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A corner site, a Celtic Bar and it all turned out far better than he expected. Publican Bertie Burleigh talks to **Kath Brown** about Peggy Gordons' first 20 years.

This Friday, November 22, it will be 20 years since Bertie Burleigh opened the doors of his new venture. And the birthday celebrations have already begun, in true Celtic style. Bertie wants everyone who has ever had a drink there to come back for another. And of course, if you haven't been there, go and see what you have been missing.

"We're creating history here," says Bertie. "No other pub in town has lasted 20 years."

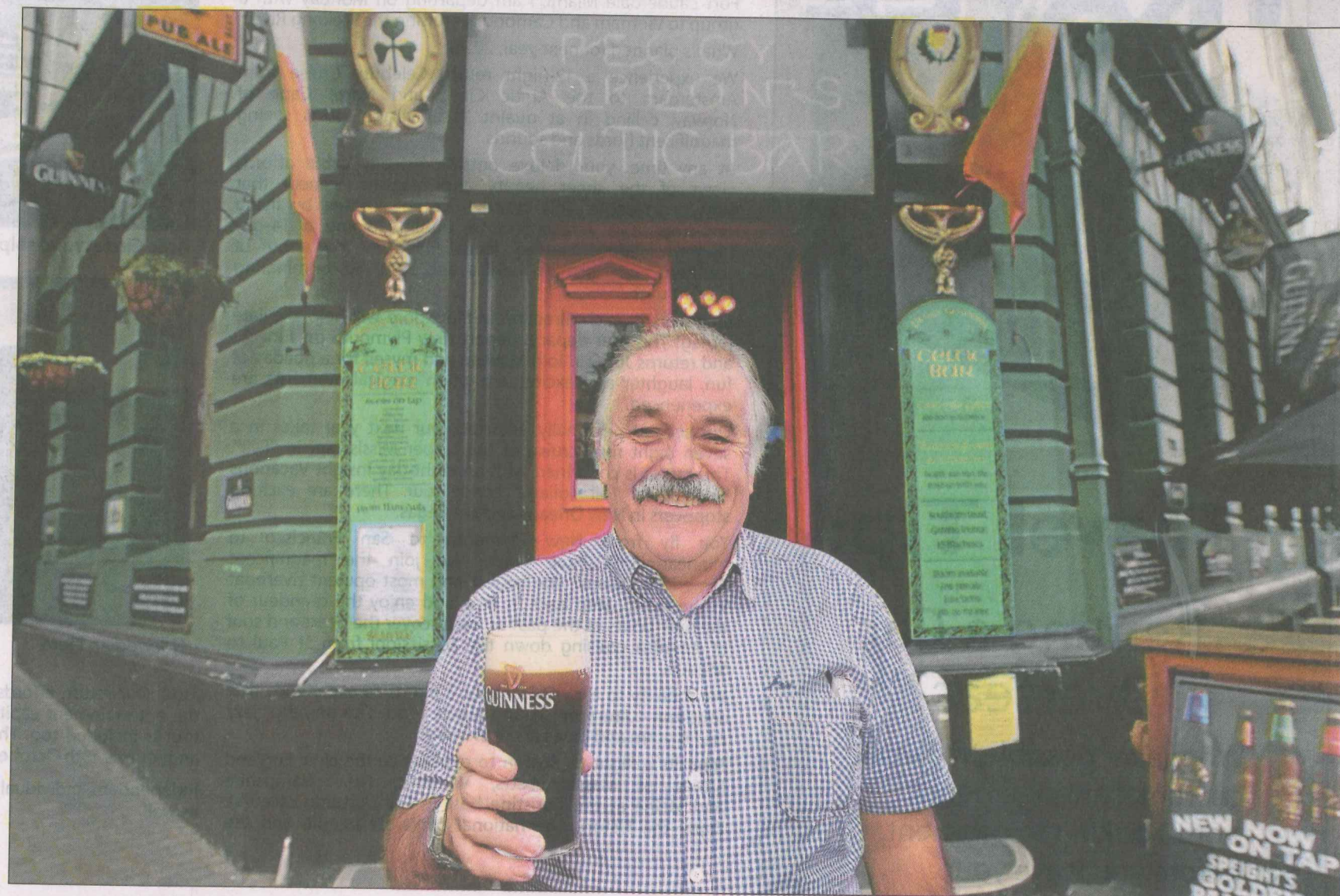
Bertie arrived in New Plymouth from Auckland in 1993. He and his wife, Lynne and their two daughters had come over from Scotland in 1979, and in New Zealand Bertie continued to work offshore on the oil rigs and driving trucks during his two-week shore leave.

"But my wife died in 1992 from breast cancer. That changed my life and gave me the strong affiliation I have with Hospice to this day.

"I had to bring up my daughters – they were seven and nine – and I think I did a good job because now they are both school teachers."

