

After argument it was decided by the Commissioners that the Thames Harbour Board should open the inquiry and call witnesses, with the right of calling rebutting evidence, if necessary.

Although it was not within the scope of the inquiry, the Commissioners deemed it expedient to investigate the scheme of harbour-construction, and works connected therewith, contemplated by the Thames Harbour Board, and to take evidence as to the nature and extent of the harbour-works intended to be carried out by them. It was necessary for the Commissioners to be well informed on these matters to enable them to appreciate many of the reasons assigned by opponents to the inclusion of certain areas within the Harbour Board District. Mr. Blair Mason, an experienced harbour engineer, had been engaged by the Harbour Board to furnish them with designs and estimates for the construction of a harbour at Thames, and comprehensive plans and specifications prepared by him were submitted for the Commissioners' inspection and information. These plans and specifications, and further details of the Board's intention, were more fully explained by the Board's Engineer, Mr. E. F. Adams, C.E., of Thames. Many of the objections placed before the Commission to the rating of lands for harbour purposes were based on the doubts of the witnesses that the proposed harbour, owing to its situation, to the nature of the sea-bottom, and its constant exposure to silt brought down by the Thames River, was impracticable. Other objections raised were the uncertainty of visits of large vessels and the inferior shipping facilities, the loading of ships having to be done by lighters. No engineer or other expert witness was called in support of these contentions, and in our opinion the soundness and practicability of the scheme were not to any extent impugned. The Commission, therefore, in considering the matters on which they are directed to report, assume the practicability and success of the Board's proposed undertaking.

In dealing with the question as to what areas of land should be included within, or excluded from, the harbour district, your Commissioners have been materially assisted by plans prepared by the Harbour Board's Engineer, showing the entire district comprised within the so-called Thames Valley. This district as a whole is in a very prosperous condition, its chief products being butter, cheese, and dried milk. The value of these manufactured goods was, for the last twelve months, £2,250,000, besides which minor industries are carried on, such as timber-milling, sheep-farming, and cattle-rearing. It is estimated that from one-quarter to one-third of the entire production of the district is consumed within the Dominion, the balance being exported. At present all produce exported is shipped from the Port of Auckland, and all imports from overseas consumed or used in the district enter by the same port. Much of the evidence brought before your Commissioners in support of the exclusion of certain areas from the district was tendered by business men either connected with or representing large businesses in the neighbouring districts or in Auckland. They expressed satisfaction with the existing means of transit by railway to Auckland; and, as they possessed large factories, freezing-works, and storage accommodation, they saw no benefit to themselves in diverting their export traffic to Thames. Much evidence was also led from farmers and butter and cheese producers, tending to show that even if a harbour were established at Thames they would not abandon their long-established means of reaching a port by railway to Auckland, although the distance traversed was three or four times greater than that separating them from Thames.

Your Commissioners found great diversity of opinion, even among residents of the same locality, as to the justness or otherwise of including their districts within the limits of the harbour district. We have very carefully considered the arguments and evidence adduced before us, and have arrived at the conclusion that, however adversely in some quarters inclusion in the district is regarded, a harbour if constructed at Thames would undoubtedly benefit, if not quite the whole, at any rate the greater part, of the land in the Thames Valley, and that, as time advances and more land is brought into cultivation, and the productivity of the district increases, the harbour will grow in importance and usefulness.

Strong opposition was raised by the Borough of Morrinsville to its inclusion in the harbour district, chiefly on the following grounds: Firstly, the distance from the proposed harbour; secondly, that, having no factories and no natural production, they cannot be benefited by the harbour in the matter of exports; thirdly, that, as to exports, their most convenient, although not their nearest, port is