Ngāti Ira Oral and Traditional History report

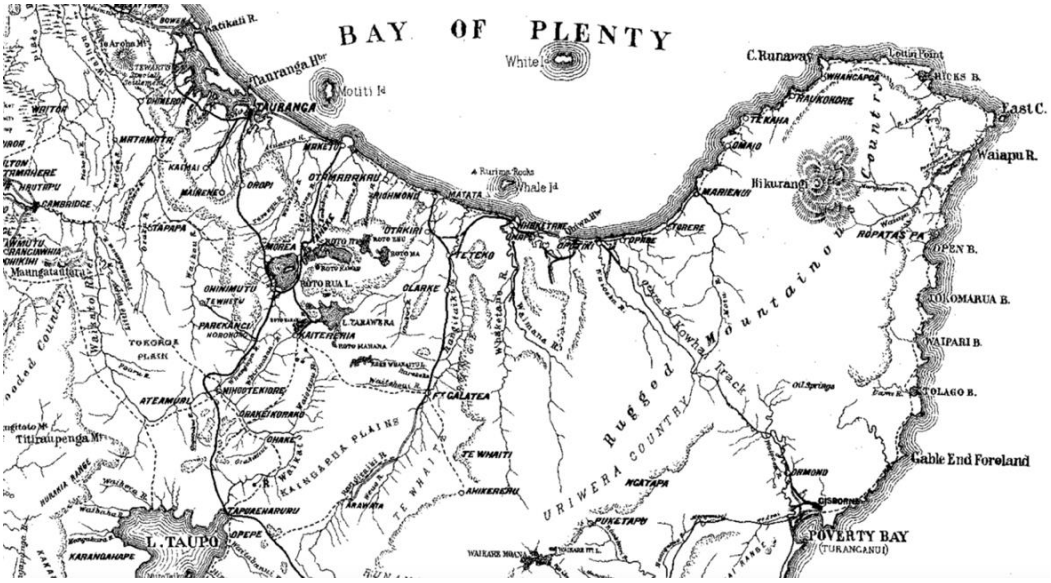
- **gap-filling information #2 – Te Kowhai Track**

[Insert as new para. 48 in main report under current heading: 2.3 1830s – Missionaries and Merchandise]

48. Te Kowhai Track

Ngāti Ira's rohe, centred on the northern entrance to the Waioweka Gorge, meant that traditionally the hapū were kaitiaki of the main access routes through and around the gorge. One route in particular, Te Kowhai Track, an ancient footway between Ōpōtiki and Tūranga or Tūranganui (later renamed Gisborne) was of great importance to both Māori and Pākehā until the mid-19th century. It was the original trail across the steep ranges separating the Bay of Plenty from the East Coast, and therefore used as a faster alternative to travelling around the coast via East Cape.

Te Kowhai Track appears to be named for an old kainga in the interior hill country, once occupied by the Ngāti Ngahere chief Punahāmoa.[1] Lyall quotes an unidentified source as saying that the Waiiti [ie. Te Waiti] Stream "takes its rise in the Kohai range" [ie. Te Kowhai – the spelling is likely to indicate the pronunciation in the local dialect].[2]



