ABERYSTWYTH: Squatters may have been in hotel where blaze started

Arson not ruled out in promenade fire

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ARSON has not been ruled out as the cause of a blaze that engulfed seven sea-front properties in Aberystwyth.

Fire officers and police will today begin the laborious task of sifting through the debris for clues.

The fire started shortly after 3.30am yesterday in the Beachfront Hotel in Aberystwyth and quickly spread to neighbouring properties, including four university halls of residence.

More than 100 students had to flee the Penglais, Blaenau, Barnowl and Cei fans halls of residence as the blaze quickly took hold, the flames fanned by a strong sea breeze.

Most lost all their possessions, including text books and computers, and are facing spending the next few weeks in temporary accommodation while university authorities make more permanent arrangements.

The Seabank, once one of the resort's premier hotels, had in recent years been used to house a number of homeless people.

It was closed in July after fire officers and council officials declared it unsafe. The 36 residents were moved to other properties in the town.

Chief Inspector Brian Wile of Dyfed-Powys Police said last night that he had heard rumours that some people might have been illegally squatting in the boarded-up hotel.

Terrace area of the town had to walk to work because of the spreading flames in yesterday’s blaze. Valuable equipment in the hotel may have been affected by water from firefighters’ hoses.

Residents living in the Cliff House hotel were forced to leave the building while staff and volunteers were being evacuated.

"At the present time these remain unconfirmed, but we will be carrying out a full investigation to try and establish if there was anyone inside at the time," he said.

A spokesman for the Mid and West Wales Fire Brigade said it was too early to speculate about what caused Aberystwyth’s worst sea-front blaze for almost 80 years.

He said, "A senior investigating team has been at the scene and will be carrying out a more detailed examination in the morning. At present we have an open mind, but we cannot rule out the possibility of arson."

More than 100 firefighters and 19 fire appliances came from as far afield as Bargoed and Haverfordwest, tackled the fire. They had to pump water from some hydrants more than 600 yards away. At one stage they even pumped water from the sea.

"I thought it might have been someone burning toast, but then I heard some shouting from upstairs and realised there was a fire somewhere. I went to the rear of the premises and saw a small flame flickering in one of the top windows at the rear of the Seabank Hotel," he said.

"I telephoned the fire brigade before alerting everyone in Penglais Hall. Fortunately, we all managed to get out quickly, although we had quite a job culling one or two of the students," he said.

Hotelier Les Francis of the Queen’s Hotel, two doors away from the Seabank, said his attention to the fire was drawn by some shouting at the rear of the hotel.

"This is not unusual, particularly with a lot of students living in the area, but when the noise persisted I looked out and saw that the Seabank was on fire with flames shooting through the roof and middle of the building.

"We only had a couple of guests in and we all evacuated the building rather quickly," he said.

Several hours after the outbreak of the fire students were still on the promenade in their dressing gowns.

One of them, Evelyn Wright, a resident of Cei Fans Hall, next to the Seabank, said when she was awoken by the fire alarms, she assumed it was a drill.

"I quickly discovered that there was a real fire, but all 30 students in the hall soon fled the building and the roll-call confirmed everyone was safe," she said.

The students initially went to the Glenogower Hotel, but as the fire spread they moved to Carpenter Hall further along the promenade.

Forestry HQ staff evacuated

ROCKY staff at the Forestry Commission Welsh headquarters were sent home because of the spreading flames in yesterday’s blaze.

Valuable computer equipment in the cellar may have been affected by water from firefighters’ hoses.

"We had to leave as fast as possible because of the fire," said a forester, who was removed to safer ground.

"It was a very frightening experience, but we were all very safe," he added.

"The fire was very close to the building and we were afraid it might have spread to us," he said.

All staff at the headquarters were evacuated and the building was left unoccupied until the fire was put out.

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