

The history of the Eyreton Railway Line

When the railway network was beginning to spread throughout the country, rival groups of settlers at Eyreton and Oxford wanted railway lines to serve and develop the needs of their own particular area.

In 1871, a meeting in the district showed that communication in the district was poor, with dray loads taking up to two days to reach Kaiapoi. By this stage, a plan for the Oxford-Rangiora branch line had already been approved by the Rangiora, Mandeville and Oxford road boards. The Eyre settlers asked at this time why it could not pass through their district on its way to Oxford, but a line from Kaiapoi to Oxford was seen as a threat to the Rangiora lines. A straight-line survey from Kaiapoi to Oxford was carried out in 1871, this being the road now known as Tram Road. Further surveys were carried out during 1872 of all the possible lines for the area.

The Eyre settlers continued lobbying for a line to pass through Ohoka, Mandeville and West Eyreton. Eventually they prevailed and the government agreed to construct both lines, 10 km apart. However, the line ended at West Eyreton, rather than carrying on all the way to Oxford. In August 1872, plans were finalised for the Eyreton line and construction began. It was completed in 1875 and opened on the 17th December. The first train left West Eyreton for Kaiapoi on 27 December 1875. Shortly after opening, the Public Works Department announced it would be necessary to join the West Eyreton and Oxford lines to avoid losing money and on 1 February 1878, the West Eyreton-Oxford section opened.

Initially, the line from Kaiapoi to the junction at Bennetts was constructed of dual gauge to accommodate the main line broad gauge and the branch line narrow gauge. This route tended to be a short cut to Oxford in the early days, with very little traffic originating on the line. By 1895, traffic was very light, with the timetable being one mixed train a day for many years.

By 1927, the service had slowed to four mixed trains a week, and most of this was a diversion of traffic from the Oxford branch. The 1930 Royal Commission made the recommendation that the Eyreton branch close unless the settlers themselves raised the necessary funds to maintain it. This did not happen and on 9 February 1931, the branch was closed to passenger services and the connecting link between Bennetts Junction and Horrelville was also closed.

By 1950, the Kaiapoi to West Eyreton branch was losing money, with only two goods trains operating each way weekly, increasingly losing freight to road competition. The flourmill generated some traffic for the line, but wagons that were delivered on a Thursday had to wait until the following Tuesday to be loaded. The Horrelville-Wetherell section was closed on 26 May 1954. A 5km spur off the main line carried on serving the flourmill at Wetherell (Evans Mill) until the early 1960s. The mill was closed in 1978 and demolished in 1980.

Little remains today of the line. The formations of it are obvious in many places but few artefacts of the line are still standing. On Mill Road, a siding to Isaac Wilson's flourmill was built in 1876 (Wilson's Siding), and is marked now by a Historic Places Trust plaque.

Sources

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