

HOKITIKA-ROSS SECTION

Length	23.0 kilometres
Opened	Stage 1 Hokitika to Ruatapu November 1906 Stage 2 Ruatapu to Ross April 1909
Stops	7 Hokitika, Takutai, Mananui, Lake Mahinapua, Ruatapu, Papakamai, Ross
Closed	Completely November 1980
Passenger services	Stopped October 1972

The line from Hokitika to Ross was built as an extension of the line from Greymouth to Hokitika, which was completed in 1893. Ross is only 22.5 kilometres from Hokitika, and the extension was needed to open more than half a million acres of prime native forest in the hinterland to logging which would provide sufficient freight to justify the expense of construction. The topography between Hokitika and Ross is more or less level and little would be required in the way of expensive infrastructure. The Hokitika-Ross section is therefore not exciting in terms of culverts, abutments or other rail artefacts – with the notable exceptions of the Mahinapua and Totara River bridges. It is however easy to trace, passes through or near to interesting places to visit and affords some interesting vistas and scenery for the fossicker.

Start this exploration where the street named “Railway Terrace” running between Weld and Stafford Streets just off SH6 in Hokitika. This is where the current railway line from Greymouth passes through on its way to the Westland Milk Products factory less than a kilometre west of the station yards on the banks of the Hokitika River¹.

The railway station has long since gone, but it was a substantial structure, on the left-hand side of Railway Terrace (facing south). It had a gently curving platform and an extended verandah. Opposite, across six sets of tracks, was a large goods shed. In the *New Zealand Railways Magazine*, Volume 3, Issue 11 (March 1, 1929) there is a splendid photo of the station and yards with the title “Where Thousands of Tons of Timber are Handled Annually”.² The site is now occupied by the Westland Farm Centre and a large petrol station facing SH6.

The line curved gently south to a road/rail bridge across the Hokitika River, known to rail enthusiasts as the longest xylophone in the world - the planks worked loose and clattered when driven over. The bridge was demolished after the line was closed and the new road bridge was built.

About halfway round a gentle right-hand curve on SH6 soon after the bridge rail formation can be faintly discerned on the left-hand side of the road. It remains either on the left or underneath the current road for 10 kilometres to Ruatapu. The embankment can be made out from time to time, but there are no visible abutments.

Note that the West Coast Wilderness Trail, a four-day cycle trail from Greymouth to Ross, uses the highway for some of the distance to Ruatapu, and the usual caution should be exercised where vehicles and cycles are on the road together.

The first stop on the line was at Takutai, the junction for a bush tramway bringing timber and logs from the Perry Hegan & Co sawmill a few kilometres inland, in the vicinity of Takutai Road. There was a platform at this stop and a 23-wagon loop to deal with freight transfer from the tramway.

Shortly after Takutai Road on the left the Mahinapua truss bridge contains a fine example of a Howe³ truss bridge, a design used in several places on West Coast railways. The height of the bridge confirms that the flax-covered bank on the left of the road is railway embankment, raised to provide access to the bridge. The bridge is protected by Heritage New Zealand registration and is described thus:

“Both the Mahinapua and Fisherman's Creek bridges were constructed by Hokitika contractor Thomas Dillon at a price of £1,748.11s.6d. Mahinapua Bridge was completed in September 1905 and the railway opened from Hokitika to Ruatapu on 9 November 1906.”⁴

The Fisherman's Creek Bridge, the site of which has already been passed, is no longer standing, or is no longer visible from the road. The next stop on the line was called Mananui. This too was the terminus of a bush tramway which is now a cycling and walking track managed by the Department of Conservation (DOC) and features a number of heritage relics. A signpost in Mananui Road marks the entrance to the track.

A short distance further along SH6 the turn-off to Lake Mahinapua is well marked. There was a station in this area, but once again there is now no sign of it. On the left side of the road is the Mahinapua Hotel. The pub is world-famous in New Zealand as the setting for a series of TV advertisements promoting a cheese product.⁵

Less than 1.5 kilometres further south turn left into Butlers Road at Ruatapu. The old railbed is immediately on the left. Although there are no visible remnants of the station and yards at Ruatapu it is reasonable to speculate that they occupied the grass areas on both sides of Butler Road. The railway continued south in a straight line, its progress now marked by trees alongside SH6. There is a very large sawmill operated by Westco Lagan on both sides of Butlers Road. Ruatapu was the terminus of the line until April 1909, at which point the extension to Ross was completed and opened for business.

