PUFFING to THE PACKHORSE
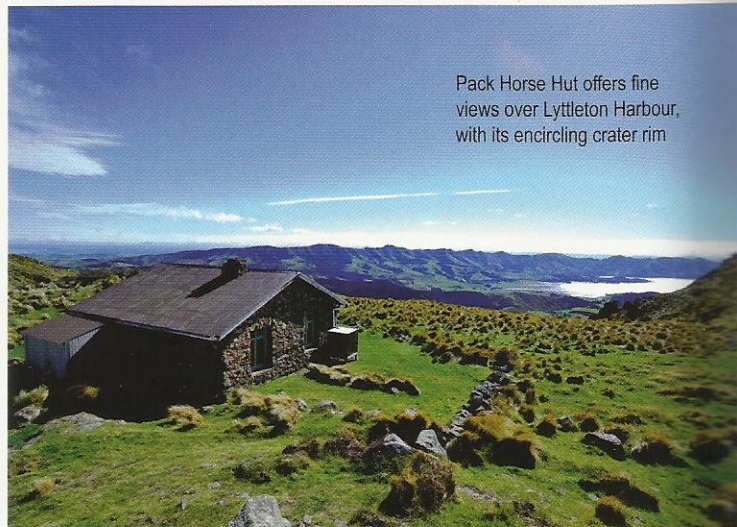
Pack Horse Hut, Banks Peninsula **EASY** ◀

Back in the 1910s, parliamentarian and conservationist Harry Ell had a dream of a network of roads and walking tracks open to everyone. Part of that dream was for the establishment of a summit road from Christchurch to Akaroa across Banks Peninsula. Alongside the road, a series of 14 rest houses were to be built to provide shelter for travellers. Only four were completed.

Until the recent earthquakes, the first two of those rest houses, the Sign of the Takahe and the Sign of the Kiwi, were thriving as a restaurant and tearoom respectively. Further along the Summit Road the remains of the third, the Sign of the Bellbird, is little more than a picnic shelter. The only rest house currently in use is the Sign
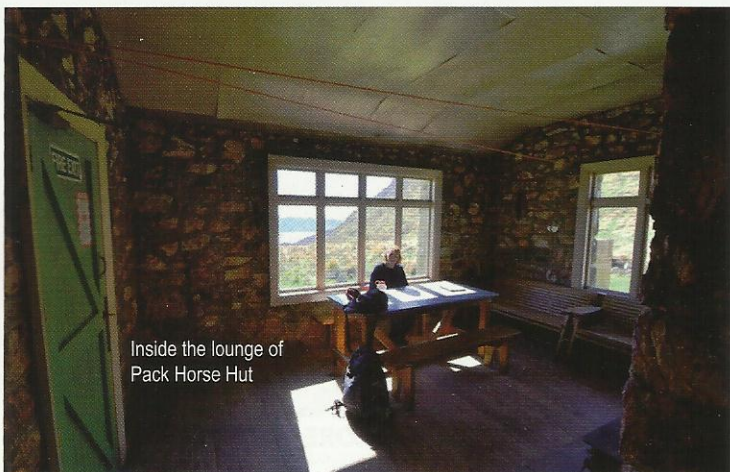

Inside the lounge of Pack Horse Hut

of the Packhorse and that was our destination on a sunny day.

Having driven past the sadly fenced-off Takahe and Kiwi, and the Bellbird, we parked at the end of the Summit Road on Gebbies Pass. This was as far as Harry Ell's summit road made it. We would now continue along its intended route up to Pack Horse Hut.

The track began by following a rather scruffy path between a fence and a 4WD road. As the road doglegs, a stile leads to the edge of an old logged area and the track goes steeply down through a pine forest. It then rose steadily, following a fence line, before another stile took us into a sheep-filled field. A well-worn path tracked the edge of the field, where we were battered by strong winds before, thankfully, crossing back into the forest.

A short stretch led down to a logging road which we followed to a large area devastated by logging. Red poles indicated a changed route, avoiding the logged area, and took us into the more pleasant environs of the pine forest. Rising steadily on a soft blanket of pine needles we arrived at an unexpected sight — a small bach with a pond and landscaped gardens in the middle of the forest.

From here we rose on steep zigzags through remnants of the old podocarp forest that once covered Banks Peninsula. This was one of the best sections of the walk, with trees stretching down the slopes below and above the path. We popped out of the trees and onto the open slopes where, once again, the wind threatened to flatten us.

Pack Horse Hut offers fine views over Lyttleton Harbour, with its encircling crater rim

The track followed the side of the hill crossing two vertical lines of rock, known as the Remarkable Dykes — igneous intrusions forced up through earlier volcanic rocks. After two hours of walking we rounded a couple more bends and abruptly arrived at the welcome sight of Pack Horse Hut on Kaituna Pass. We hurried in out of the wind.

The DOC-administered hut is well-appointed with wood-burning stove and two sleeping rooms containing nine bunks. Built in 1916 with local stone hauled up to the pass on sledges pulled by bullocks, the hut is beautifully situated on the pass. It offers fine views of Lyttleton Harbour, with its encircling crater rim, and the tops of the Southern Alps beyond. We gazed out of the picture window as we ate lunch in the company of four other trampers.

From the hut there are various options for leaving the pass. A short track drops down to the Kaituna Valley, another path goes straight down to Orton Bradley Park or a much longer route

takes in the summits of Mts Bradley and Herbert and onwards to Diamond Harbour (and a ferry to Lyttleton). We returned the way we had come.

Despite being close to Christchurch, Pack Horse Hut feels remote. It stands as a tribute to Harry Ell's vision and is definitely a place we will return to, preferably without the gale-force winds.

- Andrew Lowton

WILD FILE

Access Head to Gebbies Pass from Christchurch via SH75 and Gebbies Pass Road or Dyers Pass and the Summit Road, or via Governor's Bay and Teddington. There is a small parking area at the beginning of a 4WD track with a locked gate.
Grade Easy
Time 4-5hr return
Map BX24