

Coal and coal mining

Mining accidents

Causes

Traditional mining was highly dangerous. There were three main causes of accidents: rock falls, often when the pillars were mined; explosions, most frequently occasioned by firedamp (methane gas given off by coal), which was usually ignited by a miner's naked flame; and tubs travelling on the haulage system knocking men over.

Single deaths

There was a high level of injury and death, but there were few large-scale tragedies. At Denniston in the 10 years from 1881 to 1891 there were 10 deaths and 35 serious injuries. Of the 141 men killed nationwide between 1900 and 1914, 98 were individual deaths.

Major disasters

New Zealand mining has seen a number of mass tragedies. They include:

- Kaitangata, 21 February 1879: 34 miners died in an explosion caused by candles in an area known for firedamp.
- Brunner, 26 March 1896: 65 were killed by choking gas. An enquiry determined the cause to be the unauthorised detonating of a charge in an abandoned section of the mine, although this has been contested. The Brunner tragedy was the largest death toll from an industrial accident in New Zealand.
- Ralph's mine, Huntly, 12 September 1914: 43 miners were killed when a miner's naked light ignited firedamp.
- Dobson mine, 3 December 1926: an explosion killed 9 men.
- Glen Afton mine, Huntly, 24 September 1939: 11 men were asphyxiated by carbon monoxide.
- Strongman mine, 19 January 1967: an explosion killed 19 miners.
- Pike River mine, in the Grey Valley: on 19 November 2010 there was a large explosion from methane gases. Two men escaped from the mine. Five days later on 24 November, while a rescue team waited for the conditions to become less dangerous, there was a second explosion, and it was confirmed that the 29 men still in the mine were dead.

Miners might also fall sick from miners' phthisis or pulmonary tuberculosis, and they often suffered ailments such as boils or poisoned hands. It is little wonder that absenteeism was high.

Double tragedy

It could be tough being married to a coal miner. Caroline Denson's first husband died at Kaitangata in 1879. Her second, Harry, perished in the Brunner explosion 17 years later.

15	Run over by r
30	Killed by fall e
35	Fell over cliff

Deaths from mining at Denniston, 1881–1906



Brunner mine disaster, 1896 (1st of 3)



Westport Coal Company rescue team, 1930s

Increasing safety

Following the Kaitangata disaster in 1879, the Mines Department was given power to inspect mines, and this provision was progressively strengthened. But even 40 years later, inspections were sporadic and depended on a strong union to be effective. From 1886 mine managers had to be certified.

The rise of opencast mining brought greater levels of safety, and there was growing intolerance of levels of injury that had once been accepted as part of a miner's life. By the early 21st century, the mining industry had brought in its own codes of practice and there was regulation by the Occupational Safety and Health Service of the Department of Labour.

Mining permits were administered by Crown Minerals, part of the Ministry of Economic Development. Environmental regulation was primarily through the resource consent process administered by local government.

Biographies



George James Anderson, 1860–1935



Mark Anthony Fagan, 1873–1947

How to cite this page: Alan Sherwood and Jock Phillips. 'Coal and coal mining - Mining accidents', Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, updated 26-Nov-10
URL: <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/coal-and-coal-mining/7>