

Meaty stores from Main Divide

The Southdown is a breed that has re-invented itself in the past decade or so. This special four-page feature relays the role it is playing on farms across the country, and where the Southdown Society sees its future.

Tony Benny kicks-off with a report from The Lakes Station, in North Canterbury.

IN HIS 35 years on Lakes Station in inland North Canterbury, Ted Phipps has tried a few different breeds and has now turned to Southdown rams to produce meaty store lambs in his high country property's short summer season.

Phipps started with merinos but struggled to get acceptable lambing percentages so then tried half-breds and Corriedales before settling on Perendales for his ewe flock.

"They've been good money makers for us," Phipps says. "I've had to cut the numbers back a bit because they eat a bit more than the finer-wool sheep. I think they eat in their sleep just about, they soon chew the country out."

Three years ago he decided to add Southdown rams to the mix and he's been pleased with the results.

"The hoggets were doing quite well. They were big hoggets so I thought I'll put some in lamb and that's when I went to the Southdown and we put those to the hoggets. They were small lambs, easy lambing and virtually no trouble. We put 1100 ewe hoggets to the Southdown and about eight or nine hundred of the older ewes."

What's really impressed Phipps is how quickly those lambs grow – much faster than the progeny of his Perendale rams. He lambs in late October and aims to get all the lambs off the place by February.

"The hoggets were doing quite well. They were big hoggets so I thought I'll put some in lamb and that's when I went to the Southdown and we put those to the hoggets."

He weans the pure Perendales off the easier, earlier half or "summer end" of the 7200ha property first and does the ewes and hoggets put to the Southdown on the rest of the property a week later, with all the lambs going straight on the truck at weaning.

"The lambs from the Southdowns pick up really quick, great weight gain as well. They're three weeks younger but they're up with the older lambs."

He aims to get the lambs up to an average of 32 kg. Once they're loaded, the truck is weighed to find the average.

"They go as stores but a lot of them will be killed because we sell them all on weight. They average 30-32 kg but a lot of those lambs will be close to 40kg but some will be under too."

The lambs all go to Southland with Alliance Meat. Some are killed straight away and Phipps says the rest are generally ready for the works after three or four weeks grazing on southern pasture.

Lakes Station is about as far west as you can go in Canterbury, nestled in the main divide. The home-stand's at more than 600m and the hills rise to 1724m.

"You're right in the main divide. You go

through the saddle here (Harpers Pass, the lowest alpine pass in the South Island) and you drop down into the West Coast. It's probably closer to the west coast than it is the east coast."

Finding the breed that can perform in that environment has been a challenge but Phipps says Perendales plus judicious

use of Southdown rams have been a winner. He breeds his own Perendale rams to get the animals he's looking for.

"I buy good big long Romney ewes and I put a Cheviot ram over them, so they're first cross and I just use those over the flock ewes. They're massive sheep. We do sell some, quite a few go to

