



Delving deeper

#1: New Zealand death data

There is so much more information available on deaths than just the formal civil registration death certificate; information that may help you locate a death, a burial location, relatives of the deceased and the circumstances surrounding a death.

In terms of chronology, the first thing to consider is who looked after the deceased. Undertaker records are a little patchy but where there are records, especially in long standing firms, the detail recorded by the undertaker can be very useful. Local historical societies, local genealogical societies and NZSG branches can be very helpful in advising what records are available where.

Cemetery records are more common. Some cemeteries, particularly local trust cemeteries as opposed to those administered by council, often have very old record books that records who bought a plot, when, who was buried in it, sometimes cause of death, when and so on.

Many councils/local bodies now have their cemetery records on-line, as a link from their home page. There is usually a search box where you can enter as much as you know and possible burials will be returned. Few have a soundex option so you do need to be quite careful in entering the details. It is always good to note any others who may be recorded as being buried in the same plot. Although there are paupers' graves where there may be several unrelated people buried, most communal graves indicate a family connection of some sort. You may find the names of the deceased relatives or those of their partner.

Some councils/local bodies also have photographs of headstones and a lucky few have recorded the inscriptions as well. Some other organisations, such as friends of particular cemeteries, have also undertaken this work and may charge for the information or a photograph. Googling the name of the cemetery may give you contact information for such organisations.

Of course, burial records and cemeteries have not, until recently, catered for those who have chosen cremation. While some of the newer cemeteries have a cremation wall, older cremations may not be recorded in burial indexes.

NZSG has had, for some time, a burial locator CD which enables researchers to find where ancestors may be buried and when. In addition, the NZSG Cemeteries Collection, searchable from the website and available via the FRC library, has more data and cemeteries included than the CD. The more recent on-line cemeteries record index, under licence to Ancestry and soon to be on-line via NZSG's website, will provide a much more comprehensive index as to who is buried where within NZ. To use this index, you must be either a member of NZSG, have an Ancestry subscription, or access Ancestry from a library that does. When NZSG's version comes online, it will provide the most up-to-date index available.

Kiwi Celts also a range of burial and cemeteries records on its website but this site is in temporary abeyance and has not been updated for some time.



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While some people die in their beds of relatively natural causes, sudden and initially unexplained deaths are often subject to a coroner's inquest. If your ancestor falls into this category, you may glean useful information by looking at the inquest documentation. There are no known surviving records of inquests dating from the pre-1844 period and more recent inquests may be subject to retrieval conditions under the Privacy Act. Requests for such information are handled by the Ministry of Justice. Archives NZ also has indexes to assist with finding inquests and their dates. Their online search facility can be found at <http://archway.archives.govt.nz>. However, you may wish to look at PapersPast, a National Library of New Zealand initiative where newspapers, especially up to 1920, have been digitised and are searchable. The site can be found at <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz>. Newspapers are valuable sources for such newsworthy items as inquests.

Wills and probates are very valuable sources of information. The catch is that not everyone has or had a will, and of those who do or did, they were not written with genealogists in mind. However, most people who had significant assets had a will and therefore a probate. Not all wills, however, were probated, especially where the assets were minimal and distribution of those assets was amicable.

Before June 1842, wills of deceased New Zealanders were filed in Sydney. The index of these wills is available in some NZ public libraries. After that, probates were filed in New Zealand. Wills are usually probated by the High Court nearest to where the deceased lived. Many are held by Archives New Zealand and its regional offices. An index can be searched via the Archway website. Because NZ law requires that anyone who dies intestate, (without a will), Public Trust handles their affairs, these documents and letters of administration will be filed through Wellington and will therefore appear as if the deceased lived in Wellington, regardless of their death location.

A will often contains information on the deceased, such as occupation and place of abode, as well as the names of the beneficiaries and details of bequests. Some are amazing in their detail and well worth wading through the legalese.

The Testamentary Registers of Inland Revenue are also known as Death Duty Registers. Such information as the tax payable on a deceased person's estate, date of death, value of the estate and usually the legatee's and executors' names can be found.