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SAM GILMER'S ROYAL OAK HOTEL (Part I)

The Royal Oak was Sam's passion. Following the fire in June 1879 (see story Gilmer Bros Hotels Wellington and Nelson) the Royal Oak had been rebuilt by the owner Bill Emeny and it was later acquired by Gilmer Brothers in June 1881. Emeny had put the property to auction on 9 June 1881. The advertisement mentioned that the hotel was on the corner of Cuba & Manners Street with a frontage of 28 feet to Cuba Street and a depth of 50 along Manners Street. The hotel contained 26 rooms.

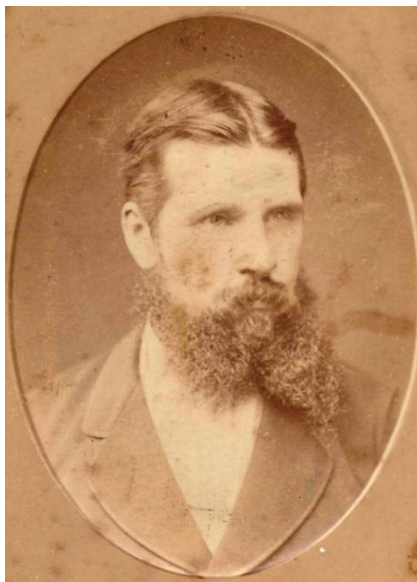
No bid was received at the auction and clearly, Gilmer Brothers negotiated privately to buy the hotel because the newspaper reported:

We understand that Messrs. Gilmer Bros., the well-known hotel proprietors, have added another to the long list of first class hotels owned by them, having purchased the Royal Oak, Cuba-street, recently erected by Mr. W. G. Emeny.

Evening Post 27 June 1881

With the dissolution of the partnership in February 1882, the Royal Oak Hotel passed to Sam. At the time Sam was running the Duke of Edinburgh Hotel and his half brother, William Gilmer, who had just come out from Ireland, was put in to run the Royal Oak for Gilmer Brothers. William had never previously run a hotel so we expect he was under the close supervision of Sam and possibly John Hamilton who in that year had also come to Wellington.

Now with Sam as the sole owner of the Royal Oak, William moved to the Gilmer Hotel at Greymouth (also now owned by Sam) and Sam moved from the Duke of Edinburgh to take over the running of the Royal Oak. The license was transferred to Sam on 7 March 1883.



Sam Gilmer Royal Oak 1884 (W. H. Clarke Wellington)

Oddly, Sam applied to the Licensing Committee in June 1885 to change the name of the hotel to Gilmer's Greymouth Hotel.¹ It is difficult to understand why he would do this. While the Committee agreed to change the name, Sam later applied to change the name back to the Royal Oak in 1887².

In September 1886, Sam started the first on a number of significant improvements to the Royal Oak. This was an extension of 90 feet along Cuba Street to Dixon Street. The depth along Dixon Street was to be 87 feet and the rear was to extend across to connect with the Manners Street side of the existing building.

Very extensive additions are about to be made to the Royal Oak Hotel, and when they have been completed the house will be one of the largest and finest in Wellington, a credit alike to the city and the spirited proprietor Mr. Samuel Gilmer. The building, which is of brick, is to be extended along Cuba-street to the corner of Dixon-street, a distance of nearly 90 feet, and from thence taken along Dixon-street for about 87 feet, and back towards Manners-street, so as to connect with the rear of the present premises and form a large square with a courtyard in the centre. On the ground floor of the new premises there will be a large dining-room, a commercial-room, two offices, three parlours leading into a bar

situated at the corner of Cuba and Dixon-streets, two offices, a storeroom, and a pantry. The public entrance will be from Cuba-street. There are to be two entrances from Dixon-street, one for carts leading into the courtyard, and the other for families stopping in the house. On the upper floor there are to be a ladies' drawing-room, three sitting-rooms, eleven double and twelve single bed-rooms, and a couple of baths, two wide staircases communicating with the lower story. The plans have been prepared by Mr. W. C. Chatfield, and the tenders for the work are now being invited. The additions mean an expenditure of several thousand pounds.

