

*Mr. Blair* : I shall swear to any statement of facts which I make. [Mr. Blair having been sworn, proceeded to address the Commissioners as follows:] As the object of this inquiry is, among other things, to find out who, if any one, is responsible for the damage to the asylum building, it is necessary for me to enter into the subject somewhat in detail—for this reason, that the Public Works Department is alleged to be implicated in the matter. It has been broadly stated both in Parliament and in the Press that these injuries have occurred through the default or the negligence of the Public Works Department or its officers; and, as I am concerned not only as an officer, but individually, it will be one of my main objects to show that neither the department nor any of its officers are in the slightest degree to blame for the mishaps that have occurred. In order to place the whole matter before the Commissioners as clearly as possible, I shall first give a sketch of the various steps taken in carrying out the building; in the second place I shall deal with the question of responsibility; thirdly, I shall consider the cause of damage; and fourthly, I shall consider the defects which have been discovered. Now, first, as to a sketch of the various steps that have been taken towards carrying out the works. The work was begun in 1878. A temporary asylum was erected, to which a number of the inmates of the asylum in Dunedin were sent. These inmates were employed in clearing the ground for the permanent building; and it was proposed that they should excavate the whole of the site of, and also make the bricks for, the permanent building. It was, however, found that this arrangement would not answer; so the contractor for the building (Mr. Gore) had to undertake the excavation of the site, and he was paid for this as an extra. Mr. R. A. Lawson was appointed the architect of the building, and he prepared the designs and superintended the construction to the end. The contract for the erection of the central block—the first one undertaken—was entered into on the 11th September, 1879; the contract for the remaining blocks was entered into on the 28th October, 1881. It was, however, in reality one contract from the first. The contractors tendered for the building in five blocks, and the Government accepted the tender for the central block, and had the option during the currency of the contract of accepting a tender for any one or the whole of the remaining blocks. The tender for the remaining four blocks was accepted on the 28th October, 1881. The central block and one on each side of it were finished on the 9th September, 1883. No. 2 Block, which is the one on the extreme north, and the one in which the damage has occurred, was not finished till the 21st February, 1884. The final certificate for the whole building was given on the 4th July, 1884. Before the contract was actually finished symptoms of settlement appeared in the extreme northern block, and the District Engineer at Dunedin (Mr. Ussher) took steps to put in a drain behind this block. This drain started well in front of the building, and, passing on the northern side, turned right in behind the building, and passed the northern block by a little over a chain. Mr. Ussher thought that by draining the subsoil the subsidence would stop. This drain was put in between May and July, 1884. The settlement seemed to stop for some time, but afterwards reappeared, and between March and June, 1886, another drain was put in. This drain was in very much the same locality as the previous one, but closer to the building. It came quite close to the building behind the northern block, and it was at a very much lower level. The settlement again stopped for awhile, and the stoppage was attributed to the drain; but when winter set in and the ground became wet the cracks began afresh. We then began—that is, the department began—to think that drainage would not cure the settlement, and in October, 1886, a plan for widening the base of the foundation was prepared, and the foundations were strengthened by being widened and extended in various directions. I shall now hand this plan in to the Commissioners [Document 1 produced]. The last drain which was put in was supposed to be too low, the first one not to be low enough; so a third drain was put in immediately over the second one. It was put in near the level of the foundations, and close by them. That was in 1886. The plan I have just put in is a general plan showing these drains. I shall describe it further on.

*Mr. Mountfort* : When was the second drain, at the higher level, put in?

*Mr. Blair* : That was put in about January, 1887.

*The Chairman* : That is the red one on the plan?

*Mr. Blair* : Yes. The lower gallery of No. 2 drain was completed in June, 1886, having been commenced on the 25th March. If you wish I will give you the exact dates of all the drains.

*Mr. Mountfort* : It was done before you widened the foundations?

*Mr. Blair* : I will give you the dates of all the drains. The first drain was begun on the 16th May, 1884, and completed on the 16th July, 1884. The second drain was commenced on the 25th March, 1886, and finished on the 30th June, 1886. Increasing the foundations and the upper gallery was done in January, 1887.

*The Chairman* : What is shown in red on the plan?

*Mr. Blair* : Yes. We began that on the 7th November, 1886, and completed it on the 17th January, 1887. The third drain was put in immediately over the second one, and close to the building. This, as I have said, was commenced at the end of 1886, and finished at the beginning of 1887. The cracks seemed again to have stopped for awhile, but whether the drain had anything to do with the stoppage or not is a matter which we are not clear about—we have a doubt about it. The Public Works Department is, however, satisfied that the strengthening of the foundation has undoubtedly done good, for the cracks that in the first instance were the largest have not moved again, or, at all events, have not moved to any appreciable extent. The movement, however, is extending outwards from the position where the strengthening had taken place, and further works must be done to prevent further settlement. It is in consequence of this fresh movement that this inquiry is now being held. Now I come to the second point—who is responsible for the damage done? I wish first to explain the relations between the Public Works Department and the Architect. In 1878 I was Engineer in Charge of the Middle Island. At about that time the office of Colonial Architect had been abolished, and the matter of attending to the public buildings throughout the colony was transferred to the Public Works Department. It was, however, arranged that when