

1898.

NEW ZEALAND.

THE NEW ZEALAND PRODUCE TRADE IN ENGLAND.

Presented to both Houses of the General Assembly by Command of His Excellency.

The AGENT-GENERAL for NEW ZEALAND to the Hon. the MINISTER of AGRICULTURE.

SIR,—

25th September, 1897.

I have more than once since coming to England written to the Government on the subject of the state of the New Zealand produce trade here. It has occurred to me that, as I have now been more than twelve months in England, it will not be premature to summarise the results of my inquiries, and the opinions they have led me to form.

These inquiries have naturally been based upon visits to the docks, to stores (cold and otherwise), to retail shops, and the offices of persons connected with the trade; also upon personal inspection and experience of New Zealand meat and dairy produce. More particularly, however, I have striven to get information by means of interviews and conversations with all sorts and conditions of men of knowledge and capacity concerned in the trade. I have made notes of conversations, and have endeavoured carefully to compare the diverse and often conflicting opinions expressed. I have also seen something of the trade in the provinces.

On the whole, I have formed a high opinion of the quality of New Zealand produce, and of the general condition in which it comes here. To this rule there are, unhappily, numerous exceptions, especially in the matter of condition. There are, however, good reasons for hoping that these exceptions will slowly grow less and less numerous. Not only are the freezing and dairy companies in New Zealand now awake to the question, but the ocean shipping companies are unquestionably alive to it also. It must not be supposed, though, that there are not still instances of the arrival of damaged cargoes. They still occur from time to time. There has been one very bad case within the last week or two. I need not say how mischievous this is. The consignor who pockets his insurance-money has, nevertheless, ultimately to suffer through a damaged market. Half-spoiled meat is sent about London, and the consumer learns to distrust frozen mutton.

The grumbling about coarse meat and over-fat lambs has been considerable, and does not diminish. On the other hand, I can say from my own personal knowledge that very good meat indeed does come from New Zealand, and can be bought here by those who know how to get it at almost absurdly low retail prices. A side of mutton can be purchased to-day for 5½d. a pound, delivered at your house. This, of course, applies to London, not the provincial towns.

As to the class of sheep likely to command the best price, the opinion here is pretty unanimous that the nearer an approach can be made to the Shropshire and Hampshire and Southdown types the better will the English taste be suited. I am aware, of course, that other considerations than meat have to enter into the breeders' calculations.

Why Australian merino mutton, which is often so palatable in the colonies, should be dry, tough, and tasteless here I do not profess to know. But so it is. I have eaten merino mutton here which has been about as agreeable as a slice of red-pine wood, the colour of which it somewhat resembled. There is no question of the general superiority of our meat to that of Argentine and Australia. There are exceptions, but the average of ours is distinctly better—any picked exhibits of Argentine meat notwithstanding. Where these meats are supplanting ours it is not owing to their quality, but from three causes—(1) cheapness, (2) energy, (3) fraud.

There is no question that the dealers and butchers are playing exactly the same game with these meats at the expense of New Zealand mutton as they have played with New Zealand mutton at the expense of English and Scotch. In other words, a persistent and general attempt is made to class all frozen mutton as New Zealand and sell it as such.

The harm which this does and continues to do our meat is very great. It is equally injurious whether the Argentine meat is good or bad; if it is good it simply takes the place of our meat and lowers the price; if it is inferior, as most of it is, it gives the name "New Zealand" a bad odour. Our best market now and in the future is neither with the very rich and fastidious nor with the masses of the poor. The former will not buy foreign or colonial meat in any shape or form. They can easily afford to pay 10d. or 1s. per pound for their mutton, and seem rather proud of doing so than otherwise. Socially, here, it is the correct thing to take the side of the agricultural interest. On