C. 1870s. AJHR, *taken from Motu Trails Facebook page*

[1] Walker, R. p. 32
[2] Lyall, p. 183

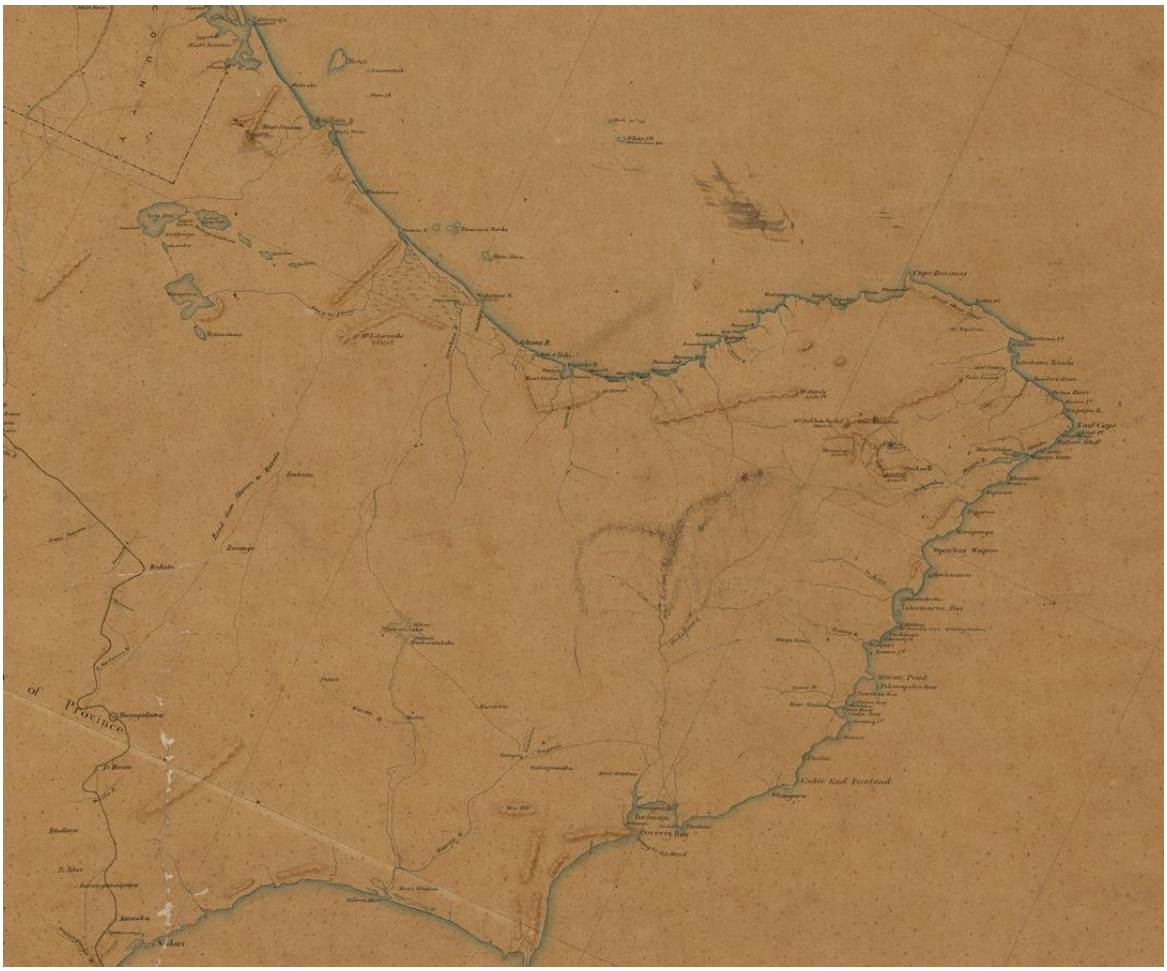
RECEIVED
Waitangi Tribunal
15 Jul 25
Ministry of Justice
WELLINGTON

The track is marked on many maps from this period, such as the one above. However, no 19th century map has been found showing the track at large scale, so details of the exact route are not always clear. Broadly speaking, Te Kowhai track ran south from Ōpōtiki through the Otara Valley, eastward of the Waioweka Gorge, following the current Pakihi Road. Slightly upstream of the confluence of the Pakihi and Te Waiti streams (two small waterways that rise near the summit of the Huiarau Range and flow into the Otara River near the end of the current Otara Road) the track veered steeply west and rose onto the forested ridgeline. It then followed the ridgeline east of Te Waiti Hill through the current Urutawa Forest at an elevation of 500-800 m. above sea level, and dropped from Moutohora, just south of the current Mōtū settlement. It then followed the route of the current Te Kowhai road (presumably named for the southern end of the track), the Waikohu River and Whakarau road, to the Waipāoa river, and southward to Tūranganui (Gisborne.)[3]

These are approximate routes only – it is clear from early Pākehā accounts that alternative approaches could be taken, especially at either end of the track, perhaps depending on weather conditions and fitness.

Te Kowhai track was approximately150 km long and could be traversed by foot, and in some places on horseback, in four days.