At the south end of Butlers Road turn right to return along SH6, and then turn left at the bottom of the slope into Paiere Road. The intersection is where the line crossed and Paiere Road is on the formation. After a slight bend the formation continues almost straight for nearly 10 kilometres to the Totara River. For the whole of this distance it is inaccessible by road, though development of the West Coast Wilderness Trail will provide access to the formation for cyclists and walkers.

Return to SH6 which heads slightly inland before continuing southwards. After crossing the Totara River (after nearly 10 kilometres) and proceeding for a further 2.5 kilometres look for

the entrance to Ross's historic cemetery on the right-hand side of the road. From the cemetery on the top of the hill the railway bridge over the Totara River can be seen (on fine days) less than two kilometres away towards the ocean.

Press on to Ross itself, a small, historic gold-mining town which is well worth exploring. The railway station at Ross was not in the township, but two kilometres west towards the coast. Follow SH6 through Ross and where it veers left on the southern outskirts of the town continue straight ahead along Ross Beach Road. About 1.2 kilometres from the junction there is a timber storage yard on the left and a right turn leads to the Totara River. The Ross station and yards were on the left along this road, about 300-400 metres from Ross Beach Road, and though there are interesting mounds and lumps in the rough grass, no specific railway artefacts can be made out. The station building was on the road side of the yards, facing the sea, and comprised a platform, station building and substantial verandah over the platform area. Also in the yard was a goods shed and stock yards, and there was a turning triangle at the river end of the yards.

On the right of the road was a large sawmill and timber-processing plant operated by Stuart & Chapman Ltd. The sawmill had its own private siding, with three more shunting lines. There was housing nearby, for both railway and sawmill workers. Stuart and Chapman also built and operated a bush tramway which ran at least 20 kilometres further south from 1919 until 1959 to exploit vast timber resources.

It is well worth venturing to the river which is only 400 metres from the station area, whether on foot or by car, as the truss bridge spanning the river still commands attention with seven spans from one bank to another. The structure is not robust and caution should be exercised about attempting to climb on to it unless it has been upgraded to service the cycle trail.

FURTHER INFORMATION

DOC information about Mahinapua Scenic Reserve:

<http://www.doc.govt.nz/parks-and-recreation/places-to-visit/west-coast/hokitika-area/mahinapua-scenic-reserve/>

DOC information about the West Coast:

<http://www.doc.govt.nz/Documents/parks-and-recreation/tracks-and-walks/west-coast/hokitika-kumara-ross%20brochure.pdf>

Visitor information about Ross:

<http://www.visit-newzealand.co.nz/westcoast/ross.html>

Ross Goldfields Visitor Information Centre:

<http://www.ross.org.nz/>

West Coast Wilderness Trail:

<http://www.nzcycletrail.com/west-coast-wilderness-trail>

¹ This is the only milk-processing plant on the West Coast. Tankers daily collect milk from farms between Karamea and Fox Glacier, and the processed output of the plant is then railed north and beyond.

² http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/Gov03_11Rail-fig-Gov03_11Rail023a.html

³ Howe-type truss is based on patents taken out by an American engineer William Howe in 1840. Howe trusses have compression members in timber (large section Australian hardwood) and tension members in steel. One of the advantages of the Howe truss was the ability to replace whole members without support from below. <http://www.gw.govt.nz/assets/Plans--Publications/Historic-Bridges-Report-for-the-Wellington-Region-Sept-2010.pdf> pp. 108-109

⁴ <http://www.heritage.org.nz/the-list/details/5010>

⁵ http://www.filmarchive.org.nz/the-catalogue/media/mainland-sterling-colby-cheese-mahinapua-hotel-c2495?option=com_events&task=view_detail&agid=2014