

This ends your journey through Ophir. If you are leaving via the old bridge look to the left and you can see the remains of the stone abutments to an old swing bridge. This was a prominent mining area that Chinese miners worked over in the old days. The "Golden Gate" mine was located here and water was piped over the gorge by a race built from the Chatto Creek. The Chinese miners, who at one stage outnumbered the European population, often picked over diggings left by others. They were hard workers living and working with primitive facilities and must have had a miserable existence surviving in the extremes of the harsh Central Otago weather.

*So laugh with me now or cry with me now  
As you tramp those memoried tracks  
For they all lead down to Ophir Town  
And the old time town of Blacks.  
(Todd Symonds)*

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#### REFERENCE

'Ophir Memories'  
Ken Leask - author & publisher  
Second edition - printed 1995

# Walk Around Historic Ophir

Ophir is a tiny settlement which ranks alongside St Bathans and Clyde as one of the country's most authentic and significant settlements from gold mining days.

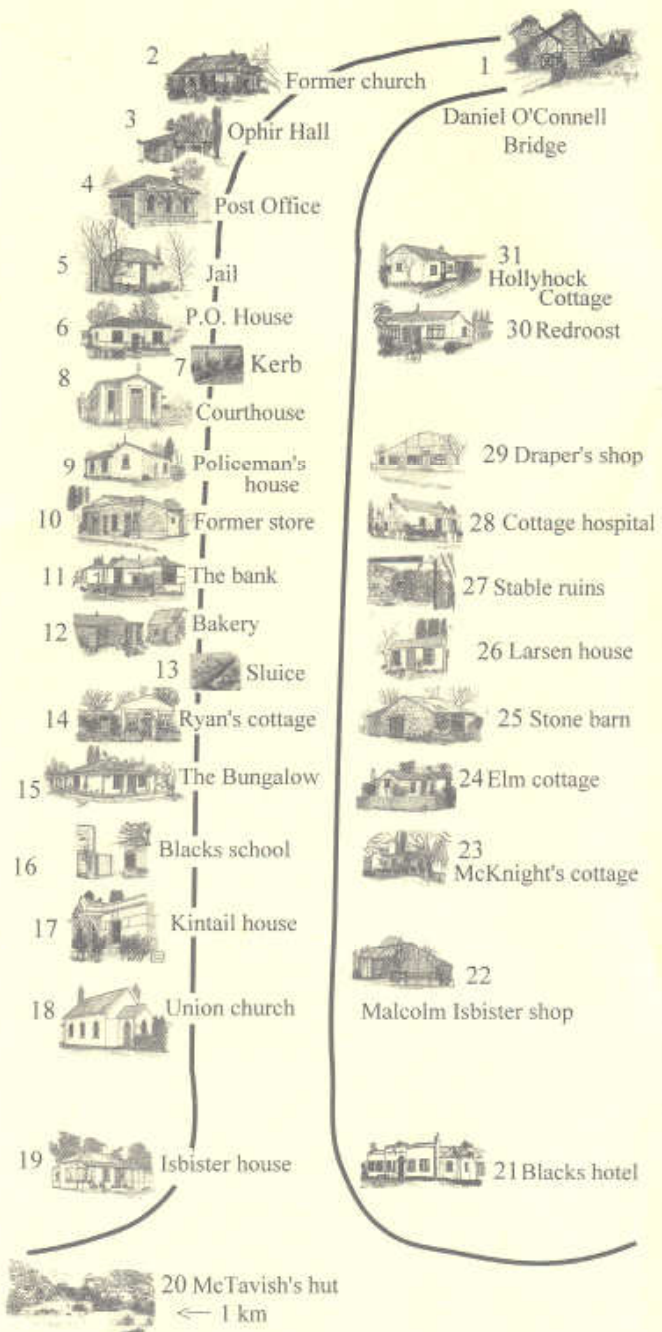
The town sprang into life almost overnight when gold was discovered on the property of local runholder Charles Black in April, 1863. In less than three months thousands of miners occupied what became known as Blacks Diggings. It was shortened to Blacks - a name that remained with the school (now closed) and the hotel in spite of an official name change in 1875 to Ophir. This was the name of the fabulous gold mine mentioned in the Bible where the Queen of Sheba obtained gold for King Solomon. An estimated 34 kg (1200 oz) of gold was taken out of Ophir.

