

NORFOLK STORY

CONTINUED FROM THE PREVIOUS ISSUE.

From the appearance of the ship, the people were convinced that relief was not far distant, and three days later two ships hove in sight. They proved to be the "Justinian" and the "Surprise" from Port Jackson with provisions and two hundred convicts. The mystery of the non arrival of supplies from England was now cleared up. The "Guardian", Captain Kicu, had sailed from Plymouth for Sydney with provisions in August, 1788 but she had been wrecked at the cape, and it was not until the arrival at Port Jackson of the second Fleet, in June, 1790 that the people felt the danger of starvation to be past.

The relief at last sent to the Islanders had, with unaccountable want of consideration been delayed two months after the arrival of the Fleet and it arrived only just in time. The mutton birds had deserted the island, the fish had also failed them entirely, and a delay of another six weeks would have meant death to the greater part of the inhabitants by starvation.

Captain Hunter did not get away from the Island, which was associated with so much suffering and anxiety to him, until February, 1791. He considered its capabilities much over-rated for- while he admits the richness of the soil - the crops were liable to destruction by blight, grub, caterpillar, and other plagues. The timber of which so much had been expected was very inferior. Instead of being able to support two thousand people as Governor Phillip had expected, he thought five hundred too many, and these should be such as had forfeited all hope of seeing their native country again, and would know that their existence depended on their industry. He recommended that the island be reserved as a place for incorrigible criminals, there being the advantage that escape was impossible. Of the island he says, "It is a dreadful place, almost inaccessible with any wind."

Notwithstanding the unfavourable reports of Captain Hunter and others Governor Phillip continued to send fresh batches of convicts and small settlers, and when Lieut.-Governor Ross gave up his command to King, on the return of the latter from England, in September, 1791, the population had increased to over eight hundred.

King had now the rank of Lieut.-Governor of Norfolk Island. He had founded the colony and took the most sanguine view of its capabilities, and of the practicability of making it prosperous and self supporting. Besides getting a large area of land under cultivation by the labour of the prisoners, he encouraged those whose time had expired to take up small allotments for growing vegetables and grain. A number of soldiers and sailors were also induced by the offer of grants of land of up to sixty acres to become agricultural settlers.

The greatest obstacle to the progress of the settlement lay in the character of the people. King says of the prisoners that, while some were well behaved, the bulk of them were miserable wretches. Collins in his account of New South Wales gives a deplorable picture of the disorder and crime which were rampant at Port Jackson, and as the selection of Norfolk Island consisted of the worst and the doubly convicted, the conditions on the island were not likely to be any better than those in Sydney. The settlers were mostly soldiers and sailors and others who had little or no knowledge of agriculture, and were full of grievances and complaints. Still the colony increased in population and production. At the end of 1793 there were over one thousand people on the island. The settlers had become a considerable body, and they had command of a plentiful supply of labour in the expiree prisoners who had hired themselves out to farm-work. The Government took into store all grain grown by settlers at a fixed price per bushel. This so stimulated production that in the year ending May, 1794 thirty four thousand bushels were grown. The settlers were all prosperous and the Lieut.-Governor was able to offer to send if required twenty thousand bushels to Sydney for commissariat use. The supply was now so large that the Governor had to refuse to purchase any further grain which he could not make any use of and settlers found themselves without a market. Many gave up their farms; many left the island. Others turned their attention to raising hogs, which had multiplied exceedingly. In 1795, King could offer the Sydney commissariat the excess of forty tons of cured pork which had been salted on the island.

It will be remembered that the New Zealand Flax plant was very plentiful on Norfolk Island. Lieut.-Governor King was very anxious to develop the manufacture of the fibre into cordage and canvas. Many attempts were made, but with small success, as no proper method of dressing the fibre could be discovered. King's method of grappling with this difficulty is sufficiently characteristic of the times.