

## WAIKAIA BRANCH

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**Length:** 22.2 kilometres

**Opened:**

Completely October 1909

**Stops:** 7

Riversdale

Waipounamu

Plains

Waiparu

Freshford

Dome

Waikaia (Switzers)

**Closed:**

Completely May 1959

**Passenger services:** Stopped February 1931

This short branch line ran between Riversdale and the small town of Waikaia for 53 years, from 1909 until 1962. Although it covered a short distance across easy terrain, it took 25 years to build. Work started in 1884 but stopped 10 kilometres from Riversdale as a result of the depression of the 1880s. Rails had been laid for 3.2 kilometres but were eventually lifted to be used elsewhere. Work started again in 1904, with the only significant structure on the line – a bridge over the Mataura River – opening later in the same year. There was a minimal increase in elevation over this distance of 112 feet so construction was straightforward, requiring little in the way of embankment or complicated bridging. There were, however, 13 bridges of varying lengths, most of them crossing overflow channels on the Mataura River flood plains. The primary reason for the construction of this branch was to open up a considerable area of productive farming land.

The Waikaia branch is one of two in Southland which for five years (1926-1931) used railcars based on a Model T Ford chassis for passenger traffic. More information about these railcars can be found in the section on the Wyndham branch.

The rail corridor today is occasionally visible, and there are sufficient relics to provide some interest on what otherwise may be a somewhat pointless drive. The road itself continues beyond Waikaia for another 25 kilometres or so, along the winding Waikaia River valley, coming to a dead end where the Umbrella and Garvie Mountain ranges close in on each other.

The station in Riversdale is described in the section on the Waimea Plains Railway. The branch line to Waikaia left the station from a dock siding at the north end of the station building, on the opposite side of the platform from the main Waimea Plains Railway line. This was to cater for passenger traffic. Other stations such as Oamaru, Timaru and Rakaia had docks on platforms for the same reason.

To follow the line to Waikaia by road, turn right at the northern end of Riversdale from SH94 into Riversdale-Waikaia Road. The branch line crossed SH94 and passed through what is now an agricultural engineering depot and yard on the right. The road continues in a more or less straight line across flat farmland for the next 3.8 kilometres, and though there is now no sign of it, the railway was on the right. Even where the road crosses the Mataura River there is no sign of the combined road/rail bridge built between 1902 and 1904. It had 13 40ft wooden truss spans and six

13ft wooden beam spans at the end. It remained in use as a single-lane road bridge after the closure of the railway line, until a two-lane concrete road bridge was built alongside and officially opened in March 1976. There are no visible remnants of any other bridges on the line.

About 3.8 kilometres from Riversdale the rail corridor started to veer right, away from where the road continues straight ahead, in order to make its way between some hills and the Waikaia River, further to the right. The intersection of Waipounamu Road and Waipounamu Bridge Road is where Waipounamu station was located, though there is nothing to the exact position. It is reported to have had “all the normal facilities of a country rail yard, including a shelter shed, a 30ft x 20ft goods shed, a loop with capacity of 32 wagons and a backshunt for 22 wagons”.<sup>1</sup>

Turn right at the intersection and then left along Waipounamu Bridge Road. After just over a kilometre further, a side road on the left (Riordan Road) sets off under the hill. This is where the railway line ran, but there is no public access after a few metres along Riordan Road. The next stop on the line was Plains, sited less than a kilometre away.

Return to the “main” road (Riversdale-Waikaia Road) and traverse the hill for nearly eight kilometres. Where the road eventually flattens out and straightens on the far side is where the line reappeared, on the right side of the road still, shortly afterwards crossing to the left side. There is, though, no indication of this crossing point, or of the line on the left, or the right of the road for that matter.

A little further on, where the road and the river are close together, there is an intersection with Camp Road on the left. This marks the site of the Waiparu station. Once again, there are no visible remnants. Less than a kilometre from Camp Road there is an unnamed concrete-sided bridge, crossing a stream known locally as Muddy Creek, though its official name is Garvie Burn. A 170m timber beam bridge spanned Muddy Creek/Garvie Burn, but there is no evidence of its location on the left nowadays.

Less than a kilometre further on there is a small but easily spotted set of remnants at Freshford. To confirm beyond a shadow of doubt that the line was on the left of the road, there is a set of rails in the asphalt on Freshford Plains Station Road. At last, after nearly 20 kilometres, there is something other than scenery to look at.

The Freshford goods shed, stockyards and loading ramp are all still *in situ*, and are easily seen from the main road. In Google Earth images dating from 2010 the shed looks in a very sorry state, with a tree growing against it. Someone has since removed the tree, repainted the shed and ensured the name is once again clear for all to see. The goods shed was a non-standard size at 32ft x 22ft. The original Riversdale station building was moved to Freshford in 1908, when the new station for Riversdale was being built. The station building is now nowhere to be seen.

From Freshford onwards the line remains more or less discernible, even though there are not a huge number of culverts, raised embankments or other specific indications of its existence. However, knowing that it ran on the left side, less than 10 metres from the current road side, means it can be made out, sometimes at road level, sometimes slightly elevated and running through small cuttings on a bank. About 1.8 kilometres from Freshford there is a splendid tumbled-down culvert or set of abutments, consisting of substantial lumps of shaped concrete, and a sleeper in a paddock. Sheep may be seen clustering around it – presumably the concrete acts as a heat sink and is good for scratching!

A few kilometres further on the formation becomes elevated slightly, and there is a series of four drainage culverts which have not been disturbed by significant road-widening. These seem to be under the embankment and may or may not date from the days of construction of the line.

Another small wayside stop – Dome – was located somewhere in this area, presumably close to Dome Burn which runs down from East Dome. The stop at Dome was less than a kilometre before Switzers. The Switzers yard occupied a large flat area just before the bridge across the river to Waikaia.

The terminus of the Waikaia branch line was called Switzers until 1951, when the Geographic Board renamed the river Waikaia, the spelling of which had previously been “Whakaea”. Waikaia station and goods shed and the associated shunting lines and stock-holding and loading areas occupied the flat area. The goods shed collapsed in 2005. At the far end of the yard area is the renovated water tank, proudly displaying “Switzers – Estd. 1909”.

Switzers was named after a local merchant and landowner, who seems to have benefitted from being on the supply side of the gold-rush phenomena, firstly in Victoria, Australia, and then in New Zealand in the 1850s and 1860s. He purchased “Run 326”, a gold-prospecting run at Waikaia, as an investment, and although his own fortunes waxed and waned, his name “stuck” in the area.

It is worth crossing the Waikaia River to visit the town of the same name. An interesting local museum is open in the weekend for a few hours. Attached to it is a “bottle house”, made from approximately 20,000 wine bottles. Waikaia’s history is based on gold finds in the surrounding hinterland and a series of “rushes” which occurred in the mid-1860s.

#### **ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

Waikaia Visitor Information:

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

Waikaia Museum:

<http://www.nzmuseums.co.nz/account/4201>

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<sup>1</sup> “The Allure of Gold – Southland’s Switzers Branch”, Jim Brown, *New Zealand Railfan*, September 2009