

REPORT FROM THE NEW ZEALAND COMMISSIONERS RELATIVE TO THE MANUFACTURE OF NEW ZEALAND FLAX.

The Hon. F. D. BELL and Hon. I. E. FEATHERSTON to the Hon. the COLONIAL SECRETARY.

(No. 34.)

SIR,—

London, 14th July, 1870.

Adverting to the serious embarrassments which must have been caused in the Colony by the doubts which recent prices for New Zealand Flax seemed to have caused as to its value, we considered it would be advantageous to visit the manufacturing districts where flax is used, and obtain the best information in our power in connection with this material.

We have now the honor to enclose a report prepared by our Secretary, Mr. Knowles, which embodies fully the result of the inquiries which were made during the visit to the districts in question.

We have, &c.,

F. D. BELL,

I. E. FEATHERSTON,

Commissioners.

The Hon. William Gisborne, &c., &c.

GENTLEMEN,—

London, 14th July, 1870.

In compliance with your suggestion, Dr. Featherston and myself recently made a tour through the manufacturing districts of England and Scotland, with a view to obtain such practical information relative to New Zealand Flax as might be of service to the colonists in its preparation and export. We visited Liverpool, Manchester, Rochdale, Leeds, Glasgow, Greenock, Edinburgh, Pennicuik, Leith, Kirkcaldy, Dundee, and Arbroath, and waited on several of the principal ropemakers, manufacturers, and spinners in those towns, taking with us samples of the flax as prepared by the colonists and Natives respectively.

We found amongst all classes a more or less practical acquaintance with the flax as ordinarily dressed, and amongst the manufacturers and spinners a general impression that it was not adapted, from what appeared to them to be the nature of its fibre, for any spinning purposes whatever; an impression which it will be seen presently has been in great measure removed.

The information obtained from the largest ropemaking firms in the kingdom, proves that the high price given for New Zealand flax last year was not on account of its known intrinsic value, but in the belief that it would be serviceable as a substitute for Manilla. Owing to the destruction of a large portion of the Manilla crop by hurricanes two years ago, the supply has been and still is so limited, that any article that would work up with it or take its place was eagerly sought after, and still continues to receive a trial. Unfortunately the great bulk of the New Zealand flax in the English market is of an inferior description, dull in colour, harsh and coarse in fibre, and very imperfectly freed from the leaf; whereas the quality preferred by ropemakers is that which most approaches Manilla,—a bright pale colour, soft and fine to the touch, and entirely free from scurf. The samples answering best to the description required (so far as we have seen) appear to come from Auckland; but in the best of them there is so much of the straw, leaf, or scurf, as it is variously termed, still adhering to the fibre, as to reduce its value considerably. The machinery employed to dress the flax in the Colony is evidently defective when it comes to the tapering end of the leaf; and it would be much better to cut six or eight inches off the end than otherwise so materially depreciate the value of the whole as is now the case. On this point the testimony was unanimous. The slightest portion of straw considerably lessens the value of the entire bale.

The first parcels that were bought by some of the ropemakers were of a very inferior description, and not answering to expectation a prejudice was created against New Zealand flax, which time and the better samples that are now coming forward will alone overcome. The strength of the rope was found to be much less than Manilla; and as it rotted more quickly when exposed to the wet of the deck, it was condemned by the Atlantic steamers first using it. It has been in use, however, for running rigging by sailing ships, and up to this date the reports have been uniformly favourable. Many of the American ships sailing out of Liverpool have for some time past taken a ton or two; and as the Americans universally prefer white ropes to brown, they will probably become large consumers if they continue to find it answer. This probability will be at once evident, when it is mentioned that the annual consumption of Manilla in America is, in round numbers, 15,000 tons, against only 5,000 tons in the United Kingdom. Already some 800 bales of New Zealand flax have been reshipped to North America, but with what result we have not yet been able to learn.

It is estimated that seven-eighths of the best samples of New Zealand flax sold have been used to mix with Manilla, not altogether surreptitiously, but in many cases to order, and as producing a cheaper rope, strong and durable enough for certain purposes. This latter has given satisfaction. We saw some good New Zealand rope at Liverpool, such as is supplied to the American ships; but at Glasgow we had the opportunity of inspecting a stock of very superior description, not greatly inferior to Manilla in its bright colour and glossy appearance. The general opinion is, that New Zealand flax, properly dressed, will find a good market for making a serviceable cheap rope, saleable at a price certainly not below £37, its present quotation, Russian being now £46, and Manilla £66. Provided the supply of flax be of the quality above mentioned, the large ropemakers of the North, (who are using it as an established article of their trade, and are therefore better able to judge of its qualities than