

WAIMATE BRANCH

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Length: 21 kilometres

Opened:

Stage 1 Studholme Junction to Waimate March 1877

Stage 2 Waimate to Waihao Downs April 1883

Stops: 6

Studholme Junction

Waimate

Arno

McLeans

Waihao Forks

Waihao Downs

Closed:

Stage 1 Waimate to Waihao Downs December 1953

Stage 2 Studholme Junction to Waimate April 1966

Passenger services: Stopped in February 1931

The Waimate branch, the southernmost of those in Canterbury, is a little different from other branch lines crossing the Canterbury Plains. It runs flat and straight for only seven kilometres before wending its way through a narrow gorge where the Southern Alps stretch out the long arm of the Hunter Hills towards the sea. With the construction of the Main South Line (MSL) near the coast inland settlers agitated for a branch line to service their district and enhance their profitability. This is another branch in which a private company built a portion of the line, from Waimate to Waihao Downs. The Waimate Railway Company was established by local residents, and the government agreed to take control of the line in April 1885 and operated it thereafter.

The line beyond Waimate has some twists and turns, but there are no remnants to be seen anywhere apart from a forlorn goods shed at its furthest extremity at Waihao Downs. While the scenery is pleasant it is not spectacular, so there is no compelling reason to explore this line. The town of Waimate though is a pleasant spot which makes the best of its historic sites and offers a number of activities. Of particular interest are the wallabies, some of which range freely in the Hunter Hills. Others can be seen at a local attraction where rescued wallaby babies are hand raised.

This branch line started east of Waimate at Studholme Junction on SH1 where these days a shiny Fonterra milk-processing factory dominates the landscape. Just south of the factory turn into Foleys Road. The MSL crosses Foleys Road and it is easy to poke around the old Studholme Junction railway station site, and to see the junction where the Waimate branch curved away from the MSL.

Head south on SH1 and turn across the traffic after 400 metres into Mitchells Road which runs parallel to the railway line on the right. Turn right again into Manchesters Road and look for the embankment left and right just after the entrance to a factory/plant on the left.

Continue on Manchesters Road, and turn left and follow Molloy's Road to the intersection with High Street. The line came alongside Molloy's at the intersection then crossed to the other side of High Street, continuing straight for another 1.5 kilometres to almost the centre of Waimate. Take the first left from High Street – Chamberlain Street – and when this curves on to a long straight the formation is on the immediate left. At the right-hand curve the line again continues straight. Continue to the right as far as the intersection of William Street, Queen Street and the Hakataramea Highway (SH82). This intersection is where Waimate station was, on the right, in the area now occupied by the

Norman Kirk Memorial Swimming Pool.¹ The station was at the apex of a short triangle of track from the branch line itself. There is nothing left of the station and its facilities these days.

BOX "The Waimate Railway Station dates from 1880, when the branch connecting with Studholme Junction on the main line was opened for traffic. The building is of wood and iron, and contains a public office, a luggage room, a ticket lobby, a ladies' waiting room, and a lamp room, with engine and goods sheds, and an asphalt platform. Three trains arrive and depart on three days in the week, and four each way on the other three. The stationmaster is assisted by a cadet, and a porter, a driver, and a fireman, and two gangers and five platelayers reside in Waimate."

The Cyclopaedia of New Zealand (Canterbury Provincial District), 1903, p. 1065. (NZ Electronic Text Collection, nzetc.victoria.ac.nz) END BOX

Continue the exploration west along SH82. The line crossed SH82 a mere 420 metres from Queen Street and can be seen on the left as rough tracks. On the right the formation disappears through a housing area, across some open paddock and converging with SH82 before the hills start closing in. Embankment can be seen as the line enters the gorge, again on the right where it stays for the short journey through the gorge. There is only one small structure to be seen 1.5 kilometres after entering the shallow gorge - a small set of abutments crossed by a farm bridge.

The line crossed SH82 less than 200 metres from Kapua Road which is on the left. The stop called Arno was about 200 metres beyond the gorge but nothing remains to identify its location. There was also a limestone quarry in the hills to the right which was serviced by the Arno station.

Leave SH82 to drive along Kapua Road, keeping an eye across the paddocks on the right for vestiges of embankment 400 metres away. This is the site of the Kapua Swamp, where in 1895 bones of 800 moa birds were excavated from the Kapua Swamp and are now at the Canterbury Museum. Turn along Kapua School Road and look for the rail crossing 200 metres beyond the Kapua Community Hall on the intersection. McLeans station was in the area.

Return to SH82 on Kapua School Road and turn left to continue to Waihao Forks. The line climbed on a 1-in-50 gradient from McLeans station up to the top level of a terrace alongside the Waihao River North Branch, and then descended on an equally steep gradient to cross the river on a road/rail bridge. The railway station and yards, alongside which were large stock sale yards, were on the flat area on the left opposite the Forks Hotel. There has been a pub here for well over a century. There are no remnants of the former road/rail bridge, but a visit to the pub to look at a photo or two may be worthwhile.

From Waihao Forks the line climbed again on a 1-in-50 gradient to cross the south branch of the Waihao River on Bridge No. 9, comprising six 40ft truss spans, which must have been an impressive sight 40ft above the level of the river. Nothing can now be seen to indicate precisely where this structure was. From the river the rail corridor went further to the left around another hillock. It reappears at the foot of a hill immediately after Waihao Downs School. The Waihao Downs goods shed 700 metres further along was still standing in 2013 in the yard of what was once the terminus of the line, Waihao Downs station.

Although work was done on formation from Waihao Downs further west it was never developed into a working line and is therefore not covered in this publication.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Information about Waimate:

<http://www.waimatedc.govt.nz/Waimate/AboutWaimate/History.htm>

¹ Norman Kirk, born in Waimate in 1923, was New Zealand's fourth Labour prime minister and the first to be born and grow up in New Zealand. He died in office in 1974 at the early age of 51.