REGIONAL OVERVIEW: NORTH ISLAND

Development of the railway system in the North Island was comparatively piecemeal and had really only came to fulfilment by the time road transport was beginning to be more widely available. With the exception of the Foxton line, the six North Island branch lines described in this publication were opened between 1915 and 1928. In contrast, 33 branch lines had opened in the South Island between 1875 and 1915.

Unlike the South Island, where most branch lines had a junction with the main trunk line, the system in the North Island comprised only a few branches which connected to the main trunk. In the South Island the main trunk ran on a single north-south axis between Christchurch and Invercargill. The North Island Main Trunk (NIMT) also ran on a north-south axis (between Wellington and Auckland), but there were two major "secondary main" lines, both connecting to population centres on the east coast. One went between Palmerston North, Napier and Gisborne. The other – known still as the East Coast Main Trunk (ECMT) – connected to Tauranga from Frankton Junction (Hamilton).

 Of the six North Island lines considered in this publication, three really had little to do with the main trunk (Gisborne/Moutohora, Kaihu Valley Railway and Kapuni), and the line from between Foxton and Longburn was built before the main trunk. The fifth, from Ohakune to Raetihi, is the only one which is a true "branch" line from the main trunk. The Waihi line described in this publication is a mere portion of the ECMT. The Kaihu Valley Railway was constructed by a private company and became part of the government system within a short time of completion. Kapuni is a classic case of responding to political pressure from local stakeholders.

Plans to connect Gisborne northwards to the NIMT via Taneatua and the ECMT were seriously considered but were abandoned when the harsh economic realities of pushing through the difficult terrain of the Motu River area were considered. The Kaihu Valley Railway was isolated until Dargaville was finally connected to Auckland in 1943. Traffic volumes on the Foxton branch declined when the Wellington and Manawatu Railway Company opened in 1886 between Wellington and Palmerston, eventually becoming the main trunk line. These six lines represent the diversity of purpose, terrain and economic imperatives operating in the North Island.

There are three significant rail/cycle trails in the North Island – the Twin Coast Cycle Trail (between Opua in the Bay of Islands and the Hokianga harbour on the west coast in Northland), the Hauraki Rail Trail between Thames and Paeroa and the Rimutaka Cycle Trail (which includes the Rimutaka Incline).