

## MOUTOHORA BRANCH

<b>Length</b>	78.0 kilometres
<b>Opened</b>	Stage 1 Stanley Road to Ormond June 1902 Stage 2 Ormond to Te Karaka April 1905 Stage 3 Te Karaka to Puha June 1907 Stage 4 Puha to Waikohu May 1908 Stage 5 Waikohu to Otoko April 1912 Stage 6 Otoko to Matawai November 1914 Stage 7 Matawai to Moutohora November 1917
<b>Stops</b>	<b>18</b> Stanley Road, Park Racecourse, Makaraka, Kings Road, Makauri, Waihirere, Ormond, Kaitaratahi, Waipaoa, Pitchers Crossing, Te Karaka, Puha, Waikohu, Mahaki, Otoko, Rakauroa, Matawai, Moutohora
<b>Closed</b>	Completely March 1959, except for a section from Stanley Road to Makaraka which is now mothballed
<b>Passenger services</b>	Stopped in January 1945

The best way to explore this interesting line is to take a half-day return trip from Gisborne, preferably in the morning when the sun will be at its most helpful angle. Even though for significant distances there is nothing left to see of the line, there are some stunning remnants scattered in various locations. In addition, the scenery is interesting once one starts climbing up into the hills, and there may be a vineyard or two to visit on the way home.

The branch had four names during its lifetime. Initially, it was authorised as a Gisborne to Rotorua line and labelled as such in the Public Works Statement until 1910. From then, while isolated from the rest of the NZR system, it was known as the “Gisborne section” of the NZR. Once Gisborne was linked to the rest of the NZR network in 1942, the line became the ‘Moutuhora Branch’, to be renamed the “Moutohora Branch” in 1952, when the New Zealand Geographic Board decided on this spelling for the line’s terminal locality.<sup>1</sup>

Gisborne was eventually the terminus of two lines – one north/south from Palmerston North which provided the link between Gisborne/Napier with the North Island Main Trunk Line, and the other east/west to Moutohora. The latter is the subject of this chapter.

The first section of the Moutohora line is “mothballed” rather than closed and is therefore not included in this description.

The primary reason for developing this line was to extract rock from a quarry at Moutohora. Metal from the quarry is particularly suitable for road-making: “The metal from the Moutohora Quarry has some of the highest Polished Stone Value in New Zealand and is therefore a highly sort after commodity and has historically been used across the country in asphaltic concrete and as a sealing chip.”<sup>2</sup>

Start this exploration at the East Coast Museum of Technology (ECMoT) at 67 Main Road, Makaraka, on the southern outskirts of Gisborne. From Makaraka intensive cultivation – grapevines, orchards, maize, and market gardening –has obliterated traces of the line for at least 20 kilometres. From

ECMoT turn left at the Roseland Hotel junction of Main Road to follow SH2 signposted to Whakatane/Opotiki.

There were flag stations at King Road, Makauri and Waihirere, with platforms and a simple passenger shelter. By Ormond the road and railway line had converged, and the station and yards were behind the Ormond Tavern. From Ormond the railway line headed left towards the Waipaoa River, crossing SH2 where road and river are side by side. The formation rounded the foot of a small hill which the road surmounts. The railway line crossed the river on a road-rail bridge, consisting of five 25-metre-long trusses, on piers some eight metres above the river, and was completed in April 1905. No remains of the railway bridge can be seen to the left from the current road bridge.

From the hill before the road bridge the derelict remains of the Waipaoa freezing works can be seen in the fields on the far side of the river. The railway provided a vital service for the freezing works, bringing stock to be processed and taking frozen carcasses to the wharf in Gisborne. The line was on the far side of the works, so turn down Lavenham Road on the left after crossing the bridge to take a look at the site. There was of course a siding into the works.

The freezing works and its associated “village” have an interesting history which is set out in Sheridan Grundy’s publication *Making a Killing – A history of the Gisborne-East Coast freezing works industry*.<sup>3</sup> When operational the works employed 200 people, and while many came from further afield, often on the train, there were a large number of families who were able to set up home nearby in two “villages”, Waipaoa, alongside the works, and Kaitaratahi across the river. Kaitaratahi was the terminus of the line for 2.5 years (1903-5) while the next stage was built. The freezing works stop was called, not surprisingly, Waipaoa. Nowadays there are small settlements at both locations, but apart from the derelict works structures there is little to suggest that a thriving community lived and worked here. The works closed in August 1931.

