

RIGHT: Firemen battle the Roebuck House blaze in the city on August 8. Arson is suspected.



Police reporter
GEORGINA GILES
continues a monthly
series on unsolved
crimes in Taranaki



Private eye probes Roebuck House fire

A PRIVATE investigator has been pitting his skills against those of a New Plymouth building arsonist.

The highly-suspicious fire which gutted Roebuck House in Powderham St on August 8 has been investigated by a private agent acting for an insurance company. The New Plymouth CIB has also been working on the case.

But both need more information before a solution can be reached.

New Plymouth CIB Detective John Innes said the evidence that the fire was arson included:

- Entry was forced into the building.
- Only the unoccupied section of the building was entered.

"The person or persons have restricted their area of activity to the vacant portion of the premises," he said.

This indicated the purpose of breaking into the building was not to burgle it — if it was the occupied section could have been entered and property stolen.

"Police believe there is no indication that entry was gained to steal property.

"We also believe there were no combustible types of material in the area where the fire appeared to start."

DSIR scientists were examining evidence which may provide further evidence that the fire was lit deliberately.

"It is not known if an accelerant was used, but the DSIR will find out," Mr Innes said.

Police believe a conclusion will be reached in the case.

"However, police do need to hear from any person who may have seen any activity in that area on the night of the fire," he said.

The offender may not have parked his vehicle in the immediate vicinity of the building.

Mr Innes said there was also a possibility the car had parked in a service tunnel to the building, which runs off Currie Lane, which accesses the Downtown Parking Building.

"The police believe that the person responsible may well have parked the vehicle in this tunnel, gone into the premises via the stairway, and left the same way.

"It may have only been a matter of minutes before the offender left the area completely."

Mr Innes said insurance assessors believed the building was repairable — about \$500,000 damage was done.

Mr Innes said soon after the New Plymouth fire brigade was called at 11.48pm it became evident the fire was suspicious.

This was partly because of the fire's size and the speed at which it was spreading.

Firefighters noticed during an inspection of the rear of the building that a door at the top of a flight of stairs had been jemmied open.

Mr Innes said further investigations showed screws on the door hinge had been ripped out when the door was jemmied open.

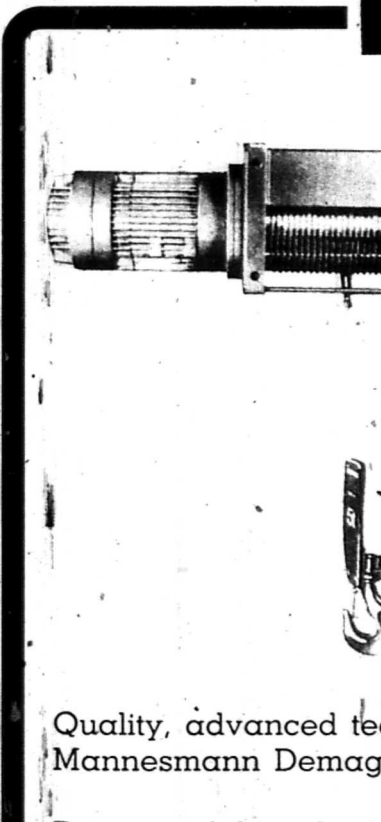
The following day police reconstructed the scene. From this they ascertained entry had been gained through the door at the top of the external stairway.

The fire gutted Roebuck House, the top floor being worst damaged.

At the height of the fire flames reached 10 metres above the three-storey building. Six fire engines attended the fire — New Plymouth's whole firefighting vehicle force. The whole duty watch and volunteers were called to battle the blaze.



The rear of Roebuck House was the worst-affected part of the building in the fire. A door at the top of the back stairs was jemmied open.



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