



1931 HAWKE'S BAY EARTHQUAKE

Mayor's Speech

A very special welcome to the 91st anniversary of the Hawke's Bay earthquake - the earthquake that shock our region at 10.47am on February 3, 1931.

I wish to acknowledge earthquake survivors, supporting families, members of our region's emergency services, councillors, young leaders and a big thank you to Reverend Andrew and David.

We are grateful to be together today as we remember the 256 Hawke's Bay people who died in the 1931 Earthquake - 91 who were from Hastings.

On that devastating day, the two powerful shakes, just 30 seconds apart, caused despair and destruction which our country had never been seen before from a natural disaster.

We remember those families who lost their loved ones, those who were injured and survived that tragic day, and the months of hardship that followed.

We remember the community who worked tirelessly together to help with the rescue and those who were tasked to rebuild our town and district after this horrific earthquake.

In the wake of the earthquake, hundreds of people came together to care for the injured and help with the clean-up. A temporary hospital was set up at the Racecourse until many of the injured could be transported to hospitals throughout the North Island.

Some survivors set up makeshift tent camps across Hastings. Many families were evacuated and billeted in Palmerston North and Wellington.

Cars supplied by of the Automobile Association, arrived to transport people and when the railway line was repaired on the 6th February they travelled by train to Palmerston North. Food was brought in from the Manawatu and the surrounding areas to support the survivors in the months ahead as the clean-up and rebuild got underway.

The work and cost that went into the clean-up efforts to repair the town's infrastructure was enormous.

Hastings' water and power was restored the day after the earthquake, although the water infrastructure needed major work as the pipes which carried water from the Havelock hills reservoirs needed replacing.

The sewerage system was restored a few days later as only minor damage occurred.

The roads around Hastings were hit hard. 53,000 square metres of roads needed the liquid from the roads cleaned - what we call today liquefaction. More expensive was the repairs to footpaths, which in many cases needed to be completely replaced.

Also destroyed was the bridge between Havelock North and Hastings across the Karamū Stream.

A foot bridge was built quickly so pedestrians could connect Havelock North and Hastings. The footbridge was 1.2 metres wide and also had a cycle track.

A low-level bridge was built at Crosses Road a few weeks after the earthquake which saved some travelling distance, but what was really needed was the Hastings-Havelock Bridge to be restored.

Paying for the bridge involved some tricky discussions between three councils – Hastings, Havelock and the Hawke's Bay County Council. In fact it dragged on for months and a ratepayer wrote to the paper asking them all to stop "dilly dallying".

Finally, a new bridge across the Karamū Stream was completed in December 1931. Arguments over who would pay continued in 1932 before being settled.

Our Hastings library, which at the time was in Market Street, was never rebuilt despite receiving some insurance funds for its ruin.

The money to build the library originally came from the Carnegie Foundation – a large world-wide charity. A condition of this funding was that the library could not charge for its services – however, because the financial pressures they decided to charge customers.

The Carnegie Foundation declined the funding for the library rebuild. A new library wasn't built until the 1950s, and until then a library was located in the Municipal building.

As we prepare to reopen our beautiful Municipal building later this year, including what was then known as the Municipal theatre, both now fully earthquake strengthened, we are thankful that the damage these buildings suffered was not greater.

Built with unreinforced bricks, we were lucky it was only the area above the stage of the theatre which collapsed and not the whole building.

After the earthquake Fletcher Construction rebuilt the stage area and strengthened the rest of the building with steel supports and it opened a year later.

Prior to the earthquake, the building had two pagodas at the top of the towers, which were removed and replaced by smaller ones – a decision made by Mayor George Roach who called for a larger roof structure to be replaced as he considered them an earthquake risk.

The cost to repair all the damage was enormous - with the Municipal Theatre alone costing ten thousand pounds.

As one of the few property owners in Hawke's Bay to have earthquake insurance, the Hastings Borough Council received a pay-out, however this pay-out was only a third of the cost of the infrastructure repairs. The other repairs were met by a loan from the Government and commercial borrowing.

Almost a year after the earthquake, Mayor Roach spoke at the 1932 carnival to celebrate the rebuilding of the central business area.

He reflected that "Less than two years ago we faced a terrible disaster and apparent ruin. But hope is invincible, and we may say in all modesty that we have done much remembering what can be achieved through courage and cheerfulness."

Hastings got on with life quickly after the earthquake, and remarkably most of the destroyed Central Business area had been rebuilt by the end of 1932.

To cap off the rebuild, the people of Hastings decided they would like a new town clock, and held a design competition.

The 1910 town clock on the post office building hadn't survived the quake, so the people of Hastings as an act of defiance to nature in 1935 built a taller, stronger one in the middle of the town. They rescued the chimes used from the 1910 clock and placed them in the new clock tower. Our community continues to enjoy listening to the clock chiming today as they did in 1910.

By the second anniversary of the earthquake in 1933, 422 permits had been issued to rebuild or restore damaged buildings.

Councils in 1932 did not have the staff and the resources we do today – town planning did not exist. Mayor George Roach carried the strain of the earthquake recovery, and within three years of the earthquake he passed away in 1934. We acknowledge his enormous effort in rebuilding our town that we know and love today.

As we recall the rebuild of our town 91 years ago following New Zealand's strongest earthquake, we appreciate today the significance and importance of our men and women who rebuilt Hastings.

They showed what a community can achieve when they care for each other. Their strength and resilience in the aftermath of this devastating earthquake ensured Hastings recovered and prospered.

Because of their courage, determination and generosity of spirit, we have a vibrant and prosperous city today.