

For many years N° 51 Salisbury High Street, just outside the High Street Gate into the Cathedral Close, housed the religious bookshop of the SPCK, the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge. Above the door into the shop stood a wooden sheep, though this had no religious connection. It dated from the shop's former function, as an outlet for a firm called Stonehenge Woollen Industries. This had been founded in the early C20th as a semi-charitable organisation, aimed at regenerating the rural economy. Its woollen goods, many knitted at home by women working on a piecework basis, were successful enough for the company to have four other shops, all in London.



The breed of sheep depicted was the one that was traditionally found on the downs around Salisbury, the Wiltshire Horn, both genders of which have horns. However this particular sheep showed itself, on close inspection, to be a ram.

When Stonehenge Woollen Industries was wound up, in 1959, the SPCK took over the Salisbury premises. Around 2008 all the SPCK's 23 bookshops in the UK closed, after they'd been transferred to an American company whose stated good intentions weren't quite matched by reality. The Salisbury shop became increasingly derelict looking, but the sheep remained in place.

Come May 2010, the sheep was still there, but it now had no head. This had fallen onto the pavement and splintered into pieces, but the prominent horns were apparently intact, so could in theory have been used to create a new head. They were traced to a landfill site south of Salisbury, but not before several thousand tons of rubbish had been deposited on top of them.



A complete new head was therefore needed, but with an uncertain ownership situation nobody could be found to take responsibility for this. At the start of 2011 the Civic Society decided that the only way forward was for it to fund the repairs, and by May of that year a carver had been found, John Marriott, and the animal was taken down. It turned out that all of it was rotten, and rather than just a new head, a complete new sheep was needed.

Within a few months a fine new animal had been supplied, but a frustrating period then ensued, with the shop needing a new occupant, to enable repairs and redecoration to be carried out before the sheep could be put back in place. It finally went back up in November 2013, only for the winter months to show up problems with the coating used to replicate the fleece effect. In the summer of the following year the animal came down again, and drying it out and recoating it, in a more durable material, took over a year. By October 2015 it was finally back in place, with hopefully a long lifespan ahead of it before any more intervention is needed.

The need for a complete new sheep created an opportunity to amend the original design slightly, and the new animal is slightly closer to the actual appearance of a Wiltshire Horn than the original one was. That was in solid timber, whereas the new one was carved out of sheets of marine ply glued together, with a hollow in the middle, into which a time capsule was placed. Among other things this included a copy of the Civic Society's 'Salisbury in Detail' book, which includes a photo of the sheep before its downfall in 2010.

Below the sheep, a plaque explains the significance of its being up there. Both sheep and plaque are good examples of one important aspect of the Civic Society's work, which is to safeguard and explain features of the city which contribute to its character.

The owner of the hair salon which now occupies the premises, Phil Smith, is a big fan of the sheep, and is in fact using it as the logo on a new range of hair products, which are just about to go into supermarkets and other shops, nationwide. So after surviving a few vicissitudes, the Salisbury sheep is about to achieve an unexpected prominence.

