

CASE STUDY: Cooktown Cyclone, 19th January 1907

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A tropical cyclone crossed the coast to the north of Cooktown (see track in Figure 1). Many buildings were totally wrecked including 3 churches, two schools, 4 halls, 3 hotels, several shops and a large number of houses. There were 9 deaths an infant girl was killed by flying debris and the ketch Pilot was lost with eight on board to the north of Cooktown closer to the cyclone (see Figure 1).

Account from Cooktown

On Friday afternoon 18 January 1907 the barometer began to fall and the weather set in and during the night. It began to blow heavily and the wind increased in violence during Saturday. The municipal baths collapsed over night and the balcony of the Shamrock hotel was blown down and the streets were littered with limbs of trees. The bar was still falling with the wind increasing and at noon Saturday 19 January the roofs and balconies of the buildings began to give way. At 4pm the Masonic Hall (a two story building) was blown down and the Boys and Girls State Schools were removed bodily from their blocks. Between 5pm and 8pm it raged furiously wrecking the greater part of the town. The RC Church was demolished and the convent and school were unroofed. The roof of the drapery was ripped off and fell on a store which immediately collapsed. The Presbyterian Church became a tangled mass of iron and timber and the top story of the Edinburgh Hotel was blown away. The roofs and balconies of Commercial, Captain Cook, Sovereign, Great Northern, Club House, Shamrock, New Guinea, Court House and Carleton Hotels were torn off. Clunn's bulk store at the wharf was demolished and a large water tank for shipping was toppled over. The Council Chambers, wharf sheds, Church of England and rectory, Methodist Church and parsonage, Federal Hall, Westcott's and Savage's were more or less unroofed, while nearly all the private residences were either completely razed to the ground or rendered uninhabitable. During the night was one to remember pitch darkness, deserted sheets, the incessant roaring of the elements and the crashing of woodwork and iron of the damaged buildings.

The winds that destroyed Cooktown came from the southeast between Finch's Bay and Mount Cook (see Figure 2). The two currents seemed to join forces in the vicinity of John Street though at times the wind appeared to come from all points of the compass The gale blew for thirty hours and was accompanied by torrents of rain 1170 points being registered. The vessel Aramac anchored at the wharf read 992.9hPa on Saturday with the lowest bar around 6pm.

On Further investigation discloses still more damage done by the cyclone than had already been reported. The Cook District Hospital which is situated on the outskirts of the town suffered considerably. One ward was completely destroyed and in fact not a vestige of it could be seen. .Evanson's boatshed 80ft long by 40ft was completely destroyed as also was the Customs boatshed, The Fire station was demolished. Two of Evanson's boats dragged their anchors and were ultimately blown out to sea and wrecked off Indian Head. Mr Evanson's private residence was wrecked.

- Two spans of the Endeavour Bridge have been washed away.
- An infant girl was killed by flying debris.
- The cutter from the Cape Bedford Mission reported that the mission was completely destroyed
- The Schooner *Marion* was wrecked on Two Islands, eastward of Cape Flattery. Crew rescued.

- The steamer *Seymour* returned to Cooktown 29 January after a fruitless search for the Government Ketch *Pilot* with eight on board including the Member for Cook in the Legislative Assembly. The *Pilot* left Cooktown before the cyclone for the purpose of inspecting the beacons on the Northern Coast.
- Nothing has been found in the intervening years:- From shipwreck site <http://oceans1.customer.netspace.net.au/qld-wrecks.html>.
The schooner *Pilot*, 35 tons, lost between Capes Bedford and Flattery (where some wreckage was recovered) in a major cyclone over 18-20 January 1907.

Rainfall

The heaviest twenty four hour rainfall reported were:-

- Cooktown 297.2mm 19 January
- Harvey Creek 43 km SSE of Cairns 257.3mm 20 January
- Coen 162.3mm 20 January.



Figure 1 Location map showing the track of the cyclone in red and the damage areas.

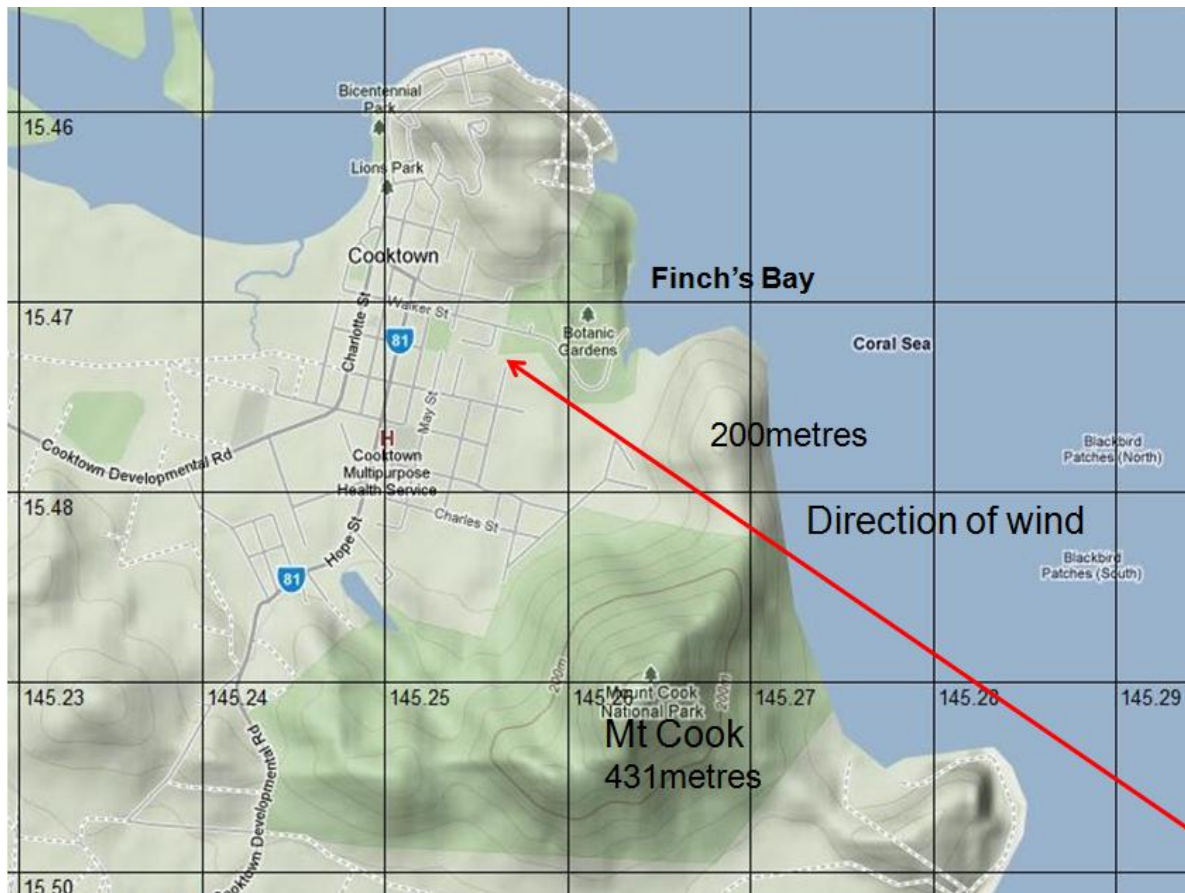


Figure 2 The wind that caused the damage in Cooktown funnelled through the saddle between the hill south of Finch's Bay and Mount Cook.