


LIFESTYLE

Take a train back into history

BY **JOHN BISHOP**

THE TRANZALPINE TRAIN TRIP between Christchurch and Greymouth is well known for its spectacular scenery but it's also a wonderful journey into the colonial history of Canterbury and the West Coast.

The onboard commentary focuses on the achievements, difficulties and failures of building the railway itself, hailed as a marvellous feat of engineering, particularly for its tunnels.

Equally interesting are the tales of times past that are referenced as the train passes over Canterbury Plains and heads into the hill country after Springfield.

Take the story of the ghost swag-gie sometimes seen in the mist making his way out of the mountain passes and said to be walking towards Lyttelton to get a boat home to his native Scotland.

Or the inventive policeman faced with multiple thefts of coal from the railyards at Otira. He made small explosives, painted them black, hid them among the coal bins at the station, and when a chimney blew up he went to the damaged house and arrested the occupants.

The history of the West Coast gets equal treatment to that of Canterbury – indeed the area was once known as West Canterbury before it achieved its own provincial status, but just before all forms of provincial government were abolished in 1870.

In the Brunner Mine disaster of 1896, 65 miners were killed in an explosion, and 33 of them are buried in a mass grave in Stillwater, just outside the town. The graveyard is

visible from the train as it passes slowly by. There's also a memorial to all miners who have died on the West Coast, in Greymouth itself.

The extraction of natural resources, gold, coal and then native timber, has driven the local economy for more than a century and a half. The stories are interwoven with the working man's struggle for living wages, economic independence for the region, and with a history so often marred by tragedy.

The Midland Railway Company is a tragedy of another kind entirely. In the 1870s there was local pressure to build a railway line from Reefton to both Christchurch and Nelson, thus linking three provinces.

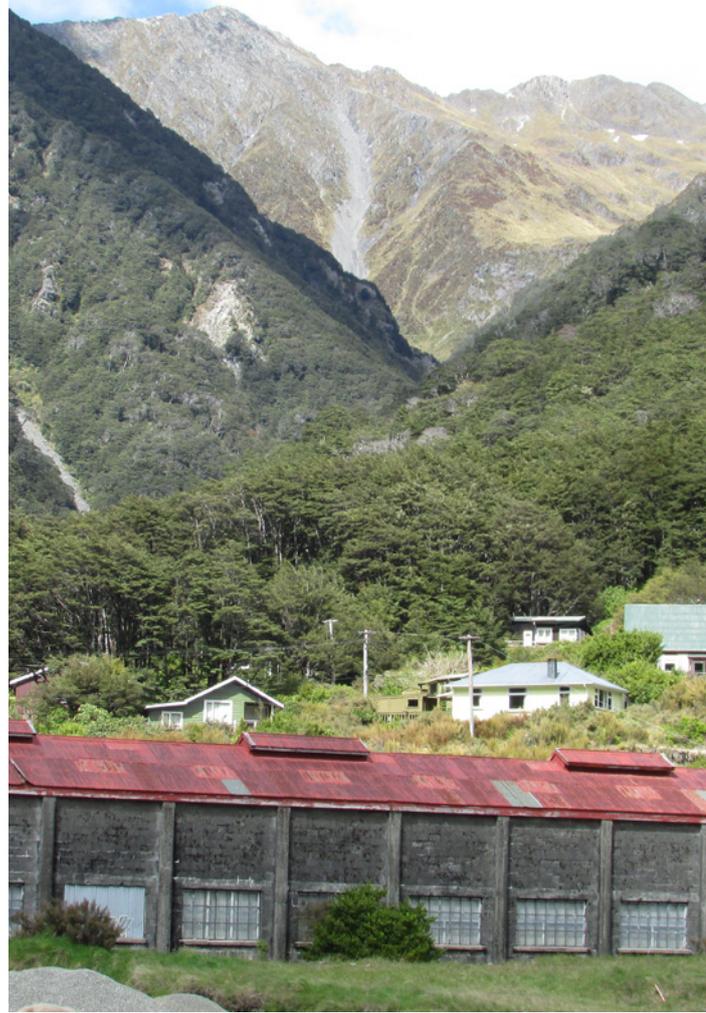
North Island interests were opposed, arguing the North Island Main Trunk had to take priority. In a compromise the government of the day granted land for a line, and a company was floated on the London Stock Exchange and won the contract to build the line.

