

Mindaribba to Dungog

STORIES

Text and Images by Chris Walters



This 'episode' we're going to veer from the formula a degree, and attempt to hit several stations with one swing. Specifically, the seven stations particular to NSW Trainlink's Hunter Line service to Dungog: Mindaribba, Paterson, Martins Creek, Hilldale, Wallarobba, Wirragulla and, of course, Dungog itself. Why lump them all together? If I am being perfectly blunt about it, the most that can be said for some of these locations may actually be, "well, they're there". Actually no, to be fair there is perhaps a little more that can be said, so let's get into it . . .

As what would eventually become the NSW North Coast Line worked its way out from Maitland, a number of intermediate stations began to spring up along the way and on 14 August 1911, Oakhampton, Mindaribba, Paterson, Martins Creek, Hilldale, Wallarobba, Wirragulla and Dungog all opened for business. Over ensuing decades, the additional stations of Airdrie (1948) and Barokee (1924) were also commissioned within this section, but along with Oakhampton, they were eventually wiped off the network map by 1975. While the others remain in service today, the former station/platform facilities at Mindaribba, Hilldale, Wallarobba and Wirragulla are long gone, and in their place sit tiny 'halts' that consist each of a short platform (wooden in Mindaribba's case, concrete for the others) long enough only to host the two centre doors of a two-car *Hunter* or *Endeavour* railcar set. Truly, I have seen more elaborate phone booths. Unsurprisingly, all four are 'by request' stops on Trainlink services between Telarah and Dungog.

Martins Creek Station is only slightly more substantial, it having the benefit of a weather shelter, which was constructed in 2012 when the original station was demolished. Still in situ, however, is the original wooden station building at Paterson, which like Mindaribba, sits adjacent to a crossing loop. Wallarobba also has a crossing loop, albeit two kilometres north of the station, on the far side of the 304-metre Wallarobba Tunnel.

Above: The Rail Motor Society's CPHs 1, 3 and 7 have just brought a full train of passengers up from Maitland on the occasion of the 2023 Hunter Valley Steamfest, and after letting them all off in the platform, the train is now shunting into a siding. Sunday 30 April 2023.

Except for Dungog itself, Paterson is the only station from this group that serves a town of any significance, with Mindaribba, Hilldale, Wallarobba and Wirragulla being very much 'out in the sticks' – in other words, the only reasons you'll likely be stepping off a train at these four locations is because you either live nearby or are holidaying locally. Three of the four are at least reasonably close to what passes for major roads in the region, but Hilldale is well over a kilometre off the nearest main road.

Martins Creek has a little bit of a village going for it, but there's no real public facilities to find – cafes, parks, galleries – something that nearby Paterson has in comparative abundance. What Martins Creek does have, which will interest readers, is the local, Daracon-owned ballast quarry, which is served by a siding that branches from the main line south of the station, running parallel to the track before veering off to the north just past the station. It is used to load ballast trains every now and then, but only as demand arises.

Back in Paterson, sure, you might visit for a lunch at the Court House Hotel or the Country Bakehouse, or visit the Court House Museum, but for rail fans, the town is perhaps best known as the home of the Rail Motor Society, whose depot sits directly across the tracks from the station, and houses the largest and most varied collection of former NSW Government Railways railmotors anywhere. In addition to their local tours and open days (generally the third Sunday of each month, except for December), the group's vintage railmotors are almost in constant use on lease to other operators and tour agencies.



Left: Looking north from Mindaribba Station. Unlike the other 'halt' style stations in this section, which are all concrete, Mindaribba still has a wooden platform. Saturday 13 May 2023.
Above: A view of the back or eastern side of Paterson Station, as seen from the commuter carpark, Sunday 30 April 2023. **Below:** Passing the small station at Martins Creek, Pacific National's 6MB4 Melbourne to Brisbane superfreighter is led by NR34 and two sister units on Saturday 13 May 2023.



Which, after a fact, leads us to Dungog. After the modest infrastructure that has preceded it, Dungog Station is a bit of a shock – a 'suburban style' station building that would not look completely out of place in Sydney's west. This can be somewhat explained by the fact that the current building was constructed in 1944, when the station itself was redeveloped as an island platform. The local Hunter Line service from Newcastle and Maitland terminates here in Platform 2, also known as the 'back platform' (and as such, your Opal card won't get you any further north along this railway),

and is normally formed by a two-car Hunter or Endeavour diesel rail-car set. In addition to these, the daily long distance North Coast XPT services to and from Grafton, Casino and Brisbane all stop here along the mainline platform. Dungog is the only member of this group of stations served by these trains. Although Dungog doesn't have a Rail Motor Society museum to draw in visitors, it does have a host of cafes, pubs and restaurants, and perhaps most intriguingly, the James Theatre, which hosts movie showings and functions, almost next door to the station, and the highly-regarded

Dungog Contemporary Art Gallery only a seven-minute walk down Dowling Street. Dungog is also one of the regular destinations for the Picnic Train tours out of Newcastle and Maitland, while the Rail Motor Society also run short trips up from Paterson during their monthly open days.

