

SETTLEMENT ON GOLD FIELDS.

This has not received any very great extension during the year. Recognizing the fact that there has been a gradual diminution of the number of miners during the last few years, it will be interesting to note what provision has been made to enable them to acquire land and become settlers if so disposed.

On the Thames Gold Fields, Auckland, there are about 100,000 acres open for selection on agricultural lease; but the land is decidedly inferior, and very little of it is as yet made accessible by dray roads. It is therefore cut off from anything but a very limited local market, and consequently there is little inducement to settle on it. With the opening of the Te Aroha alluvial lands, naturally accessible by the branches of a navigable river intersecting the plain, and handy to forest reserves, there are conditions very favourable to a successful settlement in the vicinity of the gold fields. Twenty thousand acres are surveyed into sections, varying from 100 to 300 acres each, which it is proposed to open for application as soon as several main outfall drains have been cut through the swampy part of the plain.

On the West Coast Gold Fields, all the land, with the exception of a few reserves, is open for application, either on immediate payment, or on one or other of the settlement clauses of deferred payments or agricultural lease. This extensive region extends in a strip, ten to twenty miles wide, along the coast for three hundred miles. In its dense forest and wet climate the settler has much to contend against, and it is only after great and persevering labour that the clearing is made and the grass sown down. The country is better suited for the rearing of cattle and the produce of the dairy than for the growth of cereals. As these products are not likely to be exported, settlement must necessarily be subordinate to the mining and timber industries, and flourish or languish with them.

The Otago Gold Fields are scattered over an area of six or seven million acres of treeless, grassy hills, mountains, and inland plains. Almost the whole of this extensive country is let on pastoral lease, and is not open for purchase or settlement. The only exception is in the Wakatipu and Tuapeka depasturing districts, which together aggregate an area of 500,000 acres. This country is nearly all let on depasturing license, subject, however, to free selection by applicants on agricultural lease; and the same applies to the Cromwell, Dunstan, Benger, and Waikaia commonages, which, taken collectively, make up 50,000 acres; or, altogether, there is an area of 550,000 acres open for application on agricultural lease. But, as these areas have been open for selection for many years, all the most desirable pieces have been taken up, and what remains is, from its steepness, height, or other cause, only deemed valuable as natural pasture.

The settlement which has taken place on the Otago Gold Fields during the last few years has been mostly on blocks specially selected by Government from the runs, and on which compensation in extinction of grazing right has been paid, according to the acreage taken. During the past year a total area of 180,000 acres, in sixteen different localities, has been set apart for settlement. This is nearly all now surveyed, and ready for selection. Fully one-half is arable, and has been surveyed into sections not exceeding 320 acres each; and the remainder, consisting principally of hill-sides and mountain slopes, into grazing farms of from 1,000 to 4,000 acres each. These figures present large possibilities in the way of settlement. The pastoral lands may be offered on immediate or deferred payments, and the agricultural on either of these modes of payment or on agricultural lease. In the varying circumstances of different localities, all these methods of disposal will have to be availed of.

Pre-emption to Homesteads.—There is a provision, under section 66 of the Mines Act, by which any one who may have established a homestead, garden, orchard, or small farm on the gold fields prior to 1st January, 1878, may, after due publicity has been given of the application, and no valid objection been offered to it, be allowed to purchase the freehold up to a limit of 50 acres. Several applications have been made, but only one, for 12½ acres, has been granted during the year; one or two others are under consideration. The number of persons who can avail themselves of section 66 are comparatively few, and, as the miners are very jealous of these applications, and will oppose some of them, no great area will be acquired under this system.

In conclusion, I have to state that I am again indebted to Mr. Wakefield for the collection of the Wardens' and other reports, and for the compilation of the statistical returns contained in the Appendix to this report; also to express my thanks for the very complete tables furnished by the Secretary to the Treasury, Mr. Gavin, and the Secretary of Customs, Mr. Seed.

JAMES MCKERROW.