

The Great Fire of 1898

On Wednesday 9 February 1898, at 2.00 am a Mr Smithson gave the alarm for a growing fire in the heart of the town.

Levin had not yet acquired a fire bell, so Miss Bowen, the Postmistress got the key to the English church & with the assistance of a Mr Nation Jnr made to ring the church bell to warn people. This ended in its own mini disaster with the bell falling down after a few rings.

However many people were aroused and by all accounts worked very hard to save goods & property.

The Levin Hotel stood on the corner of Queen & Oxford Sts. Going south of the hotel was (we believe) a gap to the (privately owned) Town Hall. This had a shop & office in the front onto Oxford St run by the chemist Mr Ernest Levy. Next was the County Council's office in the same building as Mr Barnard's jeweller's shop. Next was Mr James the shoe maker. Next was Mr Frank Keen. He was a hairdresser & tobacconist with a billiard saloon. He had just sold it and was in Wellington to collect payment at the time of the fire. Next was Mr Frederick Pink, also a bootmaker. His shop was owned by the future Borough Mayor Basil Gardner. Next was Mr David Smart's bookshop which may have had the office of the solicitor Mr H Fitzherbert as part of the shop.

The fire appeared to have started in the Town Hall & spread to all the above shops, all built of wood with no separation between them.

Amazingly people helped get stock out of some the shops. It was reported as: "...all along the street a clearance of goods from shops was made just in time, the flames devouring the buildings in rapid succession."

Marco Fosella's shop was next in line to the south but was saved by a change in the wind. The Levin Hotel was also saved by the wind.

This wind must have changed to a West-East direction as it was also reported that the Te Aro House branch building (Clarke's) was nearly destroyed. This building is on the opposite side of Oxford St, so it must have been a strong wind.

The Hotel was also saved by the action of several men. A Mr Walter Gardener stood on the fire-escape landing and with the help of Messrs Laing, Seales, Leeson, Nordstrom & Ellis used buckets of water on the hotel. Mr Basil Gardener found one of the hotel rooms on fire and "...with great exertion suppressed the flames & then fell exhausted."

Lost in the Town Hall was furniture, including a piano, dozens of skates & lots of books. The Foresters, Knights of Labour & Druids lost much of their material & the Levin band lost quite a few instruments.

No one knows how the fire started. There had been a dance in the Hall the Tuesday evening, but that finished at 11.00 pm and nothing seemed amiss by the organisers.

Fortunately all the County Council valuable papers were in a safe, however they were found to be much charred. It turned out the safe wasn't very good.

Interestingly enough the newspapers of the day recorded the insurance cover of each place including the name of the Insurer & the amount of cover. No privacy as it would be today.

This must have been a very scary fire. At the time it must have been brave to go into likely burning buildings to rescue papers & stock.
However in the light of day, and even today it could be thought to be foolhardy.

Aftermath of the fire. See photo below