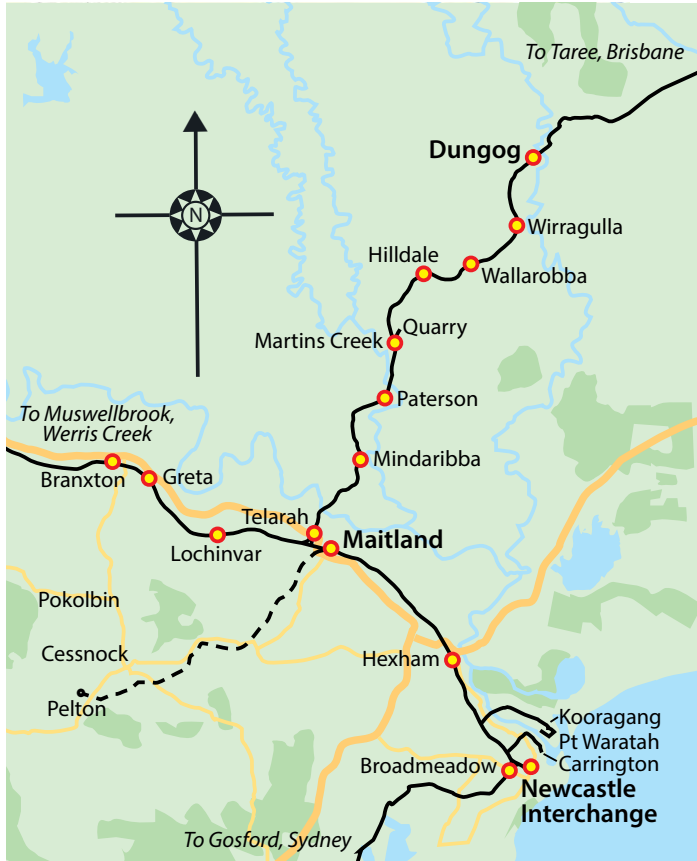
Dungog Station also sits on a crossing loop, albeit a shorter one that is handy for meets that involve the regular XPTs or terminating tour trains. A longer loop was constructed just north of town in 2007 and this is where North Coast freight trains usually cross. On the matter of freight trains, the line does see its fair share, although it would be fair to say that most pass through this 'lower North Coast' section during pre-dawn to late morning, and mid-afternoon through to early evening. Freight traffic can dry up somewhat during the middle of the day. Pacific National and SCT dominate

intermodal/container services with the former generally operating two or three services in both directions while the latter has just the one. At the time of writing (early October 2023), Aurizon had just commenced its weekly Melbourne- Sydney-Brisbane (MB1/BM1) service for Team Global Express (TGE). Aurizon plans to introduce a second and third service during April 2024.

The only regular non-intermodal freight trains on the line are Qube's Port Kembla-Brisbane steel trains, and Pacific National's weekly cement/ sugar train between Morandoo and Grafton, which usually runs north early on Saturday and returns the following afternoon. In addition to these, occasional coal trains run out of Stratford, again, as the need arises. Of course, other infrastructure related trains also run, including the aforementioned Martins Creek ballast trains, and ARTC's AK inspection train (which operates on a quarterly cycle).

With thanks to John Hoyle for his assistance in preparing this article.

Next: St James



Quick facts:

Distance from Sydney Central:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mindaribba: 203.46 kilometres • Paterson: 213.22 • Martins Creek: 218.53 • Hilldale: 226.37 • Wallarobba: 231.63 • Wirragulla: 237.97 • Dungog: 245.20
Crossing loops in the section	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mindaribba (1,562 metres) • Paterson (1,820) • Kilbride (1,586) • Wallarobba (1,550) • Dungog South (770) • Dungog North (1,550)
Opened:	1911
Departures:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weekday: Five Hunter Line services to/from Newcastle Interchange • Weekend: Three Hunter Line services to/from Newcastle Interchange • In addition, Dungog is served by three long-distance XPT services daily



An author self-portrait at Hilldale Station, Saturday 13 May 2023.

Wirragulla: NT35 northbound XPT from Sydney to Grafton rushes by, its passengers likely ignorant of the tiny Wirragulla Station that is being left in their wake, Saturday 13 May 2023.



Looking north from Wallarobba Station, Saturday 13 May 2023.



Left and Above: Two views of Hunter set HMT2756/HM2706 as it awaits departure from Dungog as service V958 to Newcastle Interchange on Saturday 13 May 2023.