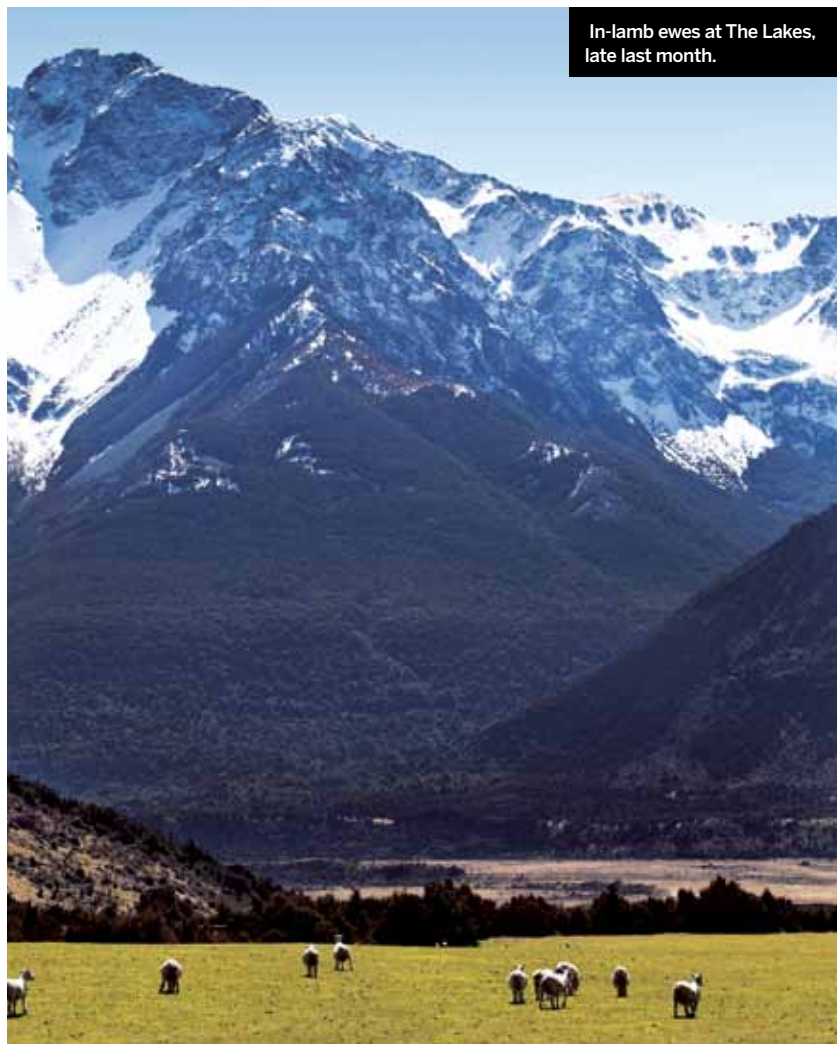
the North Island," Phipps says. "They're not registered. I don't keep any data on them. We keep all the twin ram lambs."

This year his cull ram lambs also provided him with a welcome bonus. "We went through the last of them and got a couple of hundred bucks for them. No-one wants them so it's a waste of time waiting till they've cut their teeth so we sold them and got \$200 for them on the place."

And with the fast finishing progeny of the Southdowns added to the mix he's expecting a good season. "They've done the job and I think those older ewes with those Southdown rams... we'll get jolly good lambs from them because they're older ewes and they'll milk well. The lambs grow quickly and they all go."



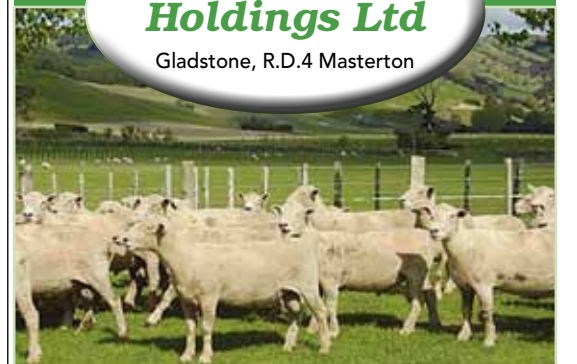
Ted Phipps



In-lamb ewes at The Lakes, late last month.

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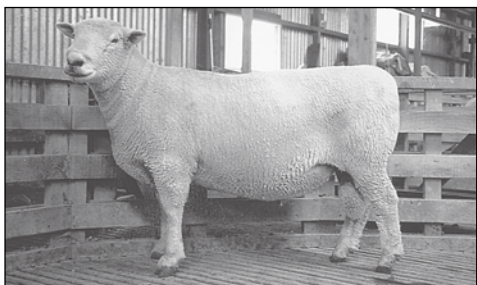
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RURAL NEWS // OCTOBER 18, 2011

44 SOUTHDOWN SPECIAL



Most gone by Xmas

» **ANDREW SWALLOW**

TAKE A look at Peter Grant's kill sheets and it's easy to see why he's keen on Southdown rams. A mob sent to Silver Fern Farms' Pareora plant on Nov 9 last year averaged 20.9kg, and a week later the mean was 21kg.