Evening Post 11 September 1886



Cuba Street Wellington c1886 Royal Oak on Left before extension to Dixon St

¹ Evening Post 4 June 1885

² Evening Post 7 December 1887

W. Eades was the successful tenderer for the new building and the work was to be completed in five months.³ Shortly afterwards Eades became insolvent and the work was completed by J D Baird. Sam used William Charles Chatfield as his architect. Chatfield was born 6 February 1852 in Greatham House, Parham Park, Sussex, England. Chatfield migrated to New Zealand arriving in 1867. He died in 1930 and was buried at Karori Cemetery on 30 May.



Royal Oak (LHS) Showing Additions along Cuba St to Dixon St

On completion of the work the Evening Post published an article (below) describing the additions. The number of rooms had increased from 26 to 100 and the bedrooms numbered 50. There were additional bars and many sitting rooms:

³ Evening Post 28 September 1886

Mr. Samuel Gilmer can now fairly claim to be the proprietor of an hotel which is only excelled in New Zealand—and that in point of size only—by the Grand in Dunedin. The extensive alterations and additions to the Royal Oak which have been in progress for several months past have just been completed, and the work of furnishing the entire premises is now proceeding. The additions are in brick, and consist of a frontage to Cuba-street of over 100ft and a frontage to Dixon-street of 100ft; and the hotel now occupies the entire end of a block having frontages to Manners, Dixon, and Cuba-streets. Like the original building, the new portion of the premises is two stories high, and an idea of the accommodation which Mr. Gilmer will shortly be in a position to offer the public may be gathered from the fact that the hotel now contains no fewer than 100 rooms. The sitting rooms alone number 20, and there are no less than 50 bedrooms. A large bar has been made at the corner of Cuba and Dixon-streets, and opening on to it are about half a dozen parlours, each of which is intended for the use of three or four persons. Each of these apartments is provided with chairs and a small round marble-topped table expressly imported by Mr. Gilmer, the object being to enable a few friends to get together and remain undisturbed. The arrangement is an excellent one, and is bound to make the hotel an attractive place of resort. In addition to these rooms, there is a large bar parlour, fitted up in a superb manner, and opening into the main entrance from Cuba-street. On the other side of the entrance is a large and elegantly furnished sittingroom. All the chairs in this apartment are easy chairs, and they, as well as the sofas, are covered in red plush. An immense mirror hangs above the mantelpiece, and a number of steel plate engravings are to be hung on the walls. The diningroom will in future be situated in that portion of the premises facing Dixon-street, Mr. Gilmer's intention being to convert the present diningroom, which looks on to Manners-street, into a sittingroom. The new diningroom is 60ft by 30ft, and will accommodate 250 people at one time. A cartway leads from Dixon-street to the yard, between that thoroughfare and Manners-street, and to the left of it is a staircase leading to private suites of apartments in the new premises. All the

bedrooms are upstairs. Each apartment is large and airy, and furnished most comfortably. Venetian blinds are fitted to every window, and both the top and bottom sashes are movable. The Royal Oak now boasts of seven suites of private apartments. These consist of a double-bedded room opening into a sittingroom, both being furnished in the most elegant manner. Each sittingroom has a fireplace, over which hangs a large square mirror, and the furniture in each is different. Both sittingrooms and bedrooms are large, and the floor of each is covered with Brussels carpet. There are five wide staircases in the house, and it will thus be seen that means of egress in case of fire are ample. The hotel contains four bathrooms, two lavatories, and no fewer than nine waterclosets. Gas is laid on to every room in the house, and every gasalier has been fitted with Christiana burners and globes. There is an electric bell in each sitting-room, and a different kind of wall-paper in every room. The selection of the furniture and wall papers was entrusted to Mrs. Gilmer, who has executed her commission in a manner which shows her to possess exceedingly good taste. A portion of the furniture was imported by Mr. Gilmer and the remainder required was purchased from Mr. H. Fielder. A large quantity of glassware and cutlery has also arrived from Home for use in the hotel. The additions to the hotel have been carried out by Mr. J. D. Baird, according to plans and specifications prepared by Mr. W. C. Chatfield. The contract was let to Mr. W. Eades, but on becoming insolvent it was taken over by Mr. J. D. Baird, one of the sureties, who has completed it. Sub-contracts were let to Mr. Houghton, bricklayer, Messrs. Fulton & Smith, plasterers, Mr. George Remington, plumber and gasfitter, and Mr. Brady, painter and paperhanger, all of whom have carried out their respective undertakings in a very satisfactory manner. The carpets were laid and the mirrors placed under the superintendence of Mr. J. L. Kimbell. The cost of the additions and furniture has been between £7000 and £8000. The Royal Oak Hotel is a credit to Mr. Gilmer as well as to the city, and we have no doubt that the enterprise which the proprietor has displayed will meet with its reward.