This was the Midland Railway Company, launched in 1886. It was to complete 376 km of rail line in 10 years. But by 1895 it had built just 131 km and had run out of money. It collapsed into insolvency, and the Public Works Department (a forerunner to the Ministry of Works which built so much of New Zealand's infrastructure) took over and completed the job.

The Midland name lives on as the name of the railway line even if the company is long gone.

Coast to Coast

From Christchurch the TranzAlpine train goes on its 230 km journey



▲ An old railway workshop at Arthur's Pass

across six distinctive landscapes and climate by heading down the Main South line (formerly known as the South Island Main Trunk), west and then southwest until it turns onto the Midland Line at Rolleston.

The Canterbury Plains are the largest area of continuous flat land in New Zealand covering 777,000 hectares.

Land use in Canterbury has changed dramatically since the Europeans arrived. Forests were burned off to create pasture. At first it was all about sheep, with some beef cattle.

Crops like wheat, oats, barley, peas, and seeds like ryegrass have all been grown here, and now it's dairying and wine in the north parts. Fat lambs, various kinds of stud farms, and deer have had their place too.

Close to Christchurch there are plenty of 10-acre lifestyle blocks and the commentary notes that 99% of the vegetation now on the Canterbury Plains is introduced. Only 0.5% of it is native vegetation.

From Darfield there used to be branch lines or spurs which ran



◀ The beginning or end of your journey — Greymouth Station

Avoca, down a steep cliff but producing high quality anthracite coal. This operated between 1916 and 1928 when supplies ran out, but at its peak it had a workforce of 65 and its own school. The winds were so strong that the toilet in the grounds of the school was secured by guy ropes to stop it blowing away in the frequent gales.

A ghost story

Here too were the sightings of the Scottish Swagger. He has apparently been seen several times on the old Stagecoach road near Avoca, a short distance from Cass in the centre of the Southern Alps.

Sightings haven't been frequent lately, but it makes for a good story on a cold night in a warm bar.

This is now the high country where pasture becomes tussock. The measure is acres to the animal, not ewes to the acre as in the low country. There are no fences, only natural boundaries like rivers, mountains and deep gullies.

Even today mustering is by horses and dogs, even if the dogs come in by four-wheel drives and helicopters are used to spot the flocks of sheep on the hills.

Cass is a small nowhere place made famous by a single painting by Rita Angus in 1936. Once a place with a railway refreshment room and home to various rail and road gangs, it now has a population of one.

Here passengers used to change from rail to coach for the onward journey up the mountains, but it lost its place as the rail line was pushed forward reaching Arthur's Pass in 1914.

By the mid-1920s travelling by car was a common enough practice, and they too stayed at the Bealey Hotel.

Fred Cochrane, the publican there from 1928 to 1938 transported cars across the Waimakariri River on a wooden dory and charged a pound for the privilege.



▲ The Miners' Memorial in Greymouth

to Oxford north of Christchurch (1884–1930) and to Rangiora, but that too was closed in 1959.

The first land connection between Christchurch and the West Coast was a road built in the winter of 1865, because Canterbury interests were keen that the gold being mined on the Coast should come to Christchurch banks. West Coasters were not persuaded and sent most of the yellow stuff north to Nelson or across the Tasman to Melbourne, because there were strong maritime links to both ports.

With the road open, Cobb and Co ran coach services using the same Concord coaches as the famous Wells Fargo Company used in the United States.