In its heyday, Ophir was the commercial and social centre for the district with stores, a school, police station, courthouse, post office, a cottage hospital and a resident doctor, two major hotels and two churches. But when the gold dwindled so did the population. The final blow came in 1906 when the railway line by-passed the town in favour of the farming community at Omakau across the river. Ophir sank into near obscurity which probably helped save many of its historic buildings. The few permanent residents were boosted by an equal number of people seeking a holiday retreat from city life.

Today the village is undergoing a renaissance. Property values have risen along with tourists eager to wander into the past and sample the special character that Ophir has retained. Any new buildings are now subject to strict regulations. Most of the early buildings are of local schist stone, mud brick or plastered mud brick and some of its historic buildings are being restored.

## Promote Dunstan 'Walk Around' series





## Walk Around Historic Ophir

The most attractive approach to the village is the original route from Alexandra via the Daniel O'Connell bridge. Turn right just before Omakau at the road sign.

### 1. Daniel O'Connell Bridge (1880)



The predominantly Irish population of Ophir named the bridge after the Irish patriot Daniel O'Connell. Crossing the Manuherikia River, it is one of the last surviving suspension bridges in Central Otago. The single-lane wooden bridge was designed by Vincent County engineer L.D. Macgeorge. A whole roasted bullock and a hogshead (238 litres) of ale was consumed to celebrate its opening. It was rebuilt with steel in 1905.

### 2. Former Catholic Church (1880)



The former St Peter's Catholic church, enclosed by a handsome stone wall, served the community for nearly 50 years. Services ceased with the 1929 opening of the larger St Peter's in Omakau. It was bought by Bob Craig, the local butcher and farmer who converted the stone building into a private residence.

### 3. Ophir Hall (1926)

The hall was built by local builder John McKnight and named the Ophir Peace Memorial Hall. It has an excellent dancing floor with the boards being only 5 cms (2 inches) wide. It is still the centre of community life and is used for many functions and events.



### 4. Ophir Post Office (1886)



One of the most photographed buildings in Central Otago, it replaced an earlier structure. Construction was done by Leslie Arthur and Company of Cromwell for three hundred & twenty-three pounds, six shillings and nine pence (nearly \$650). By 1976 its future was under threat but the New Zealand Historic Places Trust took over the building. It still operates as a Post Office agency opening for three hours each day between 9am and noon. Take a minute to look at the memorabilia on display, buy a postcard and have it stamped with the Ophir date stamp.

### 5. Jail (c1882)

This small wooden two-cell jail was possibly located between the policeman's house and the courthouse. It was moved in 1939 when a new police station was built in Omakau. Just over 60 years later and after a fundraising campaign by the Ophir Welfare Committee in 2002, the jail was purchased and moved back to this site behind the Post Office.



### 6. Post Office House (1909)



Now substantially modified with an addition to the front, the house for a resident post office attendant was built for two hundred and seventy pounds and 12 shillings (about \$542.40). (Not open to public).

### 7. Stone Kerbing (1880s)

Pause a moment to look at the original schist stone kerbing leading to the courthouse and the former policeman's house. It was laid to mark the street boundary. The kerbing in other historic parts of the main street (Swindon St) is being restored.



## 8. The Courthouse (1884)

The old courthouse heard many cases involving disputes over mining claims, water rights and, later on, land titles. The building reflects the optimism of the nineteenth century that Ophir would remain a town of substance long after the gold ran out. This building of pointed and dressed stone with a smooth plastered face to the street is the same design as the

Alexandra and Clyde courthouses. (Not open to public)



## 9. Policeman's House (1870s)



The house is unusual in that it is built in half stone and half timber. It served as the police station until replaced by one in Omakau. (Not open to public)

## 10. Pitches' store

It served as the police station

This large stone building was originally built for an early resident, John Pitches, who ran a grocery shop in one part and a butcher's shop in another. He lived in the residential part. Remembered as a benevolent man, he was prominent in all Ophir projects. The building's roof and shop front were altered when it was converted to a service station in



the 1960s but there are plans to restore it to its original design.

## 11. The Bank (1886)



Ophir had two banks but only one has survived. The former Bank of New South Wales building had an office at the front and a residence behind. It has been substantially modified since its conversion to a private home.

## 12. The Bakery (1880s)



The smaller of this pair of stone buildings was once the town's bakery run by Bryan Flannery. It is recorded Mrs Flannery took exception to rugby games played on a nearby paddock and she chopped down the goal posts to stop them playing! The larger building was a stable and then a workshop. Both buildings were restored and converted to a restaurant-café in 2004. It is now a homestay.