From the works the railway ran straight across the river flats and made its way out of sight at the foot of the low hills on the left into a tunnel which cannot be accessed. Return to SH2 and continue for just over six kilometres to Pitcher Road (on the left). The northern portal of the tunnel can be seen very clearly, albeit in the distance on the left, from about 400 metres along Pitcher Road. Tunnel No. 1 is 180 metres long.

The line can be seen crossing Pitcher Road at a slight angle where a small stock ramp rises above road level. Pitchers Crossing flag stop was in this area. The formation ran straight for half a kilometre more, then it curved gently round low foothills alongside SH2. The embankment can be faintly seen from SH2 as the two converge. Te Karaka station, which became the terminus of the line for 18 months or so, was on the left on the outskirts of Te Karaka opposite a transport depot. The station verandah was taken away and reinstalled at Gisborne after the line’s closure, and there is no visible trace of the station or the yards these days.

The line continued on the left and the concrete portal to Tunnel No. 2 is clearly visible. The top of the portal is only slightly higher than the current road level, which shows how much the level of the road has changed since the railway line was working through this area. This tunnel was the longest on the line, at 275 metres. Its other portal has long since been buried under, or obscured by, road alignment works and diversions of the nearby Waipaoa River.

Two rivers converge about where the now concealed tunnel portal would have been – the Waikohu River flows into the Waipaoa River. The former rises close to Matawai and flows southeast, while the latter rises on the northeastern slopes of the Raukumara Range, on one’s right. A third river, the Waihuka, also rises close to Matawai, south of the Waikohu, and it too flows into the valley through

which the railway line made its way to Matawai. It is important to understand this watershed, as from now on the bridges across rivers bear one name or the other, and the sequencing seems odd, but accurately reflects the somewhat tortuous routes the rivers take from their sources in the hills.

At the turnoff to Whatatutu Road on the right about 3.5 kilometres from Te Karaka is where Puha station was. There is nothing between Te Karaka and Whatatutu Road to identify the railway corridor.

There are faint traces of embankment on the right-hand side of the road from McGregors Bridge and the most likely route for the railway was between the current road and the Waikohu River.

Shortly after the second bridge over the Waikohu River, there is another, this time crossing the Waihuka River and numbered "4". For three kilometres the road is flat and the rail route is hard to discern, though it is most likely on the right or at times perhaps even under the road.

Perseverance has its rewards though, as suddenly the portal of Tunnel No. 3 appears, on the right, just before the road begins to climb. A very clear view can be obtained from the old alignment of SH2 on the right. The area round the old road alignment is where Waikohu station was sited. Waikohu was the terminus of the line for four years, from 1907, while the work over the next 13 kilometres was tackled.

This section was very difficult because of steep gradients and tight curves. A large workforce was required, more than 350 at any one time, and there was a large work camp at Waikohu so that the men didn't have long travelling times at the start and end of each day. Many men had their wives and children with them, so there was quite a busy community for the duration. The men had one bridge to build, over the Waihuka River, two kilometres from the upper tunnel portal. In 1910 the construction camp was moved to the area of the river crossing, called Mahaki, to be nearer to where a separate gang of steelworkers and riveters had been building the Otoko Viaduct further upstream. The new camp was even larger, as there were at least 450 men employed on formation work. . From Mahaki the line climbed steadily up the right-hand side of the valley, snaking its way around the bluffs and spurs on the far side of the river down in the valley.

Tunnel No. 3 is only 45 metres long. It marks the beginning of the Department of Conservation's Otoko Walkway which is accessed via a layby on the right slightly further up the road. The walkway is nearly five kilometres long, mostly on the formation, and is closed during the lambing season between August and October each year.

Apart from walking there is no way to access the line for 20 kilometres from Tunnel No. 3. For the first nine kilometres the formation is initially in the valley below the road on the right, but it is hard to see while travelling uphill as the car is on the left side of the road. Note that this is a two-lane highway; there are no passing or slow traffic bays and very few places to pull off or overtake other vehicles. It is therefore almost impossible to stop, leave the car and wander around looking down into the valley. This is one reason why it is well worthwhile making this a return trip – to take advantage of easier sight lines from the road across the valley.

