

## WAIKAKA BRANCH

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**Length:** 20.8 kilometres

**Opened:** November 1908

**Stops:** 7

McNab

Howes

Willowbank

Maitland

Fleming

Pullar

Waikaka

**Closed:**

Completely in Sept 1962

**Passenger services:** Stopped Feb 1931

Exploration of the Waikaka branch from McNab to Waikaka has little to recommend it. Apart from a Heritage New Zealand-registered windmill and water tank, there are no interesting remnants. The countryside, though attractive enough, has no special scenic features, and there is little of historical interest or value in the locale apparent to the rail explorer. That is not to say, though, that the enthusiast should not take the short drive to Waikaka and spot for themselves the line as it makes its way along the valley for the grand distance of just over 20 kilometres. The only reason the line was built was the usual one – to open up land for development and to service the resultant agricultural production.

The starting place for exploring the branch line from McNab to Waikaka is about five kilometres east of Gore, on the junction of SH90 (Waikaka Valley Highway) with SH1. At the intersection pull off the road to look towards Gore and to the west side of SH1. On a hillside there are the remnants of a loading bank, the site of McNab station. The branch line left the Main South Line (MSL) about 500 metres away towards Gore, behind the hill and, out of sight of the roadside observer.

From the intersection, it is not apparent where the corridor was. Until Willowbank there is no obvious embankment, and abutments or culverts, if extant, are concealed in undergrowth. There are no visible cuttings where the road climbs slightly, and there are no indications across paddocks on the right side towards Waikaka Stream. The first stop on the line, Howe, was 2.5 kilometres from McNab, and it can be assumed that it was in the vicinity of Howe Road, which runs off to the right 1.7 kilometres from the intersection with SH1. There is nothing to indicate where the station and yards were.

Willowbank was the next stop on the line, easily identified by the windmill and water tank on the far side of a major Y-intersection. These two structures provided water for the steam engines on the line. Both are registered with Heritage New Zealand Heritage Pouhere Taonga, so there is good information available about them online.<sup>1</sup> The windmill is one of only two in New Zealand to survive on its original site, the other being at Belgrove on the Nelson section. In addition, this is the only place where both windmill and its associated water tank are both retained. The interpretation panel records that the windmill was built by the Railways Department at its Addington (Christchurch) workshop. The solid concrete foundations of the water tank suggest that both items stand in their original location, and that therefore the railway line ran across the road. The alignment was apparently between the tank and the windmill. On the opposite side of the intersection, on SH90,

there is a shed and attached corrugated iron tanks and lean-to's, and one wonders whether the central portion of this may have been a goods shed. There is, though, no indication in terms of vestigial paint colour or faint lettering to support this possibility.

Turn left to follow Waikaka Road. Only by closely studying Google Earth can one ascertain that the line was on the right of Waikaka Road for the next two kilometres, between 10 and 20 metres away from the road, far enough to not be able to make out from the road any physical indications of its passage.

After 2.8 kilometres (from Willowbank) the line crossed the road immediately after Pryde Road on the left. At last vestigial embankment appears, veering further away from the road at the bottom of a slight slope. Line and road are separated by up to 300 metres, but when you get to East Chatton Road, turn left and look for a crossing 150 metres from the turn-off. The farm track on the right is where Maitland station and yards are most likely to have been located.

Just over 500 metres further along Waikaka Road there is a set of abutments on each side of a waterway on the left side of the road. About 1.7 kilometres further, where an unnamed road culvert crosses a small stream, there is another set of abutments on each side of the stream and a set of posts in the stream bed. Shortly after, a signboard standing in a paddock identifies the location of the next stop – Fleming. It looks as if someone locally has made a frame using rail remnants and inserted the original name board into it.

Road and rail corridor then run side by side (corridor on the left) for just over two kilometres until the next stop, which was called Pullar. Occasionally a contour in the land can be spied, suggesting the presence of embankment. The Pullar site is identified by a subtle cutting against the hillside, creating a flat area, some of which is used for farm equipment and storage and as a stockyard. A small, somewhat elderly looking shed seems to have vestiges of the standard railways paint colour, so may once have been railways property.

Immediately after Pullar the line crossed the road and set off towards some low-lying hills about half a kilometer distant on the right. The access road is a dead end and not worth driving along. Continue on Waikaka Road for about 2.5 kilometres and start scanning across the paddocks on the right to spy the line making its way around the lowest slope of the hill on a cutting/embankment. From this point the line was on its final stretch into Waikaka, less than two kilometres ahead, and it ran more or less parallel to the road at a distance of up to 300 metres.

On entering Waikaka, turn right into Matheson Road, noting the war memorial and lovely old church on the right on the corner, where a picnic area is also designated. A large transport yard in Matheson Road occupies the yard area of Waikaka station, which had a 30x20ft goods shed, an engine shed, stockyards, three loop sidings and two backshunts. There may have been a number of railways staff in residence, as there are three houses which are clearly railways style and vintage in Tailings Street, on the left of Matheson Road. There do not appear to be any visible remnants of the station or associated platform, loading banks, etc. these days.

The line was sustained financially for a number of years to carry items too big to be carried on the Roxburgh branch for the Roxburgh hydro project. A heavy-lift crane was installed in Waikaka and the items were taken from the train to make a laborious journey by road to the project site about 65 kilometres north.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.heritage.org.nz/the-list/details/2553>