

miles. There were also at that date 164 miles of railway in course of construction, of which 80 were in the North Island and 84 in the South Island. The total expenditure on railways, including cost of provincial lines and purchase of district railways, up to the 31st March last, was £14,466,705, and the liabilities on the 31st March were £261,577; making in all £14,728,282.

For railways in course of construction as a whole, the amount voted last year was £460,600, of which £365,449 was expended; and, for this year, with liabilities at the end of March last amounting to £247,951, we propose to ask for votes to extent of £338,900, leaving £829,518 for future appropriation.

To proceed now to detail the existing condition of each several line, as has usually been done in the past, would, I think, under the present circumstances, be simply tedious. That such should be done where new works are proposed is, no doubt, very desirable, in order to enable honourable members, who may not all be acquainted with the several localities, to understand the existing condition of things, as a first step towards realising what is proposed to be undertaken. When nothing is proposed to be done, however (with the two exceptions already mentioned), beyond making progress and final payments on account of the works already contracted for, it seems scarcely necessary to weary the House with a recital of what these works consist of in each several instance. Besides this, too, the interval between this and my last Public Works Statement is so short, that the scope of the undertakings on the various railways, as there described, has not materially altered in the meantime. It is no doubt desirable, however, for record purposes, that a brief summary of the condition of each railway should be embodied in the Public Works Statement as usual. I have therefore had one prepared, which will be attached to this Statement as a supplement, and in the same supplement there will also be found some remarks which I would wish to bring under the notice of honourable members, on the subject of our railways generally, retrospective and prospective.

In the case of all works other than railways I propose to state the details in the usual manner.

ADDITIONS TO OPENED LINES.

As mentioned in my Statement last session, the expenditure on additions to opened lines has been steadily decreasing, and the amount expended during the year ended 31st March last is a further illustration in the same direction. The amounts for the last few years were in round numbers as follows: 1884-85, £140,000; 1885-86, £91,000; 1886-87, £80,000; 1887-88, £38,000. This is exclusive of permanent-way, and if permanent-way is included, the amounts are: For 1884-85, £183,000; 1885-86, £109,000; 1886-87, £91,000; 1887-88, £41,000. The item of rolling-stock I have not taken into account, as the proportion of rolling-stock added was little, if anything, more than equivalent to the length of new lines opened during these years.

For additions to opened lines the amount voted last year was £40,000, of which £38,277 was expended; and for the present year, with liabilities at the end of March last amounting to £13,625, we propose to ask for a vote of £65,000.

Up to about five years ago the undertakings of this character were undoubtedly rather lavish. No separate account had until that time been kept of the works done in the shape of additions to the opened portions of the railways, as distinct from new extensions. Towards the close of 1883, however, the matter engaged the serious consideration of the Government, and steps were taken to curtail expenditure of this class as much as possible. With that object accounts were opened in the books of the Public Works Department in order to show exactly how matters stood, and my successor in office carried this reform a step further, in 1884, by bringing down separate estimates and taking separate votes for this class of works. By this means it was possible, for the first time, to properly realise what was being expended from year to year upon such undertakings, and to keep a proper check upon them. It was not, of course, possible to countermand undertakings which had already been entered upon, but great care was exercised to avoid any unnecessary expenditure in the future, and I can