

From my own observation I am of opinion that the Act works well. Some object, but they cannot give any reason for doing so. They object more in the spirit of contrariness than of sound reason. There has been no trouble or friction in regard to the Act. One of the factories—a saw-mill—had to be stopped whilst repairs were made to the brickwork round the crown of the boiler, but there was no trouble in the matter, and the employés did not complain at stopping work.

THE SHOPS AND SHOP-ASSISTANTS ACT.

The provisions of this Act are fairly complied with. There being no legal half-holiday the shopkeepers close every Thursday afternoon. On two occasions men have not received a half-holiday; but, owing to the difficulty of procuring evidence, no prosecutions have followed. Men who are employed are afraid to say anything, as it would probably mean losing their billets. The two occasions referred to have been express-drivers, who have been sent on long journeys the day of the half-holiday. The shop-assistants do not appear to understand that the Act is for their benefit.

THE BUILDING TRADE.

During the past year a number of large houses have been erected, and a Catholic chapel and a number of other houses are in course of erection. One sawmill and a number of small farmhouses were destroyed by the last bush-fire. In the majority of cases they were insured, and are being rebuilt. The sawmill is not being rebuilt. The fire in the latter case was caused by a young lad setting fire to some scrub, which burned the mill and toll-gate. Painters are very busy at the present time, having plenty of work.

RETAIL TRADE.

The different shopkeepers under this heading appear to be doing fairly well. Taking the year all round, they do not complain. There are not a great number of people to be seen in the shops, owing to a custom having arisen of supplying by express delivery, a good thing for the buyer, but a bad thing for the seller, as it keeps people from visiting the shops who would otherwise visit, and probably spend more.

BLACKSMITHS AND WHEELWRIGHTS.

These trades are kept constantly employed, horse-shoeing and wagon-repairing being the main dependence of the trade. As this is a pastoral country, but a small number of agricultural implements are used.

MISCELLANEOUS.

A considerable amount of fencing, road contracts, and bushfelling has been done in the district during the year. Grass-seed sowing has commenced, and will last some time. Men who are willing to work have no trouble in getting it. There has been a number of swaggers through Eketahuna during the year, but not so many as in the past year; the majority of them could be classed as the genuine "sundowner," simply travelling in search of free food; a percentage are men who have met with misfortune, and others men who are getting too old to work. They do not trouble the settlers, as they keep to the main road.

The usual yearly bush-fires have occurred in this district, a hardship to some at the time, but in the end a benefit, by clearing the waste and rotting logs and stumps, thereby clearing the ground for grass-sowing.

LABOUR.

One plumber and three navvies registered at this office during the year. Employment was found for all. There are no applications for employment, owing to the railway-works being removed past Eketahuna.

A circular was received from the Commissioner of Police *re* delay in registering factories. In a district like this it is very difficult to register them strictly to the end of January, as often they commence to build them during that month; again, where sawmills are seven and eight miles from the office, and in different directions, it takes more time than in a town where the factories are close together.

I have, &c.,

CHARLES GREY, Inspector of Factories.

The Chief Inspector of Factories, Wellington.

BLENHEIM.

SIR,—

Police-station, Blenheim, 7th April, 1898.

I am pleased to be able to report that the conditions of the labour-market have considerably improved during the last twelve months, and the district is in more prosperous circumstances than it has been for years past. One of the main factors of this state of affairs is the splendid agricultural harvest. Though this district had its full share of the drought which prevailed over the colony during the growth of the crops, it did not suffer in the same degree as other parts of New Zealand, the character of the country and the nature of the soil being fitted to withstand a dry season. The harvest generally was an exceptionally good one—in fact, it has been described at a meeting of the Agricultural and Pastoral Association as the best that has been experienced in Marlborough for many years. This result has to be taken in conjunction with the entire absence of floods, and it goes to show how the district can thrive when it has a fair chance in this respect.

The excellent prices obtained for grain has also put good hearts into the farmers. Large quantities of barley have been exported, several special trains being laid on for this purpose alone, and tip-top prices have been obtained for the produce.