

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE.

WEDNESDAY, 8TH MAY, 1878.

Mr. ARTHUR JOHN BURNS, M.H.R., and a Director of the Mosgiel Woollen Factory Company, examined.

1. *By the Chairman.*] His Excellency the Governor has appointed a Commission to inquire into the working of the Employment of Females Act, and the Commissioners wish to learn from you whether, in your opinion, that Act and the amending Acts have answered the purposes for which they were enacted. You are a member of the House of Representatives, are you not?—Yes, but I was not a member when the Act was passed. I introduced a Bill to amend the Act last session. That Bill only applied to the Mosgiel Factory. It contained but one clause, and was an amendment regarding the hours of employing females in the factory, and as to holidays, I think, but I have not a copy of the Bill here.

2. Did that Bill embody the whole of your views?—Yes, so far as I can recollect.

3. *Hon. Mr. Reynolds.*] How do you find the Act is working? Will you make a general statement?—There is one point with regard to the Bill that I introduced that I wish to allude to, if I may be allowed. There was an impression abroad that I introduced the Bill into Parliament for the benefit of the Mosgiel Company. I wish distinctly to give a negative to that impression. I never would have touched the Act if it had not been for the spontaneous action of the female employées themselves. It arose in this way: The Inspector, as in duty bound, insisted on a compliance with the Act. In regard to the hours it is not true that our manager brought pressure to bear upon the employées, but they, on his insisting that the hours of the Act should be kept, complained to such an extent that there was almost a "strike" amongst them. The Chairman of the Company telegraphed to me, asking what could be done in the matter. I replied that I would do nothing at all, unless the girls were in earnest themselves, and it came spontaneously from them. Some days after this, I received a telegram to the effect that the girls themselves wished a change in the Act, and had petitioned the House for it. I then said that I would present the petition, and endeavour to get the Act altered. I think it right to make this statement, to remove a wrong impression. On the second occasion that the Act had been infringed regarding the holidays (two cases were brought before the Resident Magistrate at West Taieri), the Directors decided that the Manager must insist upon the girls keeping the regular hours, in accordance with the Act, and preserve the law by not working on holidays. The hardship in the case here is this: With the exception of a very few (not more than six), the whole of the girls are employed on piecework, and, as the Act does not provide for anything in this way, when the holidays come round the girls are forced to leave their work, and do not get paid. Another reason why the terms of the Act with regard to holidays are objectionable is, that many of the days chosen are unsuitable. We always give a certain number of holidays during the year, but we think it hard that the days should be specified, particularly when they have more of a religious element about them than anything else: a great many do not value these holidays. With regard to the working hours, the mill, from the day it started, has been shut down at 2 o'clock on Saturdays, the employées being allowed to make up the number of hours during the week, as we considered it unfair towards those employed on piecework not to allow them to make up their full time. On the other hand, it is but fair to state that, having a large amount of expensive machinery kept idle, we think it a hardship that the hours should be limited, whilst not allowed to put on another shift of people. But, in regard to putting on a shift of hands upon a loom, there is a difficulty, arising from the fact that it is very seldom that any two weavers will weave in the same way, no two women giving the same attention or turning out the same amount of work—a web of cloth might soon be spoiled by changing hands upon it at any given hour. Consequently, by limiting the hours to those in the Act you reduce the production of our mill to a large extent, as also the pay of the employées, and the value of our machinery. Of course, it may be said, "Why not pay higher wages, and make up the difference by employing more skilful hands?" but you must bear in mind the struggle to compete with foreign productions. After giving our people a fair and reasonable wage to induce them to come from the old country, the placing of too severe restrictions upon us naturally has the effect of checking the enterprise, or inducing us to fall back upon expedients which we have no wish to do. There has been strong temptation to evade the Act. Our manager has experienced great difficulty, after getting these girls, to keep them. I do not think, in principle, the Act refers to such places as our factory. I can quite understand it to apply where girls are shut up in a close room, but anybody who knows our factory knows very well that the atmosphere in the buildings, which are well ventilated, is very good and pleasant. I do not consider it would be at all oppressive for any female if the hours were altered to fifty-four hours per week—the old hours.

4. *Mr. Strode.*] How long do you work in one day?—The mill is going nearly all day and night, but of course these girls are only employed the exact number of hours mentioned in the Act. We conform to the Act—as nearly as possible to the letter of the law. The females are dissatisfied with the provisions of the Act in regard to the working hours and holidays.

5. *The Chairman.*] I understand that, in the interests of the Company, it is desirable to keep your machinery constantly at work; you have a large capital invested, and the interest on that would be very small unless the machinery was kept at work?—Yes; I may say that the Company, wishing to show a fair spirit in this matter, have ordered an additional number of looms, to make up for time lost in production, and so get over it in that way—by expending extra capital. Each of these looms costs £100 by the time they are fitted up. To make up the production anything like what it used to be we must employ additional hands. Just now the engines are going from 6 in the morning till 10 at night, the females keeping their hours in accordance with the Act, the other hands being employed at carding and spinning. We are obliged to do that, so as to bring up the production nearly to what it was before.