On 30 September 1889 a property adjoining the Royal Oak Hotel was offered for sale. This property was owned by Michael Bohan who was a coach builder who had been a Blacksmith at Charleston for eight years before moving to Wellington in 1873. There is every chance that Sam knew him from Charleston. The land had frontages of about 100 feet to both Dixon Street and Manners Street and had an area of 6,000 square feet. It represented an absolutely perfect opportunity for Sam to buy land that would give him other opportunities of expanding the hotel.

Three years later in 1892, it was clear that Sam had bought the land and was now proposing to further expand the hotel with three storey wings down both Dixon and Manners Streets.

ROYAL OAK HOTEL.

The Royal Oak Hotel, which is now one of the most commodious and best establishments of the kind in the city, is about to be added to and improved, and when the work has been finished it will be the largest hotel in Wellington, affording accommodation unsurpassed anywhere in the colony. Mr. Samuel Gilmer has given further proof of his enterprise by acquiring the land between Manners and Dixon-streets, on which Mr. M. Bohan's coach factory has stood, there being a frontage of about 100ft to each of those thoroughfares, and Mr. W. C. Chatfield, under whose supervision the former enlargement was made, has prepared plans and specifications of the extensive additions which the proprietor intends to make to this favourite hostelry. It is intended to erect a wing of three floors along each street. The Manners-street wing is to contain on the ground floor a reading-room 28ft long and 15ft wide, and nine large bed and sitting-rooms; the first floor a morning-room 30ft by 15ft, and ten bed and sitting-rooms; while the top floor is to be divided into single rooms. On the ground floor of the Dixon-street wing there will be six large sample rooms; on the first floor 13 bed and sitting-rooms; while there will be a number of bedrooms on the top story, the arrangements being similar to that on the upper floor of the Manners-street wing. Features in the new building will be the ventilating arrangements, the fine large staircases, and the arrangement of the bathrooms, lavatories, &c., in order to suit the convenience of families as well as the ordinary travelling public. The present dining-room is to be enlarged, and will measure 61ft by 35ft at one end and 61ft by 24ft at the other. There will also be an alteration in the portion of the premises set apart for culinary purposes. The kitchen and scullery are to be enlarged, and

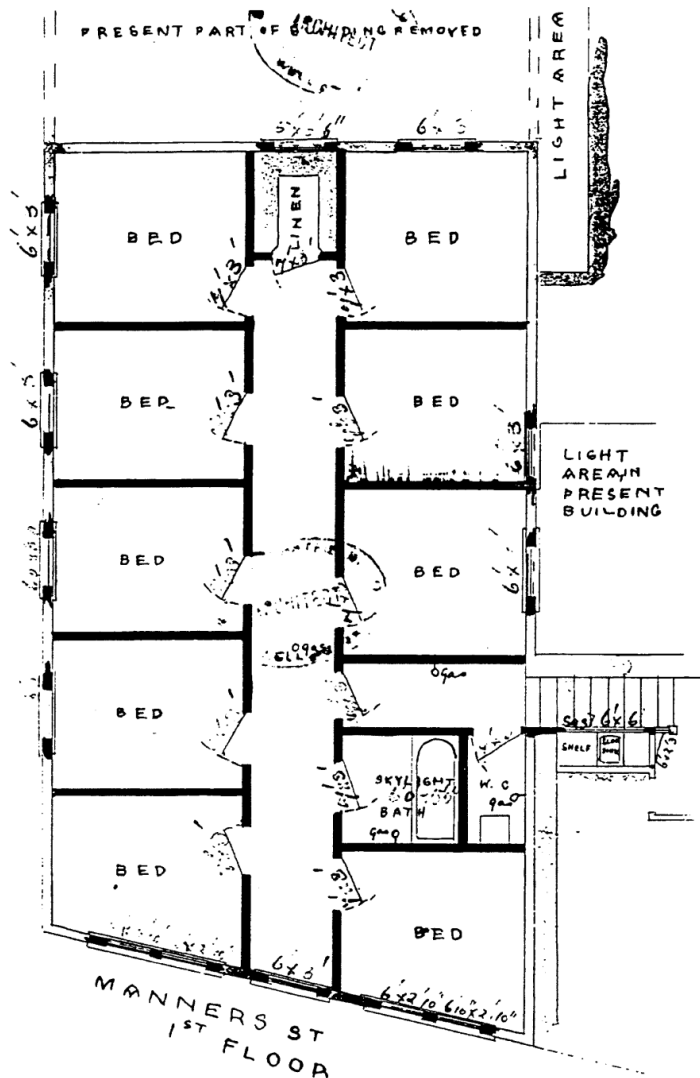
several improved appliances will be fitted up, including a new range, baker's oven, &c. In consequence of the enlargement of the hotel it will be necessary to alter the arrangement of the present portion of the building. A drawing-room, 38ft by 14ft is to be fitted up at the corner of Cuba and Dixon-streets, a special smoking-room 28ft by 18ft will also be made, and under a portion of the dining-room there is to be a large cellar, 34ft by 18ft, approached from Dixon-street. Mr. Chatfield has carefully studied, at Mr. Gilmer's request, the convenience of families visiting the hotel, and it is confidently anticipated that the provision which is about to be made in the interests of that class will still further increase the popularity of the Royal Oak. Some idea of the accommodation which the house will possess when the alterations are completed may be gathered when we state that on the first floor alone there will be exactly 60 bed and sitting-rooms.

