

THE CROMWELL RAILWAY STATION

In 1864 the Otago Provincial Council accepted a recommendation that, to promote the development of the province, three railway lines should be built. One of these was to extend from Dunedin to Clutha however, the Railways Act 1870 gave the responsibility for building railways to Central Government. Even though the gold rushes were largely over by 1871, John Millar, a one-man commission, reported on the best access for a Otago Central Railway. It was not until 1879 that the first sod was turned at Wingatui and the 236 km line commenced.

By 1907 the Otago Central Railway had reached Clyde. Immediately a Railway and Progress League was formed in Cromwell to push for the extension of the railway through the gorge to Cromwell. Apart from stressing the high cost of transport between Cromwell and Clyde, and the concomitant effect on the farmer, this lobby group also pointed out the inadequacies of the road.

Finally the work began. By mid-1915 6.4 km of rail had been laid and 4.8 km of ballasting completed. A year later rails had been laid halfway to Cromwell and bridges and culverts were in the process of construction over the creeks. Meanwhile, fruit and other freight from Cromwell were being loaded on to a Public Works train at a temporary siding at Leaning Rock Creek and taken to the railhead at Clyde. 'Josephine' the 'E' class Double Fairlie locomotive which pulled all the trains in the gorge during the construction era, is now a museum piece in Dunedin.

In 1917 the rail laying had been completed to Cromwell, with the track on top of the foundation to provide temporary connection for goods and construction material to be brought in. The Cromwell station and engine sheds were erected and the engine turntable installed. The Public Works Department engine was stabled in Cromwell, the shed located near the big rock which marked the extreme end of the line.

By 1919 a regular goods and passenger service was running between Clyde and Cromwell, and the Cromwell station building, five staff houses, a 6000 gallon locomotive watering tank, and the stockyards had all been built. As the most economic way to get the region's produce to Dunedin, the train became the lifeline for the runholders of Waenga Station and the orchardist of the gorge. Bales of wool, sacks of rabbit skins, boxes of fruit, and children going to school all had to be put aboard the train, either at the Cromwell station, at one of the two gorge sidings or even perhaps outside one's house.

There is no record of any official opening ceremony of the Cromwell Railway Station, or the Cromwell to Clyde section through the Cromwell Gorge, when the Railways Department took over the final section of the Otago Central Railway on 11 July 1921.

The Cromwell to Clyde section of the rail line was officially closed on 4th April 1980 making way for the reconstruction of State highway 8, and the filling of Lake Dunstan behind the Clyde Dam.