A coach capable of seating 17 passengers plus their baggage and mail was hauled by six horses. The horses were changed every 20 kilometres or so, but it still took two days for the passengers to complete their journey.

Overnight accommodation was at the Bealey Hotel, and where the road got steep and the load was heavy,

the passengers were expected to get out and push the coach forward.

From 1906, rail replaced the horses between Christchurch and Springfield, but it was still by coach after that up to Otira, and then as the railway was extended progressively to Arthur's Pass, and finally all the way to Greymouth, horses gradually lost their place altogether.

Rail cars were introduced to give a better level of comfort, but now have been replaced by the TranzAlpine with its carriages with big windows for easy viewing, and seatless scenic cars open to the elements for better photography.

On the modern rail journey gorse and broom can be seen from the Waimakariri River Gorge. Like the possum, they were introduced with good intentions, but all three had no natural competitors and consequently thrived, and now they're all noxious pests and nuisances.

At Avoca sheep station just short of Cass, one of the most remote stations in the country, the residents would hang out a large white sheet, so it was visible to the train heading to Arthur's Pass, to show that they needed supplies or needed to make a journey. The message would be relayed to the east bound train which would then stop at Avoca in the afternoon and take the travellers to Springfield to shop and do their business.

There was also a coal mine at



▲ The TranzAlpine Train coming into Greymouth station

Motorists were free to attempt their own crossing, but Fred charged five pounds to haul out stranded cars. He was suspected of dredging the river to boost his revenue, but whatever the truth of that, his little perk ended in 1936 when a road bridge across the river was opened.

Later, another Bealey publican also increased his trade at least for a short time, with a very inventive story involving a moa.

In the 1990s Paddy Freaney claimed he had taken a picture of a moa in the Craigieburn Forest, and it was convincing enough to make the news around the world resulting in a deluge of visitors as curious sightseers and explorers anxious for a sighting themselves flocked to his hotel.

The “moa” didn’t oblige with another appearance, and the photo was proven a fake, but Paddy travelled internationally for several years in a row on the proceeds.

The Otira Tunnel

The railway station at Arthur’s Pass at 737 metres is the highest in the South Island and third highest in New Zealand behind Waiouru and National Park.

It’s a popular stop for the train passengers and the prelude to perhaps the most interesting engineering aspect of the train journey – the Otira Tunnel, the last and most significant link in the Midland Line.

The railheads had reached Otira from the western side in 1900, and Arthur’s Pass from the east in 1914, but the question was how to link the two by rail. Many options were canvassed but a conventional rail tunnel was considered the most desirable and feasible.

John McLean and Sons were given the job, but like the Midland Rail Company, it was broken financially by the difficulty of the job, and by industrial strife and union militancy. It went bankrupt in 1912, and again the Public Works Department picked up the task.

Construction had begun on both sides in 1908 and hole-through occurred in July 1918, although the official opening didn’t take place until 1923. Some of the

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▲ A standard view from the TranzAlpine Train journey

tunnellers used the experience gained here to dig tunnels under German lines on the Western Front in World War I.

The 8.5 km tunnel rises 359 metres over 14 km, which is a gradient of 1:33. The engineering was a success.

At the time it was the seventh longest tunnel in the world: now it is the 45th longest, and in New Zealand both the Rimutaka and Kaimai tunnels are longer.

Today the operation of the tunnel is controlled from Wellington and the town has just four rail staff living and working there. Total population is around 45, boosted when the publican bought the town and all its houses and leased them out to people seeking a cheaper lifestyle.

Rainfall is 5 metres a year and in midwinter the sun is seen only for a few hours a day.

But this is exactly the kind of hardship that the pioneers who built the road and the railway endured year on year in Otira and other places along the way to create a modern rail link now enjoyed by thousands of visitors from New Zealand and overseas each year. ■

John Bishop travelled on the TranzAlpine at his own expense.