

Balclutha bridge

Stat attack

Total length: 244.1m (six spans of 36.6m)

Height: 9.15m

Width: 11.8m (roadway: 6.7m, footpaths: 1.4m wide on both sides)

Total weight: 10,830 tonnes

Hey guess what?

'Clutha' is the ancient Gaelic name for the river Clyde, on which the Scottish city of Glasgow is built. 'Balclutha', can thus be translated as 'town on the Clyde'. Where Dunedin can claim its title as the 'Edinburgh of the South', Balclutha can justifiably consider itself the 'Glasgow of the South'.

Jargon hunter

Bowstring bridges

The Balclutha bridge is built in the style known as 'bowstring'. This type of bridge was first designed and patented by American structural engineer Squire Whipple in 1841. It takes its name from its classic parabolic curved shape, which resembles an archer's bow. Bowstring bridges remained popular throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, as their distinctive design often meant they came to be seen as symbols of local communities.

Balclutha isn't called 'Big River Town' for nothing. The mighty Clutha River runs through the very heart of the town, crossed by a bridge with six massive concrete arches.

The bridge stands as an icon of Balclutha, and of South Otago as a whole. While thousands of Otago people cross this bridge every year, how many of us realise that it is in fact the third to be constructed in this location?

The first bridge built to link the banks of the Clutha River, or Molyneux as it was then known, was erected in 1868. This structure lasted only 10 years. In 1878, there was a massive flood, so devastating in its scale that it covered the entire lower Clutha Basin, causing high losses of stock and property. The bridge at Beaumont, having been swept away in the floodwaters, came floating downstream and slammed into the Balclutha bridge, damaging it to such an extent that it too was swept away. The second Balclutha bridge was not completed until 1881.

Construction on the current State Highway 1 road bridge began in 1933, and it was officially opened in 1935. Built in the style known as 'bowstring', it was specially designed by Public Works Department engineer W L Newnham to resist both flood and earthquake. Its reinforced concrete structure has indeed stood the test of time, with the bridge resisting several major floods during its 70 plus year lifetime.



The Balclutha bridge, with its distinctive bowstring design



The Balclutha road bridge with railway bridge in the background

