

CASE STUDY: Cairns Cyclone, February 1920

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A tropical cyclone crossed the coast north of Cairns. The barometer at Pt Douglas dropped to 962 hPa and the town was practically demolished.

At Cairns the bar dropped to 29.17 inches or 987.8 hPa and the southeasterly winds were strongest from 2.30am Tues 3rd to daybreak. A Café was razed to the ground, most of the houses along the waterfront were unroofed, 2 hotels were badly damaged, a building was overturned, street trees were blown down and windows were blown in including two of plate glass. There were many heroic rescues including an old man plucked from a house just before it toppled over and a girl ran through the storm at 2am to get assistance for a cyclist with a broken leg. A number of the rescuers were injured by flying debris. One hour after dawn the wind shifted to north-easterly gales, which swept a high tide over the seawall and into the streets. The tide became 4 feet deep over the Esplanade and 2 feet deep in other parts. In the Main Street in town one side of the roadway and the footpath were flooded by the sea. The seawater subsided at 10am. Many people took refuge from the sea on the upper portions of their homes and several people were rescued including 2 women who gave birth during the night. The sea baths and the attached house were washed out to sea. Boats and boatsheds were badly damaged. And ships anchored in the harbour were destroyed. A large valuable quantity of cedar logs was lost from the wharves to the sea.

Nearly every house in Kuranda was unroofed. At Mt Molloy, with the exception of one small house, all houses including the Post Office were blown down. At Chillagoe, between early Tues and midday, the Hotel, Butcher Shop, C. of E., The Theatre, Bakery, School of Arts and several houses were destroyed. At Mareeba several houses and the Nurses Quarters were unroofed. A few places were unroofed at Herberton. A man drowned in the Russell River. There were widespread floods in NQ and enormous cattle losses inland.

In Figure 1 the weather map from the Bureau of Meteorology Sydney and published in the Sydney Morning Herald shows a low offshore from Cairns before the impact while Figure 2 shows the cyclone moving towards Chillagoe after it made landfall.

Report of loss of Fishing Boat

The Japanese fishing boat Cherry, which left Cairns with two men on board for the Daintree River, was not been heard of again. A search boat went to Port Douglas then Daintree, Low Woody Island, Oyster Bay, and Green Hill, but saw no sign of her. The vessel was given up as lost. Several Islands were seen to have been devastated. Reports from shipping circles showed that the lighthouses on Island Point and Low Woody Island in the vicinity of Port Douglas disappeared.

Floods at Normanton

Normanton had a record flood at 6 metres over the rails, and enormous loss of cattle. The Leichhardt River was 5 metres over the rails. See the heavy rain distribution in Figure 3.

