

No. 10.

Mr. Warden PRICE to UNDER SECRETARY for GOLD FIELDS.

SIR,—

Warden's Office, Okarito, 7th April, 1876.

In transmitting the usual statistical returns for the year ending the 31st March, 1876, there is little for me to report respecting the condition and progress of gold mining in the Okarito District for the past twelve months, beyond the fact that at least it continues to hold its own.

The population numbers 455 souls, which has been the average since 1867, and there has been no decrease during the year, as on 31st March, 1875, it was 448.

The yield of gold has, I believe somewhat diminished; but as this is no longer a port of entry, it is difficult to ascertain what is sent away. However I may safely estimate the earnings at an average of a little over half an ounce (£2) per week for each miner.

The Gold Fields revenue during the twelve months shows an increase of £21 8s. over the preceding year, namely, to 31st March, 1876, £234 5s., as against £212 17s. for that ending 31st March, 1875.

The present licensing system has a tendency to decrease this source of revenue, but it has only done so to the extent of £24 10s. To the 31st March, 1875, £442 was received; to same period 1876, £417 10s.

The portion of the Okarito end of the Bowen and Ross road of which about twelve miles is completed, has been the means of opening some new ground at the forks of Okarito River, five miles inland. It is fair payable sluicing ground, about 15 feet sinking on the banks of the river, and gives employment to between thirty and forty miners, and would support a much larger population were the people in the district. But it is not sufficiently attractive to draw men from outside places, where they are able to live cheaper, and avoid the inconveniences they have to put up with in a remote locality like this; to which there is no access except what nature affords along the coast line, with all its difficulties and dangers.

With the exception of those at the Forks, eight men up the Waiho River, and five up Cook's, the diggings are still confined to the sea beaches, Gillespie's being the principal one, numbering 135 people. And although the former are all doing well, and gold from inland fetches a higher price, yet, as in most cases it is only found in patches without any defined leads, or in beds of rivers troublesome to work in consequence of floods, the majority prefer sea beach mining, as less laborious and the return more certain, for every man can, without fear of disappointment, make from 25s. to 30s. per week on any of them.

During the twelve months, there have been 80 grants of various mining rights issued, one mining lease of five acres, and 40 extended claims—the latter the largest number ever granted, in fact more than during the four previous years put together; and as this entails on the miners the expense of survey, £3 per claim, it speaks well of their estimation of the ground.

I regret to say prospecting has entirely ceased in the district, from two causes: first, want of means on the part of the miners; and secondly, that the storekeepers who used formerly to support such enterprise, by supplying parties with provisions on credit, now decline to do so, as they can no longer afford the risk of loss if they are not successful. Consequently, quartz reefs in the neighbourhood remain untried, containing, perhaps, wealth which must continue undeveloped until some future day, when it may be found expedient and worth while to adopt some general system to assist to open up the mineral resources throughout the country, which surely cannot be confined to their present restricted limits. The district also affords hopeful indications of other minerals.

A valuable discovery has been lately made of lithographic stone, which has been tested and pronounced to be excellent, and will no doubt be of great importance to lithography, not only in the colonies but in other parts of the world. The quarries are situated at Abbey Rock on the coast, about sixty miles south of Okarito, giving promise to be of an extensive nature, and from which blocks of the largest size used in the trade can be obtained, and wait only the proprietors, Docherty and Arthur, to commence working them, when a considerable number of people must be drawn there. And the locality has this further advantage, that it is within easy distance of good agricultural land, about the Paringa River, where a settlement has already been commenced by two of the pioneer diggers of the district, Ward and Douglas, who own some seven hundred acres, which they are gradually clearing and putting under cultivation—and forms the nucleus of what in time promises to be a populous and prosperous place.

Although the mining population in this district may to a certain extent be considered a permanent one, every man having been a resident eight, nine, and ten years, yet experience teaches me that when the yield of gold diminishes till it only affords a mere livelihood, which is now the case, not here alone, but generally throughout the gold fields in Westland, mining loses its attraction, the excitement consequent on rich diggings ceases, and it then falls into the level of ordinary labour, when most miners are ready to leave it for other industries which insure a safer return. Therefore, the district must look to something else besides mining for its support. The majority of the people here are desirous to acquire land and make homes for themselves, particularly those with families, provided they could do so on easy terms of payment; and its future progress will in a great measure depend on the course Government adopt with regard to this question. And further, to make the settlement a success, there must be a main line of road of some sort to open up the country; for unless the two go hand in hand, it is hopeless to expect any substantive result.

The completion of the road to Bowen is important, and should be undertaken without delay. It is likely to open up, not only fresh auriferous ground, which the portion constructed has been the means of doing, but country fit for agricultural purposes, besides affording the advantages of road communication, which this place has never had.

The special settlement at Jackson's Bay is within the Warden's District of Okarito, which also forms the Resident Magistrate's District, both under my charge; but as a gentleman has been especi-