

1907.
NEW ZEALAND.

ABATTOIR AT CHRISTCHURCH

(REPORT OF THE ASSISTANT CHIEF VETERINARIAN ON).

Laid on the Table of the House of Representatives by Leave.

REPORT.

The Chief Veterinarian.

5th August, 1907.

As instructed, in order that the Hon. the Minister might be apprised of the true state of affairs at the Christchurch abattoir, I visited Christchurch on the 27th ultimo, and made an inspection of the place.

The Christchurch *Press* of the 24th ultimo had published a long article reflecting seriously upon the structural and sanitary conditions of the abattoir yards and men's quarters. The points to which exception was taken in the newspaper article may be summarised as follows:—

- (1.) That two dogs were seen within the abattoir building, walking beneath hanging carcasses of beef.
- (2.) That dressed carcasses are hung for cooling purposes in the same apartment as is used for slaughtering, and that consequently unsavoury odours from the "disembowelling of cattle and manipulation of offal," and also the "nauseating fumes of hot blood" permeate (presumably to the detriment of the dressed carcasses) the currents of air passing among them.
- (3.) That the blood-channel provided for beef-slaughtering purposes is wrongly situated, being too far distant from the spot where the blood is drawn from the cattle, and that, as a result, a large accumulation of coagulated blood is present on the concrete floor, it being described as "nearly" an inch in depth. It was also stated that in their dying struggles cattle "splashed this blood about in all directions."
- (4.) That the cattle and sheep pens and races appeared to be inconvenient. That there seemed to be great difficulty in getting sheep to travel up the inclined plane to the killing-place. That the concrete-paved cattle and sheep pens were unduly dirty; that, though surrounded by concrete channels, the "filth" did not seem to escape into these. One entirely and one partially unpaved cattle-pen were stated to be very filthy.
- (5.) The fences and gates of the yards were said to be in a bad condition of repair.
- (6.) The sanitary and general arrangements of the men's quarters were taken exception to.

After a thorough inspection of the entire premises on three separate days—viz., the 27th, 29th, and 30th ultimo—during which inspection I personally witnessed the processes of slaughtering both cattle and sheep, I came to the following conclusions:—

1. Regarding the fact of dogs having been seen within the abattoir building, there can be no doubt but that they were there. At the same time I do not believe that this is a common occurrence. An abattoir by-law prohibits the presence of dogs on the premises, and the manager does his best to enforce this. It is obvious that when cattle, sheep, &c., have to be worked dogs are necessary, and where several different individuals are engaged in this work a number of dogs are to be found around the premises. However, I was assured by the manager that, as in the past, every effort would be made to keep these animals out in the future. I may mention that personally I have no recollection of having ever seen a dog within this abattoir building.

2. There is no possible objection to be raised, from a scientific sanitary point of view, to dressed carcasses hanging in the same apartment as is used for slaughtering purposes, provided that such material as blood, offal, &c., is cleared away, and the floor-drains, &c., thoroughly cleaned frequently, thus obviating the possibility of putrefactive changes taking place in this material before its removal.

The Christchurch abattoir consists of one huge apartment, with offal-rooms at either end, and is a quite up-to-date structure in every way. It has an excellent water-supply—both hot and cold—and this is constantly utilised for cleansing purposes. On no occasion could I detect any objectionable odour within the building, even while slaughtering was going on busily. There is nothing objectionable in the odour of freshly removed viscera. It is absurd to assume that, while a necessary portion of the animal body during life, it becomes a source of danger when removed from the body immediately after death. All stomachs, intestines, &c., of cattle are taken from the main apartment immediately after removal from the carcass. So also it is absurd to talk of fresh blood as being capable of giving off nauseating fumes. It has no nauseating smell, and it is, in fact, as good and as wholesome as is fresh meat.

On my last previous visit to the abattoir—about 2 p.m. on the 14th June of this year—slaughtering for the day was concluded, and the whole of the interior of the building was thoroughly clean and sweet.

3. The cattle-blood channel is wrongly situated, it being too far from the pithing-pens, and as a consequence the blood from newly slaughtered animals, instead of draining, as it should, almost directly into this channel, has to run over some 3 ft. of sloping concrete floor before reaching it. Through some error, this blood-channel was placed in a position other than that indicated when the original plans of the present building were revised, one alteration provided for during this revision being the placing of the blood-drain in its proper position, nearer the pens. At the same time, if the slaughtering contractors fulfilled the conditions of their contract—which include the maintenance of cleanliness in both buildings and yards—there need be, with the present drain, no accumulation of blood on the floor-surface. Such an accumulation, though in no degree dangerous, is certainly unsightly. I spoke to one of the contractors, and suggested that he and his fellows should between them engage a lad whose duty should be the continual removal of blood to the drain by sweeping. I also instructed the Inspector to see that the blood was always kept swept away, and on the occasions of my last two visits this was being done.