The Royal Oak Hotel occupies a splendid site, and the additions which Mr. Gilmer is about to make will greatly enhance its appearance. The tram line runs past it two ways, and when the railway has been extended to Te Aro travellers arriving by it will find the house very handy. Mr. Gilmer has shown great enterprise since he took up his residence here, and he is now about to give further evidence of his belief in the future of the city by launching out into a very considerable expenditure in the same direction.

Provision is to be made for an electric light installation, and money is not to be spared in making the sanitary arrangements as perfect as possible.

Mr. Chatfield is now calling for tenders for the work, and a contract will be let next week.

However, the above publicity was premature and the proposal did not proceed as described. Instead in 1892 Chatfield applied for and obtained a building permit to refurbish the upper floor and create nine bedrooms in the back part of the building on the Manners Street side⁴.



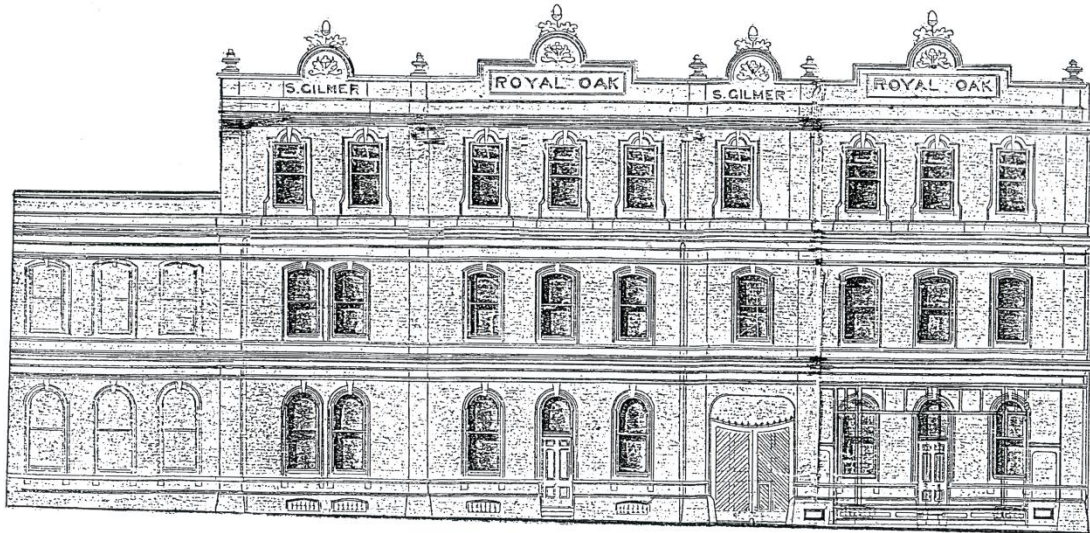
Floor Plan provided to Wellington Council by architect WC Chatfield

The Dixon Street (Taranaki Place) three storey extension proceeded in May 1896 using the builder J.H. Meyer who was later to sue Sam in the Supreme Court for 345 Pounds for non-payment of "extras."⁵

Later in the year in December 1896 the newspaper described the new addition in Dixon Street (Taranaki Place) reported that a three storey addition was planned for the Manners Street side of the building. However, this did not immediately proceed.

