

WAIIAU BRANCH

Length	66.6 kilometres
Opened	Stage 1 Waipara to Waikari April 1882 Stage 2 Waikari to Medbury September 1884 Stage 3 Medbury to Culverden February 1886 Stage 4 Culverden to Waiau December 1919
Stops	10 Waipara, Waikari, Hawarden, Medbury, Balmoral, Pahau, Culverden, Achray, Rotherham, Waiau
Closed	Completely on 15 January 1978. Subsequently the Waipara to Waikari section sold to Weka Pass Railway which operates a heritage railway.
Passenger services	Stopped in January 1939

The Waiau branch is the most northerly of the Canterbury branch lines. It is one of the longer ones, covering 66.6 kilometres from Waipara, a small town at the junction of SH1 and SH7 in north Canterbury, to the Waiau River in the north. Waipara is also a stop on the Coastal Pacific service run by KiwiRail on the Main North Line (MNL). The first 12 kilometres of the branch line have been restored by the Weka Pass Railway Society which operates both vintage steam and diesel-electric locomotives from Waipara through the Weka Pass. A ride on one of their timetabled journeys is an experience not to be missed if in the area. The website for the vintage railway is referenced at the end of this chapter.

This branch line was built not only to access agricultural resources in the northern parts of the Canterbury region, but also because there were for years various proposals under consideration about how best to link Christchurch to Picton. The Waiau branch was a potential route, though eventually the selected main line route was coastal (via Kaikoura) and Waiau was destined to remain a branch. In its later years the line also provided an invaluable service taking timber from plantation forests.

Driving through the Weka Pass to Waikari is well worth doing, affording many views of the restored railway line, as well as fascinating rock formations.

Exploration of the Waiau branch begins at the northern end of the Weka Pass Railway line at Waikari. A restored station precinct, the northern terminus of the Weka Pass Railway, sits on a rise above the township. The Star & Garter Hotel just down the road from the station has a large photo of Waikari in the 1880s which is worth viewing before setting off.

After exiting the pass it is fairly easy to work out where the railway formation continued. It crossed what is now SH7 and made its way gradually down the hillside to level out in the valley floor. Waikari station was about 1.8 kilometres by road from the Weka Pass railway terminus.

Head down the hill from the Weka Pass Railway terminus and turn left into Princes Street. Any of the streets running left off Princes Street provide access to or viewing points of the rail corridor which has been used to develop a 1.5 kilometres long Village Walk. There are

another four walking loops ranging from 1.2 kilometres to 11.3 kilometres in length around the area, some of which also make use of the rail formation beyond the township.

After passing Waikari School the embankment can be seen very clearly across a paddock above the road. Just past a set of industrial storage buildings there is a small reserve area, where the formation crosses the road. The crossing is clearly marked on the right by a set of railway gates and a level-crossing sign. There is also a small signboard to the right of the gates providing information about the walkways. These artefacts mark the entrance to the Waikari station site which took up much of the land on the right of Princes Street for the next half kilometre or so. The platform can still be made out across the paddocks, and much of the railway reserve land is now a pleasant picnic/park setting. This contrasts with the days when the station was a bustling place, especially during harvest times. There were all the usual facilities: a third class station comprising a large open lobby, waiting-room for "ladies", stationmaster's office/post and telegraph office, and toilets; a 60x30ft goods shed (opposite the station); a foot-warmer building; an engine shed with coal shed and water vat; and a turntable. There were also four houses for railways staff and a 1.5-ton crane, as well as stockyards and associated loading bays. Included amongst various loops were two private sidings, one to a limeworks store and the other to the Waikari flour mill. Both the latter facilities were at the north end of the yards, and the somewhat tumbledown remains of the flour mill can still be seen by turning right along Singleton Street from Princes Street. The rail formation is also very clear on both sides of the Singleton Street, now used as walking tracks.

Princes Street becomes Hawarden-Waikari Road and this should be followed to Hawarden, with a couple of side trips to viewing spots along the way. The first of these is Parkview Road, where one of the walk loops ends, having made its way along the very clear raised embankment. After leaving Parkview Road, the embankment is again very clear from the main road, particularly as they converge. A couple of culverts can be seen. The embankment becomes a cutting when the road rises slightly, and continues this way till it diverges to the right to bypass Hawarden just ahead. A turn into Gemmells Road just before Hawarden affords a good view of the level crossing.

In Hawarden turn right into High Street. The station was on the right 800 metres from the intersection, and the rail corridor is still very obvious, as are a loading bank and the platform, though these are very overgrown. At one stage Hawarden station was another busy place, with a 60x30ft goods shed, 1.5-ton crane and stockyards for both cattle and sheep, as well as 48 and 40-wagon loops and a 35-wagon backshunt. Though the station started as a shelter shed, by 1911 the facility had been much improved to a Vogel-era class three type, and the stationmaster lived in a house provided for him in the yards.