It might be suggested that this, by causing extra labour, imposes a hardship upon the contractors. Such, however, can hardly be the case, seeing that they, when making their contracts, did so with a full knowledge of the structural conditions of the abattoir, and of the fact that they had to maintain cleanliness. As a matter of fact, this abattoir was designed with a view of the work of slaughtering being carried out by the Council's own employees, and not for slaughtering by different contractors.

4. I cannot see how the cattle and sheep pens and races can be described as inconvenient, or how difficulty should arise in getting sheep to travel up the inclined plane leading to the killing-pens. As regards the latter point, sheep travel with ease to much greater heights at various freezing-works—as, for instance, at Fairfield and Pareora.

With regard to the alleged unduly dirty condition of the paved yards, it must be remembered that when a number of stock are confined for several hours in a small yard a considerable amount of excreta will necessarily be deposited on the floor-surface, and in these yards, although some provision is made for liquid matter to get away, it is obvious that solid or semi-solid material can only be got rid of by the manual process of sweeping. This material is, and has been in the past, removed daily, the open channels surrounding these yards, and provided for the purpose of carrying off liquid drainage, being cleaned at the same time.

The two large cattle-pens, one entirely and one partially unpaved, were open to legitimate criticism, and they should have been paved before the winter came on. At the same time, when I visited them they were very muddy; but the mud was not so deep as was alleged in the Press report, which stated that the cattle were standing in filth “nearly up to their hocks.” I saw cattle in them, and the mud did not completely cover their hooves. In the partially paved pen one beast was confined, and this animal, evidently from preference, was standing in the unpaved portion, although at full liberty to go on the concrete flooring if it desired.

A large amount of work is done in these yards, particularly the outer one, it being, as I understand, the practice of the contractors to use them for drafting purposes. Thus, if they have in their charge, say, thirty cattle belonging to a particular butcher, and he desires ten slaughtered on one day the whole thirty are brought into this yard, ten drafted out into the inner yard, and the balance taken back to the paddocks. This drafting should really be done in the paddocks, but I understand that no yards suitable for this purpose exist there.

While I am of opinion that in the newspaper report an unjustifiably serious view, especially as regards the possible danger to meat-consumers, was taken of the condition of these yards, they certainly are not in a good condition, and it is necessary that immediate steps be taken to improve them. During the prevalence of frost concrete flooring cannot be laid down satisfactorily, but, as a temporary measure, shingle could be carted into them, and later, at the earliest possible date that weather-conditions permit, they must be concreted. It is only just to the Inspector to state that he has on more than one occasion called the attention of the Abattoir Committee to the necessity for the proper paving of these yards. It must be borne in mind that under their conditions of contract the slaughtering contractors are really responsible for the maintenance of cleanliness in all the yards.

5. The fences are not well built, and some of the gates need repairing. This is a matter which, though not affecting sanitation, requires immediate attention from the Abattoir Committee.

6. The structural arrangement of the men's quarters are not open to objection on the score of insanitation. The room in which the men take their meals forms really a separate building some 7 ft. or 8 ft. distant from another building in which are the sleeping-quarters, closets, and urinal. Certainly the door of the living-room faces the opening into the urinal, but there is the above-mentioned space between quite open except for a roof covering. If kept clean, as all men's quarters should be, there is no more objection to the situation of the closets and urinal than there could to the presence of similar conveniences inside a hotel or a private house.

After a careful consideration of the whole facts I am satisfied that, though in some respects cause for legitimate criticism did exist, the newspaper report was overdrawn, and the inferences as to the danger to the health of meat-consumers deduced from the conditions prevailing at the abattoir were entirely unwarrantable and unjustifiable. As a matter of fact, I understand that the manager (who is also the Government Inspector) has from time to time called the attention of the controlling authority to the necessity for paving the unpaved yards and altering the position of the blood-drain. The Chief Veterinarian also has done likewise verbally.

The Council, as a whole, I believe quite realised the necessity for these improvements, but for some reason delay has occurred in carrying them out.

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