

HARRY MAY SKEET, Commissioner of Crown Lands, Auckland, made a statement and was examined. (No. 5.)

1. *The Chairman.*] You are acquainted with this township and the circumstances connected with it?—Yes.

2. Will you make a statement concerning the matter?—It depends on what you want. I am simply administrator of this hamlet, but I may be allowed to give you the history of the settlement. The land comprised in the hamlet was first put on the market in 1902 on lease in perpetuity. It was a “frost,” I may say, for years. It was reconsidered, and most of it was regrouped in 1909 and put on the market on renewable lease. It was found that the land had been cut up into such small subdivisions in 1902 that it would not go off. It was mostly in 2-acre sections. It was only after the sections were regrouped in 1909 that they commenced to go off. They were mostly grouped in two and in some cases three sections. The settlement has been “hanging fire,” off and on, for years. The land was first offered in order to give people small homes so that they could make a garden and perhaps keep a cow, as is done on small rural sections near Auckland. Taking it as a whole it is just about now that they are improving the sections—well, moderately well. In all cases the settlers have not done more than barely the amount of improvement required. During this last twelve months, from what I could see of the place, there has been a speculative boom on the borders of this hamlet. The Act of last session allowing the holders the right to acquire the freehold has enabled the people to finance the holdings much better, which has enabled two or three of them to take advantage of a speculative value. Of course, we deal purely with the administrative part, and when the applications came in to acquire the freehold, according to the Act we asked the Valuer-General for a valuation, and as far as I can gather the valuation is a fair and equitable one. The land, if it were used for the original purpose for which it was put on the market, is not worth to-day any more than it was then, because it is not what you might call easily tilled land—it requires a great deal of working; and for the purpose for which the settlement was put on the market as a whole it has not been altogether a success. Regarding the prices, I may mention that several efforts have been made to induce the Department to acquire other lands in the vicinity for workmen’s homes, and even with this very object of selling it in small sections for settlers. In both cases the land was offered to us—one block of 170 acres and another of 270 acres—at £65 an acre for the block as a whole. We could not recommend acceptance of the offers. I might also mention that in this Hetana Hamlet there are twenty-eight transactions almost complete. The original value of the twenty-eight sections was £2,945; the present valuation of the sections is £7,015, and the amount that we have received or will receive is £3,898 11s. 6d. Therefore, from the time it was first put on the market to the present time it has a little more than doubled in value. Unless there is a continuation of the boom, which is dependent on certain brickworks round about there and cheaper transit into Auckland, I cannot see that the prices will in the next ten years improve very much, because this will always be a workman’s locality. The better class of dwelling does not seem to be spreading out that way. There were two sections that fell back into our hands—two of the best sections, as far as position is concerned—of 5 acres each, and we have held these back purposely to subdivide for workmen’s homes if required. They are right in the middle of the hamlet.

3. *Mr. Forbes.*] Was the original purpose of this settlement to give men homes? There were some sections up to 39 acres—what was this being used for?—That had extensive improvements on it, so they had to give a bigger area to try and get it off. That is the homestead, and it has had rather a chequered career. It came back into our hands forfeited once, and it was reoffered, but it has been changing hands time and again, and it is only now that it has been parted with at a really good profit.

4. The improvements are set down at what?—About £500 now. Since the man has taken it up he has cut the furze and greatly improved it.

5. And it has been sold now?—Yes.

6. What was the intention of the buyers—to cut it up?—Yes, a speculative syndicate has bought the land for subdivisational purposes, which will necessitate roads being made and other things to conform to the conditions of the local body.

7. How many men in this settlement have applied for the right of the freehold?—Twenty-eight.

8. And how many are there altogether?—About eighty altogether. You can see by the plan. [Plan produced and explained.]

9. Some are on the lease-in-perpetuity tenure now?—Yes.

10. When these men apply for the freehold and are finished the Board has nothing more to do with them?—No, except some of them that applied to complete under the deferred payment.

11. As to the question of residence, the Board was interested in that when under the renewable lease?—Yes.

12. Now that it has been purchased outright has the Board anything to do with it?—No, nothing more to do with them.

13. The sections can now be parted with without any reference to the Board?—Yes, they can do what they like.

14. What were the men doing with these 39-acre sections—farming?—Trying to; but it has not been a success.

15. In buying the freehold is it for subdivision?—A speculative syndicate has bought the 39 acres to subdivide and sell in small sections. There is a notice on the ground to that effect.

16. *Mr. Witty.*] Have any of these sections been resold since they were acquired?—The only one I am aware of is the homestead-site.