Continue from Hawarden on the "main" road, now called Horsely Downs Road. The rail corridor is up to 2.5 kilometres from the road, so out of sight. Its passage can be checked by turning along Bentleys Road (unsealed) and at nearly two kilometres the embankment can be seen both left and right. Beyond Bentleys Road there is a Y-junction. Take the right-hand fork (Medbury Road) and shortly after turn right along Gilberts Road. At 2.27 kilometres from the turn-off (or 800 metres after Holders Road) the line crossed where there was a ballast pit used during construction of the line. The pit is now a dip in the road. The

formation can be seen at right angles to the road, particularly clearly on the right via a set of double railway gates. On the left it is not clear, but it was heading straight to a bridge over the Waitohi River. The bridge was “only a few feet above the riverbed, [so] three pile piers gave sufficient support to the superstructure”.ⁱ

Return to Medbury Road and turn right to cross the Waitohi River. Continue on Medbury Road where it turns right to run along the the southernmost extension of the Balmoral Forest. This forest area is one of Canterbury’s largest exotic plantings, using poor lands around the Hurunui River, and although planted by the government as unemployment schemes during the 1920s and 1930s it is now privately owned by one of New Zealand’s largest forestry companies. In 1975 the forest suffered extensive wind damage, and hauling the windfall logs out to market staved off final closure of the branch for a couple of years.

Look for a plaque on a rock on the right side of the road. This explains how the station, on the other side of the road, was named “Medbury” by the landowner who was given naming rights when the railway was put across his property in 1878. Apparently, his family had a farm called Medbury in Bedfordshire, England.

Medbury was the terminus for a year until the extension to Culverden was finished, so the station had a loading bank, stockyards and a water tank with a windmill for steam locomotives. A goods shed was installed in 1924. The station itself was a mere shelter shed. There was also a ballast pit which was turned into a road gravel pit, which in turn was excavated through the station site so there is nothing now to see. It is said that a farm building standing in a paddock slightly further along on the left is the old goods shed, safely relocated and given a new lease of life.

Resist any urge to turn into unsealed Shimins Road as this becomes a dead end just before the Hurunui River. There used to be a railway bridge across the river, a significant structure at 1,632ft long, requiring 40 spans of 40ft and two short spans of 8ft each. The bridge was supported by piers, consisting of four piles driven at least 20ft into the river bed. The superstructure was a timber truss typical of railway bridges built throughout the country around this time. The sub-soil proved to be harder than anticipated, and the original piles had to be withdrawn and steel cylinders driven into holes excavated in the river bed.

There were two stops between Medbury and Culverden, at Balmoral and Pahau, both of which comprised only a platform, a loop and stockyards, but they have now vanished. Their role was primarily to service the forestry, but they also handled stock from local farms and quarried “marble”ⁱⁱⁱ chips used to make “distinctive building blocks known as Summerhill Stone”.ⁱⁱⁱ

Continue on Medbury Road, to SH7, and turn left to pass through Hurunui and to cross the Hurunui River. The Stage Coach Hotel at Hurunui, which has held a liquor licence continuously since opening in 1860, was an important local hostelry for those fording the river. The hotel was bought in 1982 by a group of local farmers after years of neglect and decay and is once again trading as a going concern.

Having crossed the river and heading north, continue to resist any urge to explore the many unsealed roads leading into and around the forestry area, as there is nothing for even the keenest rail explorer to see. The line proceeds north in a direct line from the river and eventually converges with SH7. A 2.5 kilometre trek down Long Plantation Road, on the left, does reveal the formation crossing at right angles on its way to SH7 and Culverden. This was the site of Pahau stop. The rail crossed the Pahau River about 1.5 kilometres on the left from the current road bridge, too far away to see if there are any railway bridge remnants.

Proceed into Culverden, where the large station and yards were behind the tea rooms, store and bakery. As is usually the case in an “urban” setting the local hotel is also close by. Roaming around the car-parking area at the back of the shops may reveal a platform or a high-level loading bank. At one stage there was a very large goods shed at Culverden – 81x31ft – as well as an engine shed, a 1.5-ton crane and a 55ft turntable. The loops and shunts ranged in size from 73 to 18-wagon lengths. There were also six houses for railway workers. Culverden was the terminus for 25 years, from 1886 until 1919. During these years there was much agitation locally for extension of the line as far as Waiau, but there was no action until the first sod was turned in June 1914. To understand how large the station area was call in to the Culverden Domain. The southern end of the yards occupied the Domain and an equivalent area on the far side of the line. The turntable, engine shed, etc. occupied the land at the back of the Domain, now filled by trees. The rest of the yards extended to School Road, nearly half a kilometre north from the gates to the Domain. There was a ballast pit between School Road and School Creek, alongside the road.

Culverden is where travellers can make their way to Hanmer Springs, a very popular destination for those seeking hot springs and a thermal spa. When the railway operated passenger services, there was a regular bus service connecting the town to the facilities at Hanmer. Cattle were driven from Molesworth Station, the largest farm in New Zealand, north of Hanmer Springs, to Culverden from where they were sent on to market, and this trade provided useful income for the branch for many years.

