

WAIHI (EAST COAST MAIN TRUNK)
WAIHI – APATA

Length	40.5 kilometres
Opened	Stage 1 Waihi to Tahawai May 1927 Stage 2 Tahawai to Apata June 1928
Stops	7 Waihi, Waimata, Athenree, Tahawai, Katikati, Aongatete, Apata
Closed	Completely September 1978 Passenger services: Stopped September 1967

The East Coast Main Trunk Line (ECMT) connected Hamilton (Frankton Junction) in the Waikato and Taneatua in the Bay of Plenty, via Tauranga. Until the Kaimai Tunnel was bored through the Kaimai Ranges and opened in 1978 the ECMT looped around the northern fringes of the Kaimai Ranges, before travelling south through the Karangahake and Athenree Gorges to Tauranga and Taneatua. This link was vital to take products to the port at Tauranga, and also for bringing produce from the fertile plains of the Bay of Plenty to markets beyond the East Coast. It had been intended to create a link between Taneatua and the Moutohora branch (to Gisborne), but this connection was eventually deemed uneconomic.

The only section of the ECMT which is now “ghost”, that is, not mothballed, not currently open and in use, and not developed for alternative use, is from Waihi south to a small junction called Apata, where trains run through to and from the Kaimai Tunnel. The Waihi line is not strictly speaking a “branch” line with a junction from another line, but a section of a much longer line. This section, running south from Waihi, was built between 1912 and 1928, and there were construction camps at Katikati, Aongatete and Apata. The main camp was at Aongatete.

From 1978 the line through Paeroa, Waihi and all stops as far south as Apata became a ghost line. More recently the Hauraki Rail Trail for cyclists and walkers has been making use of sections of the formation, and the Goldfields Historic Railway has redeveloped the line between Waikino and the historic gold mining town of Waihi. A ride on one of their vintage trains is a “must do” when in the vicinity, and exploration on foot or by cycle north to Thames is also recommended.

According to a report prepared for Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga in 2002¹ “there are twenty significant historic features along the closed section of the East Coast Main Trunk railway line between Athenree Gorge and Apata. These features were identified during a 2002 survey of the railway line by archaeologist, Phillip Moore. They include “6 intact bridges, the remains of 6 other bridges, 3 well preserved railway formations and 2 station

¹ Called the New Zealand Historic Places Trust Pouhere Taonga at the time the report was written

buildings².” The same report notes that the line is “at risk from land developments. All of the rail formations and station sites are in private ownerships³.” Not all of these features are either visible or accessible more than ten years after this report was written, but some of the bridges are still standing and can be viewed, along with the one remaining building, the Athenree station.

It is worth taking some time to explore the local history and understand the significance of the gold-mining industry in and around the gold-mining town of Waihi where gold and silver have been extracted from the Martha and other mines in the area for well over 100 years. There is historic and heritage information available at various facilities locally.

The railway station at Waihi is the main terminus for the Goldfields Railway and is therefore a hub of railways activity with much rail memorabilia to view. The station precinct is best approached via Wrigley Street which runs south at right angles from SH2, opposite Hetherington House, a large rest home complex. Wrigley Street ends at the station, where there are a couple of railways houses, built in 1905, as well as the original Waihi station building maintained in good order as is everything else associated with the Goldfields Railway. With the station on the right, look left and note the engine shed and workshop sited across the formation heading south from Waihi.

To find the next rail artefact marking the southward direction of the line from Waihi, return along Wrigley Street to the first turn to the right – Consols Street. At the T-junction at the end of Consols Street turn right again into Victoria Street. Almost exactly 200 metres from the intersection there is a splendid set of abutments on the bank on the left which show how elevated the station site was above the countryside to the south.

The line continued through what are now the yards and works of a concrete plant, at the back of which it crossed the Mangatoetoe Stream. The line continued to be elevated, and this is apparent on the other side of the stream where there is an interesting concrete structure. To view this remnant, return along Victoria Street and turn right along Consols Street then right along Baber Street and right once more along Station Road. On the left of this dead end there is a concrete tramway-crossing slab which allowed the railway line to cross over a tramway from one of the mines. The Waihi Gold Mining Co.'s "Rake Line" ran through this structure, at ground level, on its way from the Martha Mine to the Victoria stamper battery at Waikino. The "Rake Line" is now in use as part of the Hauraki Rail Trail. Apparently there are fixings on the top of the structure which show that the railway line crossed the tramway at an angle, gently curving left to turn more directly to the south.

For the next kilometre or so the rail corridor is extinguished by housing. From Station Road turn right along Silverton Road, then turn left into Union Street. At the far end of Union Street turn right and proceed to the dead end of Rosemont Road where there is room to park. Coffeys Walkway, another part of the Hauraki Rail Trail, is signposted, and a short walk to the riverbank will reveal three large concrete piers, remnants of the rail bridge across the

² <http://www.westernbay.govt.nz/Documents/Projects/District%20Plan%20Review/KatikatiHeritageInventory1%20Web.pdf>

³ *ibid*

Ohinemuri River. A local informant advises that the walkway passes close enough for a walker to hug one of them if so inclined! The alignment of the piers shows how the bridge curved slightly. There is an extension of Rosemont Road to the left, and from here, by peering hard across the landscape towards the river the top of an abutment may be seen.