Nearly eight kilometres from the start of the Otoko Walkway look for Otoko School Road on the right. The railway line and an associated camp were behind the end of this short road, which now only leads into a couple of private properties. The only part of the school to be seen from the road is the small swimming pool, clearly still used by those in the area. Return to SH2 to travel a short distance to cross (another) Waihuka River Bridge. On the right a large steel girder can be seen in the trees and shrubbery around the riverbed. This is the one remaining steel pier of the Otoko Viaduct,

which was, according to a report in the New Zealand Herald of 26 December 1911, “one of the most interesting engineering features of the railway between Gisborne and Motu”.<sup>4</sup> If you have the chance to park the car somewhere in the vicinity and walk back to the bridge – with great caution as heavy-laden trucks and other traffic whizz past – you will also sight the remains of three concrete piers. The base of one is tucked amongst trees at the far end of a grassy area to the left of the steel pier, and the top portion of a complete concrete pier rises from the trees further to the left. Very careful examination of the greenery to the right of the steel pier may also reveal the top of yet another concrete pier. The viaduct was 370ft in length, or in today’s parlance 112.8 metres.

The report in the *New Zealand Herald* described the viaduct further: “Two trestle piers, similar to those in the now familiar Main Trunk viaducts, will, together with the massive concrete piers and abutments, support the various spans. The viaduct comprises three 66ft spans and three 36<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>ft spans, the balance of the length being made up with the deck of two piers, which in themselves measure 36ft at the top.”<sup>5</sup>

From the viaduct the line ran a short distance into Otoko station, which occupied the flat land on the right where the road levels out, just before Makaretu Road on the left. There is a little house at the back of the land which is probably one of the railway houses. There was a small settlement at Otoko, and there seem to have been a small number of houses close to the station yards. The yards included a water tank on a stand, a small goods shed and an even smaller passenger shelter shed. The station was officially opened on 6 April 1912, once the viaduct was completed.

About 200 metres further up the road there is a cluster of farm buildings, some of which were removed from the railway station some time ago. One close to the road seems to be the goods shed. For the next 10 kilometres or so, road and rail are as one, the modern road having been built over the old line.

At Rakauoa Road on the left less than 300 metres from SH2, there are three enormous concrete pillars – one on the right of the road is immediately obvious; a second is opposite; and a third, somewhat obscured by trees and greenery, is only visible by going up the road and turning to return to SH2. The third pillar, set back from the road, seems to have two eyes and a quiff of green hair falling nonchalantly over its “forehead”. The size of these pillars is a fantastic surprise – they rise majestically at least 10 metres from road level, and they look as solid as when they were built a century ago. Their height gives some indication of the gradient the railway was now taking, lining up at the nearby Rakauoa station for a final steep climb to Matawai.

Having marvelled at the pillars return to SH2 and carry on to Station Road, on the left immediately past the Waikohu River Bridge. The Rakauoa station site is no longer accessible, even though Station Road appears to be a public road. However, it is to a farm house and the station site is on private property. Venture no further along Station Road than the interesting sign which presumably dates from days when there was a museum operated by previous owners of the property.

From Rakauoa station the line climbed steeply on its final run up to Matawai, through significant cuttings and embankments, all of which are well out of sight behind the hills to the left of SH2. “The entire section from Otoko to the summit (some 5km south of Matawai) averaged a continuous 1 in 35 [gradient].”<sup>6</sup> The summit was 566 metres above sea level, and 472 of these were climbed in the short distance of 30.6 kilometres.

Although technically challenging to run trains on such steep gradients, particularly during the days of steam, the most difficult operational aspect was to maintain the supply of air to the Westinghouse brakes on the descent, when the trains were invariably laden with heavy goods such as stone from

the quarry at Moutohora and timber from the many sawmills in the Matawai/Motu area. On the uphill journeys the trains carried lighter loads so had little difficulty with the gradient.

About three kilometres past Waikohu River Bridge the line reappears on the left to cross the road and traverse a loop around a spur on the right, where it is being used as a stock track. The passage of the line approaching the road from the left (when travelling uphill) is best seen on the return journey, looking to the right for a large cutting on the hillside.

