

Department that 218 tons of stone have been delivered at the Ashburton Railway-station during the last twelve months. The demand for stone would be considerably increased were the quarries at Alford Forest and Mount Somers opened up, as there is stone of excellent quality there. I am also of opinion that, if the railway were extended in the direction recommended by the committee of the Ashburton County Council, which reported on the route, timber for fencing and firewood would form a very important industry in this district. In the year 1873 or 1874 the Provincial Council of Canterbury voted £10,000 for a railway designated "the Ashburton and Mount Somers line." In corroboration of this I have a letter from Mr. Knowles, the late Under-Secretary for Public Works, in which it is referred to by that name, showing that it was the intention of the Provincial Government to extend the line from Ashburton to Mount Somers. The date of the letter is, "Wellington, 12th July, 1877," and in it the history of the purchase of the rails and refunding the amount for the rails appropriated to other lines is mentioned. In the year 1874 the rails arrived at Lyttelton, per "Northampton," "Eastern Monarch," "Hereford," and "Taunton." These rails were afterwards taken possession of by the General Government. Within the last twelve or eighteen months a counter agitation has been raised by the settlers at Rangitata, the grounds and objects of which were set forth in a petition to the Minister for Public Works. It was stated in that petition that the Engineer-in-Chief for the Middle Island had recommended the extension of the line for a distance of three miles beyond the present terminus along the South Branch of the Ashburton River. In my place in the House of Assembly, in 1882, I moved for all papers bearing on the subject of the Mount Somers Railway and its extension, and on searching through those papers I could find no such recommendation. I am therefore at a loss to understand how the residents in the Rangitata district could have obtained that knowledge that the Engineer-in-Chief had made that recommendation. They also stated that they had been induced to take up land on the understanding that the railway would be made in that district. The railway to Mount Somers was projected as early as 1873 or 1874, some years before the settlers purchased the land or located themselves in the district mentioned in their petition: in fact, it was only in 1878 that the agitation in reference to this railway commenced. The petitioners also alleged that "the public Treasury has received a large sum of money from the undersigned for the purchase of land, in full reliance that the said railway would be constructed." The land in the neighbourhood is owned by two or three individuals at the outside: therefore any extension in the direction of the survey made as far as the Cliff or Rock—the extension up the South Branch—could not possibly be of any service to the petitioners, inasmuch as their land lies considerably to the southward. On the other hand, if the line were to cross the South Ashburton River and go on to Bowyer's Stream, it would be the means of serving a large number of small settlers who have been located in the district some years, and who have been induced to take up land on the strength of this railway being constructed. If the line were so extended it would very largely increase cultivation and settlement, and would tend to render the line payable—which is at present unremunerative—by the increase of freight and passenger traffic. Reserves had been made for railway purposes in the Mount Somers district many years back, and the residents had been induced to build what was the nucleus of a township on the strength of those reserves having been made. Mr. Williams, the District Engineer, was requested to report on this question in 1878, and sent in the following report: "I have the honour to forward you herewith a plan showing the route which I would suggest for above railway. My instructions inform me that the line is to be located on the south side of the Ashburton River. The line shown on the plan (in red) crosses the South Branch of that river at a place which I consider the most favourable. A bridge at this point would probably not require to exceed 500ft. in length, with sound banks on either side; while a bridge lower down, close to the fork, would probably require to be at least double the above length. It will no doubt be found desirable to continue a line in the direction of Alford Forest, for the sake of the timber." From this it will be seen that it was the intention of the Government and the County Council (who had charge of the work from the time the agitation was set on foot) to carry the line over the South Branch of the Ashburton River. It was originally intended to carry it up the forks from Ashburton, but for the sake of economy, to save bridging, it was considered advisable to utilize the bridge on the main line and start the line from Tinwald; and that, in my opinion, was the only reason the diversion was made.

240. Have you any further information to give?—I have nothing more to add, except that I think, in the interests of the colony at large, if the line were to cross the river and be extended to Bowyer's Stream, there would be some chance that it would pay; whereas if it were continued on the south side of the South Branch it could not serve the districts of Mount Somers and Alford Forest, as the terminus would be removed something like three or four miles from the bulk of the inhabitants, and when they had their wool or other produce on their drays they might as well take it Methven, or even to Ashburton.

241. You consider that any extension of the line up the river would serve neither the petitioners nor the Alford Forest and Mount Somers people?—There can be no question about it.

242. *The Mayor.*] Are you aware that the proprietor of Westerfield has signed the petition?—Yes.

243. And you are also aware that the present line goes through his estate?—Yes.

244. Would it benefit Westerfield if the line were continued?—In no possible way: it would rather injure it, in as far, at least, as obtaining timber is concerned, as he would have to pay more for the cartage of timber. But if, on the other hand, the line were extended to Bowyer's Stream he would get his timber cheaper.

245. Then you are clearly of opinion that it could not benefit Westerfield in any way?—Certainly; it would rather injure it, in my opinion.

246. Are you also aware that the Rangitata Estate, the property of the late Sir Cracroft Wilson, is represented in that petition?—Yes; but it is many miles from the present terminus, and could not be benefited in any way.