



2026 Restoration Award

Chain Hills Tunnel

The Governor of New Zealand, Sir George Bowen, turned the first sod of the Dunedin and Clutha Railway on 18 March 1871 and the British railway construction firm, John Brogden and Sons, was awarded the Taieri Contract in July 1872. This contract for the construction of 55 kilometres of railway from Green Island to south of Milton, included the boring of a 473m-long tunnel under the Chain Hills between Fairfield and Wingatui. Mr. E. Duxbury's tender to complete the tunnel works was accepted in September 1872 and a construction camp was established at Chain Hills the following month.

By April 1873 work was underway at both ends of the tunnel with hole through expect in six months, but major slips in the cuttings at either end of the tunnel, the hard rock and clay combination encountered by the tunnellers, constant water seepage, and the need to fully-line the tunnel with over 100,000 kiln-fired bricks would delay its completion. This would also delay the opening of the Dunedin and Clutha Railway.

Timetabled trains were running between Dunedin and Green Island by June 1874 and tracklaying had started at the Balclutha end of the line, but finding skilled men for the tunnelling work was proving difficult. Two workers, Patrick Dempsey and Thomas Kerr, were killed by a rock fall inside the tunnel on 10 February 1875. A third, George Turnidge, survived the accident but would be crippled for life.

The tunnel was finally holed-through on 31 May 1875 and the remaining works were completed by mid-August. With the final obstacle overcome, the Dunedin and Clutha Railway was officially opened on 1 September 1875. After 39 years as part of the rail network Chain Hills Tunnel was bypassed on 1 June 1914 with the opening of the double-track Wingatui Tunnel deviation. In July the Government acquired land at the Wingatui end for use as an explosives magazine and the site was used for that purpose until the 1970s. Locals were then granted informal use of the tunnel by the landowners, and it became a popular walking and horse-riding route between Wingatui and Fairfield until gated shut by Dunedin City Council in 1998.

A few individuals began advocating for a formal cycle trail through Caversham Tunnel in 2005, but it too was sealed off by the council in 2007. Efforts to reopen Caversham Tunnel and establish a cycle trail to Mosgiel via the Chain Hills Tunnel gained momentum in 2008, and with the aim of working in partnership with the council to achieve that end, the Dunedin Tunnels Trail Trust was established in 2009. Thanks to community support and a major fundraising effort, the council bought the Wingatui end of the tunnel via the Dunedin Tunnels Trail Trust in 2017. The council began design work for a staged cycle trail between Mosgiel and Caversham in 2020 and with Dunedin Tunnels Trail Trust as a partner, it decided to proceed with Stage 1.

After allocating \$1.8 million to the 1.5 km Chain Hills Tunnel section work started in June 2025. The external works included laying paths to make the tunnel publicly accessible, removing overgrown and fallen vegetation, clearing drains, building fences, planting, and installing signage. Inside the tunnel the drains were cleared, the brickwork stabilised and repaired, and the tunnel base cleaned and resurfaced. Roof lighting was then installed the length of the tunnel roof together with protection sheets where water seepage remained an issue. With the project nearing completion in November 2025, the Government announces \$2 million of funding to help extend the trail to Green Island. The Chain Hills Tunnel cycle trail was opened on 19 December 2025.

This award is presented to the Dunedin Tunnels Trail Trust and Dunedin City Council in recognition of the successful completion of the Chain Hills Tunnel project, and to the local community who long advocate for and supported this outcome. This project both highlights the adaptive reuse potential of old rail infrastructure and preserves a significant piece of rail heritage that dates back to the early development of New Zealand's rail network.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Murray King".

Murray King MNZM, Chairman

May 2026