Continuing up SH2, the line re-crossed the road from right to left where a farm road now stands and then curved away on the left of SH2 on much the same trajectory as the road, about 200 metres away. Just over a kilometre further look with great care at the foot of the hill directly in front on the left of the road for a glimpse of the portal of Tunnel No. 4, the final tunnel on this line. The portal is not easy to see – a sighting depends on what crops are growing in the fields, how tall trees in the area are, whether the wind is blowing trees away from the portal or towards it, how much traffic there is on the road and therefore how fast one has to travel, etc.

This tunnel is only 90 metres long but took two years to complete through solid rock. The formation on both ends had been constructed while the tunnel was being built, and the last section to Matawai station opened on 2 November 1914.

The Matawai Hotel has a good collection of old local photos which are worth browsing. Continue to Kerei Street on the left and find where the railway entered the town alongside the school. Leaving the school, turn left into Raumati Street (which becomes Tee Street) and where this comes to an end, look carefully back along the visible embankment to find the “top” portal of Tunnel No. 4, at the far end of the hill.

Matawai station is long gone, and although the platform is said to be easy to find, it is elusive, somewhere on the far side of SH2.

Return to the bend on SH2 where the hotel stands and take a left-hand turn to travel the final eight kilometres to Moutohora. Signboards at the junction provide good information about the Motu Trails, part of Nga Haerenga/The New Zealand Cycle Trails.<sup>7</sup>

Although there are no visible remnants of the final stretch of line to Moutohora, it is a scenic drive, with the Motu River gently making its way on the left of the road. Just when you despair of seeing any railway vestiges, on the left a splendid span of the truss bridge can be seen in the fields. The bridge crossed the river for the final few metres to Moutohora Station. An informative interpretation panel has been installed on the roadside by the Motu Trails organisation, with a very good short history of the line and its operations.

The major surprise about this remnant is not its survival, in splendid isolation from all other remnants, but that it is privately owned. Its location on the Queen’s Chain along the river allowed it to be passed into private ownership. A family farming further down the Motu River bought the span several decades ago, intending to move it to their property to replace a flying fox which was then the only means of access across the river to their farm. However, after clubbing together with neighbouring farms, a new bridge was built, and the plan for moving the truss bridge became redundant. Over the years the truss bridge has provided various bits and pieces for local farmers, and perhaps others simply scavenging, but let’s hope its value as an outstanding artefact provides it with some protection in the future. The signboard highlights its historical significance, so this may in the end be the best protection.

Moutohora station was on the far side of the river and was the hub of the local community, which in the early days of the railway line was busy – there were three sawmills as well as the quarry, and the land was being cleared of forest to develop into farmland. “On a Friday night up to 300 people would gather at the railway station to wait for the train, which often arrived late. They would collect their groceries, farm supplies, cream cans, high school kids, mail and news.”<sup>8</sup>

The station facilities were comprehensive – ladies and gentleman’s waiting rooms, a ticket office and foyer, a goods office and a storeroom. There were also public toilets, and a boiler room in which sand for the footwarmers was heated. A manual telephone exchange and clerical office were housed in a separate building behind the station. There was an engine shed, a large goods shed and houses for the stationmaster and train crews. Until 1952, when a turning triangle was installed, all trains ran backwards out of Moutohora.

None of the station area is now accessible, and its location is marked only by a more modern house standing in the paddocks. The quarry is still operating but access is of course restricted.

Return to Matawai and cruise down SH2, keeping an eye out for places where the line reveals itself more clearly to the downhill traveller.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moutohora\\_Branch](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moutohora_Branch)

<sup>2</sup> <http://logjam.wordpress.com/business/>

<sup>3</sup> *Making a Killing: A history of the Gisborne-East Coast freezing works industry*, Sheridan Grundy, Tairāwhiti Museum, 2004

<sup>4</sup> *New Zealand Herald*, Volume XLVII, Issue 14273, 19 January 1910, p. 7, <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/paperspast?a=d&d=NZH19100119.2.33>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> *Steaming to the Sunrise: A history of railways in the Gisborne region*, Chris Wood, IPL Books/Te Rau Herald Print, 1996, p.42

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.nzcycletrail.com/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://livingheritage.org.nz/Schools-Stories/Motu-From-bush-to-grass/The-Railway>