Continue through Culverden to the bridge across School Creek where there is a set of abutments, on the left amongst the trees. The formation remains visible on the left of Mouse Point Road, also known more prosaically as SH7, confirmed by a set of abutments about a kilometre out of town. Thereafter there is nothing similar to reassure the explorer, but a line in the vegetation indicates the formation even where paddocks have been thoroughly worked over.

At the Y-junction of Red Post Corner take the right-hand fork, Rotherham Road. There is an interpretation panel at the junction explaining why it is called Red Post and describing the huge sheep sales that used to be held in the area. The formation continues on the left for nearly five kilometres, marked by at least five sets of low-profile abutments.

By the intersection with Beavens Road (right) and Flintoft Mouse Point Road (left) the line cuts away gently to the left. The stop called Achray (originally Flintofts) was in the stand of pine trees on the right 200 metres along Flintoft Mouse Point Road. This stop comprised only a small shelter shed, a low-level loading bank and a 22-wagon loop. There was no

platform. In 2013 there was a rather forlorn set of railway gates hanging between two posts on the left of the road, an isolated and fragile remnant of what was once a busy branch line.

Back on Rotherham Road the embankment can just be made out where it is raised on the left, but the distance between road and rail widens, reducing visibility. A left turn along Hendersons Road leads to a level crossing marked only by some scrubby vegetation after 760 metres. Hendersons Road marks the southern end of the Rotherham yards, and it extended about half a kilometre to Station Road.

Rotherham is a smaller town than Culverden. This small settlement was the railhead for five years from 1914 until the extension to Waiau was completed in 1919, and it was therefore somewhat larger than might have been expected. It had a fairly large station, incorporating a stationmaster's office. There was also a 40x30ft goods shed, two loading banks and stockyards as well as two loops and a backshunt. There were two railway houses at the north end of the yards, close to Station Road. Access to the yards via Station Road now encroaches on private land so there is little that can be viewed.

From Rotherham SH7 makes its way around Isolated Hill, a local landscape feature which looks as if it is an outcrop of the Amuri Range, cut off when the Waiau River settled in its current bed. The river is on the left, and the rail corridor is between road and river all the way to the terminus just before the bridge across the river to Waiau.

It is 10 kilometres to the terminus, and for all this distance the rail formation is pretty much clear on the left of the road, at times as raised embankment, at other times in use as a stock track. Where road and rail first converge the embankment is raised, and a bridge can be seen in amongst trees and grass. Slightly further along there is a fish farm on the left, and the line runs at the far side of the property and continues straight while the road takes a right-hand loop. Where line and road re-converge there is a set of rather wonky bridge abutments or a culvert obscured in the long grass. The formation is in use as a stock track. After the local golf club there are at least three culverts under raised embankment and then another vestigial set of remnants in an open stream bed, opposite a raised stock-loading ramp under old road surface. Just a few metres further there is a rather substantial set of abutments, probably the largest needed on this line apart from those used for bridges across the rivers.

Road and rail both curve right around the foot of the hill, and the terminus is very soon in sight. It is hard to miss, not only because there are concrete remnants to be seen, but also, at the far end of the yards a somewhat strange silo-type structure on top of a concrete stand. There is a layby with a picnic table in the shade of an oak tree, which, according to the interpretation panel, was planted on 10 June 1914 by the Hon Heaton Rhodes "after he had turned the first sod of the new railway link from Culverden to Waiau". The interpretation panel also identifies the silo structure as "a concrete hopper, built to enable quick loading of bulk lime for agriculture". There is a lime quarry in the hills three kilometres to the south.

As befitted an important and initially busy terminus, Waiau had all the fixtures and fittings needed: a 3-room station with verandah, 61x21ft goods shed, stockyards, engine shed, 55ft

turntable, water tank on stand, crane and six loops and shunts of different capacities. There were also five railway houses on the far side of the site. The location of the turntable is opposite a brick-gated farm entrance. The platform is still in place, as are a couple of concrete stands which perhaps were mounts for the crane, alongside the goods shed.

The line never went across the river into the township of Waiau itself, which is only a kilometre or so distant across the Waiau River.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Weka Pass Railway:

<http://www.wekapassrailway.co.nz/>

Department of Conservation (DOC) information on Weka Pass:

<http://www.doc.govt.nz/conservation/historic/by-region/canterbury/north-canterbury-and-arthurs-pass/weka-pass-historic-reserve/>

ⁱ *The Great Northern: the story of the Waiau Branch Railway*, Leslie Dew, Weka Pass Railway, 2001.

ⁱⁱ An outcrop of red-tinted, recrystallised limestone on the Waiau River supplied Hanmer 'marble' for many years. <<http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/canterbury-region/page-2>

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid. pp187-8