

In the southern part of the South Island we inspected considerable areas of land that had been developed by private owners as irrigation settlements, or were in process of development as such.

The land was situated in valleys surrounded by mountains, or on plains near to mountains, and consisted of alluvial and perhaps glacial soils, varying from fine silt to coarse gravel and shingle.

Much of it was of good quality and suitable for the growth of deciduous fruit and lucerne. The latter is a very profitable crop, and it is hoped that fruit will also prove to be so, though the marketing of it in the United Kingdom is still rather in the experimental stage.

*Gum Lands.*—The gum lands, which derive their names from the nodules of fossilized gum or resin found in the soil upon which kauri forests formerly grew, are situated on the narrow strip of land that extends some 200 miles north of the City of Auckland.

The lands are not very accessible except by sea, and, as our time was limited, we were unable to visit them.

We gathered from officials of the Lands and Agricultural Departments, who were familiar with these lands, that they extend over about 1,000,000 acres. The soil, which has been worked for the gum, is of a clayey nature and capable of being converted into good grass land, but the process entailed would be lengthy and expensive. Owing to the wet climate, work would only be possible during a limited part of the year. The land would have to be fallowed for a year after levelling, and also limed. After the pastures were established they would need some 3 cwt. of superphosphates per acre per annum.

It was thought that to bring the land into cultivation would probably cost about £12 per acre, and that it might ultimately be worth about £25 per acre.

A large number of persons are engaged in digging gum, the export of this product last year being valued at £520,409. Since gum-digging began £19,505,017 worth has been exported. We were told that some of this land has already been settled by Moravians and Czecho-Slovaks, who combine digging with farming. Reclamation and settlement on such lines do not appear to be well suited to British settlers as a rule.

*Pumice Lands.*—Some of the “pumice” country between Cambridge and Rotorua was traversed. The soil is so called owing to the layer of powdered pumice or volcanic ash existing either on the surface of the ground or a short distance below it. The Commissioner of Lands for the district, who has known the country for many years, considers that if fully improved the land might possibly carry one beast to 3 acres or one and a half sheep per acre, but that the necessary preparation would involve considerable time and expense.

The rainfall is good, but water is often scarce owing to the porosity of the soil.

In the past the Government made free grants of pumice lands to settlers. The chemist of the Department of Agriculture, who has conducted experiments on such lands, stated that they vary considerably in value, and that the quality depends upon whether the pumice exists as originally deposited from the air, or whether it has been transplanted and redeposited by water. In the former case it is very light and dry and easily lifted by frost in winter, whilst in the latter it is firmer; both classes are deficient in humus and phosphates. Turnips and clover can be grown if the land is fertilized, but the former would be profitable only if grown in conjunction with pasture. To consolidate the soil, to incorporate into it a sufficient quantity of humus, and to establish grass well enough to keep stock growing would be a lengthy and expensive business.

As far as could be ascertained, the general opinion is that, as a rule, pumice land is difficult to handle and that it is wiser to leave its reclamation to the local farmer, who knows how to treat the soil and can reclaim portions of it gradually, in conjunction with other farm-work.

*Other Lands.*—From time to time a certain amount of Crown land will be drained or otherwise reclaimed and rendered available for settlement, but the greater part of the land needed for settlement purposes in the future will have to be acquired by the Government—either by the resumption of Crown leaseholds or by purchase—and resold to settlers, or bought from private owners by the settlers themselves or by persons acting on their behalf.

According to the Year-book, much of the land legislation of recent years has been in the direction of preventing large areas of good land from being acquired or retained by single individuals, and under the various Land Acts the Minister of Lands has the power compulsorily to acquire land that may be needed for closer settlement, unless the owner elects himself to subdivide it for sale.

The Land Purchase Controller states in his report for 1923 that 1,980,045 acres of land have been purchased by the Government under the Land for Settlements Act, 1908.

Private owners have also shown a disposition to subdivide their holdings. In some instances such action is no doubt due to hints from the Government, but for the most part it has been owing to the tendency for farms in the more fertile districts to be reduced to one-man propositions.

The average area in 1922–23 of occupied holdings of over 1 acre and including the big sheep-stations and the rough grazings attached to them was 510 acres.

In the North Auckland Land District, which has an area of 3,025,246 acres, the average holding was 221 acres, and in the Taranaki District 261 acres.

It would appear, therefore, that though there is still scope for closer settlement in some parts the opportunities are not unlimited.

18. PRICE OF LANDS.—The price of land is high. This was the case before the war, and subsequently it increased to such an extent that farms sold since peace was declared have often realized two or three times their pre-war value; in some instances even more.

In a country so fertile and highly favoured by nature, where farming can be pursued so cheaply, one would naturally expect the land to be valuable.

The 1,980,045 acres of land bought by the Government since 1908, most of which was presumably purchased before the war, cost, roughly, £6 10s. per acre.