⁴ The Hotel That Sam Built. Compiled by John Hewstone, Ian Cameron and Peter Sydor.

⁵ Evening Post 4 August 1899



1896 Plan for Three Storey Wing Dixon Street also showing
1886 Two Storey Building on Left ⁶

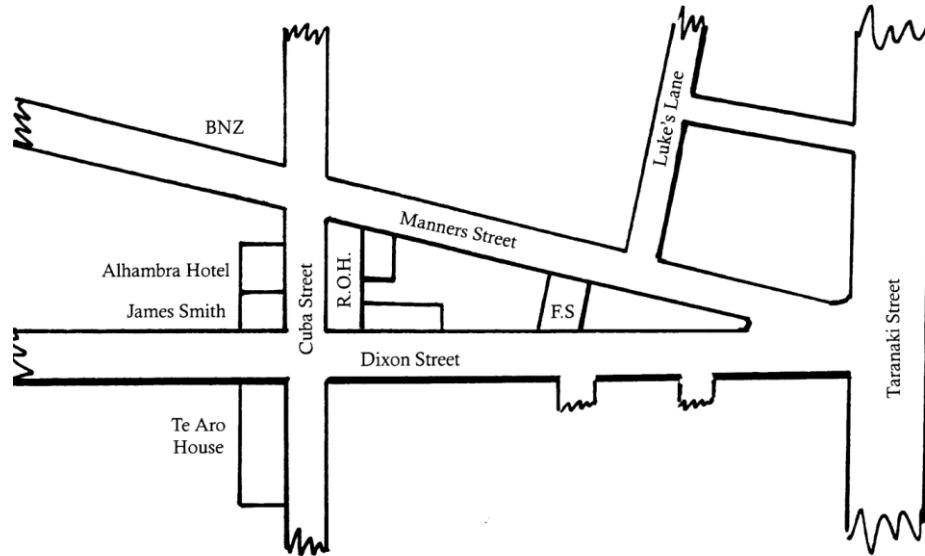
his hostelry. As everybody knows, the ground on which the Royal Oak stands is at the foot of Cuba-street, and it has frontages to three streets—to Cuba-street 130 feet, to Taranaki-place 171 feet, and to Manners-street 181 feet. The building occupies the whole frontages to Taranaki-place and Cuba-street, and 120 feet of the Manners-street frontage. It has been at various times enlarged to keep pace with its increased business, and that the proprietor is looking ahead is seen in the fact that plans have been prepared for a completion of the design of the hotel, of which the addition under notice has been the latest step. The general design of the hotel was conceived by Mr. W. C. Chatfield, architect, when the present building was first erected, and the successive additions that have grown around the central structure are only portions of one design.

Turning now to the recently completed addition, we find that it faces Taranaki-place, extends to 92ft of frontage, and is three stories in height. The contemplated addition to the Manners-street frontage will also, we learn, be three stories high, while the portion of the building that is at present two stories in height will eventually be raised a story in

order to complete the design. The Royal Oak will then be one of the largest hotels in the colony. The completed portion of the block is entirely of brick, quite isolated by its position, and fitted up with all the latest appliances, from electric light to modern fire-escapes. The total accommodation of the hotel (counting in the recent addition) is now 75 bedrooms, 20 sitting-rooms, besides numerous parlours, commercial rooms, &c. The bedrooms, too, are not boxes. Should any traveller, before retiring to rest, desire to "swing a cat" in his room, our representative can assure him that any animal up to a full-grown kangaroo could be swung with consummate ease and with the greatest comfort to the marsupial operated upon. But Wellington is a growing place, and the host of the Royal Oak intends, with the further improvements contemplated, to almost double the bedroom accommodation.

Evening Post 23 December 1896

⁶ The House That Sam Built. Compiled by John Hewstone Ian Cameron and Peter Sydor



Royal Oak Hotel Layout 1898⁷

The 1895 Cyclopaedia of New Zealand contained an advertisement for the Royal Oak Hotel. This contained two references which were relevant to later events.