### 13. Sluice Channels

Between the old bakery and Ryan's cottage are the remains of a sluice channel. Water was a vital ingredient for the miners because it was used to separate the gold from the gravel. The waste was discharged into the Manuherikia River by sluice channels. The remains of old gold mining races which brought water to the diggings can still be seen cutting across hillsides.



### 14. Ryan's Cottage



This mud-brick and timber-faced cottage replaced a hotel owned by Robert Ryan from 1873 to 1890. The ruins to the side of the cottage are thought to have been the hotel stables. The cottage has a colourful past and was once a dressmaker's shop, a cobbler's, and, in the early days, a brothel. It now operates as a homestay.

### 15. The Bungalow (1926)

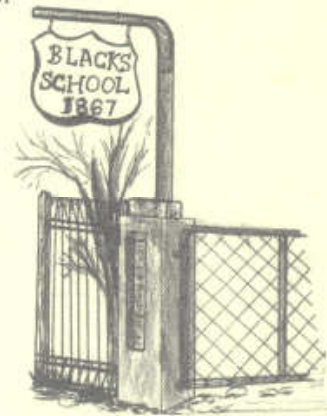
Built by John McKnight who also built the Ophir Hall, a plaque beside the front door records its occupancy by the Very Reverend Alexander Don. He was renowned for his work in Otago Chinese mining communities after spending time in China where he learned Cantonese. The Chinese



miners called him "Jesus Don". A former moderator of the Presbyterian General Assembly, the Rev Don retired to Ophir. He was on the verge of publishing his life story when he died on the train going to Dunedin in 1934. The manuscript was lost or stolen on the train but his book, "Memories of the Gold Road", was reassembled and finally published in 1936. A keen meteorologist, he recorded and reported the Ophir weather.

### 16. Blacks School Site

The original stone school and adjacent school house were of stone from the nearby Raggedy Range and opened for business in 1886 with one teacher and 21 pupils. It was replaced by a new school (now a play centre) in 1956. It survived for a time but sadly was demolished in 1961 "in the interests of public safety". Former pupils of the old school can remember the frozen ink in the ink wells on winter mornings and the black currant jam sandwiches wrapped in newspaper.



### 17. Kintail House (c1917)

This house was built for Martha and Donald McRae and is notable for its unusual construction - solid concrete, poured

behind a mold of slatted and figured boxing to give the exterior a chiselled stone block appearance. Donald, who came from the Shetland Islands, was head shepherd on Moutere sheep station and used to import colliers from Scotland to muster and work sheep.



### 18. Union Church (1897)



This simple gothic church, still referred to as St Andrew's Presbyterian Church, opened for worship in March, 1897. The vestry, which doubled as a Sunday School, was added in 1931. More recently the timber cladding was roughcast.

### 19. Isbister Cottage

At the end of the main street turn right at Blacks Hotel and walk a short distance for a roadside view of Isbister House. Malcolm Isbister from the Orkney Isles built this home into the face of the foothill known as Brandy Hill. It has been altered over the years.



### 20. MacTavish's Hut

A kilometre further up the Ida Valley Rd (maybe a little too far to walk!!) on the right is a restored miners hut. The two-room hut was built on an acre of mining land owned by Lockhart MacTavish. At one stage it was occupied by Clem Daniels a goldminer who ended his days there at an advanced age. Clem used to dress in a blue suit when he went to Ophir and being keen on cricket used to umpire matches marking the number of balls bowled with his walking stick. It was always obvious when he found gold – he would hold a roaring celebration at the old pub. (Privately owned, not open to public)



### 21. Blacks Hotel (1937)

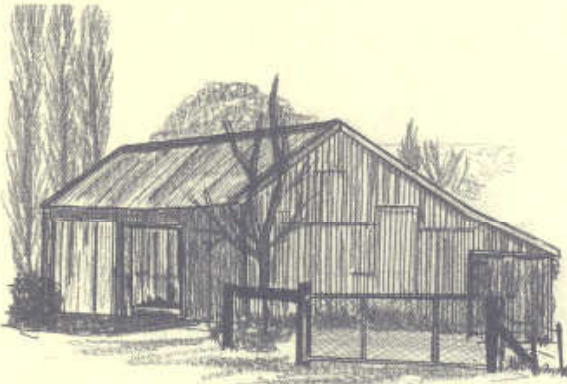
The art deco style Blacks Hotel was established when a new bridge crossing the Manuherikia River to Omakau was built and what was known as the Ophir lane became



a highway. The site was originally occupied by Micky Moran's stone cottage. An Irishman with a very thick brogue Micky kept the community amused with his exploits.

and sayings. Micky installed power when electricity came to the district about 1930 and it is recorded it took him three days before he found how to turn it off. The original Blacks Hotel, a picturesque stone building, was in the main street but has been demolished.