[3] Williams, H. C. 1992, *Te Kowhai Track; Poverty Bay – Bay of Plenty, 1840-1992* 3rd. ed., produced privately, pp. 4-5



Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections Map 2651

The above detail from an 1857 map shows two ‘roads’ running east from Opotiki – the Te Kowhai track through the ranges to Tūranga (Gisborne) and another around East Cape, but none to the west.

The Te Kowhai track was evidently well travelled by Māori from throughout the Bay of Plenty and Tai Rāwhiti regions. The first Pākehā known to have walked it was the CMS (Church Missionary Society) missionary Rev. William Williams. From 1840 Rev. Williams and his family lived at the Kaupapa (now Manutuke) mission beside the Waipāoa River, just south of present-day Gisborne. This was the first Christian mission on the East Coast. In late 1840 a party of Māori guided Rev. Williams and his nephew Henry (the son of William’s older brother Rev. Henry Williams) on a clockwise circuit from Tūranga through the Urewera to Ōpōtiki, then back to Tūranga via the Te Kowhai track. Unfortunately, Rev. Williams’ daily diary of this journey

has not survived, but in letters to the CMS in London he describes walking the unmapped route south from Ōpōtiki:

> (21 Dec. 1840) - … after passing up the bed of the [Otara] river for about ten miles we ascended to a range of hills called Kowai. [ie. Te Kowhai]
> (22 Dec. 1840) – Travelled all day on the range we ascended yesterday and brought up at night within 5 miles of the river Motu. The whole surrounding country is densely wooded and extremely rugged.
> (23 Dec. 1840) – Travelled hard all day. In the afternoon we had a view of Turanga from the top of the range… In the evening we slept on the banks of the Turanga river.
> (24 Dec. 1840) – Made a forced march all day and reached home at 10 oclock at night in heavy rain…[4]

Missionary and printer William Colenso walked the track the following year and described it as "nine inches [25 cm] wide and barely discernable."[5] Gisborne historian Harold Williams points out that "Any Maori going such a way would repeatedly bend aside nuisance vegetation and trample underfoot to a minor degree the forest carpet, then leave nothing else by way of on-site signposting."[6]

Rev. William Williams walked Te Kowhai Track in the opposite (northward) direction in the autumn of 1844:

> 29 April 1844 – We set out early on our way and instead of walking up the bed of the [Waipaoa] River which was my former route, we continued on the range of hills throughout the day.
> 30 April 1844 - … we travelled without serious inconvenience to Pakihi the upper part of the Opotiki [ie. Otara] River.
> 1 May 1844 - … we travelled on the range of hills to Wakangaire
> 2 May 1844 – Came to the end of the wood at half past one and then walked down the [Otara] river continually fording the stream often up to the middle in water.[7]

In 1845 Rev. Williams returned to Ōpōtiki via the Te Kowhai track, then made another circuit of the Urewera, this time in an anti-clockwise direction.[8]

---

[4] Williams, W. in Frances Porter (ed.) 1974 *The Turanga Journals – letters and journals of William and Jane Williams* Price Milburn for Victoria University Press, p. 142
[5] Colenso, W. quoted in Williams, *Te Kowhai Track*, p. 2
[6] Williams, H. *Te Kowhai Track*, p. 2
[7] Williams, W. *Turanga Journals*, p. 281
[8] Williams, W. *Turanga Journals,* pp. 327-33

In the winter of 1847 he again walked the track from Tūranga to Ōpōtiki, a journey his family described as "crossing the alps:"

> 12 August 1847 – We set out at daylight and passed Rangiriri and Tauawatea and brought up within an hours walk of Motu.
> 13 August 1847 – We encamped at Te Wairapukao
> 14 August 1847 – We travelled hard and got to the outside of the wood by 3 oclock. Having a strong native in the party who had no load I got carried out over the fords [in the Otara River.][9]

The following year Williams travelled the first part of the route from Tūranga on horseback:

