

RAETIHI BRANCH

Length	13.7 kilometres
Opened	Completely December 1917
Stops	5 Ohakune, Rochfort, Makaranui, Pakihi, Raetihi
Closed	Completely January 1968
Passenger services	Stopped December 1951

Ohakune used to be a busy place servicing traffic on the North Island Main Trunk Line (NIMT), along with agricultural produce from the surrounding countryside. These days it is busier servicing the tourist trade, particularly in winter when the ski slopes on Mt Ruapehu are busy. The little branch line to Raetihi, not quite 14 kilometres away, was one of many built to get timber from extensive native forests in the area and as was usual to then support turning the cleared land into productive farms. At one time it was thought that it might be possible to connect the line to Wanganui though this never eventuated.

The Ohakune station is located in Thames Street on the north side of town and is registered as a Historic Building Category 2 with Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga. Built in the period 1906-1908, the station is “one of only two remaining NIMT construction era stations in the Central Plateau still fulfilling its original function and it therefore provides a direct link to the history of the railway and Ohakune's development”.¹ There is a café in the station and a rail museum and gallery in an old railway shed.

To find the Ohakune-Raetihi branch line, proceed west along Thames Street to the intersection with Mangawhero Terrace and turn right. Take the first right turn just beyond the railway overbridge into Railway Row. The houses along this street are good examples of classic railway houses, mostly maintained in neat and tidy order. At the far end of Railway Row, where it rises to the left slightly, is the area of the Raetihi branch line junction.

Railway Row becomes Upper Thames Street at the top of the rise. Proceed to a T-junction and turn right to cross the railway overbridge into Ruapehu Road. The branch line was on the right and curved from the station and yards, around the bank of the gully below Ruapehu Road.

Continue to the intersection with Shannon Street and turn right. The line crossed Shannon Street 500 metres from the intersection, where there are several gates to private properties on the right and some scrubby open land on the left. Road and rail have both descended 1.3 kilometres from the station, and will descend more gently for another kilometre to SH49, the main road through Ohakune. For the final kilometre the line is in the bottom of the gully equidistant from Tainui Street and Arawa Street.

Directly opposite the iconic Ohakune symbol of the “Big Carrot”² on SH49 the Raetihi branch line Bridge No. 2 crosses the Maungateitei Stream. The bridge has been restored by a local businessman/railway enthusiast, and an interpretation panel alongside provides a full description of the bridge, the adjacent Rochfort station and surrounding area, as well as the branch in general.

The boardwalk and plantings around the carrot occupy the site of Rochfort station, one of three on the line between Ohakune and Raetihi. The station area is a local park, with attractive plantings of native vegetation. The line can be discerned heading south-west away from the park and again from Raetihi Ohakune Road.

From the “Big Carrot” proceed towards the centre of Ohakune and turn left into Raetihi Ohakune Road which the line crossed just after the intersection with Patiti Road. The formation on the right is a farm track and runs in an almost straight line on the right of and some distance from the road.

After 4.3 kilometres the road and the line converge, though there is no remnant visible from the roadside. The road crosses the Managwhero River, and there are no remnants of the railway bridge to be seen amongst the trees and undergrowth.

Shortly after the bridge the formation can again be sighted, now on the left side of the road, first running along the fenceline and then gently curving away on a raised embankment to pass out of sight behind a small hill. Once over the small rise and on the flat again a small gap in some trees allows a glimpse of a scrubby bank 140 metres from the road which may be an old railway loading bank, and it is certainly in the area where the Makaranui stop was located. The line has come round the hill and straightened up while gradually converging with the current road. Makaranui comprised a platform and stockyards.

Just over two kilometres from the Mangawhero River Bridge turn left into Pakihi Road, and then immediately left again into a gravel pit/layby. At the far (north) end there are two large concrete abutments, which supported a road overbridge. The rail formation coming between the abutments can be clearly seen. There is a marae on the other side of Pakihi Road, and the rail corridor ran between the marae and the current road and then alongside the road for a few hundred metres before curving gently away to pass round the far side of another small hill in a gentle right-hand curve.

Continue to Ngapahiki Road, which is on the left. About 500 metres along there was another “stop”, but there appear to have been no particular facilities. Its sole purpose seems to have been to service the nearby Makotuku Timber Co.’ sawmill siding. This company also operated two sawmills in Raetihi. One of the founders of this company was Francis Carter, and in turn this and many other enterprises he was associated with became the well-known timber company Carter Holt Harvey.³

From Ngapahiki Road the line continued straight for nearly another kilometre, before curving gently to the right to make its run into the Raetihi station and yards. The road and line are nearly half a kilometre distant from each other, so nothing can be seen of the formation from the road. Continue past the striking Ratana church⁴ on the rise on the left, and 200 metres later turn left down Railway Road. This leads into the station area which is now occupied, as is so often the case, by a transport company and various other local entities.

Some artefacts are still *in situ* – a concrete loading bank, stockyards, what seems to be the base and fixture of an old water tank, and fences made of railway track. At the far end of the yards there is a cutting through a small hillock showing where the rail corridor was. There were three loops in the yards, along with two backshunts. The 60x30ft goods shed appears to be amongst various structures still being used in the yard. Although there was a 1.5-ton crane, there was neither an engine shed nor a turntable.

The Raetihi station building is nearly a kilometre away, in Seddon Street in the middle of Raetihi, and forms part of the Waimarino Museum complex which chronicles the people, events and history of the Central Plateau region of New Zealand's North Island.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Waimarino Museum:

<https://sites.google.com/site/guidetoraetihi/waimarino-museum-in-raetihi>

Ohakune:

<http://www.visitohakune.co.nz/page/history/14/>

or

<http://www.ohakune.info/whyohakune/ohakune-history.php>

Ohakune Station Gallery & Railway Museum: 62 Thames St. Phone 06 385 8240 or 021 727112. Open daily 11am-3pm.

¹ <http://www.heritage.org.nz/the-list/details/7790>

² The 'Big Carrot' was unveiled In 1984 at the entrance to the town, in recognition of the importance of market gardening to the local economy.

³ <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/3c6/carter-francis-john>

⁴ <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/people/tahupotiki-wiremu-ratana>