

Media Release

Foxton, 22 March, 2013

Inspired by Foxton's Te Awahou–Nieuwe Stroom Tourism Project: A New Business Investment is Under Way

It was back in 2010, when Jim and Sarah Harper first heard about the plans for a Museum and Cultural Centre for and about the Dutch in New Zealand, right next to windmill De Molen in Foxton. Their thoughts immediately turned to their street organ '*De Lieve Stem*'. And without a second thought, the Harpers offered the Dutch Connection the use of the historic instrument – built in 1880.

The Wellington couple are now bringing *De Lieve Stem* closer to the Dutch Connection museum, where it will spend its future days entertaining the crowds. Jim and Sarah are in the process of setting up business in Foxton.

They bought the 90 year old Racing Club building on Main Street, in 2012, after falling in love with it during a random visit. "To our great surprise, we saw that the property was for sale on Trade Me. Right then, we decided to buy it and relocate my consultancy business to Foxton. This will be our new home," says Jim.

Jim and Sarah own a range of mechanical music machines dating from the 18th and 19th centuries. The biggest and loudest of them all is '*The Sweet Voice*', a '*Draaiorgel*' that entertained the crowds in Amsterdam on a daily basis for many years. It was owned by the Perlee Company until 1962.

The Dutch Connection is extremely grateful. "It will be absolutely fabulous to have the traditional sounds from home, to welcome visitors into '*Onze Plek*' or '*Our Place*' once we are in business," says Arjan van der Boon, Chairperson of the museum trust.

Jim Harper has painstakingly restored the street organ after he bought it from its previous owner in the United States. "Back then, it was just a huge box of broken 120-year-old bits." says Jim. The couple worked on it for two years, and since it became operational again in 2002, *De Lieve Stem* has sung its popular Dutch and classical tunes at many regional events – including the official opening of De Molen, Te Papa's 10th birthday, and a number of Dutch Queen's Day celebrations.

"I imagine that at the official opening of the Te Awahou-Nieuwe Stroom (TANS) community and tourism project, we will hear Maori *karakia* welcoming people, and we will also hear the organ play the Dutch historical songs from our childhood that we know so well," says Arjan. "It will be an emotional moment for our Dutch guests. And Jim and Sarah want *De Lieve Stem* to play for visitors on a regular basis. That will prove to be a great promotion and an attraction for young and old alike. Te Awahou-Nieuwe Stroom will have its own recognisable sound vignette. An exciting Maori and Dutch mix!"

Jim and Sarah Harper are making a substantial investment in Foxton – as a result of the plans to turn Foxton into a tourism destination. The intrepid couple have commenced rebuilding the Foxton Racing Club building according to an architect-designed plan that both meets 100% of seismic building requirements and also preserves all the key heritage features, along with the original street facade.

Due to the new earthquake strengthening rules, most of the original building had to be demolished. But the original facade of the Foxton Racing Club that they spontaneously fell in love with has been retained.

"We have committed to a considerable expense to preserve the look of the building," says Jim. "We made this the core requirement for our engineer, architect and builder, even though it was not required because the building has no heritage listing. Foxton has a fantastic long history, and we hope all those involved with town's older buildings will do their utmost in trying to preserve that visual heritage. Keeping "the look" in Foxton will all add to the tourism appeal that will be strongly driven by the huge TANS project. We believe that visitors will want to come here and soak it all up; in particular, the feeling of the New Zealand heartland which is still here to be experienced - in Foxton".

The Harpers found that the one and only central bearer wall in the building had been removed years ago. Additionally, while in the building, they experienced a few unnerving earthquake shakes generated by the South Taranaki fault. It was also an identified "earthquake prone building" and engineers advised that it was not feasible to attempt strengthening so it needed to be demolished. To retain the facade, the back layer of the double cavity wall was removed and a new reinforced wall was built after hundreds of Helifix Ties were inserted.

"We are now creating an architect-designed new building that meets 100% of the building code for earthquake resistance," says Jim. "At the same time, key heritage features, like the facade, internal woodwork, the strong room and its beautiful historic door (made about 1865) have been preserved – all dating back to the days when the front section was the Commercial Bank of Australia. When we talk to the locals, they tell us that they're pleased that the building will look the same and, in fact, even better."

Arjan is impressed by the courageous initiative by Jim and Sarah to rebuild the Foxton Racing Club. "It shows the potential of our Te Awahou-Nieuwe Stroom project for Foxton," he says. "We've basically now attracted the first business investment from outside. More will follow, as we bring together the local library and community centre with a Maori art and crafts gallery, plus a national Dutch museum centre that tells the story of one of our country's major immigrant groups. By combining all that with the stories of a historic flax and river town – the birthplace of the Manawatu – we are creating a major tourist attraction that will include the Flax Stripper Museum and a raft of river activities.

"Sarah and Jim's interesting collection of music boxes, mechanical pianos, player organs and other self-playing devices fits extremely well with Foxton's heritage and, for example, the newly reinvigorated and also earthquake strengthened MAVtech museum. We are creating synergies here between a range of initiatives, which also include the successful new Dutch Market on State Highway One, and the Manawatu Hotel that will re-open and tell the story of the battle to open the Foxton River Loop. Visitors will have more and more things to do, see and experience.

"Along with all these initiatives taking shape on the side, and people making significant investments in Foxton, Te Awahou-Nieuwe Stroom is already contributing to generating confidence in the new tourism trade that it will bring to Foxton, and the region."

For more editorial information:

Phone ***Jim and Sarah Harper***: 04 385 8377

Or ***Arjan van der Boon***, Chair of The Dutch Connection Museum Trust: 027 494 365

Photos:

- Draaiorgel 'De Lieve Stem'
- The old Foxton Racing Club building – before the big makeover
- The building work on the Foxton Racing Club building in full swing