

Hyde Park, Maungatapere

A network of paths through farmland and bush, with plenty of space for dogs to roam and run, off-leash, as well as a range of artefacts and geological features to explore.

Location: Hyde Park, 227 Pukatuea Road, Maungatapere. Turn south off SH14 ca. 0.8 km south of Maungatapere, and continue on Pukatuea Road for another 1.8 km.

Access: Small parking area just inside gates to Hyde Park; entry fee (by honesty box) of \$4 per adult (\$2 per child) and \$4 per dog.

Length: ca. 6km

Configuration: Network of tracks, giving up to 7 routes

Grade: Gently undulating with some rough sections; mainly grass/soil; coloured markers on paths

Status: off leash (under control)

Cafes and restaurants: The Office Cafe in Maungatapere (ca. 3 km) - one of the best small cafes in the north!

More information: Details and map available at <http://www.hydepark.co.nz>

Hyde Park is something of an odd-ball – but a lovely one, and we could only wish there were more. It comprises about 60 ha of farmland and bush, which has been thrown open by the land-owner, Bill Hyde, specifically for dog-walkers. I've never met Bill, but in the leaflets that are usually available by the entrance gate, he describes himself as a retired farmer who has worked with dogs all his life, and who recognises that there isn't enough effort made to provide facilities for dogs to have a good time in the countryside – so he created Hyde Park! For the privilege of walking there, we're charged a small fee (because, as Bill says, the rates still need to be paid) – but it's worth every cent.

Having parked in the small parking area just inside the gate to the park, we start by following the main track to the entrance kiosk. Here we pay our fee (via the honesty box) and pick up a leaflet (so long as previous walkers have left us some) and then have to face our choice. Which way to go: left, right or straight ahead?

It probably depends on what we want to see. Left takes us across pasture, and down into an area of bush where there's a waterwheel, which despite its age still feeds the five houses and stock on the property. From there we can walk on through the bush, and explore the Rocky Trail – a rough path that picks its way between mossy boulders and thick totara bush, then loops back to the main track. The rocks are made of fine-grained basalt, and are fragments of lava ejected from the Maungatapere volcano, which erupted some 300,000 years ago – and still forms an almost perfect ash cone a couple of kilometres to the west. We can see it – as well as its sister, Maunu – if we choose the route to the right. This way is through open pasture, so we might encounter some grazing stock (though they are friendly and dog-tolerant) and usually involves negotiating a number of electric fences. It's worth treating these with respect, for they are connected up to mains electricity, not a humble car battery, so give a decent shock if you touch them. But Bill has kindly provided

plenty of detachable sections, with rubber handles, that we can open with confidence. If we do so, we loop round to the left past the water ram – a hydraulic pump that draws water and can be heard clunking away in its hut – to join the main track near its end.

It's the main track that offers our third choice. This takes us towards the old farmhouse, passing a duckpond and chicken run on the way, so if your dog is anything like hours, it's advisable to keep it firmly under control! The area around the farmhouse is private, but a track runs off up the slope to the left, through bush, to a rock outcrop. Beyond that, there's a marked loop back to the main track, or we can venture off along unmarked trails further into the bush.

As all this indicates, Hyde Park isn't a place just to come to once and 'do'. Instead it's worth coming back to, to explore and savour at leisure.

