

On the consent of the parties being obtained, and the land formally gazetted, it became vested in the Governor under the Act of 1856 as amended by the Act of 1862, and the officer holding delegated powers became empowered to issue leases for twenty-one years. A system of leasing thereupon commenced, under which the persons who are now in occupation hold their present tenure.

The portion of the reserve comprised within the Town of Greymouth has been in process of occupation for the last eleven years, dating from the 1st July, 1865, and has produced a revenue in the shape of rent during that period of £33,943 15s. 5d., out of a total revenue of £38,862 0s. 7d. collected from the whole of the Native reserves estate in Westland during the same period. The gross annual rent from all sources in Westland is £4,132 13s. 9d., of which Greymouth produces £3,714 5s. The value of the Native reserve estate at Greymouth has been immensely increased through being occupied by tenants. Its former value, taking the upset price of town land sold by the Government on the West Coast—namely, £40 an acre as a fair price for rough, unimproved land—as a basis of calculation, the outside price for the portion available for town purposes—namely, 150 acres—would represent £6,000; whereas the capital value of the property at the present time, even calculated at 10 per cent. on the gross proceeds, would represent the sum of £30,714. In addition to the value of the land, the tenants have made improvements exceeding £400,000; and as time glides on the property will become more and more valuable, provided the confidence of the tenants is upheld in the permanency of the tenure. The quantity of land at present utilized within the reserve is about 160 acres, a large proportion of which is occupied for building purposes. The remainder, with the exception of about twenty acres, may be described as utterly worthless for occupation, in consequence of its rugged and hilly character, besides being covered with a dense forest.

The application made by the Natives interested in the estate to have a Crown title issued in their favour, cannot in justice to the lessces be given effect to without proper precaution is taken to protect the interests of the tenants, as it would be a breach of faith to those persons who have improved the property by their capital and labour if they were debarred by the issue of a grant to the beneficiaries from obtaining a renewal of their leases, to which they are justly entitled, and on the faith of which they have expended large sums, both in the erection of buildings and otherwise improving the estate.

Before the present protective works were undertaken by the Government the Town of Greymouth was subject to frequent encroachments of the river, causing considerable damage to the property, and threatening in course of time to sweep away all the most valuable portion of it. The efforts made by the tenants to protect the estate from the river, coupled with the outlay needed for town improvements, have imposed burdensome and oppressive expenses on the occupants, necessitating the levying of a tax equal to 10 per cent. on the annual value of their properties. The tenants contend—and very justly—that the increase in the value of the reserve is entirely due to the energy and capital of the European settlers, and that consequently it would be inequitable to apply all the results of such outlay to the future aggrandisement of the Native owners, who, it is known, have openly stated that they are only waiting for the termination of the existing leases to pounce upon the property as their own; for had it remained in their hands no appreciable improvements would have taken place.

It is also urged that, as the Government accepted the trusteeship of the property, and allowed large and important interests to grow up, it cannot now relinquish it without prejudicing the equitable rights of persons who have accepted leases under the Native Reserves Act, in the full confidence that such mode of occupancy and the system that gave rise to it would endure.

The principal cause of uneasiness that prevails amongst the Native owners is owing to the opinion expressed that the Governor would sell the land under the provisions of "The Native Reserves Act, 1876," coupled with the efforts continually being made by the tenants to obtain the fee of the land. The feeling is also considerably augmented by injudicious statements, made by thoughtless individuals, that the Government is disposed to sell the land—statements which the Natives, unfortunately, place full confidence in. The Governor, it is true, is empowered to dispose of property vested in him under the provisions of the Native Reserves Act, by absolute sale or otherwise; but the Act forbids the alienation of the land except for the benefit of the Natives interested, and, as it is not probable that adverse action would be taken against the expressed wishes of the owners, there is no real cause of apprehension that the sale of the Greymouth estate would have been sanctioned. Moreover, the Natives, if for no other reason, would oppose the alienation of the reserve on the ground of sentiment, even if the sale would actually secure to them in perpetuity an income far in excess of the amount they now receive.

The most equitable mode of procedure for all concerned would be to repeal the Act empowering the Governor to sell, and pass a fresh measure enabling leases to be issued for sixty years with the assent of the owners (where such assent was necessary), to persons who are desirous of improving the land by erecting a permanent class of buildings of brick and stone, as would be the case at Greymouth if the tenants were secured in possession. This course, on the one hand, would allay the anxiety felt by the Natives that the property would be sold; and, on the other hand, secure a fixity of tenure to the tenant that would enable him to repay himself for the required outlay.

Concerning the objection made by the Natives, that their revenue has been expended in improving the estate, they evidently are ignorant of the fact that landed proprietors "have duties as well as rights," as they seem to be of opinion that they should not be called upon to contribute anything towards the improvement or preservation of a valuable estate like Greymouth. Had they had more experience, they would have doubtless learnt that one of the most important duties pertaining to the ownership of land is aiding in local improvements. Neither have they any occasion to complain of not having had a fair share of the income devoted to their use, as they have received in cash and its equivalent, during the last eleven years, the sum of £21,515 4s. 9d.; and the recipients only number about twenty.

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