The first of these was that, among other feature, the hotel had a special fowl yard *“about a half mile from the hotel, a most comprehensive stock of poultry is kept. It is a very large yard and every precaution is taken to ensure the health of the birds.”*

However, the neighbours appeared to be more concerned with their health rather than the birds. In April 1898 twenty two of them signed petition to the Council complaining of the nuisance and *“injury to our health”* caused by the poultry and the barking of dogs kept at the yard. They also complained that Sam sent waste food from the hotel (no doubt to feed the birds) which brought rats.⁸

The Council was slow to respond on the matter and it took four months for an inspector to respond to the Council. This advised there were about 200 fowls and several dogs but, while large, the yard essentially meet Council requirements. A man was living there who was employed cleaning it and the owner *“does all in his power to avoid creating a nuisance.”* Although there was an odour no previous complaint had been made.

Sam was even later in responding to the Council and he was quite dismissive. He considered the complaint unjust and said dogs were kept to prevent the place being robbed and they only barked when people passing by late at night excited them. He considered that everyone, more or less, had rats.

⁷ The Hotel That Sam Built Compiled by John Hewstone, Ian Cameron and Peter Sydor

⁸ The Hotel that Sam Built. Compiled by John Hewstone, Ian Cameron and Peter Sydor

There was no further action taken by the Council and the yard remained open. However, it was later closed following the next major event.

The second feature referred to in the 1895 Cyclopaedia on NZ advertisement was *"the fire proof nature of the hotel is, of course, an attraction"*. However, only about two years after the new Dixon Street addition was completed the Royal Oak was destroyed by fire for the second time. On this occasion two people died.

The fire was first noticed a little after midnight on 10 December 1898 by a young woman employed at the hotel who was sleeping in a room above the kitchen in the old part of the building. Flames were coming from the kitchen below. She ran down the stairs to the Commercial Room where she found Messrs O'Regan MHR, Fenton, Russell, Woodward and Simpson who had stayed up late talking. They quickly moved around the hotel shouting *"Fire"* and kicking and banging on doors to wake people.

The fire spread through the building very rapidly raging in all directions. While the Fire Brigade arrived quickly from the nearby Manners Street Fire Station it had too great a hold on the building for brigade officers to take control of it. In a little more than an hour the hotel was completely gutted.

The fire had spread to the new three storey wing fronting Dixon Street where there were nine people staying. One of these was Sam's daughter Edith Gilmer and she got out safely. Of the others, Sharpless, Faulbaum, Gear and Blandford found themselves on the third floor cut off from escape with flames in all directions. Sharpless knotted bedding together to make a rope ladder and climbed down to where the fire brigade had placed a ladder which he reached.

Faulbaum made a very risky leap of about 25 feet to the roof of a nearby corrugated iron shed which he fell through but survived suffering a broken ankle. Gear and Blandford were both caught by the fire and died. The Inquest found they died by suffocation from the smoke and by a false sense of security because they were a distance from the seat of the fire and did not move quickly enough to exit the hotel.

A critical feature of the fire was the speed at which it went through. The following articles describe this and the losses suffered by Sam and the insurers:

The occupants rushed out from all directions in scant attire, some of the women being so frightened that they had to be assisted downstairs. Mr. O'Regan had just assisted two of the servants downstairs, and was returning when he found that in the brief two or three minutes the whole of the staircase had caught fire, and was quite impassable. His friend, Mr. Fenton, and others who had remained upstairs were thus cut off, and it was impossible for him to do anything for them. In fact, he had some difficulty in getting out of the place himself. Fortunately his companions made their escape by one of the back windows. Like the others, Mr. O'Regan speaks with amazement of the rapidity with which the flames spread, particularly seeing that the night was comparatively calm. From the time the alarm was given to the time he assisted the two girls downstairs must have been about five minutes, and yet even then the flames were bursting out of the Cuba-street windows. "In fact," said Mr. O'Regan, "had I not seen it I would not have believed that a fire could have spread with such rapidity. I would like to say that in my opinion the Brigade and police did all that was possible." Mr. O'Regan also speaks most highly of the good judgment and cool courage of his com-

THE PROPRIETOR'S LOSS.

Little more remains to be said in a general way. Mr. Gilmer, owner of the hotel, when interviewed by our reporter, told readily enough all that he knew of the fire. He had gone to bed, and was sound asleep when the nightwatchman aroused him and told him the kitchen was on fire. He rushed down and saw the flames breaking through the ceiling of the room. He threw a bucket of water on the flames, but quickly saw that this was of no use, and therefore immediately rang up the Fire Brigade. He then dashed back to his room, but so rapidly had the flames spread that he had not time even to find his clothes, and it was as much as he could do to make his way out of the building. As it was he received some burns. His anxiety was great, for he had left Mrs. and Miss Gilmer when first aroused, and was not certain for some time whether they had escaped or not. The servants called the people sleeping in the building, and but for them and the action of Messrs. O'Regan, Fenton, Russell, Woodward, and Simp-

panions, Messrs. Fenton, Woodward, Russell, and Simpson.