"We send them straight off their mothers up to Christmas basically. In dryland Canterbury you want most of your lambs away by then. That's the aim here: we want at least three-quarters gone before Christmas, and at good weights."

He's not lambing super early either. "We start the second week of August. That's early enough for here."

His 100ha farm runs down to the coast at Kingston, just south of Timaru. Any wind south of south-west hits it off the sea, with little shelter for the stock other than a few banks of round bales. Trees and toitois have been planted, but they've got some growing to do before they'll provide effective cover.

He describes his 600 ewes as 'Romney-cross'. The cross is mostly Texel, but there are about 200 Coopworth-cross among them. They all go to terminal sires, mostly Southdowns but with a couple of Suffolks among them.

"We stopped breeding replacements when we came down here - we downsized a few years ago."

Previously he'd run 1100 ewes and a Hereford stud on the current block and the then home farm of a similar size

a couple of kilometres away.

He started using Southdown's eight years ago when his supply of Suffolk rams from his brother's stud dried up. "Basically I used to get the rams for nothing!" Not that he was unfamiliar with the breed. "My father had a Southdown stud in the 60s and 70s when they were all the rage."

However, today's Southdown is a markedly different animal from those, he points out: larger and longer. "Now they're as big as the Suffolk."

He leaves the selection of his rams to breeder John Macauley. "He has all the SIL figures and knows what I want: nothing too extreme, reasonably long with good conformation, shoulders and feet. There's no use buying an extreme ram and finding it breaks down in the first season."

The lamb carcass looks to be good too. Silver Fern Farms' x-ray scanning at Pareora was in its first year last season so he has no previous data to compare them with, but most of his lambs

landed in the optimal range for fore, mid and leg yield. Some were also over the normal weight limit of 23.5kg, he admits.

"But they don't seem to penalise you quite as much early in the season if you get a few too heavy. It's after Christmas that they really start to ping you for those [over] heavy lambs."

Besides fitting the pasture growth curve of the farm,

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Peter Grant

Medlicott Southdowns

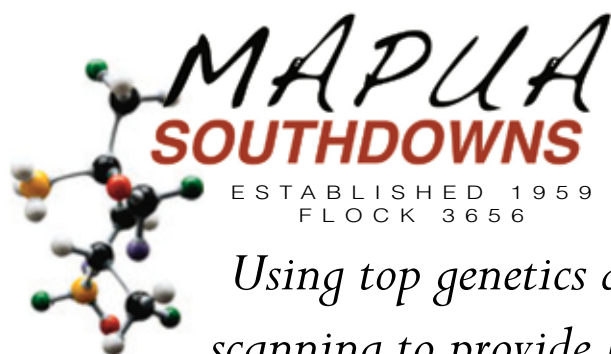
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Good results across old ewes and hoggets

» ANDREW SWALLOW

EASY LAMBING and early finishing are two of the main reasons Neil Heather, Rotorua, gives for using Southdown rams.

He runs 1200 Romney breeding ewes and an Angus stud on 325ha on the slopes of Mt Ngongotaha. Romneys are used for his flock replacements but a couple of Southdowns go out with them, and Southdowns are run with lighter ewes drafted out pre-mating.

"I put the Southdown with them so there's no chance I'll keep their lambs," he told *Rural News*. "I also use them over my hoggets. The lambs are nice and small and easy lambing which makes my life easier.... They're feisty little things.

They've got plenty of get up and go."

That's reflected in the conversion of scanning percentage to docking. "We normally scan about 160% and dock about 140-150%. This year it will be reasonably high because we've had fantastic weather."

Lambing is from mid September to October, with the rams only being out for a cycle and a half.

There's the potential to take a draft at weaning in early December, but Heather's preference is to leave the first draft until January "when everybody is back from holiday."

