

MARLBOROUGH.

SIR,—

Blenheim, March, 1898.

I have the honour to forward the following report of the proceedings of the Marlborough Education Board for the year ending 31st December, 1897.

At the commencement of the year the Board consisted of the following persons: The Hon. William Douglas Hall Baillie, M.L.C., Thomas Lindsay Buick, Thomas Carter, John Clervaux Chaytor, John Duncan, Charles Houghton Mills, M.H.R., William Benoni Parker, Joseph Henry Redwood, and Arthur Penrose Seymour. The members retiring by rotation in March were Messrs. Duncan, Chaytor, and W. B. Parker. Messrs. Duncan and Chaytor were re-elected, and Mr. Richard McCallum was elected in place of Mr. Parker, who did not offer himself for re-election. An extraordinary vacancy caused by the absence of Mr. T. L. Buick, for three months, was filled by the election of Mr. Harry Fleetwood Thompson. Twelve meetings were held during the year, and the average attendance of members was 5.7. The individual attendance was as follows: Hon. Captain Baillie, 4; Mr. Carter, 11; Mr. Chaytor, 5; Mr. Duncan, 11; Mr. McCallum, 8; Mr. Mills, 6; Mr. Redwood, 9; Mr. Seymour, 8; Mr. Thompson, 6.

SCHOOLS.—Sixty-four schools have been in operation during the year, an increase of four since last report. All but twenty-one of these are either small aided schools or household schools, principally the latter. The absolute necessity for the existence of these schools can be readily understood by those who have visited and explored the Sounds County. It may be sufficient here to say that scattered round a coast-line of about five hundred miles inside the heads of Queen Charlotte and Pelorus Sounds there are twenty-eight schools, communication with which is only possible by water, and generally in open boats, and even this is liable to constant interruption through violent or contrary winds; and it frequently happens that the inspection and examination of these schools are thus interrupted or entirely prevented. This year several schools were not examined, through being unable to reach the appointed rendezvous.

The average weekly roll-number for the year was 2,182, and the working average attendance was 1,819, or about 83 per cent. Thus, although the average roll is nearly 73 less than last year, the working average is only 13 less, so that the percentage of attendance is slightly higher. This percentage was exceeded last year in only four of the Education Districts.

The Board has tried the effect of employing truant officers in several of the larger school districts, but the result does not seem to justify a continuation of this effort to secure a fuller attendance. It may be supposed that as Marlborough occupies the fifth place as regards regularity of attendance there is not much ground for complaint on this score; but it may be noted that at twenty-three of the small aided schools the attendance as shown by the quarterly returns is absolutely perfect—the irregularity being chiefly noticeable in the larger schools. The attendance has been considerably affected by the prevalence of epidemics, which have necessitated the temporary closing of some of the schools.

BUILDINGS.—The new buildings at Renwick, Omaka, and Blind River, contracts for which were let at the beginning of the year, have been finished, supplied with furniture, and the sites have been securely fenced. A new school has been built at the Grove to replace a very old and dangerously dilapidated building—one of the earliest buildings in the district. The Board's expenditure on Building Account during the year has amounted to £1,603 8s. 3d., of which amount £1,047 1s. 6d. was on account of the new buildings named above. Repairs and improvements absorbed £283 11s. 4d.; fencing new sites at Omaka, Blind River, and Renwick, and renewal of fencing on others, £133 19s. 1d.; addition to furniture and appliances, £82 16s. 10d.; plans and supervision of works, £55 19s. 6d. This expenditure left the Building Account in debt to the General Account to the extent of £1,406 14s. 8d., thus reducing the general balance to the small sum of £35 15s. 2d. The long-contemplated building of a teacher's residence at Springlands can be no longer postponed, as a new head-teacher has been appointed, to whom rent-allowance must be paid until a residence is provided. Several old schools in the district will require to be painted during the coming year to preserve them from decay; and a small new school will also be required at Mahau Sound. The amount, therefore, of £875 allotted to this district out of the building vote for the (now) current financial year, will still leave the Building Account in debt to the General Account to the extent of £531, without making any provision for the inevitable expenditure of the current year.

SCHOLARSHIPS.—In consequence of the repeated appeals to the Government for some adequate provision for secondary education in Marlborough having proved unavailing, the Board applied to the School Commissioners for assistance from the fund accruing from secondary reserves. The Commissioners responded to this application by undertaking to assist the Board to establish another scholarship annually for five years, by which time the funds at their disposal will be practically exhausted. The new scholarship has been named the "Record Reign Scholarship," and at the suggestion of the Commissioners the upward limit of age for competitors has been fixed at fifteen years. The annual value is the same as that of the other Boards' scholarships, namely, £40 per annum. Of this amount £32 will be provided by the Commissioners, and £8 by the Board out of the statutory grant of 1s. 6d. per head of average attendance. The annual value of these scholarships is fixed at £40, as owing to the absence of any secondary school in Marlborough the holders have to attend at Nelson College, the governors of which institution remit the tuition fees in such cases.

SHORTHAND.—The Board has resolved to introduce the teaching of shorthand, under the provisions of "The Manual and Technical Instruction Act, 1895," and the preliminary steps are now being taken with this object in view. The name of the proposed teacher will shortly be submitted for your approval.

SCHOOL DISTRICTS.—The number of school districts within this Education District remains the same. In two cases—the largest and the smallest in point of population—the householders refused or neglected to elect Committees, and the Board appointed Commissioners as required by the Act.