

FOXTON BRANCH

Length	31.2 kilometres
Opened	Completely April 1876
Stops	8 Longburn, Karere, Tiakitahuna, Rangitane, Rangiotu, Bainesse, Himatangi, Motuiti, Foxton
Closed	Completely July 1959
Passenger services	Stopped in August 1932

Before the Wellington and Manawatu Railway Company completed a railway line between Wellington and Palmerston North in 1876, the port of Foxton on the Manawatu River was the gateway to the Manawatu.

It makes sense to explore the Foxton branch the “wrong” way round, that is, from its terminus at Foxton and then trace it back to the junction at Longburn on the outskirts of Palmerston North. Why? Because the explorer is likely to be making their way along SH1 heading north or south, and will be prepared to make a deviation to Foxton, where there are a number of interesting things to see and do, and from there follow what little remains of the line to Longburn where there is nothing of heritage interest to entertain the traveller. Also, there is information about the line and its terminus at the river port which is worth studying before setting off on an exploration journey.

Start by visiting what used to be the port and station area of the main township of Foxton, on the sea-side of the iconic windmill towering above the town. The area has been landscaped into a pleasant park and children’s play area looking over wetlands that have developed since the river was diverted through a cutting and the flow of water around what became the Foxton Loop declined.

BOX Foxton is named after Sir William Fox, an early settler who was Premier of New Zealand for four periods between 1856 and 1873. Foxton comprises three parts: the area bisected by SH1, the main “town” to the left of SH1 (heading north) on the banks of the Manawatu River, and the settlement at Foxton Beach which is mostly holiday homes. There was a port on the Manawatu River at Foxton from 1868 until 1951 though shipping to the port had declined by 1930. END BOX

There are interpretation panels all around the park which include photos that show very clearly the arrangement of the wharves, rail lines, shunting space and station, alongside the wharf sheds.

Although there are few visible remnants of the branch line on its route to Longburn, its passage across the flat landscape is easy enough to trace to the junction with the Main Trunk Line, 24 kilometres distant as the crow flies. It has been more or less obliterated within the area of Foxton township itself, but ran from the wharf area in a gentle curve across what is now the site of the Feltex factory and Manawatu College, through a cutting in

sandhills and around the racecourse to cross State Highway 1 where there is now a petrol station. The line ran from here on the right-hand side of the SH1 to the junction with SH56 to Palmerston North (Himatangi Junction), and for nearly all this distance the formation has been removed by road widening.

As one travels north on SH1, the site of Motuiti station is immediately before Motuiti Street on the right about 2 kilometres from the racecourse. There is no sign of the station itself. A further five kilometres, Platform Road on the right is close to the intersection with SH56. Take care if crossing SH1 to explore Platform Road which leads to the now vanished Himatangi station (originally called Carnarvon), which was fairly large as it serviced the Foxton branch traffic as well as the Sanson Tramway¹ for 60 years. Less than 200 metres along Platform Road the old line can be seen as a vehicle track running north alongside a row of macrocarpa trees. The remnants of the stock pens can be made out to the left of the line. The station itself was on the right-hand side of the line, but cannot now be located in the long grass, blackberry and other undergrowth. The line at this point is on a 45-degree angle to SH1, and continues at this angle for just over a kilometre across farmland until it crosses SH56 approximately 1.2 kilometres from the Himatangi intersection. The line is no longer discernible on the flat farmland.

From the point where the line reached and crossed SH56 it ran along the roadside on the left (heading east towards Longburn). A wide berm more or less unbroken for almost 4.5 kilometres indicates where the line ran. At the small settlement of Bainesse there was a station, the site of which is a grassed triangular area opposite the primary school. About six kilometres beyond Bainesse Rangiotu station was on the flat land immediately prior to the bridge over the Oroua River. The station was called Oroua Bridge until 1910. There were a goods shed and stockyards on separate sidings and a water vat. This station was particularly busy during World War 1 when four battalions of the New Zealand Rifle Brigade trained in a temporary military camp nearby.

Immediately beyond the river, in a paddock below road level, some formation is clearly visible. This identifies the corridor as it approached from the east to traverse the river. A stopbank built in more recent years as part of the flood protection work on the river covers any other sections leading onto the rail bridge. However, formation can be clearly seen further east alongside the road, heading towards the next stop on the line at Rangitane, about 3.5 kilometres from the Oroua River Bridge. Rangitane station comprised a shelter shed on a short earth platform. Nothing remains of the station and environs, all of which have been removed by roadworks and realignments for the junction where the SH56 from Opiki (Rangitane Road) joins the SH56 from Himatangi. There are two concrete structures on the triangular grass zone between the two roadways, but these are not part of the station.

SH56 now runs in a straight line towards Longburn, and the formation continued on the left-hand side of the road. Look for Tiakitahuna Road on the left, 1.73 kilometres from the Rangitane junction. This was the site of the Tiakitahuna station, which had an unusual layout "rather like a French metre gauge railway. There was a backshunt (holding fifteen 18ft 6in wagons), with points facing Longburn, a combined goods shed and passenger shelter (measuring 35ft by 11ft or 19.7m by 3.35m), and a low platform which was little more than

a bump in the ground.”² Open drains were situated on both sides of the road and railway to carry away flood waters.

An unusual structure directly opposite the station site, on the corner of Jackeytown Road (directly opposite Tiakitahuna Road) is known as the Tiakitahuna Rocket. The original rocket was apparently put together in the 1950s by a couple of local farmers to retain community identity, once the school, the store, post office, dairy factory, etc. had all gone from the area. It was replaced in 1982 with the current model.

The penultimate stop on the line was a further 2.35 kilometres along SH56, at Karere, the junction of SH56 and Karere Road. For once there is a visible remnant, with the station name on a low concrete platform parallel to the road.

The line continues straight for 1.5km as far as the Longburn overbridge which crosses the Main Trunk Line. The branch line corridor can just be seen looking back from the overbridge, but doing so is dangerous as there is no pedestrian access across the bridge, and it is certainly not advisable to stop a vehicle on the bridge. Both the branch and Main Trunk lines curve gently away on the left of the overbridge, passing an old wooden two-storey structure, which has all the signs of having been a local hostelry.

The Longburn platform for the branch line is still on the far side of the Longburn yards. It can be viewed by continuing along SH56 slightly less than a kilometre from the overbridge to Reserve Road on the left. Reserve Road is the entrance to the Fonterra Casein Factory and Dairy plant which dominate the locale. Turn left again into Ngaire Street. At the far end there is a small “reserve” with a barrier stopping people straying onto the Main Trunk Line and the sidings servicing the factories. In the distance to the right the concrete branch line platform remains.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Murals of Foxton:

<http://foxtonmurals.library.org.nz/12.html>

Foxton:

<http://www.foxton.org.nz/index.html>

Manawatu River estuary:

<http://envirohistorynz.com/2012/03/26/the-town-that-lost-its-river-the-sad-story-of-piriharakeke/>

¹ The Sanson Tramway operated between Himatangi and Sanson from 1885 until 1945. Owned by the Manawatu County Council, it connected with the national railway network at Himatangi on the Foxton branch. It was never part of the national network. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanson_Tramway

² *New Zealand Model Railway Journal*, October 1997, article by Peter Hodge, p.16