

The History of Agriculture in Canterbury, New Zealand

Agriculture before 1900

Māori and early European farming

Banks Peninsula was close to the southern limit for kūmara (sweet potato) growing, and gardening was never as important in the Māori economy of Canterbury as it was further north. The introduction of potatoes extended the range of cultivated crops.



European farming began when cattle were landed near Akaroa in 1839. Before 1850, the Deans family had established a successful farm at Riccarton, and other Europeans were farming on Banks Peninsula and at Motunau.

A piece of paradise

In 1844 John Deans wrote to his father about his land at Riccarton: 'This is certainly by far the best place I have seen in New Zealand, and for squatters like ourselves no place could be better, as there is plenty of level land with good pasture for cattle of all descriptions ... there is a wood about 200 acres ... and a river of water clearer than crystal (indeed the finest water I ever saw) running close past the front.'¹

Immigrants

Three years after the arrival of the Canterbury Association settlers in 1850, the Canterbury Province was established. To support development of the region, it began recruiting more immigrants from the United Kingdom, offering assisted passages to labourers and skilled workers in particular.

While 56% of migrants between 1854 and 1870 were from England, 22.1% were from Ireland and 19.9% from Scotland. Scottish shepherds were encouraged to emigrate and help on the back-country runs.



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Sheep farming

Unexpectedly, sheep farming gave Canterbury its economic start, and no other region is more closely associated with it. Sheep were turned out on 'native' pastures to produce wool, which was in demand in Europe. By 1860, most of the region was divided up into large leasehold runs, and many of the runholders were to become extremely wealthy. Sheep numbers reached 3,152,525 in 1885 – 21.7% of the national flock. The top breed was merino. Besides wool, skins and hides, tallow and potted and salted meat were produced.



High-country sheep runs

On the plains, leasehold sheep runs gave way to freehold estates and family farms in the 1870s and 1880s. But in the high country, sheep grazing on leased land remained the norm. The laconic shepherd and the autumn muster became key elements of the image of Canterbury.

Wheat

Steel ploughs and reaping and threshing machines made wheat-growing easier and more profitable.

In the 1870s and early 1880s Canterbury enjoyed a wheat boom. Between 1870 and 1913, it had more than half the total area of New Zealand's wheat land. Large flour mills were built in Christchurch and Ashburton. But by 1900 the boom was over. It had speeded up the change from large sheep runs to mixed farming on smaller properties.



Canterbury cocksfoot

For a few years Banks Peninsula farmers earned good money from an unusual crop: the seed of cocksfoot grass. This plant flourished on the volcanic hills, which the settlers had cleared by burning. The seed was in demand for pastures in the North Island, and in 1905 the peninsula grew 83% of New Zealand's supply.



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The family farm

Some small landowners in the 1850s were little more than subsistence farmers, but a 'middle rung' of farmers was already producing wool, meat, milk and wheat for markets.



More intensive farming on the plains was possible once rural railways were built and shelter belts planted. New crop options – peas, potatoes and fodder crops – made small farming more profitable. Large areas of the plains were without surface water, and the first water races were built in the 1870s, bringing water to stock between the Waimakariri and Rakaia rivers. Stock races were built in mid-Canterbury and on the Waiau Plains in the 1880s.

Refrigeration helped make smaller farms viable. The Canterbury Frozen Meat Company was formed in December 1881 and slaughtering and freezing began at Belfast, on the northern outskirts of Christchurch, in February 1883. Cross-bred sheep, for both meat and wool production, were developed as the family farm emerged. But the depression of the 1880s limited opportunities to get into farming in Canterbury, and in the 1890s many farmers moved to the North Island to try their luck.



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Agriculture after 1900

Breaking up the large estates

The spread of the family farm was hastened by the breaking up of large freehold estates between 1890 and 1914. The Liberal government acquired estates for farm settlements, and some owners subdivided their land privately.

By the time of the First World War, the family farm of between 320 and 640 acres (130 and 260 hectares) was the norm on the plains. After the Second World War, some large properties were cut up by the government for returned servicemen.

Farming in the 20th century

Between the world wars, farm mechanisation, the use of lime, and improved seed, raised farm productivity. There was even greater progress in the 1950s and 1960s. 'Canterbury lamb' remained one of the region's major products.

Sheep on show

Canterbury celebrates its anniversary not on the actual date of its founding (16 December), but on Show Day, held by the Agricultural and Pastoral Association each November. At the Christchurch Showgrounds 'town and country mingle more freely than in any other metropolitan centre of New Zealand'.



In 2002, sheep numbers reached 4,931,565. But this represented only 12.5% of the national flock, compared with 21.7% in 1885.

The region also remained 'the granary of New Zealand'. In 2002, 60.7% of the country's wheat, 51.1% of the barley and 43.7% of the oats were grown in north and mid-Canterbury. The Ashburton district alone produced 45.3% of the country's wheat.



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Orchards, market gardens and vineyards

Today, on small holdings, especially around Christchurch, farmers grow vegetables and fruit, and raise poultry. Apple and other fruit orchards have been planted in the sun-trap valleys of the Port Hills and at Loburn. Some Ellesmere farmers grow vegetables for freezing in a plant near Hornby.



The region's first grapevines were planted by Akaroa's French settlers in the 1840s. After the first large vineyard was planted near Christchurch in the 1970s, grape-growing expanded at Waipara and Burnham, but the region produces far less wine than Marlborough.

In 2002, north and mid-Canterbury had 8.8% of the land used in New Zealand for horticultural crops.

Irrigation

Large-scale irrigation of the Canterbury Plains came only after the Rangitātā diversion race was completed in 1945. This drew water from the Rangitātā River and snaked across the upper plains to the Rakaia River. Three major irrigation schemes are supplied by the race.



Construction of a major irrigation scheme in the Amuri district began in 1977. Water flowed into the main race from the Waiau River in 1980. The smaller Balmoral scheme, with an intake on the Hurunui River, was begun in 1981. Farmers outside the schemes sank bores and used spray equipment.

In 2002 the 188,170 hectares of irrigated land in the region was almost half the total area of irrigated land in New Zealand. Much of the expansion occurred after 1985, despite the removal of government subsidies for irrigation.

The impact of dairying

With irrigation, dairying expanded quickly in the 1990s. North Island dairy farmers were attracted south by cheaper land. Effluent and heavy use of



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water from aquifers caused environmental problems.

Socially, different work routines disrupted traditional patterns of community life. Long-established families sold up, and share-milking increased the movement of families in and out of districts.

Despite the growth in dairying, in 2002 the greater Canterbury region still had only 7.7% of all dairy cows in the country.

Rural towns

In the 19th century, small townships had developed as rural service centres. Besides shops and stock and station agencies, they had churches, schools and public halls. Even in their heyday, few of these towns had more than 1,000 inhabitants.



After the First World War, country people began driving to Rangiora, Ashburton or Christchurch to shop. Some villages disappeared, leaving only a church or hall. Country schools, hospitals, banks and post offices closed, and hotels became taverns.

A few settlements grew because they were within commuting range of Christchurch. Hanmer and Akaroa became popular for holiday homes and retirement and, like Methven, with tourists.

Source:

The Encyclopedia of New Zealand

<http://www.teara.govt.nz/Places/Canterbury/Canterbury/7/en>



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