> 23 October 1848 – I left home this morning for an overland trip by way of Opotiki.
> 24 October 1848 – Continued our course till noon when I left the horse tethered & at two began to ascend towards Rangiriri…
> 25 October 1848 – Ascended Tauawatea [old name for place on southern side of Pukekiwi, which is just south of Motu] and encamped at night on Te Waiwhero [tributary stream of Motu River at Motu end of present-day Whakarau Rd].
> 26 October 1848 – Crossed the river Motu before breakfast… We then walked in quest for a place of encampment and soon came to Te Wairapuako.
> 27 October 1848 - … in the evening we encamped on the banks of Pakihi at the head of the valley Opotiki.[10]

By 1850, and Williams' eighth traverse of the track, he was able to travel further inland from Tūranga on horseback, to Whakarau on the Waikohu River. He later camped at Pukekiwi:

> 16 February 1850 – In three and a half hours we reached Motu, & from there to Pakihi in four hours.
> 18 February 1850 – Went on to the Wairapukao to breakfast (2.5 hours), thence to Whakanguru (3 hours) to Turangatohu (3 hours) & to Okarakia (2 hours.) Here we encamped…
> 19 February 1850 – In an hour and a half we reached the [Otara] river & after crossing it a few times we halted for breakfast. Got to Mr Wilsons (CMS station at Opotiki) at four.

At about the same time as Rev. Williams walked Te Kowhai track from Tūranga to Ōpōtiki in February 1850, his fellow CMS missionary, Thomas Grace, made the same journey accompanied by two Māori guides. He found it very difficult, "the path being overgrown." They reached Ōpōtiki on 9 February:

---

[9] Williams, W. *Turanga Journals,* p. 439
[10] Williams, W. *Turanga Journals,* p. 503

> The journey this far was very toilsome, being a succession of hills and mountains all the way… one day's walk from Opotiki we met a Native woman and a little boy returning to Turanga. Was greatly astonished to find that she was carrying 60 lbs [27 kg] of potatoes on her back, and more astonished still when, a few hours afterwards, I found that she had climbed with them an almost perpendicular hill of between 2000 and 3000 ft [600 to 900 m] high.[11]

Rev. Grace went on to Auckland, then returned to Ōpōtiki and walked Te Kowhai Track in the opposite (north-south) direction.

> 4 March 1850 – A ford in the [Otara] river – we had to wade for 5 or 6 hours more or less. Succeeded before dark in making the first ascent, where the poor woman had climbed with her heavy load of potatoes. Night closed upon us while we were a considerable distance from the first place where it was possible to pitch our tent.
> We were now crossing a sharp ridge, in many places no broader than a narrow pathway, but being well wooded, there was not much danger. While in this situation, however, one of my boys lost his footing and made several turns before he could stop himself…
> 6 March 1850 - … after walking for another 4 hours, descended upon the fertile river flat. This is the most heavily wooded place I have seen, with a beautiful river winding through it. In this place are several rough sheds, that were erected by the Natives, with the names engraven on the trees of all the English Pilgrims who, I conclude, have passed a night here…
> 8 March 1850 – At 6pm, when we were all quite spent, we reached a small cultivation on the upper branch of the Turanga River, about 30 miles from the Turanga settlement.[12]

There appear to be no written accounts of the use of Te Kowhai track by troops during the period of the Crown-Māori wars in the Bay of Plenty, 1864-72. However, Harold Williams says "one has to assume that the 'Te Kowhai Track' between Poverty Bay and the Bay of Plenty stayed in use, with successive improvement, mainly to meet the initial needs of the constabulary and their [Māori] foes throughout the opening phase of the New Zealand Hauhau wars 1864-1872?"[13]

Fragmentary evidence of such usage appears in accounts of those wars by Binney and others, eg:

> [In early December 1868, before the siege of Ngatapa] Pera [Aperahama Tutoko], who had been one of the original emissaries of the Pai Marire cause to Turanga in 1865, was very closely connected with Ngati Ira, the people living at Waioeka; now he had been sent [from Tūranga] along with Timoti Hakopa… into the district of the Whakatohea

[11] Grace, T.1928, *A Pioneer Missionary Among the Maoris 1850-1879*, GH Bennett and Co. pp. 5-6
[12] Grace, *Pioneer Missionary* pp. 7-9
[13] Williams, H. *Te Kowhai Track,* p. 14

> tribe… That Pera got through is made clear in a letter sent in turn by Hira [Te Popo] to the other hapu of Whakatohea.[14]
>
> After the last core of Te Kooti's support miraculously escaped from Nga Tapa in the early morning hours of 6 January [1869], they scattered and fled into the mountains at the headwaters of the Motu River… Te Whiu [Maraki] offered to guide Te Kooti through to the Waioeka River, where he could take shelter in its steep ravines.[15]
> [Te Whiu Maraki was of Tawhana and Waimana in the Urewera, and therefore likely to be familiar with the Te Kowhai track route through to Tūranganui.]