"They generally kill out at 17kg plus. They don't look big but they certainly kill out well. If we kill a lamb for the house it's always a Southdown

cross."

He believes the breed's under-rated as a meat sire, and should probably be used more widely than it is, though he acknowledges that's based just on personal experience. "I see the results of what we produce here and what goes off to the works. Nothing comes back as being too fat."

He largely leaves ram

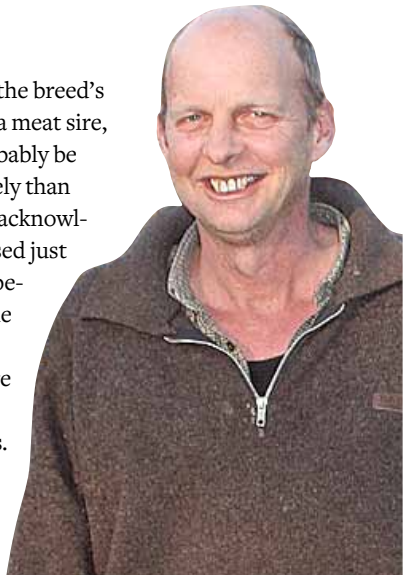
Neil Heather

selection to his breeder Charles Trousdale. "I have enough faith in him and he knows what I want.... I'm looking for good feet and a good long carcass on the rams. There is a lot of length in the Southdown now compared to the old days."

The rams are typically kept until they're five-six

years old, and he's been using the breed 10 years.

"I've always liked them as a breed and when we first crossed them with a Romney we got such good results we carried on. Then when we'd started mating hoggets and we tried using the Southdown we found it decreased problems."



Regional representative

IF NEIL Heather's name sounds familiar, that's probably because you've heard him quoted on water and farming issues in the Rotorua Lakes catchment.

He's the Rotorua/Taupo province president of Federated Farmers, and a board member of the Rotorua Lakes & Land Trust.

The Ngongotaha and Umurua streams flow through his Paradise Valley property, parts of which have been in his family since the 1920's. Both streams are fenced off and all banks have been re-planted over 25 years.

The largest part of the farm is on the side and towards the top of Mt. Ngongotaha, with 17ha of native bush protected by a QEII Trust covenant.

• Heather is also a trustee of the Mount Ngongotaha Restoration Trust and a member of the Lands Use Future Board.

Gone by Xmas

» FROM PAGE 44

and workload – he also grows some cereals – getting the lambs away early normally means getting better prices than post-Christmas.

He's hoping last year's rising schedule as the season progressed proves to be the exception, rather than a new rule. "It's the first year we've missed out a bit by being early."

This year's drop got off to a flying start with kind weather for lambing following a dry winter when the grass "never completely stopped growing."

Earlier this month some rain was needed to kick-off the spring flush, though his generally heavy ground "hangs on" in the dry better than most.

He's expecting his first draft will be away in the first week or two of November at about 19kg or better, and to achieve a 150-160% lambing percentage all delivered.

