

For 76 of its 105 years, the Taranaki Agricultural Society's winter show was held under the arched Army Hall roof. This picture was taken at the show in 1981.



The interior of the hall in 1982, prior to refurbishment. Contemplating the project were Staff Sergeant Vic Colson and plasterer Robin Saunders. Markings for various indoor sports groups who used the hall can be seen on the floor.

Coronation hall fit for a King

By PETER WATT

The destruction of the Army Hall by fire eight days ago closed a chapter in New Plymouth's history going back to the days before World War I.

Citizens were justly proud of the large new building which shot up on the edge of town in 1911.

The hall would stand for more than 77 years, changing barely at all in that time, and would perhaps have stood for more than a century but for the fire.

The hall's story began in June, 1911, when the Taranaki Agricultural Society went to the New Plymouth Borough Council with the idea of building a large show hall to commemorate the coronation of King George V.

Coronation

The council was most impressed and dropped all other planned projects.

On June 22, 1911, the foundation stone for the

The hall was lauded then as the home of agriculture in the Taranaki district, and so it was.

But the society could not afford to retain exclusive use of the structure, and it was leased privately in the first year.

This proved to be an unsatisfactory arrangement and in late 1913 a letter was sent to the Army Department, which had expressed an interest in the hall.

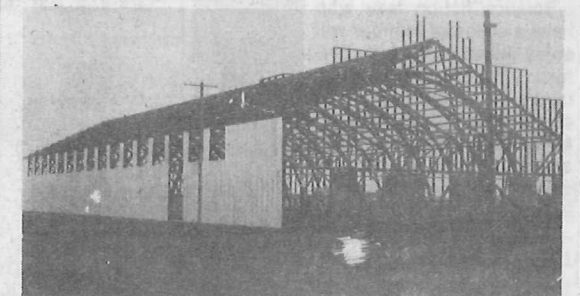
The hall was offered to the Army for rent at £4 a week over a 20 year period, with the society retaining free use of the hall two weeks a year.

Military use

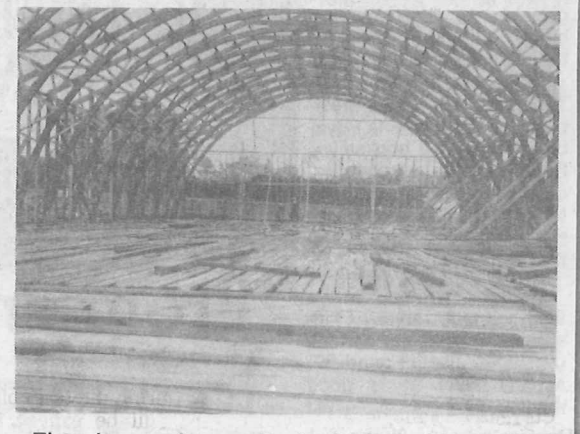
But the world was drifting towards war and the army was keen to have a permanent base of its own in New Plymouth.

In March, 1914, the society offered to sell the hall to the army, again reserving the right to use it for shows for two weeks a year.

The army and the society agreed on a sale



The King George Coronation Hall, completed in 1912.



The impressive arched design...



The Taranaki Agricultural Society has packed them in over the years at Winter Show time, as this photo from 1968 illustrates.



These two photographs (left and below), lent by the Taranaki Museum, appear to be of a fancy dress ball, perhaps for the Glideaway Skating Club, soon after the hall opened. The museum would like to hear from anyone who can shed more light on the story behind the pictures or name the people involved.



King George Coronation Hall was laid in St Germain's Square, now the site of the Army Hall and Queen's Hall.

It appears that the decision to build the hall was made in some haste, for the society's own records show that it was not until the following month that an official decision on its construction was made.

The society's building committee recommended that a hall 260 feet by 84 feet be built for winter shows and other purposes.

Finance

The society agreed to this, "provided satisfactory arrangements can be made to lease and finance same".

Finance was indeed forthcoming, helped at the start by a £250 Government grant for coronation projects.

Less than a year after the foundation stone was laid, the hall was completed, at a cost of nearly £3000, the official opening coinciding with the opening of the 1912 winter show in early June.

Heavy rain kept many people away from the opening ceremony; illness kept away the Governor, Lord Islington, who was meant to open the hall.

The Taranaki Herald of the time records that the Mayor of New Plymouth, G. W. Browne, took his place, performing the function with "a handsome silver key".

Mr Browne told the hardy souls who had gathered for the occasion that the hall had been built for the greater good of the community.

"The town is to be congratulated on erecting such a fine structure to commemorate that great event — the greatest of all events to the British people — the coronation of our king."

price of £2500 plus 10½ acres of land at the Rewarewa rifle range as part payment.

The rifle range land would become the society's Waiwakaiho Showgrounds.

Known for many years as King's Hall, and later the Army Hall, the building could hardly have been described as beautiful, but it was certainly an impressive structure.

For many years the huge, arched hall was the largest unsupported cover in the Southern Hemisphere.

It was the first building to be erected on St Germain's Square, the original showgrounds for the society.

Other buildings were added later, including the Queen's Hall just before World War II.

Skating rink

The Army Hall was for decades a focal point for activity in the town.

Not only was it the venue for drills by the army and schools, but it was home for the Glideaway Skating Rink, which opened in April 1913, and of course it was the new home of the winter show.

It allowed New Plymouth to host, for the first time, large exhibitions indoors, and it was the automatic choice for grand balls and other big social events.

In later years it was heavily used by indoor sports clubs, but a choice of other, more luxurious venues and changes in social habits led to the dying out of its use for all but very large society occasions.

Its loss leaves the city without a venue for such events and may, in the end, be the catalyst for a modern day replacement which will exceed the grandeur of the old Army Hall at its best.



The hall had its important visitors, including in 1984 the then Governor-General Sir David Beattie and Lady Beattie, guests of honour at a vice-regal military ball as part of the 5th battalion 125th anniversary celebrations.



New Plymouth Mayor David Lean gives the New Plymouth Cadet Corps the once-over with Lieutenant Craig Luxmore in December last year. The corps, not a year old, must now find a new home.