

1852.

Victoria.

REPORT

FROM THE

SELECT COMMITTEE

ON THE

POST OFFICE DEPARTMENT,

TOGETHER WITH THE

Proceedings of the Committee.

ORDERED BY THE COUNCIL TO BE PRINTED,

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Melbourne :

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EXTRACTED FROM THE MINUTES.

FRIDAY, 17TH SEPTEMBER, 1852.

POST OFFICE.—Mr. Westgarth moved, pursuant to notice, That a Select Committee be appointed to enquire into and report upon the condition of the Post Office Department, with power to take Evidence and sit during the adjournment of the Council. The Committee to consist of the Colonial Secretary, The Chairman of Quarter Sessions, Mr. Murphy, Mr. Smith, and the Mover.

Debate ensued.

Question—put and passed.

REPORT

*From the Select Committee appointed to enquire into the Department of the
Post Office.*

YOUR Committee deem it quite unnecessary to enter upon any elaborate details of the whole system of the Postal Arrangements, as this subject has already been so fully exposed, in a Report drawn up in February, last year, by the Board, appointed for that purpose, by the Lieutenant Governor. Your Committee will therefore proceed at once to some of the principal defects that they now find to prevail, and that call the most urgently for remedy. Their enquiries have been directed chiefly to the head quarters of the establishment in Melbourne.

1. *Want of Accommodation.*—This is a defect of long standing, and formed a subject of complaint so early as the time of the enquiry of the Board above alluded to, that is to say, for some time prior to the present extraordinary extension of all the public official Departments, and of this one (in particular,) more perhaps than any other, in consequence of the discovery of the Gold Fields. Under these circumstances the present accommodations are of course altogether inadequate. There is, for example, no available space for properly and completely assorting the Mails upon their arrival, even in the letter department alone, without reference to the multitude of newspapers. In consequence of the great increase of the postal business in the Colony, the boxes and drawers set apart for receiving the various in-coming and out-going Mails, are found to be much too limited in dimensions, while at the same time, any further enlargement is at present impossible, consistently with maintaining convenient passage way through the apartments. Rooms for receiving mails, for receiving visitors, or spare accommodations for any other purpose are at present out of the question.

2. *Want of adequate Staff.*—This defect is in some measure contingent upon that which has just been adverted to. It appears impossible, conveniently to accommodate more than the present number of assistants, with the space now available.

3. *Remuneration inadequate to the Duties.*—The rate of pay has not been advanced sufficiently to consort with the altered circumstances of the Colony; and it is generally inferior as compared with that of other official Departments, which are not by any means superior in importance. The Junior Clerks, for instance, receive the original allowance of 5s. per day, together with the late general addition to the smaller official Salaries of 50 per cent, making a total of 7s. 6d. per day. These parties are supposed to be young men of good education, and consequently of some social position. For such persons, therefore, this rate of remuneration in the present circumstances of the Colony, appears to your Committee to be wholly inadequate. This position cannot be better illustrated than by the fact, that the different Post-men employed in the same Office in the delivery of letters throughout the Town, now receive pay at the rate of 10s. per day,—that even this amount has been represented to your Committee as insufficient, and that your Committee, with the view of procuring and permanently retaining the best services in

these duties, which are of such considerable importance and responsibility, are prepared to recommend an advance in the case of the Postmen, to 12s. per day. Considering the decided advantage, and in reality, the economy of employing competent and responsible parties in all the postal Departments, it appears to your Committee that no Junior Clerk, competent for employment in the Post Office, should receive a less remuneration than that just adverted to. The general importance, and in most instances, the high degree of trust involved in the different Clerical duties, must of themselves indicate the necessity for liberal remuneration. But another reason is still to be found in the arduous and unremitting nature of the duties. The time of daily attendance is usually three hours longer than that which prevails in other public Offices; nor are there any set holidays, such as occur in the routine of other departments, to which the different officers may look forward for change of scene or recreation.