Major Keepa Te Rangihiwinui and his party of Whanganui kūpapa may have used the northern [ie. Ōpōtiki] end of the track in March 1870 when heading inland to capture Te Kooti, who was then taking refuge in the Waioweka Gorge. Major Keepa and his men are reported to have begun their journey by walking up the Otara River, but they then cut westward across the Waioweka River to Wairata. Sgt Austin, the only Pākehā with Keepa's force, wrote that on the early morning of 21 March 1870, after twice crossing the Otara river:

> we struck right into another River running SE. This one we followed., crossing and re-crossing it until 10am when we halted for breakfast. After breakfast we fell in and marched again, still crossing and re-crossing this river. At 2.30pm the country began to get more open and the hills not so high, or steep… It is a frightful road, we are about 25 miles from Opotiki. Now the name of the [river] we are going up is the Tutae Toka [ie. Tutaetoko] river.[16]

At the same time as this expedition approached Te Kooti's pā Waipuna, a Ngāti Porou kūpapa force under Major Wahawaha was also moving south from Ōpōtiki, but via the Waioweka Gorge.

The increasing Pākehā population after that period, and the need for better access for mail services and stock movements, led to improved communications between Ōpōtiki and Tūranga that reduced the use of Te Kowhai track. By 1872 a 'dray road' extended some six miles (10 km) south along the Otara River, making that northern section of Te Kowhai track accessible for horse-drawn vehicles. A short branch of this road gave dray access to Ngāti Ira's Ōpeke Marae at the mouth of the Waioweka Gorge. According to HW Williams, "Those short dray roads are said

---

[14] Binney, J. 1997, *Redemption Songs – a life of Te Kooti Arikirangi Te Turuki*, Bridget Williams Books / AUP, pp. 141-142
[15] Binney, J. 2009, *Encircled Lands – Te Urewera 1820-1921* Bridget Williams Books, p. 141
[16] Austin, Sgt. S. quoted in Crosby, R. 2023 *Te Kooti's Last Foray,* Oratia, p. 122

to have been the work of Maori people furnishing their own sea access for their farming enterprises."[17]

Ōpōtiki historian Lorna Aikman states that "Following the occupation of Ōpōtiki in 1866 by militia, a track based on older Māori paths advanced inland… up the Waiaua River Valley (now the Motu Road) for 14km before climbing east to continue along an east-west ridge to take in the upper part of the Waiopu Stream Valley."[18] This track, longer but less steep than Te Kowhai Track, appears to be the route known as the Military Road. Its northern (Ōpōtiki) end began at the mouth of the Waiaua River, east of Te Kowhai Track. It intersected with that track in the ranges near Motutohora, ran south of the track to Matawai, then rejoined the track at Te Karaka and followed it to Gisborne.

In 1872 the Poverty Bay Highways Board contracted L. and F. Simpson to cut a bridle [ie. foot and horse] track from Ormond, inland from Gisborne, to Ōpōtiki. "Only resident native labour could be employed." The following year the *Poverty Bay Standard* reported that "Some considerable distance is formed from the Opotiki end, where [General Government Engineer] Mr Simpson's brother has charge of a party of 80 natives who are working well. The complete formation of this track will open up some beautiful country and help our settlers, who have a plethora of fine stock, to reach the markets."[19] In 1874 the *Bay of Plenty* Times reported that "The only means of communication to the proposed new [Motu] settlement will be by means of the Opotiki and Ormond Roads, now in process of formation… which so far, although having experienced many delays through winter weather, has been pushed on most successfully."[20]