Return along Rosemont Street to Adams Street and turn right to connect with SH2 and turn right again to head south across the Ohinemuri River. The rail corridor is out of sight on the right across the countryside, but turning along Crean Road and then Ford Road leads to level crossings, indications of which are still visible but are subtle. Waimata station was somewhere in the vicinity of Woodlands Road.

Nearly five kilometres from Crean Road the railway line crossed SH2 at a right angle immediately before Old Tauranga Road. The railway used to be under a one-way road bridge which has been removed and the highway lowered. There is nothing to see of the line on either side of the road from the highway, and it remains out of sight of SH2. However the large loop around a gully on the left can be viewed by turning left off SH2 to venture at least 500 metres up unsealed Mathers Road. Look across the gully/valley to identify formation/embankment about 500 metres to the left. The railway line crossed Mathers Road less than 400 metres further uphill, but the crossing is not easy to spot. The line then went into a deep cutting just visible amongst the trees.

From Mathers Road to Athenree there is nothing left to identify the rail corridor through the gorge, though there are apparently a set of large concrete piers in the river on a sharp bend in the road, but seeing them depends on vegetation growth, seasonal changes, the direction of sunlight, etc. Approaching Athenree, extensive and significant road realignment has completely removed all traces of the line coming out of the gorge. Turn left at Athenree Road and about 500 metres from the intersection a deep cutting can be seen on the right of the road immediately before Waiau Road (on the left).

Returning to SH2, make sure to look at the partially renovated Athenree station building on the right above the road which was moved from its original location high above the road off the last big bend in the gorge sometime after the line closed.

The line continues on the left of SH2 for the next 12 kilometres or so to Katikati, gently snaking its way round the few small hills en route. The rail corridor is mostly out of sight amongst intensive cultivation, but there are a few viewing spots where the corridor can be seen or there are remnants extant.

Just after Tanners Point Road (nearly four kilometres from Athenree) there is a clear remnant of embankment close to the road. Half a kilometre further there was a rail bridge over Taupiro Stream, and while there are no piers to be seen there is a piece of abutment on the far (south) bank, and the embankment continues parallel to the road. Tahawai station was somewhere around Taupiro Road. Nearly three kilometres further turn along Kauri Point Road and nearly a kilometre from the intersection the corridor can be faintly seen on the left.

Continue to the outskirts of Katikati, and after passing the Baker timber mill on the left turn right along Highfields Drive, the second road on the right. Highfields Drive leads into a housing development. Take the first turn on the left into Uretara Drive, and behind the houses on the left of the road is where Katikati station used to be.

Leaving Katikati turn right into Henry Road. Where the road curves to the left just past the Katikati Christian Centre there is a deep cutting on the right side of the road, much disguised by vegetation.

Shortly after the intersection of Henry Road and SH2 there is a shady vehicle layby/picnic area. The rail corridor is at the north end of the layby and from here it crossed SH2, the crossing being vaguely discernible on the left at the southern end of a light industrial complex.

Just over one kilometre from the crossing turn along Tetley Road (on the left) and at the T-junction turn right along Rereatukahia Road, which becomes unsealed. Half a kilometre along this road there is a view on the right of a trestle bridge on a concrete pier where the line crossed the Rereatukahia Stream. Going slightly further, then turning and heading back up Rereatukahia Road, there is an even better view of the bridge. Its height indicates the extent to which the slightly lumpy landscape required the construction of some reasonably large bridges.

Return to SH2 which curves gently inland. Just before crossing the Aongatete River a concrete pier of the old railway bridge can be seen in the river bed on the left. At the Aongatete Coolstores the road and rail corridor converge. The corridor ran through what is now the yards of the coolstore complex.

After the coolstore there is a small embankment. When crossing the Whatakao Stream Bridge a railway trestle can be seen very clearly on the left. The corridor is now angled towards SH2 which it crosses within 100 metres of the south side of the Whatakao Stream, to make its way on the right of SH2 around the foot of a small hill.

A short diversion along Work Road on the right takes the explorer to another crossing, where the corridor is marked by a cutting on the left about 400 metres from the intersection. Following Work Road for another kilometre or two takes one to the current railway line close to where it runs through the Kaimai Tunnel.

To find the last section of the old ECMT line, return to SH2 and continue southwards. Approaching the Wainui Stream Bridge, look to the right, and in the middle distance a higher-level trestle can be seen. This trestle carried the railway line over Wainui Stream. Its height indicates the slight but definite gradient the line required. The bridges at Tahawai, Aongatete and Wainui were sited in swampy land and building foundations stable enough for the structures was rather difficult.

Further up the hill on SH2 a line of telegraph poles to the right shows the route of the rail corridor which was in a cutting, climbing gently to its junction with the current line. Turning into a work track on the left of Wainui South Road may lead to the junction itself, but access

to the area cannot be guaranteed. Slightly further along SH2 Apata Station Road leads to the site of Apata station where this segment of closed railway line comes to its inglorious end. Turntable Hill Road suggests that there was once a railway turntable in use but if so it has long since been removed.

Further Information

Walkways around Waihi:

http://www.waihiwalkways.org.nz/walkways/ohinemuri_historic/discussion_document.htm

Hauraki Rail Trail:

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

Goldfields Railway, Waihi:

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

Waihi Goldmine Tours:

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

Waihi:

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