



English Leicester stalwarts believe in the future of the breed which has been farmed in New Zealand for 150 years.

---

Retired farmer Don Reid can remember when 78 English Leicester rams left his family's Darfield property on a truck to go out to their stud's many customers.

That was the sheep breed's heyday for the Reid family in the mid-1960s when they carried 350 stud ewes and Don was the last member of three generations to run the stud - first recorded in 1895.

We sold lots of rams and I think the most rams we sold in one year was 150. I remember one truckload of 78 rams that went off at one time."



The English Leicesters were highly valued then for their strong wool for carpet making and ability to raise a good lamb, he said.

Past and present English Leicester farmers celebrated 150 years of the breed being in New Zealand on Thursday at the small farm of Bede and Decima McCloys at Harewood, near Christchurch

On display were English Leicesters from eight breeders with talks centred on the future direction of the breed.

**The English Leicester has stood the test of time**

Inglewood farmer Philip Threlkeld was the first to run English Leicesters near Flaxton in Canterbury in 1865, bringing them over from Britain. He started the breed's first recorded flock and by 1894 had 12,000 ewes

English Leicester Breed Society president Pam Tait said the breed's feat of being farmed for 150 years was worth celebrating

She said high country farmers initially turned to putting an English Leicester ram over their merinos for a Halfbred that produced less coarse wool than the Lincoln and a good meat and wool sheep.

The English Leicester was still used by high country farmers for this purpose but in much fewer numbers and breeders were today promoting the breed's resilience against foot rot. The breed lost ground in the 1980s with the high sheen in its strong wool considered slippery by the carpet trade and other breeds were favoured for their high bulk and loft to help carpet wools stand up.

Tait said the English Leicester had much going for it with a lovely crimp and wool handling and made beautiful rugs.

She said the challenge for the 12 remaining breeders was to improve the breed's marketing and promote its assets with younger people needed to increase the breeding base

Breeders had made good progress in toning down the animal's shoulders and increasing its leanness and length. Fertile ewes were good mothers and produced quick growing twin lambs, she said.

The largest commercial farmer of the breed is Michael Costello with about 3000 ewes in Hawarden and farmers such as the Northcotes continues to use English Leicester rams on their merinos.

Like Tait who had to stop her stud when her son went dairying, Reid no longer has English Leicesters, but was among past breeders at the anniversary with files and clippings of milestones in his collection.

He said it was sad that there were few flocks remaining in New Zealand and they were worthwhile retaining as they were part of New Zealand's sheep heritage.

"We want to keep the breed running and we don't want to see that slip away because it served its purpose at the time and it could easily come back as long as the breeders do the right thing."

Reid's Riversleigh stud remains in the green New Zealand Flock Book at Flock Number seven - one of the oldest still recorded and in theory still operating

His grandfather, Robert Reid and a great uncle founded the flock in 1893 with five ewes from Threlkeld and among buyers were Sir Robert Heaton Rhodes, Canterbury Agricultural College and more latterly the McCloys.

The stud flock was taken over by his dad, another Robert, with Reid carrying it on from 1979 to 1990 at the family farm, Riversleigh, before moving to another Darfield farm.

Now 74, he remains ever hopeful that the next generation of Reids might carry on the family tradition with several of his children living on lifestyle blocks.

Reid disposed of his flock in small lots so the parting "wasn't too much of a shock to the system."

"It was very hard to let them go, but I still have the memories."

Tim Cronshaw

The Christchurch Press