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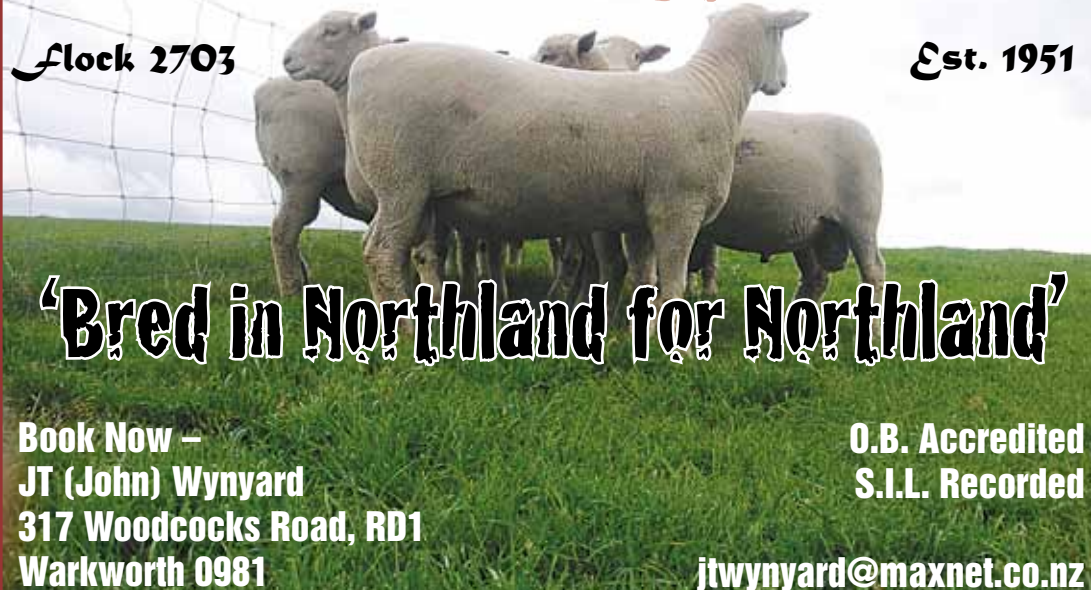
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RURAL NEWS // OCTOBER 18, 2011

46 SOUTHDOWN SPECIAL



Breed Soc president looks to future

» ANDREW SWALLOW

BUILD ON the illustrious history and look to the future, says Blair Robertson, president of the Southdown Society.

The 37-year-old sheep farmer from Waikoikoi, about 15km east of Gore, took on the president's role earlier this year. He's looking to build on the Southdown's renewed status as a terminal sire to be reckoned with by encouraging breeders to sign up to SIL and get the figures to back the performance they and their clients see in the paddock.

"The objective is to get everyone onto SIL," he told *Rural News*. "It's just so you've got a measure; a reference."

On his own 600-strong Southdown stud flock – they also run a Romney stud – SIL is used to cull the bottom end of rams, pick out any particular family line that isn't performing, plus identify the top performers in traits the eye can't reliably assess, such as meat yield and eye muscle.

"If a sheep's got a short jaw, or horrendous legs, that's not what SIL's for. It's for the internal things you can't see."

When all or nearly all the current 80 or so registered flocks are on board it will make it easier for Southdowns to enter and compete in progeny test schemes, he argues. As



Lively lambs: Southdown cross twins in tussock.

The objective for the breed is more of the same, building on its strengths of growth rate, yield and vigour

it is, the society is taking steps to do some growth rate and meat yield trials with competitor breeds as comparisons this season, though Robertson is reluctant to reveal the detail as it hadn't been finalised as this feature went to press.

Work with a North Island restaurant produced positive feedback on eating quality and the breed has had some success in the Glammies, he adds. But the breed's

key strength, and the one which has seen its popularity bounce back from the brink of extinction to a total stud ewe count of around 4500, is growth rate.

"You should be able to kill them at 11-12 weeks old at 17.5-18.5kg carcass weight." For producers prepared to lamb early, say in July, that can mean getting lambs away at the peak of the market in October, he points out.

"That's off their mothers but after weaning they'll go on just as well. You can take them through to 24, 25kg without any overfats."

The shift in structure to a longer bodied, larger animal than in the 1960s is what's made that possible, but Southdowns elsewhere in the world haven't all kept up, he notes. "In the UK they're still a more old-fashioned animal: smaller, shorter, woollier."

Australia's Southdown flock is starting to move in the same direction as New Zealand's, with quite a bit of NZ semen having been exported across the Tasman. In due course,

Robertson can see the trade becoming two-way. "We're going to need them to help us bring in some outside genetics in the long-term."

As it is, the objective for the breed at present is more of the same, building on its strengths of growth rate, yield and vigour.

"It's a very sound, meaty compact sheep that's easy doing. The survival when it's put across a maternal breed is quite outstanding."

So what does he see as the Southdown's main competitor. Perhaps surprisingly, it's not another terminal breed.

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