

There is nothing in the prices given on the various works or in the nature of the country to account for the large difference in the wages earned. It can only be accounted for from the fact that we have to employ all conditions of men, and when men of varied physique and skill have to work at the same prices it will always be the case, for a glance at the return will show that a strong party can earn very good wages, but a weak one, working on the same conditions, only earn enough to cover their working-expenses. You may notice that the highest wages are earned by parties working in the Poverty Bay portion of this district; they have no advantage in any way that can account for it in the prices given or nature of the country, but throughout the district there are very good hard-working men experienced at roadwork.

The works generally have been carried out in a satisfactory manner, and will compare favourably with those constructed by the local bodies under ordinary contracts.

ERIC C. GOLD-SMITH, Chief Surveyor.

WANGANUI.

THE nature of the works done under this system comprises bushfelling, grass-seed sowing, stumping, clearing, and forming of bridle-tracks and dray-roads, metalling, ditching, sawing, squaring, culverting, bridge-building, stone-breaking, concreting, &c.

The wages earned have not given satisfaction to certain of the workmen, and, in consequence, complaints have been made. As a result of the complaints, two inquiries have been held to consider the alleged grievances. The first inquiry was held in May, 1896, and in August instructions were given to somewhat raise the scale of prices, besides other regulations. The prices have since been raised, but in several cases the parties still fail to make wages. At bushfelling on improved farms, the prices paid being merely in the nature of advances, the wages earned in many cases have been very low.

Fully 75 per cent. of the men employed are now settlers, and about half of these belong to the improved farms. Settlers work so intermittently that it is difficult to estimate what wages they really do make, and the settlers as a class, being drawn from all manner of previous occupations, are not sufficiently experienced to make fair wages, even at good prices, at roadworks and other severe manual employment. Good navvies such as would be picked by a contractor would make much higher averages. They would camp on the spot, work every available hour, and have nothing to distract their attention, and work in a more practical manner.

Settlers are always given the preference in the selection of men for work, and justly so, for, without convenient work at fair rates being thus found for them, most of them would assuredly have to leave their sections in a very short time through want of means.

The number of contracts completed has been 202, the average number of men in each party being three. The average wages, wet and dry, has been 5s. 10½d., as against 5s. 9½d. last year, though, deducting bushfelling for advances, the average is 6s. 1d. for all weathers, and 6s. 10½d. for actual working-time.

The highest wages earned—10s. 10½d.—was at a small metalling contract at Mangaweka Bridge approaches, and included the hire of a dray and two horses. The lowest earnings—2s. a day—were made at bushfelling in the Ohutu Block by a man entirely inexperienced at that class of work. The average earnings at bushfelling has been only 4s. 5½d. all weathers. At this kind of work it is difficult to get the settlers to work together. There is a strong inclination on the part of the settlers to take in outside labour, but this is distinctly against the regulations.

As in previous years, the character of the work done has been good, but owing to the works being scattered over such a large area, and with only a few men at any one place, the cost of inspection and contingencies has been comparatively large.

The contracts have to be made so small, and estimated so accurately, that in this particular the co-operative system entails much more preliminary expense than was incurred under the ordinary contract system.

G. T. MURRAY, Road Surveyor.

WELLINGTON EAST.

IN my last year's report I suggested that the intermittent system should be modified, and that, if possible, settlers should be employed, say, for three-fourths of the year for two or three years to come, and at the same time that the rate of wage should be increased, and that larger contracts should be let. This was adopted after the Commission sat, and has been the means of satisfying the men to a large extent, although at one time it became necessary for me to put my foot down in order to prevent certain prominent characters assuming absolute charge of the works.

Comparatively few applications have been made to me for employment during the past year, which would seem to indicate a healthy state of things in the labour-market.

With regard to the average wage earned, I might state that the cause of the minimum rate of 2s. was owing to the fact that several old men were engaged on some of the contracts; and as to the maximum amounts—12s. 1d. and 13s. 7½d.—the roads on which these contracts were let were partly cleared by the settlers before the work was commenced, and the estimate was made accordingly, in order to recoup them. The average wage earned on all roads was 6s. 2½d., but, when taken in conjunction with the improved-farm settlement contracts, was reduced to 6s. 2d. Some of the settlers on the farms took contracts for work at exceptionally low rates, in order to save increasing the rentals of their holdings.

Provisions and Tools.—On the Alfredton-Weber Road, at Mount Wolff, Weber end, there has been established for the past two years a Government store, which has for its object the supply of all classes of goods to the workmen employed on the different contracts. No money passes, the value of the provisions, &c., being deducted on the vouchers and pay-sheets from the amounts due