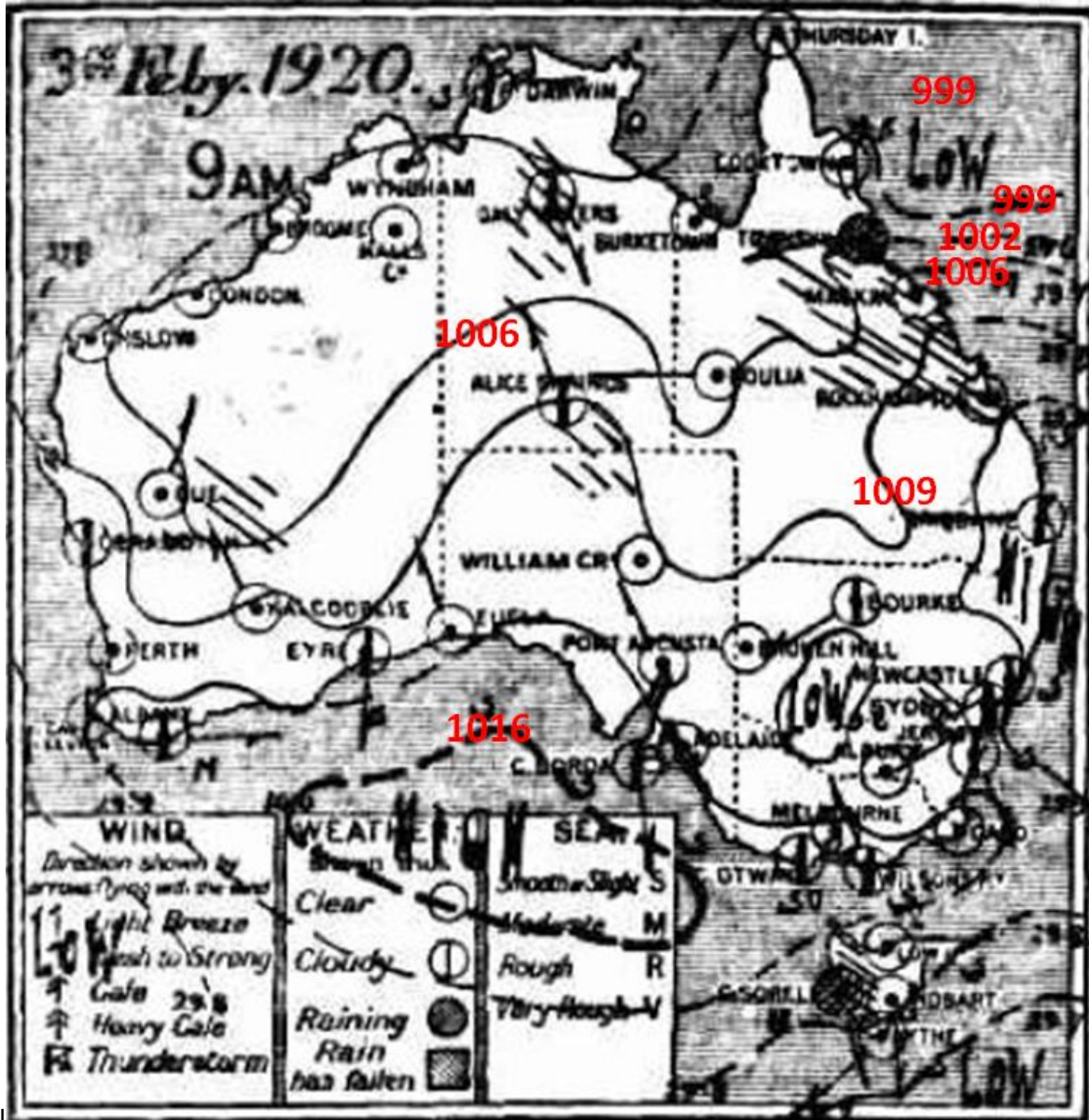


Figure 1. Mean sea level weather chart for 9am 3 February 1920 from the Bureau of Meteorology Sydney and published in the Sydney Morning Herald.

