

Merchant made his mark on commerce

Nick Krause

Few individuals would have made as indelible an impression on Otago's

commercial landscape as merchant Sir Percy Sargood.

His vocation began in his late teens with a six-year apprenticeship in his father's textile manufacturing business. In September 1940, the year he died, Sargood was quoted as saying: "I have had 58 years' association with the firm from post boy to governing director."

He's also well-known as a philanthropist and supporter of the arts.

His grand-daughter Jill Blennerhassett tells the story of him loaning his late son Cedric's Steiner violin – one of the world's rarest – to the Kiwi child prodigy Alan Loveday to take to London to further his studies.

Born in Melbourne on September 26, 1865, Sargood entered his father's local business, Sargood Bros, aged 18.

A few years later he went to London to gain further merchant experience, including buying for the London office of the family firm. Then in 1891 he moved to New Zealand as manager of the company's Christchurch and Dunedin warehouses and boot factory. He was soon made a junior partner and took over full control a decade later, in 1903, following the deaths of both his own father and his father's business partner, John Alexander Ewen.

Sargood established one of the country's first staff provident funds at Sargood Son and Ewen, where he was governing director until his death in 1940, aged 75.

His grand-daughter said his family were proud of his reputation in staff welfare and pension provision.

As well as being leading warehousemen and importers, the company was also a large scale manufacturer. Its Dunedin boot factory had ground floor space of 13,000 feet (3963 metres) and at one stage employed more than 250 people operating 60 or so sewing machines.

In 1973 the business was bought by warehousing firm Bing Harris & Co of Dunedin and became Bing Harris Sargood (BHS) until it was, in turn, acquired in the early 1980s by Brierley Investments (BIL). The company was broken up in 1984, just as it



Indelible impression: There are many pointers to merchant Sir Percy Sargood's legacy in the South Island.

had become one of New Zealand's most prolific manufacturers of various Star Wars merchandise, according to a fan website.

His company may no longer remain but there are many pointers to Sargood's influence in the South Island – including Sargood Drive in Wanaka, Sargood Rd in Cromwell and Sargood St in Maori Hill, Dunedin.

Both he and his wife, Lady Lucy, gave support for the arts, including gifting a former art gallery to Dunedin. Now surrounded by sports-fields, it is undergoing refurbishment and will have multiple uses. The gallery also served as a memorial for their son, Cedric, who was killed at Gallipoli in 1915.

In 1939 Sargood founded the Sargood Bequest, a charitable trust offering grants for projects and activities associated with children and youth, culture, sports, outdoors, education and the environment.

His family, as trustees, now administer and

distribute around \$250,000 each year to New Zealand causes.

Sargood devoted time to the well-being of youth. A sizeable donation from the Sargood trust enabled construction of St Paul's Collegiate School's first purpose-built boarding house, Sargood House, in Hamilton.

He was involved with a scheme settling British boys from poor homes on Commonwealth farms and had strong ties to the YMCA and the scouting movement where he gained the top award for outstanding service.

The merchant also championed irrigation and orcharding. Wanaka Station, which he bought in 1912, won a reputation for its sheep and Friesian cattle.

Parcels of the station land were sold by family until the 1970s when the rest was gifted to the community. That land includes a large part of the Wanaka Golf Course, Wanaka Station Park, QE II reserve and Wanaka Lakefront. Remaining family land

A celebration of enterprise

The Fairfax Media New Zealand Business Hall of Fame was established in 1994 by the Young Enterprise Trust to recognise and celebrate individuals who have, through enterprise, made a significant contribution to the economic and social development of New Zealand.

In 2008 a physical Hall of Fame was opened at Auckland University Business School where the stories of the laureates could serve as inspiration to young New Zealanders.

An independent panel, chaired by laureate Sir Eion Edgar, selects the laureates, of which there are 112 to date.

The 2011 laureates, who were inducted last night in Auckland, are:

- Thomas Cawthron (posthumous): Shipping agencies/investment/contracting/philanthropy.
- Les Hutchins (posthumous): Tourism/conservation.
- Sir Percy Sargood (posthumous): Merchant/philanthropist.
- Brian Perry: Civil engineering/philanthropy.
- John Todd: Energy, investment, philanthropy.
- Anne and David Norman: Jewellery retailing/department store retailing/philanthropy.

parcels include the Rippon Vineyard on 65 hectares run by the Mills family, the Blennerhassett's Barn Pinch Farm and a further 55ha owned by the next generation of the Blennerhassett family.

Knighthood in 1935, Sir Percy – a keen golfer, horseman and fisherman – served with many organisations, including Rotary and the Chamber of Commerce. He represented New Zealand at the International Conference of the Chambers in London, and Dunedin at the Empire Conference in 1926.

He and Lady Sargood were hosts for garden parties and other fundraising for charities. After his death, the bulk of Sargood's personal fortune was distributed among charities and the rest formed the capital for the Sargood Bequest.

"I wish, for myself, that this kind, honest man had lived longer and that I could have known him at an age when I fully could appreciate his idealism and integrity," his granddaughter said.