

The insiders' magazine  
for fire services



# NZFS

**through the decades**

As the dawn rises on our new organisation, we take a look back at our history and reflect on the events that have shaped where we are today.



# 1850s

1856

## "Water, Water (buckets) Everywhere."

It wouldn't have looked strange when walking into someone's home to find two buckets of water by the door. Set by the Wellington Provincial Council, the Town Protection Act required all citizens to keep pails of water at the ready to help put out fires.

1861

## Volunteer fire brigade formed in Dunedin.

New Zealand's first paid firefighter – Superintendent Robertson.

1867

## Municipal Corporation Act 1867.

1870

**Lytelton's business centre burns** while residents demolish buildings to stop flames spreading. They had no brigade at the time.

1879

## Fire in Dunedin's Octagon

engulfed many buildings killing 12 people.

1901

## Three serious central Auckland city fires

including a blaze in the Grand Hotel took five lives. Led to the restructuring of the Auckland Fire Brigade.

1906

## Fire Brigades Act signed into existence.

Auckland and Wellington also take possession of these 'self-propelled' motorised fire machines.

1913

## "SMASH IT."

A Dunedin City Brigade member invented a new system of street alarms. If there's a fire, a member of the public would smash a glass box situated on a lamp post. This sent a signal to a switchboard operator who then sent a fire engine to the address indicated by the signal's location. Believe it - this was to be the main system in New Zealand for the next 50 years and was still being used in some towns up until the late 1970s.

1942

## 8 December. Fire at Seaciff Mental Hospital.

37 patients, who had been locked in an unsupervised ward, died. Resulted in a recommendation that automatic fire detection systems and sprinklers be installed in psychiatric hospitals.

1949

## Fire Services Act.

First standardisation attempt of the of the Fire Service organisation, admin and financing.

# 1950s

1954

## Fire Service Regulation, Code of Practice and Co-ordination Scheme

is put in place to allow extended cooperation between brigades.

1969

## July. Fire at Sprott House, a nursing home, in Wellington.

Seven elderly women residents died. Led to the Fire Safety (Evacuation of Buildings) Regulations 1970 making sprinklers, automatic alarms and evacuation schemes compulsory for institutions housing more than 20 people.

1973

## "What's that smell?"

February. In Parnell, Auckland, leaking chemical drums were dumped causing an emergency resulting in 6,000 people being evacuated from their homes. 643 people were treated in hospital including 41 firefighters injured from either inhaling fumes or receiving burns from the caustic soda used to neutralise the spilled chemical.

1976

## 1 April. Who you gonna call?

The New Zealand Fire Service. Goes live today.

1984

## A fire broke out in Auckland's ICI's chemical warehouse.

60 firefighters were injured after they came into contact with chemicals. The investigation into the fire resulted in improved clothing for firefighters, a standard procedure for fireground safety, the introduction of fireground safety officers, and changes to the occupational health service.

1990

## Fire Service Amendment Act changed the make-up of the Fire Service Commission.

1997

**NZFS was restructured** into eight fire regions with a corporate office and a National Service Centre. Known as the "Future Direction" project.

1999

## The Audit Office criticised

the disagreements between the Fire Service Commission and the CEO on a proposed agreement with the NZ Professional Firefighters Union.

2001

## NZFS launched Firewise, the flagship fire education programme.

2006

## National Training Centre opened in Rotorua.

2011

## Feb 22. Christchurch Earthquake. 185 deaths.

2017

## Christchurch Port Hills fire.

Started 13 Feb 2017. Steve Askin, helicopter pilot and sole occupant, crashed and died.

1854

## "First NZ volunteer fire brigade formed in Auckland."

Back in ye olde days, insurance companies sponsored a few fire brigades to fight fires BUT only at insured buildings that were specially marked. To combat the blaze, brigades used water buckets but thankfully, soon upgraded to manual pumps provided by the Auckland City Council and...of course...the insurance companies.

1858

## Auckland fire destroys much of the commercial district around High and Shortland streets.

1868

## The first permanently manned brigade

is established in Christchurch allowing paid firefighters to live there.

1878

## United Fire Brigades of New Zealand.

## "Jump... for your life."

Dunedin Brigade imported the first 15-metre telescopic fire escape ladder. Around this time, the first use of 'jumping sheets' was recorded. Jumping sheets were used to catch people leaping from burning buildings... and probably in a single bound as well.

1903

## "The first motorised fire engine in Australasia."

Of all places to have it first, Whanganui received the 'Merryweather Automobile Steam Fire Engine,' the first in Australasia, becoming the pride of the Whanganui Fire Brigade. There was an unveiling in which the mayor addressed the large crowds at the Fountain, while "Lady Mayoress" started pumping the apparatus. After three loud cheers, the lever was pulled and a jet of water shot over the Post Office tower. An evening demonstration also took place and at the conclusion, the Garrison Band played the Brigade home.

1888

## Let there be light.

12 automatic electric street alarms were installed in Auckland replacing alarm bells and lookout towers.

1907

## "Burning down the House."

11 Dec. The first Parliament buildings in Wellington, which were made from wood, were destroyed by fire. Many onlookers and firemen raced to save books, papers and artworks while the General Assembly Library next to it was saved due to its fire walls and metal fire door. Parliament sat in Government House until the replacement, wisely built of stone, was erected in 1918.

# 1920s

1930

## Founded: New Zealand Fire Brigades Institute.

1926

## The updated Fire Brigades Act 1926.

1947

## "Ballantynes Fire."

70 years ago, during Cup week in Christchurch, Ballantynes was inundated with an estimated 250-300 visitors and shoppers along with a staff of 458. Mid-afternoon on 18 November, a fire started in one the building's basements. By 3.35pm, a staff member saw smoke emerging from the stairwell and asked another staff member to alert the brigade. At 3.48pm the fire was swelling out of control and the brigade arrived undermanned and unable to handle the extent of the inferno. In the end, the fire claimed 41 people, the most victims to date in New Zealand fire disaster history.

A Royal Commission of Inquiry found that Ballantynes and the fire brigade did not reasonably provide safety and escape measures for staff and public. Upon the Inquiry's recommendations, the Fire Services Act 1949 was introduced, attempting to standardise the Fire Service organisation, its administration and financing. The Act also established the Fire Service Council which represented the Government, insurance companies, local authorities, and the United Fire Brigades' Association and the firefighters.

# 1960s

1957

## Fire Service Training School to open in Island Bay, Wellington.

1970

## First 'snorkel' appliance

was deployed to Wellington. Now known as 'Type 5' appliance.

1974-1975

## The creation of the Fire Service Commission.

# 1980s

1981

## Fire Incident Reporting System begins.

Pre-cursor to ICAD reporting system.

# 1990s

1995

## A major restructure occurred changing

from six regions and 20 areas to become three regions and 11 areas. Legal action was taken.

1989

## Fire at Auckland's Terwindle Rest Home

caused the death of six elderly residents. Further fire deaths in rest homes in Fielding and Collingwood in the 1990s led to NZFSD calling for compulsory smoke detectors and sprinklers.

1998

## Part of that restructure set out to rearrange firefighter numbers and employment conditions which led to industrial unrest.

# 2000s

2003

## 'Speed of Fire' advertisement

was launched showing people how quickly fire spreads. The success of the advertisement is still felt today.

2010

## Nov 19. Pike River Mine disaster. 29 deaths.

2016

## Nov 14. Kaikoura Earthquake. 7.8 richter. 2 deaths.

2008

## NZFS joined the 50-year celebration of the 111 emergency phone number.

# 2010s

