

THEATRE ROYAL

The Theatre Royal (called Alexandra Hall in the early days,) was the first place in New Plymouth to screen pictures. It was suggested in 1877 that a company should be formed for the establishment of a new theatre in New Plymouth. A company formed in 1881, their intention to build a public hall and theatre. On Saturday June 3rd 1882 tenders were received and the one of Mr. Will Gardener of Opunake for £3,100 (pounds) was decided on, who built the Hall where the Opera House stands today.

OPENING... Alexandra Hall opened on January 17th 1883 according to the Taranaki Herald, with an Orchestra performing the Oratorio of Elijah.

NAME CHANGE... On August the 21st 1897 the name was changed from Alexandra Hall to Theatre Royal.

FIRST SCREENING... A company called Biograph Picture Company formed in 1910, with Garnet Hornby Saunders as manager. The company leased the theatre for 6 months for the intention of screening silent pictures. A hand cranked projector, considered the latest and best English made machine was purchased. A man called Mr. Blair, formerly of Hewitts Pictures, was hired as projectionist. The opening screening was on June 16 1910. The admissions for the evenings were 1/6 (one shilling, six pence) for the Dress Circle, 1/- for the stalls. The Pit seats were 6d (six pence) and children were 6d wherever they sat in the theatre.

TRAGIC END... Only six years after the first screening, on the early hours of July 22nd, 1916, the Theatre Royal and a number of business premises (almost all the block) were completely destroyed by the fire which started in the Theatre Royal. The last screening on the evening of the 21st was the "Martyrdom of Nurse Cavell."

Mr. Caleb Wyatt, a long serving projectionist of New Plymouth, was a boy at the time, his parents were farming out in Bell Block when the fire occurred, recalls the incident...

"We drove into town with the horse and gig to go to the market place, I saw hoses and fire engines all over the place and a big crowd had gathered. That night, the whole of New Plymouth was on the street, it was the biggest fire we had ever had. Everyone came out of the near-by hotels in their dressing gowns.

A night watchman had seen smoke pouring out of the building and had rushed to the phone exchange to alert the Fire Brigade, but when the watchman arrived at the exchange, there was no one there. The exchange operator had gone to the toilet, unaware of the situation and it was several minutes before the Brigade could be called.

By the time help finally arrived, the hall was well alight. The paint was peeling off the nearby hotels from the intensity of the heat and even the faces of wax dummies in the dress shop across the road were melting and running down their clothes."

The Theatre Royal in its time had a large effect on New Plymouth. It was the location of the first projector and film screening in New Plymouth and underwent a name change. What would have become of the businesses surrounding the Theatre Royal if the great fire which started in the Theatre and destroyed the surrounding premises, had not occurred and the buildings were left still standing? Would the Theatre Royal be standing today, instead of the New Plymouth Opera House? No one will ever know, but the Theatre Royal certainly has had a big part to play in the changing of the cinema industry in New Plymouth.