Bertie loved working on the rigs but knew it was impossible to continue. "It was physically dangerous work. You were living on the edge and I liked the job because of the danger and I like anything to do with the sea. I've always been a sea person."

He says he realised New Plymouth needed something different. "It had nothing, just the State Hotel and the Duke of Devon. I decided on a Celtic bar. I remember talking to the builder and saying to him, 'Make sure the seats are strong'. We'd gone up to Auckland to watch the Lions play and we found that when the Lions and their supporters went into an Irish bar they were just screaming and dancing on the seats. What I recognised was that



Guinness man: Bertie Burleigh is ready to celebrate 20 years of his Peggy Gordons Celtic Bar in New Plymouth.

Photo: FAIRFAX NZ

people loved it. It was what they wanted to do so we had to get that right."

When he was looking for a suitable site he remembered Bob Jones' advice: Build on a corner. And that's what we did. It was a brilliant place to be." And of course he is close to the sea. "I can smell it every day."

That opening day 20 years ago is a permanent memory for Bertie. "We ran out of every single beer we had. The breweries totally underestimated the kick from the town. The response from the town and the province was huge. They were heady times.

"They were 20-hour days. You were at the coal face and they kept coming at you. The business wasn't set up for this attack. We had to move to the next phase immediately. Hell's teeth, we needed more chiller space.

"We knew we had to be better at what we were doing. There were a lot of things involved. We were ready for a certain business level and we got absolutely blown to bits. It gets quite scary. We were being tested in every single facet of our operation."

Who would have thought that being so popular was going to prove so difficult? "Exactly, it was very hard work," says Bertie.

The affable Scotsman credits a lot of his success to the acumen of the business team he has behind him. "I know that the reason we have continued for 20 years is because that I have formed a very strong business association with Lion Nathan and Guinness, Bruce Richards from Staples Rodway and Ross Fanthorpe from Govett Quillam.

"These are the three huge business partnerships that have gone on behind the scenes and that I've kept. And of course there is Terry Donaldson from ANZ who I've



Party time: Bertie Burleigh supervises the erection of a giant marquee used for the street party to celebrate the All Blacks test match in New Plymouth this year.

Photo: FAIRFAX NP

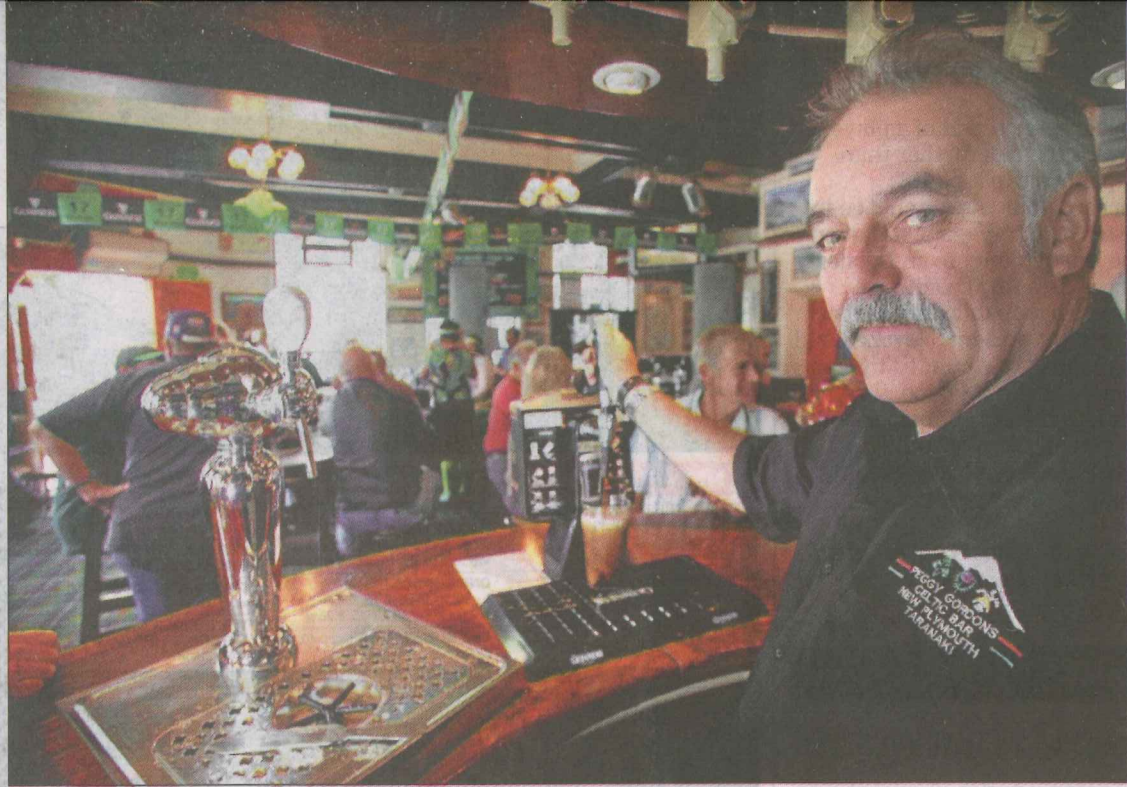
worked with for the last seven years.

