

FACT SHEET

RICHARD PEARSE



Richard Pearse (1877-1953) – Pioneer Aviator

Richard Pearse was a New Zealand inventor who was possibly one of the first people in the world to design, build and power a plane into the air. He was born on 3 December 1877, the fourth child in a family of nine children. His family lived on a farm in Waitohi Flat, Temuka, in the South Island. As he grew up Pearse was interested in studying engineering at university, but was instead given a piece of land to farm. On this land he built his workshop, where he designed and built a variety of inventions.

Pearse's great achievement was to design and build an aeroplane that he successfully powered into the air. It was a monoplane that was powered by a 2 cylinder petrol engine, and according to a number of eyewitness accounts, he successfully flew it into the air above his farm in the early 1900s. He managed to power his plane into the air and travel for about 150 metres before crashing into a gorse bush. The exact date of this event is not known for sure, but researchers believe it probably occurred on 31 March 1903. Pearse made other attempts at flight, in which he continued to achieve similar powered take-offs, but was never able to maintain sustained and controlled flight. This achievement was made by the American brothers Orville and Wilbur Wright, who in December 1903 successfully achieved a powered take-off followed by 59 seconds of sustained and controlled flight travelling a distance of 852 feet (about 260 metres).

Richard Pearse went on to design and build a number of other inventions throughout his life, including another plane. However his early pioneering flights were not recognised in his lifetime. He died in the Sunnyside Mental Hospital on 29 July 1953.

Definitions:

Monoplane:

An aircraft with one pair of wings

Powered take-off:

Using an engine to power an aircraft into the air.

Sustained and controlled flight:

An aircraft that, once powered into the air, is able to stay in the air and can be controlled by a pilot.



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Did he really fly?

While there are a number of eyewitness accounts of Richard Pearse powering his plane into the air above his farm in the early 1900s, he himself never considered this to be real flight.

What Richard Pearse did achieve at this time was a powered take-off. This means that he used an engine to power an aircraft into the air. However once he was in the air he was unable to control the aircraft and keep it in the air.

The eyewitness accounts also tell us of Pearse crashing his plane into a gorse bush after only a few seconds in the air. This means that Richard Pearse did not achieve sustained and controlled flight, and this is why he himself never considered it to be the real thing.

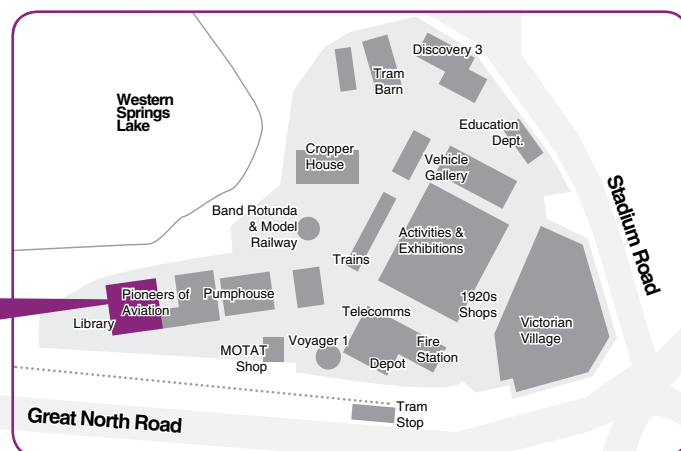
When did Pearse's first flight happen?

The date that Richard Pearse first powered his plane into the air is not known exactly and probably never will be.

The story of Richard Pearse's pioneering attempt at flight was only discovered after he died in the 1950s, more than 50 years after the event itself. Researchers began to interview people who may have witnessed the flights and tried to find out when the first powered take-off may have occurred. This was very difficult to do as there were no written records or photographs of the event, and the eyewitnesses provided different dates from 1902 to 1904. Using the eyewitness accounts and other circumstantial evidence researchers established what they believed to be the most likely date of Richard Pearse's first powered take-off, on 31 March 1903

At MOTAT you can see:

- A replica of the 2 cylinder petrol powered monoplane that Pearse flew above his farm
- The propeller and part of the engine of the monoplane
- Richard Pearse's third 'Utility' plane, which he never flew
- Richard Pearse's motorcycle



For more information about Richard Pearse have a look at these books and web sites

These resources are available from the MOTAT Library (09 815 5810, library@motat.org.nz)

Books

Rodliffe, Geoffrey. (1983) *Richard Pearse: Pioneer Aviator*. Auckland: Museum of Transport and Technology.

Rodliffe, Geoffrey. (1993). *Wings Over Waitohi*. Auckland: Avon Press.

Ogilvie, Gordon. (1994). *The Riddle of Richard Pearse*. Rev. ed. Auckland: Reed.

Riley, Bob. (1995). *Kiwi Ingenuity: A Book of New Zealand Ideas and Inventions*. Auckland: AIT Press.

Tonkin, Keith. (2003). *Four Great New Zealand inventors*. Wellington: Gilt Edge Publishing.

Williams, Tony. (2006). *101 ingenious Kiwis: How New Zealanders Changed the World*. Auckland: Reed.

Yarwood, Vaughan. (2002). *The History Makers: Adventures in New Zealand Biography*. Auckland: Random House.

Web Sites

Dictionary of New Zealand Biography
<http://www.dnzb.govt.nz/dnzb/>

NZedge.com
<http://www.nzedge.com/heroes/pearse.html>