

Chris's Riccarton House Speech for Southdown Sheep Society Centennial Tour.

Master of Ceremonies, honorary life members, fellow breeders, ladies and gentlemen — welcome, and thank you for being here today to recognise this remarkable milestone.

The Southdown Sheep Society was formed in 1926 after the breed had become strong in its own right, with 490 active flocks recorded at the time. The decision was made to separate from the Sheep Breeders' Association, where Southdowns had been one of the founding breeds.

Becoming an independent society was likely influenced by the changing agricultural landscape of the time. The New Zealand Meat Producers Board had been established in 1922 and effectively controlled the rules surrounding meat exports. It wasn't until legislative changes in 1997 reduced that level of control and the perceived ability to favour certain sectors of the market that its influence began to lessen.

Many of those founding members would go on to have a significant impact on the breed over the decades that followed.

While today is about celebrating the sheep and the breed itself, it is also important to acknowledge the people behind the scenes. Remarkably, over the course of 100 years, the Society has had only three secretaries — a testament to the dedication and continuity of service within our organisation.

Another interesting point from those early years was that there were 49 official judges, evenly split between the North and South Islands. And, seeing as we are here in Canterbury, perhaps it's acceptable to gently tease our North Island friends by noting there were twice as many inspectors in the North Island as there were in the South!

The Southdown Sheep Society evolved alongside the fortunes of the breed throughout the twentieth century. Stud numbers peaked during the late 1950s and early 1960s before entering a period of decline, when the Southdown was

unfairly blamed for the excess fat associated with the Southdown-Romney cross — at the time the dominant fat lamb produced for international markets.

Yet at its peak, the breed was setting world-record prices for stud rams at ram fairs and providing excellent livelihoods for some of the country's finest stockmen.

Showing has always been an important part of the breed's history, particularly for stud breeders, although that too continues to evolve with changing times.

As has always been the case during difficult periods, good people stepped forward and got to work. Throughout our history, this Society has been fortunate to have those kinds of people.

During the late 1960s and 1970s, breeders and stockmen worked together to develop the type of animal required to meet Meat Board specifications. This collaboration led to the establishment of a "Scientific Committee", which worked alongside some of the country's leading university experts. Their work included obtaining, measuring, and shipping container loads of Southdown-cross meat to the United Kingdom to gather scientific data and market feedback.

That work laid the foundations for what later became carcass evaluation at our Royal Shows and, ultimately, the performance recording systems, ultrasound technology, and CT scanning we rely on today — tools that allow breeders to compare apples with apples and make measurable genetic progress.

At this centennial, it is fitting to recognise that only one member of that original 1972 Scientific Committee is still with us today. Now that he has reached 100 years of age himself, perhaps he picked up a few longevity secrets during all that research.

Our Society, and the people within it, continue to evolve. It is hard to imagine what breeders and their studs will look like another 100 years from now. Yet when we look back through our history, some things have never truly changed, despite the sheep themselves evolving over time.

The Southdown has always been a meat breed — an early maturing sheep producing exceptional quality and flavour. And today, as we gather together on tour and in fellowship, we celebrate not only the breed itself, but also the people, traditions, and achievements that have shaped its history.

There is an old saying I would like to leave you with:

“If you do not understand the past, how can you take care of the future?”

As we look ahead, we must continue working together for the good of our breed and its people — combining stockmanship, measurement, technology, and the sharing of knowledge. By doing so, we can preserve the integrity of our purebred Southdowns while continuing to achieve sustainable genetic gains that support productivity, efficiency, and the future viability of New Zealand’s sheep meat industry.

Chris Medicoot