

The Editor,
Taranaki Herald, N.P.

20-2-1989

Dear Sir,

I am interested in the early history of New Plymouth and would like to correct a mistake in the caption to the photograph of the Alexandra Hall, on the 1991 Celebrations page, in Herald of 18th. February

This photo. could not have been taken in 1900 but some years ~~later~~ earlier. The same mistake is made with the same photo. in the book The Industrious Heart, a history of New Plymouth.

The following brief history may be of interest to people who have asked for information of this site.

In 1877 the subject was raised of forming a company for the erection for a new theatre in New Plymouth.

In December 1881 a company was formed to build a public hall and theatre.

On Saturday 3rd. June, 1882 public hall tenders were received and the one decided on was that of Mr. William Gardiner of Opunake for £3,100 (pounds).

It was recorded in the Herald on 17th. January, 1883 that the Alexandra Hall opened this evening with the Philharmonic Orchestra performing Oratorio of Elijah.

On the 7th. August, 1897 it was stated that the lessees, Messrs Fisher and Jones, of the Alexandra Hall intended to change its name and on 21st. August, 1897 it became the Theatre Royal, This name appeared at the highest point above the entrance, replacing the name Alexandra Hall.

In later years it was used as a Cinema when Garnet Hornby Saunders screened silent films in it under the name of Biograph Pictures. Admission prices: 1/6, 1/-, 6d.

As the Alexandra Hall it had many uses, one being when the Northern Agriculture Association, a fore-runner of the Taranaki Agricultural Society, held their first shows there.

Early photos. show it as a one level topped building; later ones show it with a high structure at the rear to house the "flys", etc. used for stage settings.

In the early hours of the morning of Saturday 21st. July, 1916 the Theatre, along with a number of other buildings, was completely destroyed by fire. The film that had been screening at the time was "The Martyrdom of Nurse Cavell".

The Grand Coffee Palace private hotel showing in the photo. was at the time of the fire known as the Grand Central.

The present Opera House, designed by Mr. T. H. Bates, architect, built by J. T. Julian and Son, was officially opened with a speech by the Mayor of New Plymouth, Mr. F. E. Wilson, on the evening of Saturday 28th. November, 1925.

The opening performance was the Irish play "Molly Bawn" presented by actor Denis Kehoe and his Dramatic Players headed by Frances Kayher, with a total cast of eleven players.

Prices were: Circle and Orchestra Stalls 6/-, Stalls 4/-, Gallery 2/-.

The last 35 mm. film shown commercially at the Opera House was in 1967.

I remain,

"Historian".

C. Wyatt

Mr. C. Wyatt,
14 Tamar Street,
New Plymouth.