

Updated all day at **stuff**

The classic country pub

Landmark

Mike Watson

When octogenarian John 'Spider' Webb says he is lucky to be alive, it's best to believe him.

The retired Royal Navy engineer is enjoying a pint in the public bar of Stratford's New Commercial Hotel.

Built in 1896, and rebuilt in 1953, the hotel is a landmark on the main street of Broadway in the central Taranaki town.

The wiry framed Webb is one of the afternoon regulars at the hotel.

"I've been coming in here since 1963," the Birmingham-born man says.

"I bought my way out of the navy, it was the best 175 pounds I spent, and got a free passage to New Zealand."

He ended up in Stratford because "I used to cycle to Stratford-Upon-Avon back home".

"I'm 84, but I feel 21 when the music gets going.

Hotel proprietors Ian Hayward and Jude Dix have clear ideas on what makes a good country pub.

A priority is to look after locals, like Spider Webb, who come in for a drink and chat.

The couple have owned the Stratford landmark for the past six-and-a-half years.

Previously Hayward was in charge at the Midhurst Hotel.

"I had a break from pubs and went back to logging and fencing," he says.

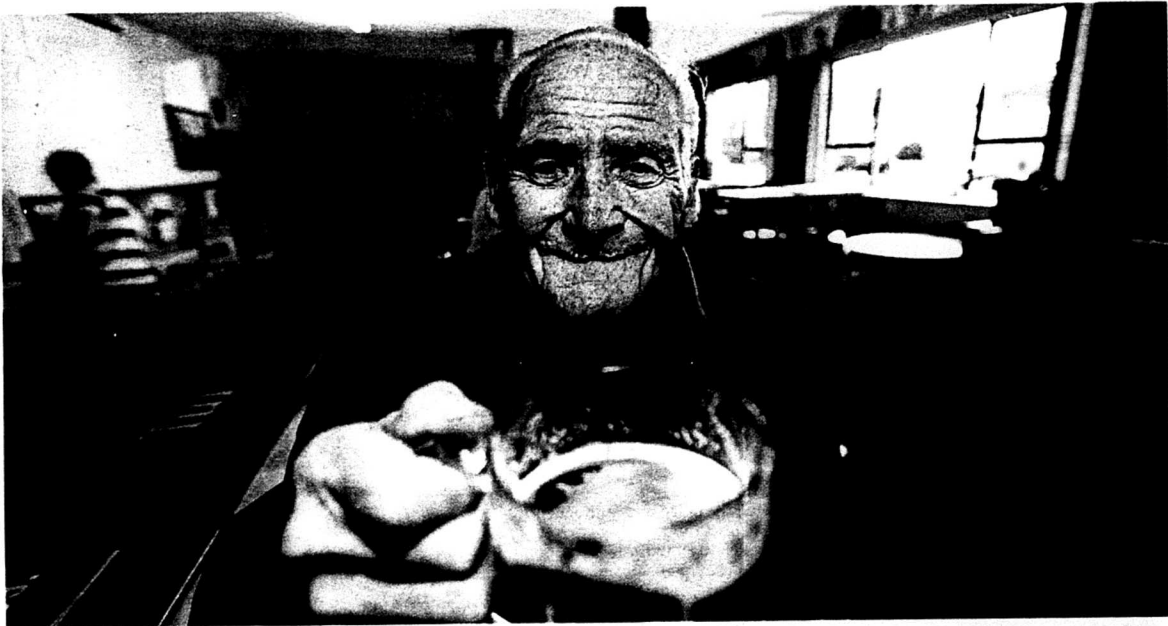
But he got lured back into hospitality when the opportunity came to take over the New Commercial. "We like meeting people and this is a good little business.

"Physically fencing and logging are harder but in the hotel we work much longer hours."

The long hours and wanting to spend more time with their families is the reason the pair put the hotel on the market a year ago. It's currently advertised on Trademe with a freehold going concern asking price of \$795,000.

Dix said they had put a lot of effort into building the business up and also wanted walk away while the going was good.

Apart from family time, exactly what will follow any sale



Retired Royal Navy engineer John 'Spider' Webb is 84 but feels 21 when the music starts.
ANDY JACKSON/STUFF

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Ian Hayward

is still up in the air, Dix says.

"I've never applied for a job" but have worked my whole life, so something will come up."

The couple still open seven days a week but have cut down on time behind the bar.

"We used to regularly do 80, 90 even 100 hours a week but now we open later early in the week.

"If there is no-one in the bar on a Monday at 7pm, we'll close up, before we used to go through to 11," Hayward says.

The couple do much of the cleaning, cooking, maintenance, and accommodation bookings for 12 rooms themselves.

Loggers, sales reps, tourists



The New Commercial Hotel was built in 1896, and rebuilt in 1953.
ANDY JACKSON/STUFF

and road makers often stay in the accommodation upstairs.

Dix's battered fish recipe is a favourite with locals having a meal in the restaurant on Friday and Saturday nights.

Hayward is a supporter of country pubs and often stays in them when away.

"You can come down to the bar and meet with others and have a chat," he says.



The New Commercial Hotel in Stratford has been put on the market by owners Jude Dix and Ian Hayward.
ANDY JACKSON/STUFF

"If country pubs are run properly people will use them."

The New Commercial is well known for giving patrons a good night of entertainment and hosting social events.

On any given week there will be competitions from speed shearing, with some of the world's best, to pie eating, karaoke and pool games.

There is a strong social club with fishing and claybird shooting competitions to raise funds for local charities.

"Events like the sheep shearing help give people who are from

out of town a taste of rural living," Hayward says.

Former Aucklander Nigel Scott says there should be more pubs like the New Commercial.

"I'd never been to anything like this in Auckland, it's got a good atmosphere and there is never any trouble."

Lauren McEldowney, whose grandfather and father drank at the hotel, says the bar provides a safe venue for women to drink.

"I wouldn't be here if it wasn't warm and welcoming, it's safe for women - and Jude's meals are the best."