

New Zealand disasters timeline

This timeline lists New Zealand's worst post-1840 natural disasters, transport accidents, fires, mining accidents and other tragedies that have caused major loss of life. Follow the links for more information on NZHistory.net.nz, Te Ara and other sites.

Note: this list does not include military disasters such as the First World War battle of Passchendaele (where, on 12 October 1917, 845 New Zealanders were killed on a single day) or major disease outbreaks, such as the 1918 influenza pandemic, which claimed more than 8600 lives over several months.

1846 Taupō landslide

On 7 May a massive landslide on the shores of Lake Taupō overwhelmed the kāinga (Māori village) of Te Rapa, killing around 60 people, including Ngāti Tūwharetoa leader Mananui Te Heuheu Tūkino II. Find out more.

1855 Wairarapa earthquake

On 23 January a magnitude 8.2 earthquake struck the lower North Island. It killed between five and nine people in Wellington, Manawātū and Wairarapa and radically altered the landscape of the Wellington region. Find out more on Te Ara.

1863 HMS *Orpheus* shipwreck

On 7 February the Royal Navy steam corvette HMS *Orpheus*, carrying British troops, foundered at the entrance to Auckland's Manukau Harbour. Of the 259 men on board, 189 died in the worst maritime disaster in New Zealand waters. Find out more about the *Orpheus* disaster

1865 *Fiery Star* shipwreck

On 11 May the sailing ship *Fiery Star* caught fire and sank south of Cuvier Island, off the Coromandel Peninsula, with the loss of 79 lives. Find out more on Te Ara.

1865 *City of Dunedin* shipwreck

Leaving Wellington on 20 May, the paddle steamer *City of Dunedin* and its 39 passengers and crew disappeared without trace. The ship is presumed to have foundered in Cook Strait.

1866 *General Grant* shipwreck

On 14 May the sailing ship *General Grant* was wrecked in the Auckland Islands, south of New Zealand, with the loss of (ultimately) 73 lives. Ten survivors were finally rescued 18 months later. Find out more on Te Ara.

1868 Great storm

On 3/4 February a violent storm swept across much of the country, wrecking 12 ships – including the *Star of Tasmania* and *Water Nymph* at Oamaru – and causing flash floods. At least 25 lives were lost.

1874 *Cospatrick* shipwreck

On the night of 17/18 November the emigrant ship *Cospatrick*, sailing from England to Auckland, was destroyed by fire off the Cape of Good Hope. Of the 473 people on board, only three survived. Although this tragedy occurred far from New Zealand, the burning of the *Cospatrick* could be considered this country's worst civilian disaster. Find out more.

1879 Kaitangata mine accident

On 21 February, 34 miners were killed in an explosion at the Kaitangata coal mine in Otago. Find out more.

1881 *Tararua* shipwreck

On 29 April the steamer *Tararua* was wrecked off Waipapa Point, Southland. Of the 151 passengers and crew on board, 131 were lost in the worst civilian shipwreck in New Zealand waters. Find out more on Te Ara.

1882 Timaru harbour tragedy

On 14 May a sudden storm wrecked two large sailing ships, the *City of Perth* and *Ben Venue*, in Timaru's exposed roadstead. Nine lives were lost. Among the dead were the port's harbourmaster and five local watermen, who had tried to rescue the ships' crews.

1886 *Taiaroa* shipwreck

On 11 April the steamer *Taiaroa* struck rocks near the mouth of the Clarence River, north of Kaikōura, and sank with the loss of 34 lives.

1886 Tarawera eruption

On 10 June the volcanic Mt Tarawera, south-east of Rotorua, erupted spectacularly, killing perhaps 120 people and burying the famed Pink and White Terraces on Lake Rotomahana. Find out more on this site, Te Ara and The story of Tarawera.

1894 *Wairarapa* shipwreck

On 29 October, in a heavy fog, the liner *Wairarapa* steamed into cliffs on Great Barrier Island, with the loss of 121 of its 235 passengers and crew.

1896 Brunner mine accident

On 26 March an explosion at Brunner, West Coast, killed 65 coal miners in New Zealand's worst mining disaster. Find out about this and other mining accidents on Te Ara.

