

# Patrons flee hotel fire

Drinkers and guests fled the Royal Hotel, New Plymouth, when the public bar (pictured below) burst into flames at about 8.30 Saturday night.

Thick smoke poured from broken windows as firefighters, alerted by the automatic alarm, doused the flames in the empty bar within 10 minutes of arriving. They wore breathing equipment to combat the dense smoke and flames which caused extensive damage to the recently renovated bar.

Nearby streets were closed off as the police helped evacuate hotel patrons from other bars.

Senior Station Officer Roger Beggs, of the New Plymouth Fire Brigade, praised the quick efforts of the hotel manager, Mr Mark Johnston, in evacuating people from the blazing building. The early-opening public bar had already closed at 8pm.

Yesterday Sergeant Terry McGreevy, of the New Plymouth police, said there were no suspicious circumstances, but investigations were still continuing.

He said it was thought that the fire might have had its origins in a rubbish container.

Mr Johnston said a smouldering cigarette in a plastic bin sparked the fire.

A darts and pool match, scheduled at the hotel for yesterday was cancelled, but a Mothers' Day dinner went ahead.

The smell of smoke still lingers throughout the hotel and in the public bar a melted till and charred Space Invaders machine rest on black and soggy carpet only recently laid.

Mr Johnston said the bar, open for only a month since being redesigned and refurbished, was insured and would be restored as soon as the insurers gave their approval.

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New Plymouth Fireman Chris Haunton surveys the burnt-out shell that was the Royal Hotel public bar.