

### KAIHU BRANCH (DONNELLY'S CROSSING)

<b>Length</b>	35.9 kilometres
<b>Opened</b>	Stage 1 Dargaville to Opanake February 1889 Stage 2 Opanake to Kaihu November 1895 Stage 3 Kaihu to Whatoro June 1914 Stage 4 Whatoro to Donnelly's Crossing April 1923
<b>Stops/stations</b>	15 Dargaville, Parore, Babylon, Rotu, Maitahi, Taita, Mamaranui, Dairy Flat, Maropiu, Ahikiwi, Opanake, Kaihu, Whatoro, Aranga, Donnelly's Crossing.
<b>Closed</b>	Completely July 1959
<b>Passenger services</b>	Stopped only when the branch closed

This branch railway had three names during its lifetime, each reflecting its ownership and operating status for a period of time. Originally it was the Kaihu Valley Railway (KVR), built as far as Opanake by the Kaihu Valley & Railway Company, a private company authorised under the Railways and Land Act of 1881 to build a railway linking timber mills in the Kaihu Valley with the port in Dargaville.<sup>1</sup> The company ran out of money during the depression of the 1880s, and after foreclosure in 1890 the Government took over and completed the line, which then became the Donnelly's Crossing section, a stand-alone operation. Once Dargaville had been linked to the main railways network in 1943, the KVR became Donnelly's Crossing branch.

Whatever its name, the purpose of the line was to support the extraction of as many kauri logs as possible and thereafter provide support for the conversion of land into farms. The story of the Kaihu Valley branch (Donnellys Crossing) is therefore typical of many branch lines. It managed to remain open until 1959, primarily because with few reasonable roads in the area this branch line provided a vital passenger service.

These days there are only a few bits and pieces of railway memorabilia to find, none of which are especially interesting. However, if you are interested in touring the Twin Coast Highways of the Far North, perhaps to drive through the Waipoua Forest to view the remaining magnificent stand of kauri, you can easily spot railway embankment from SH12. There are no platforms, goods sheds, sidings or stations extant on the line. There is an interesting cluster of abutments/piers at Whatoro, and the drive along the formation from Whatoro to Aranga is attractive. The more dogged railway explorer may be prepared to venture to Donnellys Crossing itself, now a little spot in the middle of nowhere.

Start exploring this line at Dargaville, a town which is still serviced by rail to take logs trucked in from surrounding plantation forests to Auckland and elsewhere. The station site at Dargaville has long since disappeared under piles of logs awaiting transhipment.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donnellys\\_Crossing\\_Section](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donnellys_Crossing_Section)

Nevertheless, Station Road, which runs on the left of the current sidings, suggests where the station used to be.<sup>2</sup>

At the yard of a milking shed a kilometre along Station Road East formation can be seen continuing north as a stock track, heading to what was a crossing over the Kaihu River, though the rail bridge has long since gone.

Head north on SH12 for six kilometres turn right into Parore Rd West. After about 1.2 kilometres the formation is being used as a farm access track on the right on a left-hand bend. It can also be seen on the left where a small unpainted structure several hundred metres away is an old railways house, just beyond the site of Parore station.

For the next six kilometres or so (on SH12) the line continues to be occasionally visible to the right, though stopbanks along the streams/drainage ditches draining into the Kaihu River are confusing. At one point there is a splendid view of the embankment converging with the road as both climb a small rise. The line crossed where the road curves slightly to the right.

Shortly after there is a car yard or depot of some sort on the left, and the line passed through this area, crossing SH12 to rejoin the stock track on the far side. This might have been the site of the Rotu stop.

Shortly after Maitahi Maori Cemetery (on the right) there is a vestigial remnant of embankment to the left of the current small road bridge. From the bridge the line continues straight for 1.1 kilometres, and the embankment can be seen 160 metres across the paddock from SH12. It is alongside the road as one approaches Waihue Road where there is a Playcentre on the intersection.

Continue on SH12, and after four kilometres turn right into Omamari Road, and at the T-junction just ahead, turn left. The road is on the formation, which runs straight ahead to cross the Kaihu River in the trees where Ahikiwi Road curves left. Continue past Ahikiwi marae to rejoin SH12.