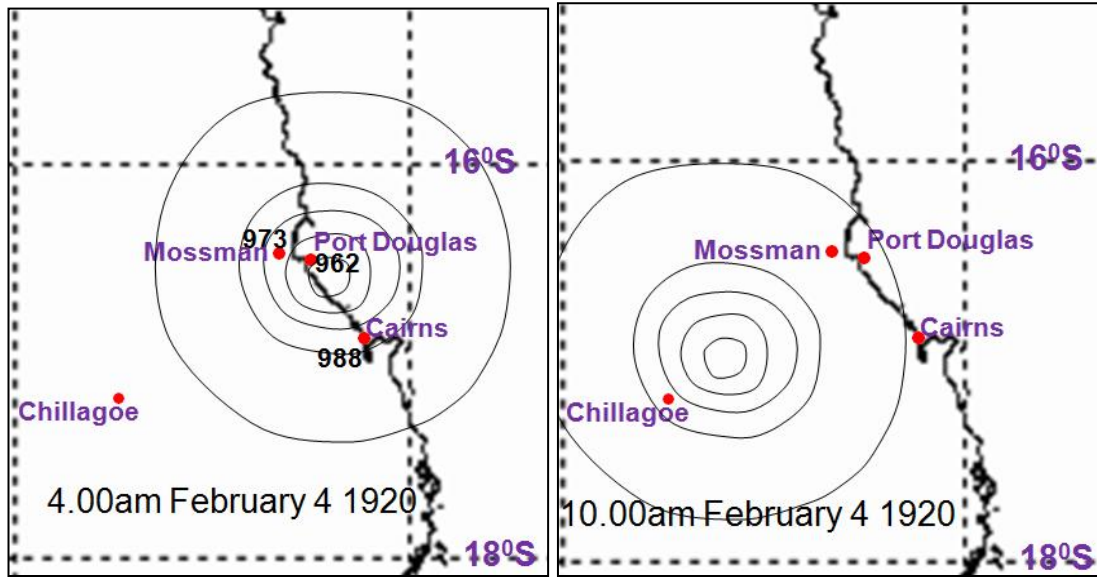


Figure 2. Movement of the 1920 cyclone towards Chillagoe during the morning of 4 February 1920 with the 4am mean sea level pressure readings for Port Douglas, Mossman and Cairns shown in the left panel. Isobars are drawn every 10hPa.

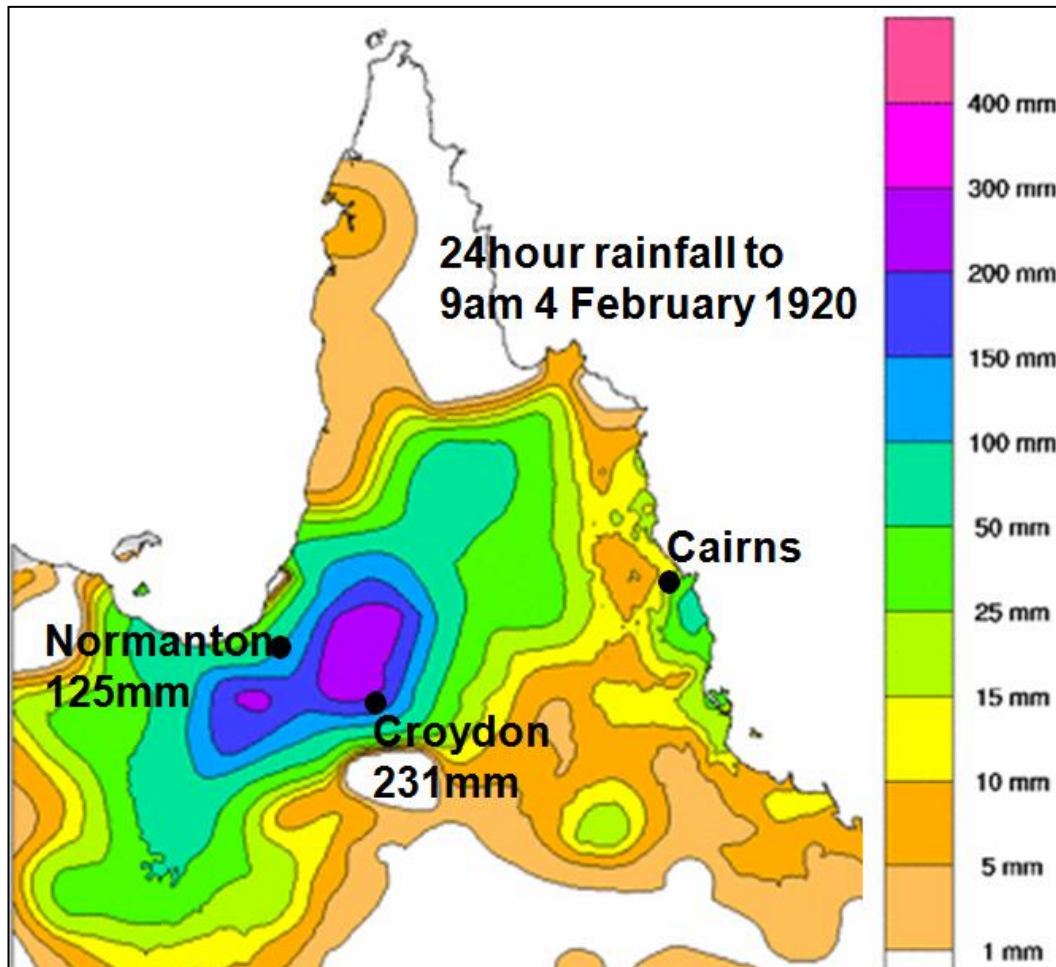


Figure 3. Rainfall distribution (mm) for the 24 hours to 9am 4 February 1920 with the 24hour totals for Croydon and Normanton shown.