Under such untoward circumstances, it was only to be expected that the greatest inconvenience should be suffered from a constant change of Officers, and the incessant introduction of new and inexperienced hands, into departments that are in most cases pre-eminently dependent for their successful working, on that knowledge and skill that is to be acquired mainly by long continued practice in the same routine of duty. Remuneration, prospective as well as present, should be such as to secure and retain both efficiency and experience. But so totally different has been the result, in the case of the Melbourne Post Office, that your Committee find, that out of ten persons now constituting the Clerical Staff of the Office, only three have been engaged prior to the beginning of the present year.

After these observations your Committee need scarcely add that the present administration of the Post Office is most inefficient and unsatisfactory. In accordance with what might have been anticipated, your Committee found the system of delivery of letters, called for at the Post Office most dilatory and vexatious. Large bundles, under each letter of the Alphabet, were thrown indiscriminately together, without the slightest attempt at double alphabetical arrangement, each lot having to be searched and re-searched entirely through on the successive daily applications of hundreds of different individuals. The case is still worse with regard to Newspapers, which, for want of an available method like that just alluded to, lay together in heaps of hopeless extent, and which, under present arrangements, might almost as well have been thrown away.

Your Committee speak of course of letters and papers whose addresses cannot be ascertained for delivery, or which are directed for call, at the Post Office; because in other respects, the department is better administered; and merchants and others, who are recipients on an extensive scale, may, by a small annual payment, have the convenience of a box of their own, from which their letters and papers may be delivered on application.

Your Committee would however allude to the great extension that has already taken place in that particular department of the Post Office, just alluded to, and to the circumstance that, owing to the condition and prospects of this Colony, the proportion of letters and papers to be retained at the Office until called for, must go on largely increasing, and become ere long the most important branch of the whole department, as the letters and newspapers so retained do already, on the statement of the Chief Postmaster, exceed one half of the whole number received.

In recommending certain improvements with the view of effecting an increased usefulness in the Post Office department, your Committee would allude to—

1. *The extension of the present building accommodation.*—Your Committee are glad to find that measures are already being taken by the Government for the accomplishment of this object. On a part of the reserve to the east of the present building, a wooden structure is now being erected under superintendence of the Colonial Architect, to measure 140 feet by 25 feet. This new accommoda-

tion is destined chiefly for a Letter-receiving Office, and an Office for the receiving and despatching of Mails, so as to leave greater room in the present building for the Letter and Newspaper delivery department. To assist the despatch of this latter business, the verandah is to be carried along the entire front and both sides of the building, so as to admit of a greater number of delivery windows.

These different additions and alterations are estimated to cost £1200, and their completion may be looked for in about six weeks; although not comprising all that may both at present and prospectively be necessary, they will add materially to the present convenience of the department. Further improvements, it may be remarked, are also in contemplation of the Government, with the view of ultimately removing the present buildings, and substituting an edifice upon a much larger scale, to occupy nearly the entire of the ground that has been reserved for the Post Office.

2. *A more efficient Staff.*—A larger number of hands is necessary, so soon as the accommodation will permit. It is essential, also, that the rate of remuneration be increased, and that there be an encouraging scale of reward, according to experience and efficiency, for those who have remained long in the establishment. The amount of overtime, which as compared with other public Offices is found necessary in the Post Office, ought, in the opinion of your Committee, to be a subject for extra allowances. With regard to Holidays, a privilege not at present enjoyed by the officers, your Committee think that that subject may be left with the Chief Postmaster, on the understanding, however, that it is desirable for that officer to make such arrangements as will permit of the different individuals of the staff enjoying during the year a considerable amount of recreation. Following the rule of the London Post Office, each officer might be allowed one month's leave of absence during the year.

3. *Other suggestions.*—The system of a double alphabetical arrangement of Letters and Newspapers is most urgently called for. To this end, a larger space and additional clerical assistance are necessary. It is desirable, also, that Letters and Newspapers, owing to the large numbers of each that are now received, should form two distinct departments; of which that for the newspapers alone would require, as your Committee ascertain, the unremitting attendance of at least two assistants. The tediousness of delivery in both these departments, and the consequent inconvenience to the public, are at present a positive disgrace to the Colony: and your Committee trust, that so soon as the alterations now in progress are completed, a more creditable state of things will in this respect ensue.

