

MAY IT PLEASE YOUR EXCELLENCY,—

Your Excellency's Commission was received and opened at Greymouth on Thursday, the 7th May, 1896, and a preliminary meeting was held on the same day, at which the mode of procedure was discussed. The mine-manager, and the relatives of the deceased miners were represented by counsel, but the counsel for the Crown and for the owners of the mine did not arrive until the following day.

2. The Commissioners decided, after due consideration, that reporters for the press should be excluded, as it was not desirable that the evidence for the present should be fully published. This was done solely in the interests of the miners, as it was represented that there would be great difficulty in getting them to bring forward their evidence if it were immediately made public. This course was, however, found to be impracticable, as the public were not excluded, and consequently reports were furnished to the press from other sources. It was, therefore, decided after the preliminary inquiry on the first day, that the sittings of the Commissioners should be open to the press.

3. The Commissioners sat on nine days for the purpose of taking evidence, two of the sittings being held at Brunnerton, for the convenience of witnesses residing there, the other sittings being held in the Courthouse at Greymouth.

4. The Commissioners devoted one day to the inspection of the locality of the disaster in the Brunner Coal-mine. Your Commissioners regret that, owing to the pumping gear having been destroyed by the explosion, the water had risen to a considerable extent in the deeper part of the mine before the time of their visit, so that they were unable to inspect for themselves the exact place where the explosion appears to them to have originated, according to most of the evidence.

5. Some of the Commissioners also visited the Blackball and Westport Coal-mine, the two latter inspections being made for the purpose of investigating the working of certain changes in the systems of management which have been adopted since the Brunner disaster.

6. Your Commissioners append hereto the minutes of their proceedings and a list of the witnesses, whose evidence, duly sworn, was taken in full, and that evidence is also appended to this report.

7. The Commissioners also examined and perused the plans and documents which are referred to by the witnesses, and which are enumerated in the appendix hereto.

8. With regard to the questions submitted to us by your Excellency, we have the honour to report as follows :—

9. That the accident was caused by an explosion, which occurred suddenly in the sump side of the dip-working about 9.25 a.m. on the 26th March, 1896, and caused the death of sixty-five persons, not one of those who were in the mine at the time having escaped. The last men now alive who were in the mine before the accident were John Moseley and Frank Thomas, who left at 6 a.m., and the first to attempt to enter the mine after the accident was Mr. Bishop, the manager.

OWNERS.

10. The leasehold in which the Brunner Mine is situated has an area of 1,280 acres, and is part of the Grey District Coal Reserve.

The original lease was granted for a term of twenty-one years from the 1st January, 1874, but was twice transferred, in 1875 and in 1879; and was surrendered in December, 1886, by the then holder, Mr. Martin Kennedy, who, in January, 1887, obtained the new lease for a term of sixty-three years. This lease was transferred in 1888 to the Grey Valley Coal Company, and was by this company surrendered, in December, 1894, for a new lease under the conditions of "The Coal-mines Act, 1891." This lease was, on the 19th October, 1895, transferred by a deed of assignment, with the consent of the Minister, to the Greymouth-Point Elizabeth Railway and Coal Company (Limited); and this company was the responsible owner of the mine at the date of the accident.

The conditions of the lease under which the mine is now worked are as follow: The term of the lease is for twenty-one years, with the right of renewal. There is a dead rent of £1,000 per annum, and a royalty of 6d. per ton for all above 40,000 tons, the annual output to be maintained by covenant at 75,000 tons. The total area of the coal which has now been worked is about 230 acres, and the total amount of coal raised since the systematic working of the mine was commenced up to the 26th of March has been 1,307,942 tons. The amount of coal which has been left in the mine, as ribs for supporting the mine and the pillars, is about 1,000,000 tons, and of which one-half may probably be extracted. It is very certain, therefore, that, unless successful prospecting-works are pushed on in other parts of the leasehold, the mine will have to be closed long before the term of the lease expires. This prospect is not encouraging for the lessees to spend more than can be avoided in the management of the mine; but the evidence obtained during our inquiry has not disclosed any lapse of duty in this respect on the part of the company.

MANAGEMENT.

11. At the date of the accident the mine was under the administrative control of Mr. James Bishop, a duly qualified and certificated coal-mine manager, and who has been in continuous employment as such for twenty-five years, and for the last thirteen years has been manager of the Brunner Mine. Mr. Bishop's mining staff in the dip-workings when the accident took place comprised: One under-viewer, John Roberts; one fireman, John Morris; one deputy, Josiah Masters; two under-deputies on night shift, Robert Tennant and William Sheard. On any occasion when the manager required to be absent from his charge, the under-viewer was always given written instructions, making him responsible for the time being.

12. The number of hands employed in connection with the mine at the date of the disaster was as follows: In the dip-workings, 5 officers and 67 miners; in the rise-workings, 5 officers and 71 miners; and hands engaged on surface work, and in charge of machinery, 54: making a total of 202.