

Sheep

What's what

Matanaka Farm Buildings, Waikouaiti

Built on the edge of a windswept sea cliff, this small collection of buildings is a testament to the tough, isolated life endured by many of Otago's earliest settlers. The buildings, which include a stables, granary, store, schoolroom and outdoor toilet, are all protected and managed by the Historic Places Trust. They can be accessed by the public during daylight hours.

Hey guess what?

The first sheep to set foot in New Zealand arrived with Captain Cook in May 1773. Cook's plans to introduce the animal to Māori were thwarted, however, when all the sheep died just days later. It is thought they poisoned themselves by eating the berries of the tutu plant.

What's what

Totara Estate, Oamaru

The first sheep to be shipped to Great Britain on the refrigerated *SS Dunedin* were slaughtered at Totara Estate, just south of Oamaru. This site was purchased by the Historic Places Trust in 1979, and the buildings have since been restored and opened to the public as a museum.

Stat attack

By 1871 there were a staggering 3.7 million sheep in Otago – 38% of New Zealand's total sheep population at this time. This was the highest percentage the region ever attained, and is a testament to the prosperity of early Otago. Today, there are approximately 5.5 million sheep in Otago, making up 14% of the national total of 39 million.

Whether it's from the smell of a sheep truck driving down Cumberland Street in Dunedin, or reading about the latest escapades of Shrek, most Otago people are familiar with the woolly white animals that share our region. There's no doubt about it – sheep hold a special place in Otago.

The first sheep farmers began to arrive here soon after the Treaty of Waitangi was signed in 1840. The pioneering sheep flocks were almost exclusively made up of Merinos – a Spanish breed prized for their fine wool. In those days, due to the distance of New Zealand from other trading countries, wool was the only product that was able to be exported by New Zealand farmers. It fetched high prices overseas until the bottom fell out of the market in the 1870s, forcing sheep farmers to find another source of income.

The solution came in the form of the invention of refrigeration, which enabled the first shipment of frozen meat to leave our shores on 15 February 1882, bound for the 'home country' (Great Britain). The cargo arrived successfully in England three months later, paving the way for the billion-dollar New Zealand meat industry.

Sheep farming still remains an important business in Otago today, although the growing dairy industry has seen many a Southern sheep farm turned over to cows. Merinos are still farmed for their wool, but are now mostly confined to the Central Otago high country. Growing numbers of composite breeds, such as the Texel cross, East Friesian and Romney cross, are most favoured for their meat and are farmed from North through to South Otago.



Sheep farmers are not necessarily men!



Every spring brings a new generation of Otago sheep