Mr. Fenton was also interviewed, and expressed astonishment at so many getting out of the building in safety under the circumstances. He is of opinion that, with the exception of the poor fellows who lost their lives, everyone was out of the building 10 minutes after the first alarm was given.

An incident is told by one of the party of rescuers as illustrating the soundness with which some of the lodgers slept. At the door of one room he saw two barefooted waiters hammering with their hands in a vain attempt to awaken the sleeper. Being lightly clad and without boots, they could not kick in or break down the door, and the gentleman passing, being of powerful physique and fully clad, succeeded, with a few powerful kicks, in breaking the door in. Strange to relate, even then the occupant slept on, and it was not till violent hands were laid on him that he awoke to the situation. There were other cases in which hardly less trouble was experienced in waking the inmates.

Mr. Rattray, of the Northern Assurance Company, was one of the late comers, for he only arrived yesterday. He saved all his property.

son, there would have been many more lives lost. Asked as to his losses, Mr. Gilmer stated that his furniture was insured for £6000, and had cost over £11,000, while the building, though insured for £13,000, had cost about £20,000. "I would not have taken any man's £40,000 for the premises as they stood," he concluded. Practically nothing was saved, and nothing is left of the building but the outer walls, and portions here and there more or less burnt.

Two circumstances appear to have averted a more dreadful calamity. One of these was the fortunate chance meeting of several persons, which kept them out of their beds later than usual, and so enabled them to give an immediate alarm to the sleepers and render prompt assistance in getting the frightened inmates out of the burning building. The other circumstance was the fact of the fire occurring high up in the building. Had it started on the ground floor the smoke would soon have filled the lower portions of the building, and made the ordinary means of exit impossible.

THE INSURANCES.

The Commercial Union Assurance Company has the original insurance of £19,000 on the Royal Oak Hotel and contents, but has reinsured the risk to the extent of £14,500, as follows:—New Zealand, £1750; South British, £1000; Victoria, £1000 (of which £250 is re-insured in the Standard); Phoenix, £1000; Imperial, £1000; Royal, £1000; North British and Mercantile, £1000; Manchester, £1000; Royal Exchange, £750; Alliance, £500; Liverpool, London, and Globe, £500; United, £500; Northern, £500; North German, £500; Norwich Union, £500; National, £500; London and Lancashire, £500; Palatine, £500; Australian Alliance, £500. It will thus be seen that nearly all the insurance offices are more or less affected.

The details of the final settlement by the Commercial Union Assurance Company of the risk on the Royal Oak Hotel fire are as follows:—The total risk was £19,750, and the amount paid was £17,925, made up of £11,500 on the hotel building; £5000 on the furniture and pianos; £675 on stock; £500 on the wooden building adjoining, and £250 on the furniture therein.

Evening Post 10 December 1898

Evening Post 31 December 1898

As an outcome of the Royal Oak Hotel fire enquiry, the Coroner has forwarded to Commissioner Tunbridge recommendations to the police officers whose duty it is to guide the Licensing Committee in regard to fire appliances provision for electric fire bells in hotels on each flat, communicating in such manner that the touch of a button on either floor would set them all ringing. He also suggests that two or three light wire rope ladders should be provided on each floor in rooms without locks, with directions as to where to find them. Further, Mr. Ashcroft has written to the City Council recommending amendment of the building regulations to provide for external balconies; that all wooden partitions should be plastered, and that work near chimneys or heating apparatus should be protected as suggested by Mr. Smith, of the Public Works Department, with Asbestos cement over the brickwork.

Coroner's Recommendations Evening Post 20 December 1898

Throughout the Inquest there had been some criticism of the Fire Brigade for inefficiency and errors of judgment and the Fire Chief Captain Kemsley resigned. However, given the proximity of the station to the fire and an adequate water supply it is difficult to see what the Brigade could have done when faced with a building through which the fire burned very quickly.

Sam and his family suffered heavily losing everything they had in the fire. The question is how would they ever recover and how would Sam respond to his dire situation?