"For anybody getting into business and you want to be there for the long term, you have to form these bonds. Those are the guys who kept me on the straight and narrow – or tried to," he laughs. "Especially over the last

few years. I do tend to tank it, you know."

Besides the bar on the corner, Bertie also operates the Basement Bar next door.

Continued page 17



Celtic calling: Bertie Burleigh pours another pint of Guinness on St Patrick's Day. Photo: FAIRFAX NZ

I Continued from page 16

"It's the home of Taranaki's Comedy Club."

Bertie likes any excuse to celebrate and he is an avid rugby fan so it was only natural that he should throw a street party to celebrate the third test between France and the All Blacks in New Plymouth this year. "We had the huge marquee and turned it into the official Steinlager fan zone. Those who weren't lucky enough to secure a ticket could watch it on the 14-metre big-screen television."

Of course, St Patrick's Day is a huge annual event at Peggy Gordons. "I know I've got a lot of St Patricks kids, who have been conceived on St Patrick's Day," he laughs.

Over the two decades Peggy Gordons has had more than a few characters and like every good publican Bertie shares a tale against himself.

"When Fleetwood Mac played in New Plymouth I went to the concert. The next day I saw this guy sitting in a booth eating fish and chips and I couldn't get over how much he looked like the bass guitarist John McVie from Fleetwood Mac. I mean he even had the same clothes on that John had worn the night before with the hat, shirt and white pants.

"And I thought 'why would you do that?' I said to him when he had finished his fish and chips, 'Do you not get pissed off with people asking why you look like the bass guitarist from Fleetwood Mac? And he said, 'Not really, no.'" I said, fine, have a lovely day.

"As he was walking out the door I saw a guy who was one of the band engineers who I knew. I said to him, did you see that guy walking out the door and he said yeah yeah and I said I just spoke to him and asked him why the hell he was dressed up like John McVie and the engineer said: 'It is John McVie.'

"We have a lady called Linda Corbett (the duchess) and she has been a regular since day one. She's 89 now but she's still kicking and comes in. And Martin Reilly arrived on day one and he too is still a regular.

"One of the characters we used to get in here was Ray Mason, the streetwalker. He's still alive. He is in a resthome and enjoying his life in retirement," Bertie laughs.

He is grateful for the staff who have helped him through the years and for his regular customers, some of whom have been with him the whole 20 years.

"We have had a lot of staff over the years and some of them have gone on to bigger and better scenes. The people who worked for me when the bar opened, Colin and Jacque Pettigrew, well Colin is now the CEO of Yarrows and lives in Australia."

Another former staff member is Cherie Bourgoise who now runs the Bella Vita restaurant in town.

BE IN TO WIN

This week every customer at Peggy Gordons will receive a free entry for a great prize - a trip for two to Brisbane, Australia, three nights accommodation and tickets to Mrs Brown's Boys. The prize will be drawn at 5pm on Sunday and you must be there to win.

Patrons can get their photos put up on the photo board.

Sign the birthday card.

And of course there are tremendous Guinness specials throughout the weekend.

In the course of 20 years in business Bertie has known a lot of New Plymouth people. "I've had a lot to do with some of the characters around town like restaurant owners Steve Petrovski and Andre Teissonniere."

Bertie actually knew of Andre many years before they both lived in New Plymouth. "He was a chef and used to run a restaurant, Petit Paris, in my home town of Largs."

Largs is a holiday resort just west of Glasgow on the river Clyde. People from Glasgow used to go to Largs for the Glasgow Fair, one of the longest running fairs in Scotland and dating back to the 12th century.

The Glasgow Fair originally marked the beginning of a two-week holiday period for the Glasgow residents. Factories and businesses closed and there was a race for the bus and train stations by the resident to enjoy their holiday. The traditional opening day was July 7 and these days the fair only lasts two days.

Bertie remembers as a hectic time of year, but loads of fun. "It was absolutely massive and that's why there are so many boarding houses and bars in Largs. All the shipyard workers would come to Largs, hankies on their heads, fish and chips on the beach and a pint of beer at lunchtime."

Bertie owns the lease on Peggy Gordons — and is keen to buy the building. The owners were originally reluctant to sell the new earthquake regulations have made them think again, so Bertie is hopeful the deal will go through.

"Would I do it again? Yes. I have always enjoyed it. It's been good.

"And I would like to thank my wife, Susan, and daughter Shaylee for all their support. To the people of Taranaki, I say thank you.

"It's been a great 20 years."

No doubt Bertie Burleigh will soon be planning the 30th birthday celebrations.