

New Zealand disasters MCH, 2020bb

Page 1 – Introduction

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, Te Ara and other sites. See also: map showing location of these disasters

This list does not include loss of life due to enemy action in wartime, such as the First World War battle of Passchendaele, where, on 12 October 1917, 843 New Zealanders were killed on a single day, or the sinking of the liner *Wimmera*, which hit a German mine off Cape Maria van Diemen on 26 June 1918. Nor does it include major disease outbreaks, such as the 1918 influenza pandemic, which claimed about 9000 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, Manawatū 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

1863 Central Otago floods

Twenty-five gold miners lost their lives as flash floods raged along the Shotover River, north-east of Queenstown, on 26 July 1863. Find out more on Te Ara.

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Related content

We have 54 events in history, 1 biography, 28 articles, 21 comments related to New Zealand disasters timeline.



Updated 3rd edition reference

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. Find out more

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. More than 40 lives were lost. Read contemporary newspaper account.

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 and involved migrants who had yet to live in this country, the burning of the *Cospatrick* could be considered our 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

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. See memorial for this event and more information on Te Ara

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. Read a contemporary newspaper account.

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 and Te Ara

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 251 passengers and crew. Read contemporary newspaper account.

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.

1900 Mōtū River accident

On 5 August, 16 children and two adults were drowned after their canoe capsized as they crossed the Mōtū River. Te Whānau-ā-Apanui placed a rāhui (ban) on fishing in the area. Find out about this accident. (Sooty's)

1902 *Loch Long* shipwreck

In late May the three-masted sailing ship *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 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 Landslide on Whakaari / White Island

On 10 September 10 sulfur miners were killed on White Island when part of the crater wall collapsed, causing a landslide. Find out more

1914 Huntly mine accident

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

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. Read contemporary newspaper report

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 death toll was 256. 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. Read more

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

1943 Paekākāriki maritime accident

On 19 June a LCVP (landing craft, vehicle and personnel) from the troop transport USS *American Legion* was swamped during an amphibious landing exercise at Paekākāriki, north of Wellington. Ten US Navy sailors drowned. Find out more

1943 US Liberator crash

On 2 August a US Liberator transport aircraft carrying enemy internees to Australia crashed into a mangrove swamp adjacent to Whenuapai airfield, killing 15 of the 30 people on board: nine Japanese (three women, two men and four children), three Thai students, and three

members of the crew. 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 Kāpiti 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. Read more

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 commemorations 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. Find out more.

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. [Read more](#)

1967 Strongman mine accident

On 19 January an explosion at the Strongman coal mine, near Greymouth, killed 19 miners. [Find out more.](#)

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. [Find out more on Te Ara.](#)

1968 *Maranui* shipwreck

On 13 June the wheat-carrying coaster *Maranui* sank east of the Coromandel Peninsula when its cargo shifted in a storm. Nine of the crew drowned.

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.

1985 Tory Channel air crash

Only one passenger survived when an Air Albatross Cessna flew into electrical wires strung across Tory Channel on 4 October. The pilot and seven members of two families were killed. [Read more](#) ([Aviation Safety wiki](#)).

1988 Whanganui air crash

On 12 May 10 people died when a charter plane crashed in Ahu Ahu Valley, near Whanganui. [Read more](#)

1989 Milford Sound air crash

On 8 August 10 people died when a scenic flight from Wanaka to Milford Sound crashed into the side of a mountain in the Upper Dart Valley. [Read more](#)

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. [Read more](#)

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. [Read more](#)

2000 Lindis Pass air crash

On 24 April a Cessna aircraft whose passengers had been attending the Warbirds Over Wanaka airshow crashed into the side of a hill in Central Otago. The pilot and five passengers were killed. [Read more](#)

2008 Tongariro tragedy

On 15 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](#)

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. [Read more.](#)

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](#)

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. [Read more](#)

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. The death toll was 185*, making it New Zealand's worst natural disaster in terms of loss of life since 1931. [Read more](#)

2012 Carterton balloon tragedy

At approximately 7.30 a.m. on 7 January 11 people - five couples and the pilot - were killed in a balloon accident near Carterton. A fire ignited on board causing the hot air balloon to crash in farmland. It is New Zealand's worst ballooning accident. [Read more on NZHerald website](#)

2012 Foveaux Strait fishing tragedy

Around midnight on 14 March *The Easy Rider*, a fishing boat, capsized off

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the northern tip of Stewart Island. Eight of those on board drowned. The single survivor said the boat was swamped by a rogue wave. Read more on *NZHerald* website

2016 Kaikōura earthquake

At 12.02 a.m. on 14 November a magnitude 7.8 earthquake struck New Zealand, causing significant damage to buildings and infrastructure in southern Marlborough and northern Canterbury. Landslides cut off road and rail links to Kaikōura, stranding large numbers of visitors in the popular tourist town. Two people lost their lives: one at a property in Mt Lyford as a result of a heart attack and another when a homestead collapsed in Kaikōura. Read more on Wikipedia

2016 Kaipara boating tragedy

On 26 November *Francie*, a chartered fishing boat, capsized while attempting to cross the Kaipara Harbour bar. Eight of the 11 men on board drowned. Read more on RNZ website

2019 Eruption of Whakaari / White Island

On 9 December, the active volcano erupted while 47 tourists and guides were on the island. Despite heroic rescue efforts, 21 people died at the scene or subsequently of burns or internal injuries. Read more on Wikipedia.

* The official toll was initially given as 181 but four further victims were confirmed by the coroner in February 2012.

See also:

- New Zealand disasters timeline and map on the Christchurch City Libraries site.
- Contribute your earthquake stories to <http://www.quakestories.govt.nz>
- The wreck of the *Rena* in historical context

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