The Ōpōtiki-Ormond Horse Track followed much the same path as Te Kowhai track at either end, but deviated from it between the Motu River and the upper reaches of the Otara River. It was a safer and easier route for horse-riders and after it was opened in 1876/77 it largely

[17] Williams, H. *Te Kowhai Track,* p. 15
[18] Aikman, Lorna, 2023 *Toatoa, Takapūtahi and Whitikau – 'The Valleys in the Clouds'* Lorna Aikman, p. 18
[19] *Poverty Bay Standard*, 15 January 1873, p. 2
[20] *Bay of Plenty Times*, 15 August 1874, p. 3

superseded the older track. It was then used by horse and foot traffic and for moving sheep, though that was problematic due to the terrain.[21]

The Horse Track proved difficult and expensive to maintain. In 1881, a letter to the *Poverty Bay Herald* read "we took four days from Gisborne to Opotiki, the pace of our horses being in general less than a man could walk, owing to the state of the road … it has been neglected ever since its formation, and all the works, except Motu bridge itself … are in a state of decay."[22]

In early 1889 an armed constabulary force of 150 followed this track on horseback, with little rest, from Gisborne to Ōpōtiki in pursuit of Te Kooti:

> The route thence to the Motu is a very circuitous one, the bridle track winding round the sides of hills of fantastic shapes, and through gullies and streams, bush, and fern of all sizes. Very little talking was allowed in the ranks, in fact, most were striving to keep awake and guide their horses safely over the holes and round the curves in the path … Without any stoppages of duration the Motu bridge was crossed and another clearing reached at three in the afternoon.[23]

Lorna Aikman recalls that "Possum trappers and hunters were still using the northern end of the [Horse] track in places in the 1970s and 80s."[24]

In 1914, after the installation of a suspension bridge over the Pakihi stream, the Pakihi Track was completed. It was considered much more suitable for stock movement and horse journeys than the twisting and dangerous Horse Track, but in 1918 a storm wrecked the bridge and closed the track. By then the Motu Road had also opened, a considerably longer route but allowing horse-drawn and eventually motorised vehicles to travel coast to coast. As a result the Pakihi Track was not maintained, and fell into disuse.[25]

In 1928-29 the Waioweka Gorge Road was opened for wheeled traffic, and by the end of the 1930s this was the preferred route between Ōpōtiki and Gisborne. However, the Motu Road