## 22. Malcolm Isbister's Shop



The galvanised shed on the site was once the Isbister carpentry shop. In later years a crib was moved onto the rear of the section for use as a holiday home.

## 23. McKnight's Cottage (c1904)

Local builder, blacksmith, funeral director and Vincent County councillor, John McKnight is thought to have built this mud-brick house about the time of his marriage to Eliza (nee Pitches) in 1904. As well as being responsible for several buildings in Ophir, he also built the Bank of New Zealand in Omakau. The corrugated-iron workshop



next door was the McKnight brothers blacksmith's shop. It is very old and was probably established before the house.

## 24. Elm Cottage

This humble timber cottage is unusual in that its lean-to is built of stone.

Adding to the mix of

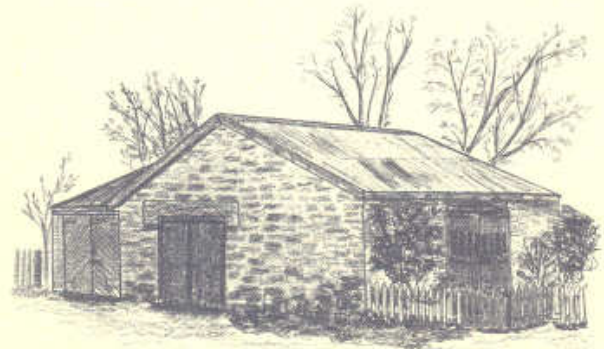


materials is a mud-

brick addition at the side, all carefully restored. Behind is a stone and mud-brick bunkroom. The original two-room cottage dates back to early mining days.

## 25. Stone Barn

The handsome stone barn is part of Elm Cottage's complex of buildings. It has a lean-to of iron and a two-stall stable behind. It belonged to the McKnight brothers who built various horse-drawn vehicles in early times. It was also used as a smithy and a hay barn. Note the sluice channel running alongside it which is a continuation of the channel on the opposite side of the street.



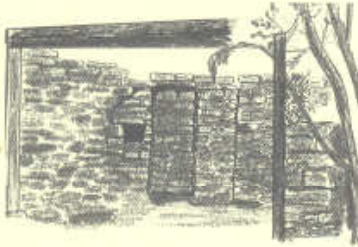
## 26. Larson House

This is actually two two-room cottages, one placed in front of the other. The front part is thought to have been the town's athenaeum, shifted from further down the street. The rear cottage dates back to mining days. Both are corrugated iron, with a more recent plaster overcoat. The neighbouring stone cottage is said to have once housed a smithy.

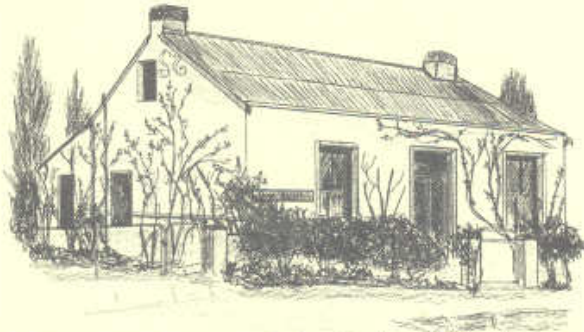


## 27. Shamrock Hotel Ruins

The roughcast cottage on the next corner was the original site of the Shamrock Hotel. Walk down McDonald St and you can see the ruins of the hotel's stone stables through the cottage garden.



## 28. Cottage Hospital



The name of this unusually large cottage of the Scottish farmhouse type reflects its early use, very likely doubling as both hospital and doctor's residence. Beneath its later coating of cement render is solid stone. Early photos show the cottage with a deep front verandah.

## 29. The Old Drapery

This early building - both shop and living quarters - was owned by Mrs Ellen Craig who let it out to various people. Mrs Craig lived with her husband next door in the former Bank of New Zealand residence which has been demolished.



## 30. Redroost Cottage (1884)

Redroost cottage was built by Peter Harrington. It was of timber construction but at some later stage was roughcast.



## 31. Hollyhock Cottage

Originally a two-roomed hut it was moved to this site from the Ida Valley in the 1940s. The cottage has been added to over the years.

