

INTERVIEWS.



The Flax Industry.

This industry is probably one of the largest in New Zealand, and the gentleman, whose portrait we publish above, may be aptly termed the "Father" of it. He has also been mainly instrumental in the promoting and furthering of the frozen meat trade in the colony. Mr. John Holmes was born in County Cork, Ireland, where he studied law before he came to New Zealand. He arrived in the colony in 1874, and engaged in a general merchant's business in Dunedin. He resigned his position there to accept an appointment with the New Zealand Loan and Mercantile Agency Company, for whom he undertook special financial duties. The Directors recognising his ability and energy rapidly promoted him, and at the expiration of 18 months he opened, and was made manager of the company's branch at Blenheim, which he conducted with marked success, the present handsome building of the company there being the result of and a monument to his exertions. He finally decided to engage in business on his own account, and on resigning the management of the Blenheim branch was presented by the Directors with a substantial cheque in recognition of his services. To Mr. Holmes, Marlborough owes the direct London frozen meat trade, in fact the initiation of that trade and the exporting of tinned rabbits, both of which have played a prominent part in the prosperity of the district, were brought about by him. He has always taken a lively interest in all that affects the produce of New Zealand and has opened up new channels for its outlet, notably to Rio Janiero, to which port he has consigned large shipments of milling wheat, oats, and other cereals.

His connection with the hemp or flax trade of New Zealand is well known, and requires but little comment, suffice it to say that out of a great number of applications his was specially chosen as grader to the New Zealand Flax Miller's Association. A representative from this paper called on Mr Holmes a few days ago with a view to furnishing it's readers with some particulars regarding the trade. He was courteously received by the subject of our sketch, who expressed himself as willing to furnish any information in his power.

"In the first place, Mr. Holmes," said our reporter, "what should the flax trade of New Zealand be worth annually to the colony?"

"I should say about £400,000, and at times over that, but the prices vary so, it is difficult to give an exact figure."

"About how much passes through Wellington?"

"From fifty to sixty thousand bales of flax pass through the Wellington sheds yearly."

"You were speaking of the varying of the prices; is it simply the usual varying of prices on a staple product; or is the market influenced by other means?"

"Well there are several features that affect the market-value of our flax export. In the first place, it is to a certain extent controlled by the export of other fibres such as manilla and sisal, and in many cases the rope manufacturers prefer to use the fibres mentioned; if at the time the amount of flax in the home market is large, naturally the demand being reduced prices go down. Then there is the competition of flax from other parts of the world, with the result that a glut in the market 'home' means a corresponding loss to the exporter."

"But the flax is bought before it leaves New Zealand, is it not? and surely the supply cannot overrun the demand when such is the case, at least in the London market."

"Ah, there you have touched the weak spot. Flax, up to within a few years ago was sold here to be delivered in London at a certain price. Perhaps during the time that elapsed between the sale and the delivery the market price through the influx of other fibres had depreciated to a considerable extent. Owing to the absence of proper grading, the buyers had a loophole of escape, and in many cases would refuse to accept delivery except at market prices, on the plea that the flax delivered was not up to the standard it should have been. This was, of course, cruel to the exporters, but there was no remedy."

"Could not this difficulty have been obviated by some system of Government grading and marking before the cargo was shipped, so that on its arrival, unless damaged during the voyage, it would have to be accepted by the purchaser?"

"Most certainly, but unfortunately we could not get the Government to take action in the matter by appointing an official grader. The difficulty was, however, to a certain extent surmounted by the flax millers forming themselves into an association, and appointing a man to examine and grade all exports in the trade before shipment. This grading has been accepted by purchasers in the English market almost universally and the result has been most satisfactory."

"But London is not the only market is it? I should have thought, judging from the cable reports of the lynching cases in America, that hemp would be a product much in demand in the United States."

"Oh yes," was the reply with a smile, "we send some to