

REPORT OF THE FLAX COMMISSIONERS.

In obedience to the foregoing instructions, the Commissioners proceeded at once to the discharge of the important duties imposed upon them.

With the view of procuring all the information that could then be got from those engaged, or interested, in the manufacture of the New Zealand flax, the Commissioners issued a circular and relative queries, of the latter of which a copy will be seen in the Appendix (No. 1).

These circulars and queries were sent to the Commissioners in each of the Provinces, who attended to their distribution and collection, and several of the Commissioners afterwards visited all, or the most important, establishments in their respective districts. Unfortunately, the replies to the queries were not so numerous or so complete as might have been expected. But such as they were, the information they afforded was carefully collated and digested; and the result of these replies, and the information received by the Commissioners during their personal visits, were embodied in an Interim Report, which, on being printed, was forwarded to the Commissioners and others interested in the trade, with the view of the former going carefully over that Report, and seeing that all the information received had been embodied in it.

The publication of the Interim Report called forth several other replies, and various criticisms thereon by the Press, and others; and the present Report has been framed after a careful reconsideration of the whole subject referred to the Commission.

The Commissioners may here state that they did not consider it advisable, in the state of the flax industry at the time they were appointed, to hold official inquiries throughout the Colony, because that course would have entailed a considerable expense without securing a commensurate advantage; and the result has so far justified the Commissioners in pursuing this course. Since then, however, a greatly increased interest has been awakened in the matter, and various new methods have been tried, and others are in course of trial, both with regard to machinery and other methods of preparing the flax, so that it will be for Government to consider whether or not this Commission should be re-appointed, or another one chosen; and if so, whether one or two of these Commissioners should not visit every district in the Colony, and carefully inquire into, on the spot, every process now in operation for dressing and preparing flax; and as they go along, impart information and give encouragement to all requiring the one or the other. From what the Commissioners know of the parties engaged in making experiments in the various modes of dressing the flax, they feel assured that such a visitation would be of incalculable benefit to all concerned. While it is to be regretted that so few replies to the queries were received, it is right to state that this, as a rule, arose from no unwillingness to give information, but from the fact that the parties then engaged in the new industry knew very little of the matters referred to in the queries, and did not feel warranted in committing their opinions to writing. There were others who thought that they had discovered something which they thought new, and which they preferred keeping to themselves, and for their own benefit.

Considerable progress has been made in procuring information, both on the principles which ought to regulate the manufacture of flax, and the mode of operation by which the best effects can be obtained, as well as regards the growth and cultivation of the plant; and it is now understood and felt that as quantity, as well as quality, is wanted to enable the demands of the English market to be supplied, it is the interest as well as the duty of every one in the trade to assist his neighbour to produce as good an article and as large quantities as himself. It is on this account anticipated that information will now be more readily imparted than it would have been twelve months ago; and it will have the advantage of being more the result of experience than of mere conjecture. It is also thought that those who have applied for patents to protect their alleged discoveries may abandon any right they may have under those patents, and allow to all the benefit they claim for themselves.

It will also be for the Government to consider whether authority should be given to the Commissioners to make experiments under their own inspection, whenever and wherever it shall be deemed by them to be necessary and useful to do so.

The object of the Queries issued by the Commissioners was to elicit information on the Growth, Culture, and Manufacture of the New Zealand Flax, and the Machinery used in its preparation; and as the information received in answer is arranged under these heads, the same course will be followed in this Report, viz.,—

- I. Growth and Culture.
- II. Manufacture.
- III. Machinery.

I.—GROWTH AND CULTURE.

The mode of growing flax from seed was a matter of considerable doubt; and the Queries were so expressed as to elicit all information possible on this point. The answers were more suggestive than otherwise, and the publication of the Interim Report induced several experiments on this point. Mr. Ludlam, of the Hutt, who has taken a deep interest in the progress of this inquiry, at once tested the first mode hereinafter suggested, and he says—"With a view of ascertaining the best mode of growing New Zealand flax from seed, I tried three experiments:—(1.) With fresh-gathered seed, soaked in warm water, at an even temperature of 110°, until the larger portion of the seed sank. (2.) With seed from the same package, soaked in warm water, at a temperature varying from 110° to 130°. (3.) With seed unsoaked. I sowed the seeds in a box placed in a green-