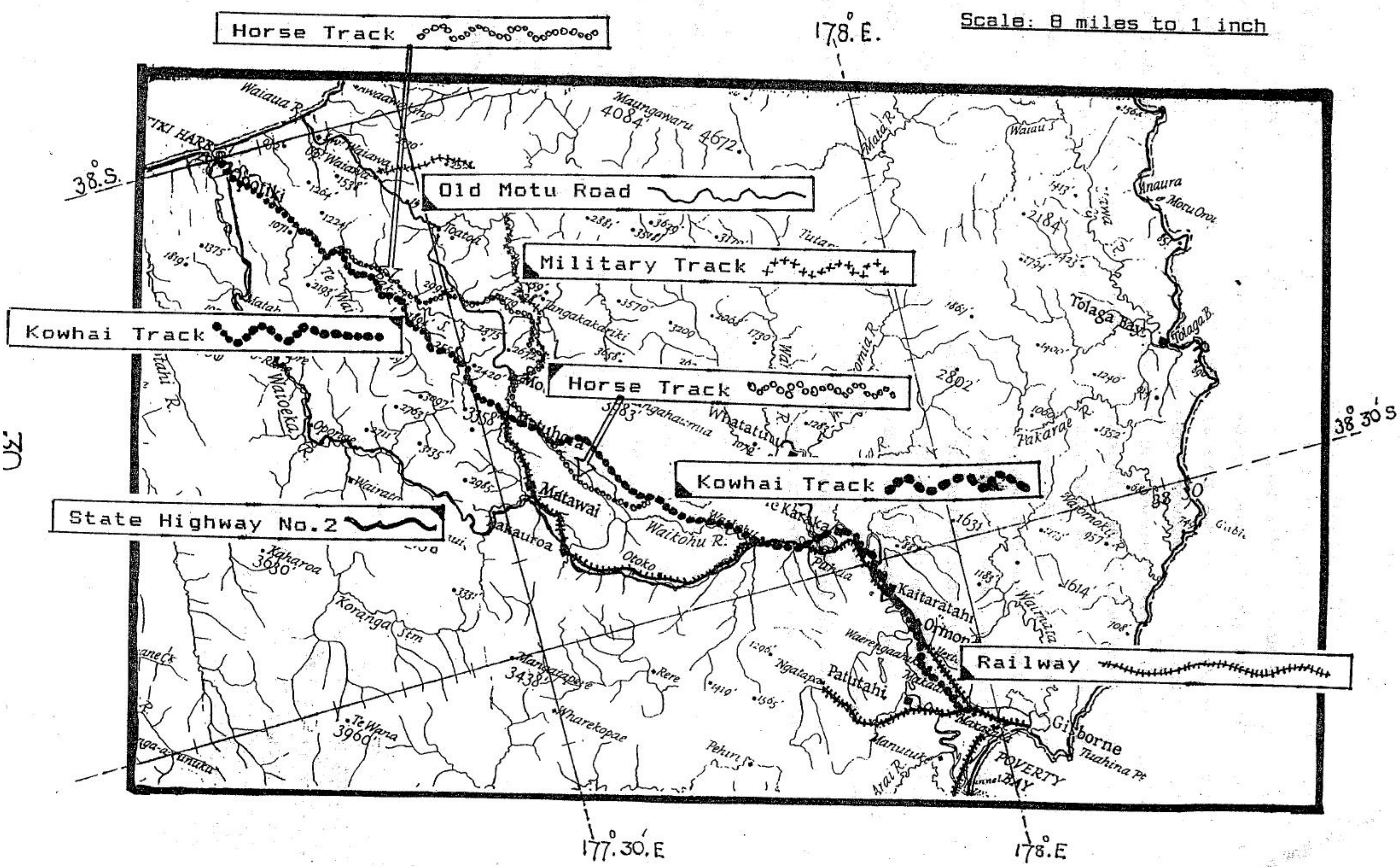
---

[21] Aikman, *Toatoa, Takapūtahi and Whitikau*, p. 19
[22] 'The Ormond-Opotiki road' *Poverty Bay Herald*, 9 February 1881, p. 2
[23] 'With the troops, the Te Kooti Expedition', *Poverty Bay Herald*, 5 Mar 1889, p. 2
[24] Lorna Aikman, personal communication
[25] 'History of the Pakihi Track' - motutrails. co.nz

remained in use and was the preferred stock route. Each year during the early 20th century, thousands of sheep and cattle would be brought through this road from Gisborne by drovers.[26]

In the 1960s the Pakihi Track began to be reused by hunters, deer cullers and trampers. In 1969 the New Zealand Forest Service (now Department of Conservation) built a hut halfway down the valley. From the 1990s the track became popular with mountain bikers. In 2010-2012 DOC restored the Pakihi Track, included installing a 32-metre suspension bridge over the Pakihi Stream near the hut, to become part of the Motu Trails Cycleway.[27]

[26] Aikman, *Toatoa, Takapūtahi and Whitikau*, p. 41
[27] 'History of the Pakihi Track' - motutrails. co.nz


Scale: 8 miles to 1 inch
Horse Track
Old Motu Road
Military Track
Kowhai Track
Horse Track
Kowhai Track
State Highway No.2
Railway
38°S.
178°E.
38°30'S
177°30'E
178°E
Maungawaru 4672
4084
Waiaua R.
Toatoa
Matawai
Whatatutu
Waikohu R.
Otoko
Te Karaka
Puhatikotiki
Kaitaratahi
Ormond
Patutahi
Ngatapa
Waerengaahika
Makauri
Gisborne
Tuahina Pt
POVERTY BAY
Manutuke
Arai R.
Tolaga Bay
Tolaga B.
Anaura
Motu Oroi
Pakarae R.
Waimata
Waiomoki R.
Koranga Stm
Kaharoa
3680
Te Wera
3960
Waioeka R.
Opotoki
Rere
Wharekopae
Mangatapere
3438
2802
2184