1902 *Loch Long* shipwreck

In late May the three-masted sailing ship the *Loch Long* was wrecked off the Chatham Islands, with the loss of 24 lives. Find out more

1902 *Elingamite* shipwreck

On 9 November the steamer *Elingamite* was wrecked on the Three Kings Islands, north of Cape

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Nation Dates
FINAL

Page
89
207

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Rēinga, with the loss of 45 lives. Find out more on Te Ara.

1909 Penguin shipwreck

On 12 February the Cook Strait ferry *Penguin* struck rocks off Cape Terawhiti and sank with the loss of 72 lives. Find out more.

1914 Huntly mine accident

On 12 September 43 coal miners were killed in an explosion at Ralph's Mine, Waikato.

1923 Ongarue railway accident

On 6 July the North Island main trunk express slammed into a huge landslide at Ongarue, north of Taumarunui. With 17 deaths, this was the first major loss of life on New Zealand's railways. Find out more.

1926 Dobson mine accident

On 3 December an explosion at the Dobson coal mine on the West Coast killed nine miners.

1929 Murchison earthquake

On 17 June an earthquake measuring 7.8 on the Richter scale struck the north of the South Island, killing 17 people. The shock was felt throughout New Zealand but centred on the Murchison area, where it caused massive landslides. Find out more on Te Ara.

1931 Hawke's Bay earthquake

On 3 February New Zealand's deadliest earthquake, measuring 7.8 on the Richter scale, devastated much of Napier and Hastings. The official death toll was 256, but 258 is likely to be a more accurate figure. Find out more on Te Ara. See also: images of the Hawke's Bay earthquake

1938 Kōpuawhara flood

On 19 February a flash flood swept away a Public Works railway construction camp at Kōpuawhara on the East Coast, killing 21 workers. Find out more.

1939 Huntly mine accident

On 24 September 11 men were asphyxiated by carbon monoxide at the Glen Afton coal mine, Huntly.

1942 Seacliff Mental Hospital fire

On 9 December a fire at Seacliff Mental Hospital, north of Dunedin, killed 37 of the 39 female patients in Ward 5. Find out more

1943 Hyde railway accident

On 4 June the Cromwell-Dunedin express derailed near Hyde, Central Otago, with the loss of 21 lives. Find out more

1947 Ballantyne's fire

On 18 November 41 people were killed in New Zealand's deadliest fire, in the Ballantyne's Department Store in Christchurch. Find out more.

1948 Mt Ruapehu air crash

On 23 October a Lockheed Electra airliner crashed near Mt Ruapehu, with the loss of all 13 passengers and crew. Find out more.

1949 Waikanae air crash

On 18 March a Lockheed Lodestar airliner crashed near Waikanae on the Kapiti Coast. All 15 passengers and crew were killed. Find out more from Te Ara.

1950 Ranui shipwreck

On 28 December the passenger launch *Ranui*, returning from a holiday trip to Mayor Island, was wrecked on North Rock, Mt Maunganui. Of the 23 people on board, only one survived.

1951 Wellington to Lyttelton yacht race

On 23 January 20 yachts left Wellington bound for Lyttelton in an ocean yacht race to celebrate Canterbury's centenary. Following a severe southerly storm only one yacht officially finished the race. Two others were lost along with their 10 crew members. Find out more.

1953 Tangiwai railway accident

On 24 December a North Island main trunk express plunged off the Tangiwai bridge into the Whangaehu River. The bridge had been fatally weakened by a lahar from Mt Ruapehu's crater lake. Of the 285 people on board, 151 were killed. This is New Zealand's worst rail disaster. See Tangiwai disaster for more information.

1959 Holmglen shipwreck

On 24 November the coaster *Holmglen* foundered north of Oamaru. All 15 crew were lost. Find out more.

1963 Northland bus crash

Fifteen people were killed in New Zealand's worst bus accident. A party was returning from Waitangi Day celebrations when shortly after lunchtime on 7 February the bus failed to take a bend as it descended Pilbrow Hill, in the Brynderwyn Hills, south of Whāngārei.

1963 Kaimai air crash

On 3 July a DC-3 airliner crashed in the Kaimai Range, Bay of Plenty. All 23 passengers and crew were killed in what remains the worst air crash within New Zealand. Find out more.

