



BLAZING AWAY: Firefighters battle the blaze in one of Inglewood's most historic landmarks in the town's main street early yesterday morning. The fire was contained in the western half of the wooden building. Photos: ADRIAN MALLOCH

Midnight blaze turns family hopes to ashes

By KIM BATCHELOR and LYN HUMPHREYS

BLACKENED and smouldering timbers of a historic Frank Messenger-designed building, partly destroyed in a fire early yesterday, now scar the main thoroughfare of Inglewood.

The Rata St building was the second historic Taranaki landmark to be hit by fire in less than a week; early on Sunday morning the 127-year-old Stratford Tavern went up in flames and had to be demolished. Yesterday's fire was not suspicious.

The fire was a double blow for the Bishell family, whose dairy and tearooms, named after Len Bishell who died almost two years ago, was at the centre of the blaze.

Up to 55 firefighters and fire police, from Inglewood, Stratford, Waitara and New Plymouth, were called after the alarm was raised at 12.45am.

The wooden two-storey building, built in about 1910, was divided in two by a fire wall - the fire started and was contained in the western section.

Inglewood volunteer firefighters said that when they arrived there were plenty of sparks and smoke pouring down the road. It was probably one of the largest and most dangerous fires, because of its potential to spread, in the town for more than 20 years.

For at least two hours fire officers and police were unable to confirm whether anyone was on the premises.

Firefighters tried several times to get in, but were forced back and it was not until about 2.30am they were told the flat above the shop was vacant.

New Plymouth Fire Brigade district chief fire officer Allen Pidwell said the volunteers did a fantastic job containing the fire.

"We have contained it to a single building. Luckily there's two big fire walls either side. That's what's saved it. There's been a slight spread to the shop on the left but



HUGE LOSS: Maria Bishell whose sons' business was gutted in the blaze.

firefighters have done a tremendous job."

The fire started within a 10m² area inside the front of the dairy and tearooms, though the exact cause was not known, he said. "Now we have to go through the various electrical equipment and various accidental causes."

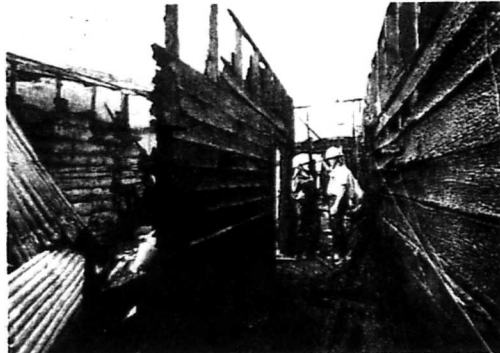
Insurance assessor Andrew Brooke said was awaiting an engineer's report before a decision was made on demolishing the building.

Fire safety officer Peter Gallagher said the building had no fire alarms or sprinklers. "If it had been sprinkled it would have contained the fire and possibly extinguished it."

The fire had probably been smouldering for an hour when the alarm was raised, he said.

Taranaki Museum director Ron Lambert said the building, built for H. B. Curtis - a former Inglewood mayor - was designed by architect Frank Messenger, one of three major North Taranaki architects of early this century.

"It's one of the largest surviving



BURN'T SHELL: District chief fire officer Allen Pidwell (left) and senior firefighter Richard Collins survey the damage. They praised local volunteer firefighters for the way they fought the fire.

older buildings in Inglewood and it was quite a feature."

During its early days the building, known locally as the Shoe Store Building, was used by a barber, a bookstore and the upstairs was once the home of the Inglewood Club. The eastern half was listed with the Historic Places Trust, but the other section, which was destroyed in the fire, was not.

There were now five shops on the bottom floor of the two sections of building - the dairy, a real estate agent and a furniture business, two shops were empty. Both halves of the building were up for sale.

Maria Bishell, whose sons Andre and Michael own Len's Place Dairy and Tearooms, said the family was devastated by the fire which gutted the shop.

The family-run business, where Mrs Bishell worked with her sister Debbie Taylor, was named in memory of her husband Len who died two years ago.

"Andre's father was helping him do up the building and he died in a car accident two days before the

shop was due to open," she said. "It means so much to us."

"We built it up from nothing and, look, it's nothing again," said Mrs Bishell.

Debbie Taylor said yesterday locals had been great and many people had rallied around offering support and alternative premises. "But we have been too numb to think about it, I don't know what we will do."

Elaine Schreiber, who was one of hundreds, many in their pyjamas and nighties, watching the old building burn, said: "It's awful. It'll leave a big hole in the main street."

Audrey Ladbrook, in her 70s, said she recalled a Chinese shop on the premises when she was young. "We used to bring in fungus from the farm to sell."

Inglewood deputy chief fire officer Alan Spurdle said: "There has always been a dairy there. I used to own it myself one time. She's gone now. It's a jolly shame for the town."

● Retailers worry: Page 3