One recommendation your Committee would most strongly urge upon the consideration of the House and the Government; that is, a system of unexceptionary prepayment of Letters, and that by means of stamps. This is no new recommendation in regard to the Post Office; it is alluded to in the Report of the Board already spoken of; and a new postal measure contemplated by the Government during the previous session, but not yet carried out, involved this among other proposed principles. As a means of simplifying labour, and diminishing the risks of error, negligence, or dishonesty, it is perhaps the most important improvement that could at present be introduced into the postal arrangements.

Melbourne, 1st Nov., 1852.

(Signed)

W. WESTGARTH,
Chairman.

APPENDIX.

Country Post Offices.—The attention of your Committee, in the present enquiry, has been directed mainly to the Melbourne Post Office, which the present circumstances of the Colony have rendered of such surpassing importance. They have, however, the opportunity, through the recent visit of their Chairman to the Gold Fields, to report upon the branch Posts established at the two principal of these localities.

Forest Creek.—The establishment consists of a postmaster and two assistants. Mails are received and despatched twice a week. There is not at present, however, any regular contract Mail conveyance, as formerly, between Kyneton and this place. The former contract terminated last month, and another has not yet been accepted, or rather, not yet been tendered for. In the meanwhile, the Government despatch semi-weekly a trooper to Kyneton, to convey and bring back the respective Mails, including the Mail for Bendigo, which is sent on and returned once a week. The average semi-weekly number of Letters now despatched from Forest Creek is about eight hundred. The Letters received are rather less in number, a large proportion still going on to Bendigo, notwithstanding a considerable recent immigration into the Forest Creek Gold Fields from that locality.

Bendigo.—The establishment is composed of a Post master, with three authorized and one acting assistant. There has never, as yet, been any contract Mail service to and from this important locality, and great delays and irregularities are consequently complained of. For the present, the Mail is conveyed to and from Forest Creek by means of the weekly Government Escort for conveyance of the gold; and as arrangements are not in harmony at the latter locality, the Mails for Melbourne are usually detained there for several days after arrival.

Above one thousand Letters are received and despatched weekly through this Post Office. The postal charge, both here and at Mount Alexander, is the usual rate of colonial postage; and for registered Letters, sixpence additional. For the month of September, there were 1017 registered Letters issued, and nearly an equal number are received from Melbourne. These issues are made in triplicate. To facilitate deliveries, the Letters of Storekeepers and other principal recipients are separately dealt with, and without extra charge.

In both these Post Offices, owing to the large number of Letters, the double alphabetical system, not as yet acted upon, begins to appear necessary. The rates of remuneration, of £200 a year to the Postmasters, and £150 to the Assistants was complained of, and as your Committee think, with justice, as being quite insufficient, and indeed scarcely on a par with the local rates of labourers' wages.

PROCEEDINGS OF THE COMMITTEE.

WEDNESDAY, 6TH OCTOBER, 1852.

Members present :—

Mr. Pohlman, Mr. Murphy, Mr. Westgarth.

Mr. Westgarth called to the Chair.

Adjourned to Wednesday, 20th October.

WEDNESDAY, 20TH OCTOBER.

Members present :—

Mr. Westgarth, in the Chair.

The Colonial Secretary, Mr. Murphy.

The Chairman reported on Forest Creek and Bendigo Post Offices.

The Chairman and Mr. Murphy were requested to inspect the Melbourne Post Office, and report to the Committee.

Adjourned to Tuesday, 26th October.

TUESDAY, 26TH OCTOBER.

Adjourned to Thursday, 28th October.

THURSDAY, 28TH OCTOBER.

Members present :—

Mr. Westgarth, in the Chair.

Mr. Pohlman, The Colonial Secretary, Mr. Murphy.

Report agreed to.