

SIR,—

Boy's Training Farm, Weraroa, 30th December, 1908.

It would perhaps be advisable, in considering the subject-matter of your circular of the 4th November, to begin by stating my views regarding the boarding-out system of the Department.

I was appointed to the charge of the Caversham Industrial School in 1892—nine years after the boarding-out system had been introduced. Previous to that date children of all ages, from three weeks old upwards, were kept in residence in the institution, with most unsatisfactory results as regards the young children. From 1892 till my transfer to my present position in October, 1905, I had on my roll at Caversham an average, I believe, of 220 boys and girls boarded out, and the ages ranged from three weeks to the limit, fourteen years, the children being placed in some eighty homes. The system provided for the general oversight and care of the children by the Manager, who had the assistance of a lady Official Correspondent, the visiting of boarded-out children by the Manager, Official Correspondent, and at least once a month by Local Visitors and the Department's Visiting Officers; and this worked very well. The Official Correspondent in my case certainly was a most valuable officer, and an indispensable link in the chain; the homes were well and carefully chosen, children were placed in localities likely to suit them best, the foster-parents were mostly people who carried out their duties from principle, and generally the feeling between foster-parent and child grew to affection. I have no hesitation whatever, with years of experience and a knowledge of most of the foster-parents who had children from Caversham, in saying that the principle of boarding children out is a sound one—the nearest to the natural family tie, and certainly the nearest approach to family life. I can call to mind cases where young women have been married from the homes they were brought up in, cases where young men are now helping their aged foster-parents as though they were their natural parents.

It goes without saying that occasionally a home has proved unsuitable—that at times a home has not been all that could be desired; yet, admitting all to be said against it, the boarding-out system stands out eminently well, judged by its results.

There were times when it was difficult to get good homes, yet they came to us, and the children were kept at the institution, specially cared for, during the time they were inmates. Owing to the enhanced cost of living, it may be more difficult to get homes now, but, by giving an equivalent, good homes will not be found scarce.

It would not be possible for children in a foster-home to be neglected for any length of time, for the system of visiting was so thorough—first the Local Visitors had to make at least one visit a month, then the day-school teacher reported quarterly, the Manager visited any doubtful home, and the Visiting Officer made twice a year a thorough inspection of the home and surroundings.

In discussing the merits and demerits of the so-called "cottage-home" system, I am very much at a loss, since the term is vague, and usually the people who talk of cottage homes are unable to define what they mean. I suppose what is meant is a building provided by the authority dealing with the children, with a woman in charge of a number of children. But how many children would be placed in such a home? What would be the limit of age? Would both sexes be placed in one home? Would a number of cottage homes be grouped, or would they be scattered over the country? If more than six or eight children are placed in a cottage it becomes practically a small institution, the family life is lost. It may be said that there are families numbering up to twenty. Yes, there are; but it must be remembered that in such cases there is the natural tie, and, coming one by one, each drops into its place naturally and expectedly. In a cottage home the natures are more diverse, there is no common feeling; being nearly of an age, the inmates are more difficult to manage, and absolutely need a man's care, and when you have a number in one home there is a loss of individuality and home-life. If not more than eight children were placed in a home the expense would be prohibitive, and the result not so good as if they were boarded out. It would be, I am sure, more difficult to find suitable persons for cottage homes than to find good foster-parents, and it would be more costly.

Some years ago Dr. Barnardo gave up the cottage-home system in favour of boarding out, except the cottage-home colony for young women at Ilford, which is still kept up, is self-supporting, and each home is under the care of a lady—in nearly all cases, of means—who gives her services voluntarily.

In the cottage-home system on this farm the children do not get the advantages of either the institution as regards discipline and oversight, or the advantages of a foster-home as regards home and family life.

In no spirit of boastfulness do I say that, if the people at Home or here who lay so much stress on the value of cottage homes could see and examine our system of boarding out, I firmly believe they would become converts to boarding out, which has for over fifty years been the established and approved mode of dealing with pauper children in Scotland.

All that is claimed for the cottage home is obtained at Weraroa.

Having expressed my views on the two systems, I reply to the statement that the boarding-out system is defective,—

(a.) On account of the difficulty of obtaining suitable homes: If the monetary payment is made sufficient, good homes will *not* be wanting. Many people will not take children to board because they do not think the pay is sufficient to enable them to keep the children as they could wish and get a return for their services.

(b.) On account of the impossibility of classification: Now, if there is one point on which there can be no doubt, it is the absolute possibility of classification in boarding out children. This is abundantly evident, for homes are *chosen* for the children, as I have already shown.

(c.) On account of the difficulty of thorough inspection: Whether the inspection of the homes is thorough or not is dependent on the officer who has the duty to carry out. The Department's Visiting Officers are surely to be relied on.