

# English Leicester Breeders celebrate 150 years in NZ

Over 30 loyal English Leicester sheep breeders gathered near Christchurch recently to celebrate their breed's 150 years in New Zealand. They marked the fundamental role of the breed in the development of this country's sheep industry and shared their hopes that it will continue to make an important contribution.

Members assembled a considerable array of historical memorabilia for display at the function. English Leicester genetics continue to figure prominently in at least two widely-farmed breeds, Halfbreds and Corriedales. At least two breeders maintain English Leicester studs to supply rams for their own cross-bred flocks — Bob Todhunter's Cleardale Station in the Rakaia Gorge, and the Northcote Brothers of Highfield, near Culverden.

One breeder, Michael Costello of Hawarden in North Canterbury, uses his Silverhope stud as the foundation for his own commercial flock of pure English Leicesters, numbering about 3000. He has found the breed highly suited to his property.

The 150th anniversary field day at the Karendale stud of Bede and Decima McCloy saw six studs displaying rams and ewes. Each breeder spoke of their own flocks' attributes and the gathering shared informal discussion on a wide range of topics, mostly around ensuring the breed continues to compete successfully within a national flock that is increasingly populated by new and composite breeds.

Among those present with some of their sheep were Ivor and Margaret Robinson of Ravenswood stud near Rangiora, New Zealand's oldest English Leicester stud still in existence. It dates back to 1886, when Margaret Taylor's grandfather Joseph Taylor founded his stud in what is now the Christchurch suburb of Papanui.

Joseph Taylor would a little later purchase rams from the Threlkelds who in 1865 established the very first English Leicester stud in New Zealand, at Flaxton near Kaiapoi where a road still bears that family's name. Breeders in South Africa, Canada and most states of Australia have in the past purchased Ravenswood sheep.

As longstanding English Leicester Society president Pam Tait recounted in her annual report, the breed came to prominence with the inauguration of the frozen meat export industry. Prior to that, South Island run-holders were using Lincoln sheep across Merinos to boost wool production, but the new meat trade called for a different type of carcass and the English Leicester fitted the bill.

By 1892, there were 41,000 ewes here. Pam Tait said it was the progeny from these sheep for which the marketing slogan "Prime Canterbury Lamb" was coined. Over the last half-century, interest in the breed waned as market demand trended towards leaner carcasses. English Leicester breeders responded by intensifying culling programmes and adopting new technologies such as CT scanning to boost meat yields.

The breed's tall conformation is still relevant in modern sheep breeding for meat carcasses, but English Leicester wool is also keenly sought for specialised manufacturing

processes that leverage its high lustre and bulk, attributes also valued by craftspeople. While the breed remains largely based in the South Island, sheep have been regularly sent to the North Island, and there is a stud near Dannevirke, Gavin Henriksen's Te Pamuiti.

Also present at the gathering at Karendale was noted breeder Colin Taylor from Western Victoria, Australia, who has previously judged English Leicesters at A&P shows in New Zealand. He commended breeders on "... a wonderful display of sheep." "You can't go wrong breeding sheep like that," he told them.

English Leicester breeders gathered for the 150th anniversary of their breed's establishment in New Zealand.



Australian English Leicester breeder and judge, Colin Taylor, was impressed with the sheep on display at the field day



Over 30 loyal English Leicester sheep breeders gathered near Christchurch on 30 April 2015 to celebrate the breed's 150 years in New Zealand.

**Speakers at Celebration**



David Bennett



Bob Todhunter



Ross Manson



Nicky Jefferd



Ivor Robinson



Bede McCloy



Alister Eckhoff



Don Reid



David Bennett