

Alumni on board for Cook's latest journey



Above: Alistair Ward behind the downstairs bar.

During his student days Alistair Ward could occasionally be found “propping up” the Brig Bar at the Captain Cook Hotel. Now, “some years on”, he says there’s a pleasing symmetry in being part of an investor group backing the iconic student pub’s redevelopment and operation.

About 18 months ago the Auckland-based businessman and several other Otago alumni became involved in a venture to back redevelopment of the Captain Cook, which reopened in May this year.

While the project presented a good business opportunity, Alistair says he also felt compelled to invest in the retention and redevelopment of an important part of the city’s social history.



Above: The Captain Cook Tavern taken by A.H. Allen between 1871 and 1878 (photo courtesy of Toitū Otago Settlers Museum). This photo was used as a reference during remodelling work.

“I was somewhat underwhelmed when the Cook shut in 2013. For my generation the hotel was an important part of campus life, a focal point in fact. It was used by various faculties and was also a place that held amazing gigs and poetry recitals – it was a natural extension of the campus and, in my experience, it’s always been a vibrant part of the University’s culture and community.”

As the possibility of reopening the Cook “evolved” it became apparent that any business plan must reflect the changed times licensed premises now operate in.

“Rich veins is a bit overdone as a phrase, but the pub does have connections to famous poets, bands, musicians, academics, and so many alumni. If the walls could talk, they could tell a few stories, but it could also be bit frightening.”

“The closure of many of the well-known establishments around the University, like the Gardies and the Bowler, showed that careful reorientation was required.

“In a way it was like looking at a start-up business plan, which sounds odd given that the Cook is over 150 years old. It was not a project embarked on lightly and there was much consideration of the impact changes like the new liquor licensing laws, the reduced drinking age, and competition from supermarkets, later bar closing times and off-licence outlets have had on drinking habits.”

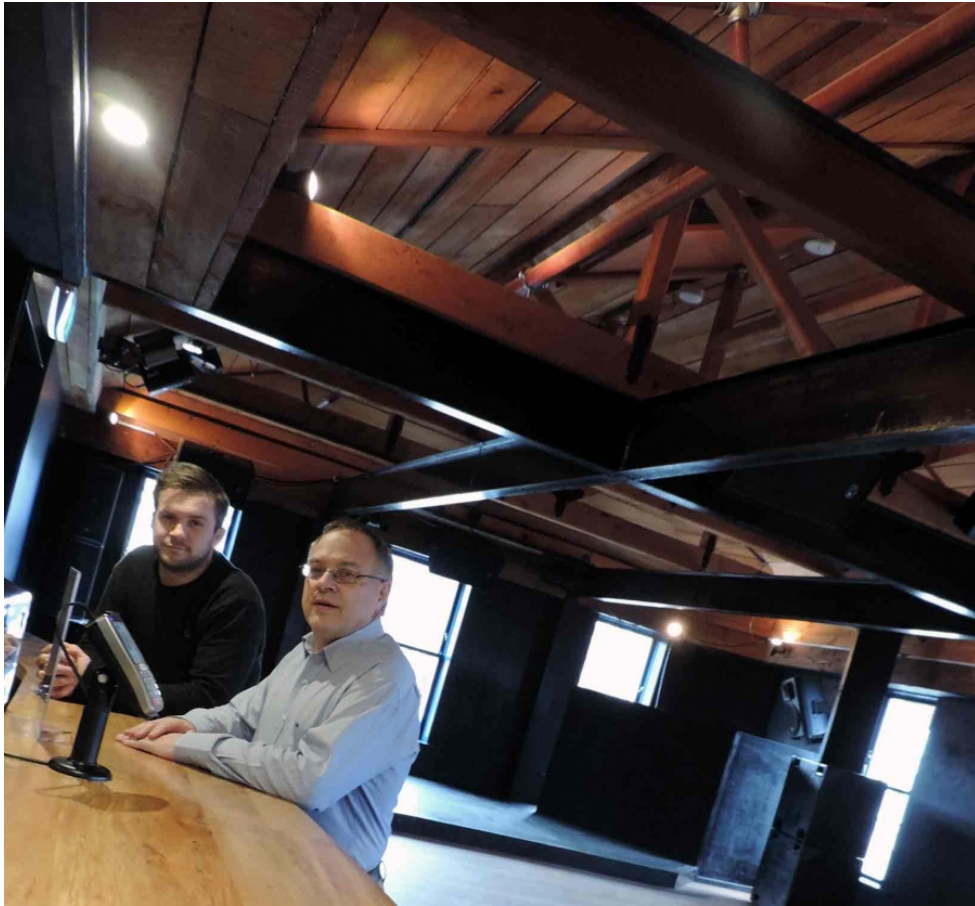
A “gastro-pub” plan was developed to accommodate a wide demographic.

“Having well-run pubs in the vicinity of the University campus makes sense. Over the decades the Cook has been supported by staff, academics and students alike. I passionately believe in the positive role hotels can play in providing a safe, managed, environment for the community to drink, eat and socialise in.”

The adoption of the pub’s original name – the Captain Cook Hotel – is a nod to its long and proud history in North Dunedin, but before pints could be pulled again the building had to be strengthened extensively to meet new earthquake and fire safety codes.

“It was a huge project to put it mildly. It’s been a major investment by both the landlord and the tenant, which is mostly comprised of Otago alumni.”

Much of the original building dates from the early 1860s and the developers were keen to retain and highlight some of the building’s heritage features. Along with exposed brick walls, ornate ceilings, wooden beams and refurbished fireplaces, one of the key features is a traditional horseshoe-shaped bar.



Above: Alastair and general manager Graham Beckett in the upstairs bar. The original wooden beams and ceilings have been exposed and refurbished. Graham sanded and refinished the seven-metre bartop.

The hotel's upstairs area provides a music venue for up to 195 people, and retains much of the old layout that alumni will remember. Several acts have already played there, and its "blast from the past" potential was hinted at in August when Shane Carter (of Straitjacket Fits fame) and his band Dimmer played to a full house.



Above: Villiany playing upstairs at the Cook in October 2016.

Long-term additions will include a deck overlooking a courtyard area. Excavations in this area have already turned up a few surprises, including the remnants of an 1850's stable.

In future, patrons will be able to view the old barrel room (below the Corner Bar) filled with historic artefacts via a window.

Alistair is a member of the University of Otago Auckland Chapter that meets to discuss the chapter's activities and plan events and functions. The Chapter is aware of competition in the tertiary sector to attract undergraduate students and promotes Otago's unique selling points, including that the vast majority of students live in flats and residential colleges near campus.

"Involvement with an advisory group and the networking is really worthwhile. More than 17,000 Otago alumni live in the Auckland region and if we can connect with some of these in a positive way that's good for everyone."

Much of Alistair's strong interest in Otago stems from his experiences studying commerce in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which gave him both a thorough grounding in business basics and, through socialising, broad connections that have been personally and professionally rewarding.

"I had a lot of fun [at Otago] which included meeting some great people. In my early career I continued to be involved with the Business School, so I have kept ties with Dunedin and the University. One of Otago's real strengths and a part of its identity is that – through residential colleges, sports or social activities – you get to know people from different schools and faculties. To this day I know builders, physios, teachers, dentists, doctors and business people from my time at Otago."

Alistair's family connection with the region extends beyond his current involvement in the Captain Cook Hotel venture and the University being his alma mater; he is pleased his son is now studying second-year law and arts papers at Otago.



Above: Many interesting historical features were uncovered and preserved during refurbishment.