1966 Kaitawa shipwreck

On 23 May near Cape Rēinga the collier *Kaitawa* was lost with all 29 hands.

1967 Strongman mine accident

On 19 January an explosion at the Strongman coal mine, near Greymouth, killed 19 miners.

1968 Wahine shipwreck

On 10 April the Lyttelton-Wellington ferry *Wahine* struck Barrett Reef at the entrance to

Wellington Harbour in atrocious conditions caused by tropical cyclone Giselle. Of the 734 passengers and crew on board, 51 died (a 52nd victim died several weeks later, and a 53rd of related causes in 1990). See *Wahine* disaster for more information.

1968 Inangahua earthquake

On 24 May an earthquake measuring 7.1 on the Richter scale struck the Inangahua area on the West Coast. Three people were killed.

1979 Mt Erebus air crash

On 28 November an Air New Zealand DC-10 airliner, on a sightseeing flight to Antarctica, crashed into Mt Erebus. All 257 passengers and crew were killed in New Zealand's worst air disaster. See Mt Erebus disaster and the related entry on Te Ara for more information.

1993 Franz Josef Glacier air crash

On 25 October nine people died when a sightseeing plane crashed into Franz Josef Glacier on the West Coast.

1995 Cave Creek disaster

On 28 April a Department of Conservation viewing platform built over a cliff at Cave Creek in the West Coast's Paparoa National Park collapsed, killing 14 people.

2008 Tongariro tragedy

On 16 April six students and their teacher from Auckland's Elim Christian College drowned in a canyoning accident while participating in an outdoor education programme near the Tongariro National Park. Read more (TVNZ)

2010 Fox Glacier air crash

On 4 September nine people died when a skydiving plane crashed after taking off from Fox Glacier airfield on the West Coast.

2010 Canterbury (Darfield) earthquake

Although there were no deaths, this 4 September earthquake was – at the time – the largest to affect a major urban area since the 1931 Hawke's Bay quake. Read more on Te Ara

2010 Pike River mine accident

Two explosions on 19 and 24 November resulted in the deaths of 29 coalminers at the Pike River mine on the West Coast. It was this country's worst mining disaster since 1914.

2011 Christchurch earthquake

At 12.51 p.m. on 22 February a 6.3 magnitude earthquake struck 10 km south-east of central Christchurch at a depth of only 5 km. Approximately 182 people were killed, making it New Zealand's worst natural disaster in terms of loss of life since 1931. Read more on Te Ara

See also:

- [New Zealand disasters timeline and map on the Christchurch City Libraries site.](#)
- [NZ air disasters over the years \(TVNZ\)](#)

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Community contributions

Admin 23 Feb 2011	Hi Henry – thanks for the suggestion, I have added this now. Jamie Mackay
Henry 23 Feb 2011	What about the 16 April 2008 tragedy involving Elim college school kids?
John Ashby 02 Dec 2010	Graham Jones. Your grandfatehr and my grandfather, Will Butler, were best mates AND brothers-in-law. My Grandfather was at the mine when the accident occurred and had to hold back William's son Jack from entering the mine. Will butler died two years after Will Maher; as a result of an injury sustained during the Murchison earthquake of 1929. They are buried almost side by side at the old Westport cemetary.
Matega 24 Nov 2010	Well just lately the Pike River Mine in Greymouth had an explosion, trapping 29 people. Just today there was a second explosion which was said to of been so powerful that no one could of survived. The youngest trapped is a 17 year old who chose to start his job early. There was

also a 50 year old guy who was meant to be in the mine at the time but he missed the bus.

Graham Jones
21 Nov 2010

My Grandfather William (Billy) Maher and 3 other senior mine officials, Bill Pearson, Jimmy Cowan, and Mick Ford, were killed in a mining accident at the Millerton Mine north of Westport on 5th February 1927 when they were overcome by poisonous gas while inspecting an area of the mine which had previously been stopped off because of a fire. All those killed were equipped with a self contained breathing apparatus known as a Proto Apparatus. However due to lack of training of because of the stress of the moment, they were not used properly with fatal results.
