



TRACK OF AUDACIOUS VISION

The Pakihi Track was inspired by a vision of connecting Gisborne and Opotiki by road during the 19th Century, writes Motu Trails Charitable Trust executive officer Jim Robinson.

GREAT VIEWS:
The Pakihi Track suspension bridge is about two metres away from the original bridge.

PICTURE © Neil R. Hutton

Travel between Motu and Opotiki 120 years ago was not for the faint-hearted.

The only formed route was a horse track cut in the 1870s that crossed the Motu river at Motu Falls and twisted through the hills to the Bay of Plenty coast about 10 kilometres east of Opotiki. It was regularly described at the time as “terrible”.

“Its neglected condition limits the class of travellers and their horses to those only whose powers of endurance, fortitude, health, and training will stand the severest ordeal,” declared a writer to the New Zealand Herald, on January 6, 1882, in an article titled East Coast. In 1895, J.F. Skelton of Whakarau

fumed to the Poverty Bay Herald, “Kindly allow me to draw attention to the disgraceful state of the Motu Road between Opotiki and Motu . . . any man who valued his horse would certainly hesitate before attempting to force his animal around the fallen trees.”

As Motu was rapidly settled and farmed, an easier and shorter link with Opotiki became vital.

The best course was rigorously debated and for several years, at least in the eyes of some settlers, a road down the Pakihi and Otago valleys was the favoured option.

In 1901, it was reported by the Poverty Bay Herald that the Motu Settlers Association was keen for “the surveys of the railway line

and of a dray (cart) road to Opotiki via the Otago Valley”.

An Otago meeting two years later was reported to be “strongly in favour of obtaining a more direct road to the Motu, and then bringing Gisborne and Otago into closer communication . . .

“By going up the Otago Valley, a good coach road could be obtained.”

Enthusiasm was unabated by 1905.

“When the Otago-Motu road is completed, the distance from Motu to Otago would be not more than half the distance from Motu to Gisborne.

According to a Mr Parkinson, a (horse) rider could then travel from Otago to Motu and

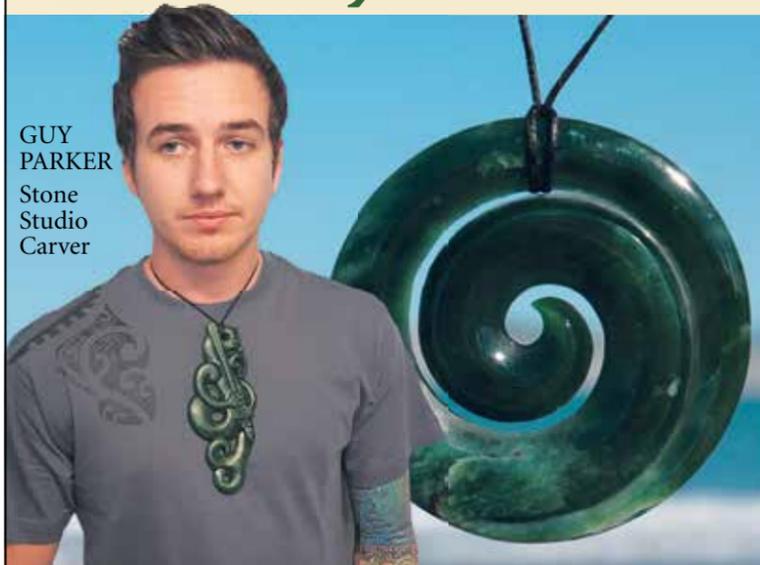
back in a day without inconvenience. This would surely be much better for the Motu settler than having to pack his goods over rough bush tracks.”

By 1907, a route had “been surveyed through the Pakihi Valley, which will considerably reduce the length of the journey at present performed over a tortuous track across the ranges”.

In 1908, it was reported that a Mr Elliott said there was some 12 miles of the Pakihi Road to complete on an 8-foot road, which would enable (Motu settlers) to ride through to Otago.”

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MONUMENTAL WORK BY HAND



REMINDER OF ANOTHER TIME:
Part of the original suspension bridge that was in use from 1914 to 1918.

PICTURE © Jim Robinson

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So much hope and energy — but as anyone who has been down the Pakihi Track will know, the hills of the valley are steep and the rocks are loose. Building a road down the track was audacious — almost certainly doomed to fail.

Moreover, by about 1912 the Motu Road was also close to being linked through, taking a longer but slightly more realistic route.