Continue on SH12 to Kaihu, which was the terminus of the Kaihu River Railway from Dargaville from 1883 until 1921, before it was extended to Donnelly's Crossing. The settlement of Kaihu began to thrive once the railway had been built, and a large sawmill was built nearby. In the early 1900s a major flood destroyed a large part of the mill, which managed to carry on business until 1915 when it closed and half the population left to find work elsewhere. Today the cemetery around St Agnes Catholic Church is well tended. There is a community hall and a tavern may be open in the evenings. Otherwise there seems not to be a lot happening in Kaihu.

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<sup>2</sup> There have been two station sites in Dargaville, the first to service the KVR, and the second closer to the town centre once the connection to the main trunk had been made.

At Kaihu Wood Road (through the “village”) cross the river and look for the station site on the right-hand side of the road, opposite the community hall. There are lumps of concrete in the grass on private land which may be part of the station structure.

It is possible to head south on Kaihu Wood Road to view slight vestiges of the line on the right, but road access to the river where the line crossed is not possible. Return to SH12 and continue to Trounson Park Road. The railway line is out of sight across the river valley amongst the forest. After 2.5 kilometres, at the junction of Trounson Park Road and Opouteke Road, there is a fine set of railway bridge abutments on the bank of the Waima River. Almost directly opposite, across Opouteke Road, there is the top of a bridge pier in the undergrowth behind a sheltering paving-stone “wall”. Take care if looking for this artefact – there is a 50-metre drop down a sheer bank also tucked away in the undergrowth. Drive down Opouteke Road and note there are two road bridges, and both cross the Waima River which makes its way south via a large loop to join the Kaihu River just below the intersection. A small, unsealed side road on the right just after the Opouteke Road bridge leads to the site of the Whatoro (formerly Tarawhati) stop, which is on private land. Returning to the bridge, note the height of embankment on the left of the road, on which there may still be piers or remnants in the bush which would indicate how the line crossed the river to the top of the bank on the other side.

Return to the first road bridge, on Trounson Park Road, and shortly after crossing it turn left along Aranga Station Road. Stop on a somewhat ramshackle road bridge to look back to the right to see a concrete pier on the river bank. From here on the road is on the rail formation for the next 4.5 kilometres or so, occasionally marked by steep-sided cuttings. The top of two concrete abutments or water vat foundations on the left side of the road only 3-400 metres after the Waima River bridge suggests there may have been a service facility for locomotives in the area, and flat land on the right of the road suggests station yards. However, this seems unlikely to have been Aranga station which was nearly four kilometres beyond Whatoro, and therefore must have been several kilometres further north.

About four kilometres from the Waima River, on a sharp right-hand turn just after a farm access road, there are the remains of a truss bridge which crossed a deep stream on the right. Embedded in the road are a couple of sleepers. It may be best to stop to look at the truss piers which are at an angle to the road and a little hard to see. This is probably where road and rail diverged, via Aranga Station, in the final section to Donnelly’s Crossing.

Continue on Aranga Station Road to SH12 and turn along Proud Road on the right about 4.5 kilometres from the Aranga Station Road intersection. Turn right again when Proud Road joins Katui Road and two kilometres later it runs through Donnelly’s Crossing. What was once a small logging and sawmilling rural township is now a rather desolate spot with little if any signs of economic activity. The only immediate indication of rail history is a metal “sculpture” of a train on both sides of power pole 20 metres from the store. There is a children’s playground in the paddock behind the power pole, where the station yards used to be. The yards are shaped like a tuning fork, with the handle at the far end of Station Road. Go to the far end of the yards and cross a rickety road bridge. The final remnant of the railway is at last evident – the bridge is a rusting iron rail structure sitting atop concrete piers and straddling a stream running into the adjacent Waima River. In railway days the

current road bridge was also used by the railway and was wide enough for two sets of tracks.

Immediately beyond is a house which must have been part of the railway set-up, grand enough to have been occupied by the station master. The line can be seen making its way through the trees past the house as it headed south to Aranga.

From Donnelly's Crossing either return to SH12 to continue to Waipoua to see magnificent kauri, or travel east with a view to eventually arriving in Kaikohe. But be warned-this is a long drive on unsealed roads.