseshoe curve. This section can also be spotted by pulling off SH99 to look right for sightings of embankment/cuttings about a kilometre distant.

There was another stop on Te Tumutu Road, of which nothing remains. From Te Tumutu the formation again curves tightly. A cutting on the curve can be seen from SH99 where it descends from a slight rise 1.8 kilometres after Te Tumutu Road. McInerney Road is the next road on the right and is the location of Waihoaka station, which would have been about 500 metres from the intersection with SH99. Although there is nothing to indicate there was ever a station here the formation is made clear by its current use as a farm track. On the left the line can be seen running into a small cutting.

A scenic lookout at McCrackens Rest on SH99 provides a fabulous spot to stop and take in the full sweep of Te WaeWae Bay. Make sure though to look right immediately after McCrackens Rest to spot the formation on an elevated bench on the hillside, making its way down onto the flats to the Te Waewae stop, which was about 800 metres along Te Waewae Road. At this site there is a very dilapidated goods shed and a concrete loading bank. The formation can be seen both left and right providing useful service as a stock track. From here the line runs straight for nearly two kilometres until curving gently to the right just before Block Road. There are no features to guide the rail line spotter's eye and tall hedges on the right obscure any view. 500 metres along Block Road the crossing and the formation are again obvious.

At Rowley Road another loading bank and shed are extant after 500 metres. The shed at this stop – Te Tua – looks just as unlikely to remain upright as the one at Te Waewae. Shortly after the Te Tua stop the line crossed Camp Creek, and the raised embankment for the crossing is still visible from SH99, though any remaining bridge structures seem not to be visible from the road.

The embankment remains in sight alongside the road, initially elevated, for just over three kilometres into Tuatapere. On the outskirts of Tuatapere turn right into Jenkins Road, and almost immediately left into Railway Road. The station, goods shed, water tank and yards at Tuatapere are still in place, thanks to local enthusiasts who have laboured long and hard to ensure their preservation.

Tuatapere is another Southland town founded to service logging operations as prospective farmers felled the bush to clear and develop the land. It is sited on the Waiau River and was the best spot for a ferry service before any bridges had been built. The town is well known these days as the starting and ending place for those tramping (hiking) the Hump Ridge Track. This walk takes three days, in a loop. A website reference for this excellent opportunity, created through extremely hard work by many local people, is provided at the end of this chapter.

Tuatapere was the terminus from 1909 until 1924. During this time work began on the final extension, with construction proceeding slowly to Orawia. Return to SH99 but instead of turning left to cross the Waiau River for Manapouri and Te Anau continue straight ahead on Orawia Road, which shortly afterwards becomes Otautau-Tuatapere Road. The rail corridor ran on the right of the road but can't be seen until embankment rises slightly above road level. It is then in use as a stock track

which continues almost unbroken for the next two kilometres until the site of Piko Piko stop appears at Gully Road. A loading bank remains in the field on the right, indicating the siding which served two large sawmills.

The railway line and road then squeeze alongside the Orauea River on the left, and the formation can be seen particularly clearly where it traversed the foot of a bluff. Road and rail follow the same pathway for the next seven kilometres, at times side by side, and at other times the line in the middle distance makes its way in a straight a line while the road meanders a little. There is nothing to alert travellers to their arrival at Pukemaori but seven kilometres from Piko Piko there is a concrete loading bank in the foreground of a paddock on the right. This indicates the location of the Pukemaori siding.

Immediately after the siding the line crossed the road and curved gently to cross the river. Turn left at the next intersection and cross Warren Creek (unnamed). A rail bridge used to stand less than 80 metres downstream from the road bridge. The railway line crossed the road and traversed the foot of the hillock the road now surmounts. Pass a small electricity substation and on approaching the cement works remnants the formation can be seen converging with the road.

The Southland Cement Manufacturing Company built the cement works at Orawia in 1956 to operate in conjunction with the Clifden Lime Company Ltd. In the opinion of its promoters, the success of the venture was assured due to its raw material, the local limestone rock, the low cost of production, the low capital cost of plant and the support of the Southland public. There is little reason to doubt that the promoters were quite sincere, if mistaken, in their belief that the company would make good profits and that the dividend prospects were excellent.⁶ By 1959 it had become apparent that the plant would not be able to produce the tonnage anticipated, at a reasonable market price, and the original owners had little option but to sell out to Milburn NZ in 1960. The closure of the cement works in 1968 spelt the end of the Tuatapere branch – in every way! Now all that remains of the works are various concrete silos and vestigial parts of the actual cement works themselves. The site covers a couple of acres, and is part of the farming operations roundabout. The main building, which was substantial, was eventually dismantled and moved to Westport on the West Coast, but has since been demolished.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Thornbury Vintage Tractor & Implement Club:

<http://www.thornburyvintage.co.nz/history.html>

Riverton Heritage Trail brochure:

<http://www.southlandnz.com/Portals/1/Documents/Brochures/Riverton%20Heritage%20Trail%20brochure.pdf>

Te Hikoi museum in Riverton:

<http://www.tehikoi.co.nz/welcome.htm>

The Southern Scenic Route:

<http://www.atoz-nz.com/ssr.asp>

and

<http://www.doc.govt.nz/Documents/parks-and-recreation/places-to-visit/southland/ssr-catlins-journey.pdf>

Walks from the Round Hill car park:

<http://www.doc.govt.nz/conservation/historic/by-region/southland/southland/ports-water-race/>

Hump Ridge Track:

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

Orawia concrete plant:

<http://www.panoramio.com/photo/88057697>

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<http://www.southlandnz.com/Portals/1/Documents/Brochures/Riverton%20Heritage%20Trail%20brochure.pdf>

² a skin from a stillborn or a very young lamb or calf

³ *New Zealand 1950s Steam in Colour Compiled from the Derek Cross Collection*, David Cross, transPress NZ, 2007, p.189

⁴ The final digit is broken and 1863 is “best guess”.

⁵ http://nzsurfguide.com/surf_breaks/southland/colac-bay

⁶ *Spanning the Centuries, The History Of Milburn NZ*, Ltd Morton Johnston and Chinn, Milburn NZ Ltd ISBN 0-47308888-6