The challenge of the Pakihi Track became increasingly clear. In 1913, “twelve miles of track were recently constructed on the Pakihi road, and . . . today it would be difficult to ride (by horse) along more than three or four miles of it.”

Even so, in 1913 a public works estimates report had £7000 budgeted to the Motu Road and £750 to the Pakihi Track, plus £500 to the Pakihi suspension bridge, and £150 to Pakihi stock reserve and river protection.

The first horse coach successfully traversed the full Motu Road in 1914. The same year, the suspension bridge went up over the Pakihi Stream, its deck well over three metres wide.

Prime Minister William Massey visited Opotiki and met the Otago Settlers Association. Pakihi/Otago farmers wanted the Pakihi Track so they could muster stock to the railhead at Motu.

It's unclear whether Bay of Plenty MP William Donald Stuart MacDonald was

talking it up when he declared, “The Pakihi Track would eventually be part of the main road between Otago and Gisborne”.

There is only one clear reference to the formed stock track being used for sheep. However, it appears to have been passable by horse riders, maybe using the riverbed in places, until 1918 when a huge storm wrecked the suspension bridge, the Pakihi road and, presumably, the track. By then, the Motu Road was used by cars, so track restoration was not vital.

In 1920, the Otago settlers had another go at lobbying government for support to reopen the track. The argument was that they were “about 11 miles in from Otago and if they wished to go to Gisborne they had to come all the way around via Otago (to the Motu Road).”

It appears that work never happened. Hopes faded. A 1937 report describes, “the abandoned Pakihi Track down to the Otago Valley”.

But over many years, hopes were reborn. In 1969 the New Zealand Forest Service (now Department of Conservation) built a hut halfway down the valley for hunters and trampers.

Almost 30 years ago, mountain bikers started to use the Pakihi Track and, from 1990-1994, Tim de Jong's Dreamers & Eastcapers ran supported cycle rides. A few years ago, Mr de Jong recalled the track as

“pretty much a bike walk back then, with lots of hauling your bike under giant logs and inching your way around cliffs . . . It was only for people who were seriously hard core!”

One trip included photographer-writer Gray Clapham, who wrote for New Zealand Adventure magazine. The Pakihi Track was described in a mid-1990s edition of Classic New Zealand Mountain Bike Rides as “50 percent semi-rideable jungle country, 50 percent sweet single track”.

In 2007, another storm brought down multiple windfalls and slips.

Fortunately, unlike the aftermath of the great storm of 1918, in 2010 there was fresh hope in the form of The New Zealand Cycle Trail. DoC had been aiming to restore the Pakihi Track for trampers and hunters, and got behind the concept of reopening access to bikers as well.

With two work teams, one from each end, DoC brought the Pakihi Track back to life as part of Motu Trails Cycleway. The official opening was mid-2012.

Six years on, the Pakihi Track gets about 2500 cyclists plus many hikers, hunters and runners each year. It's one of the iconic rides of The New Zealand Cycle Trail.

Nature has continued to dish up hefty challenges, most notably with a massive slip in late 2016 that wiped out 100 metres of track. But thanks to DoC, with support from

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volunteers, the track has remained open.

In large part, because of that natural force, its reputation continues to grow.

The trail head is on Motu Road at about 600 metres altitude. You pass through tawa, rimu, nikau and countless tree ferns. In winter, the track sides glow green with moss and lichen.

Birds include tui, kereru, North Island robin, long-tailed cuckoo, even the occasional karearea (New Zealand falcon).

There are numerous side streams and small waterfalls. You cross 25 bridges, the highlight a 32-metre suspension bridge over the Pakihi Stream that sits right alongside the remnants of the 1914-1918 bridge.

Steep drop-offs to the side of the track mean cyclists require sound skills but on foot it's within the capabilities of anyone who is comfortable walking off-road, and prepared.

For most, the full track is a five to seven-hour walk, or a two to three-hour ride. On a bike, it's one direction, starting from the Motu Road. On foot, you can go both ways, so an out-and-back walk or run is an option.

At the upper end of the Pakihi Track, much of the original benching remains. Whether you ride, run or walk, it's not hard to imagine the monumental work that went in by hand — and be thankful for that audacious vision of so long ago.

• For more information please visit: www.motutrails.co.nz or, to have a free brochure mailed anywhere in New Zealand, email jim@motutrails.co.nz