

3. Agency House Views on the Blister Blight Situation.

G. K. NEWTON.

(Read by L. E. Baker.)

I much appreciate the opportunity given to me by the Director of the Tea Research Institute for expressing the views held by Members of Agency Houses on the Blister Blight situation as it has arisen to affect the Tea Industry in Ceylon. It is with the greatest regret I have not found it possible to attend the Symposium personally, but my colleague, Mr. L. E. Baker, has very kindly consented to read this paper, the contents of which are based on views expressed by Members of a number of Agency Houses and General Managers of Companies representing views I would have expressed if made as a personal contribution only.

The Secretary of the Planters' Association was good enough to circularise Agency Houses, etc. (34 in number) asking for expressions of opinion on this subject many of whom have assisted me with their written views which I much appreciate, and gratefully acknowledge in compiling this memorandum.

I believe all present are aware that the fungus manifested itself in this Country towards the end of 1946 when great concern was occasioned by its arrival, and, except for academic knowledge at that time, nothing was known here of its habits and activities, nor could anyone judge how it might affect the Tea Industry in Ceylon for the future. Since then several outstanding features have established themselves, showing how the Blight affects Tea in varying degrees in different parts of the Island, at different elevations, and even varies in its

intensity between adjoining estates, and adjoining tea fields, according to their situation in respect of rainfall, mist, and exclusion from the rays of the sun, etc. These are points of an agricultural nature, which are being dealt with more specifically by Mr. Kenneth Morford, but I would emphasise here that the general view held is that Tea planted in the Low Country (say, up to 2,000 ft. above sea level) attacks of the Blight so far have not given cause for much apprehension nor have we received any reports of probable crop losses from estates so situated. For what is known as the Mid-country Zone (2,000 to 3,999 ft.) the intensity of attacks seems to vary very greatly according to the situation of the fields, but there is a general feeling that crop losses in these areas have now become serious amounting to between 5 per cent and 10 per cent. For the Up-country Zone (4,000 feet to our highest tea a little over 6,000 feet) the losses appear to be even greater, in this case estimated at between 5 per cent to 20 per cent, according to the situation of the fields.

The above computations refer to estates which receive rainfall from both the South West and North East Monsoons and as far as tea estates in the Uva District (where rainfall is only heavy during the N. E. Monsoon period) liability to Blister Blight attack appears to be less, with the exception of some of the highest Tea which lies in the Mist Belt. On the whole, opinion is that this area of tea is not suffering as severely as that planted in the S. W. Monsoon dis-

tricts, except perhaps for some sporadic and very acute attacks.

From figures at my disposal no indication is given of crop being lost from this area, but it is quite likely that some individual properties have been adversely affected for which there is no specific information.

Although it is generally admitted that losses of crop are taking place the Customs Returns of tea exported for the past 5 years are as follows:—

1944 - 273,453,894 lbs.

1945 - 230,042,976 lbs.

1946 - 290,511,908 lbs.

1947 - 287,259,020 lbs.

1948 - 296,000,174 lbs.

which figures appear to contradict the general assumption, but I think to some extent the high total output since Blister Blight arrived has been occasioned by increased manuring on Low-country estates following greater availability of artificial fertilisers after the War, and resultant high yields from these properties not affected by the Blight; a higher intensity of plucking on properties which have recently changed hands, and also increased yields from the Uva Province, where weather conditions have been conducive of good flushes and where manure applications have also been increased.

One also has to bear in mind the fact that heavy attacks of Blister Blight have a similar effect to a very light cut across and, with good weather conditions following, result in heavy flushes. This may tend to keep yields up for the time being on some properties but eventually must have a detrimental effect on the tea. Naturally Proprietors and Shareholders are concerned with falling crops, and to what extent such a fall may affect their dividends, the alloca-

tion of sufficient reserves for future requirements, and other allied factors. These important issues are of particular concern for Agency Houses.

It is generally admitted that cost of production has been increased on many properties figures given to me being between 2 cents to 14 cents per lb., with a few outstandingly high increases, the highest being placed at 44 cents per lb. Such a factor of course is responsible for reduction in profits, and there seems to be no doubt that Proprietors and Committees are suffering as a result. One of the repercussions can be seen in share price lists, where shares for Companies holding estates in the North East and Low-Country districts are very firm, whereas the same cannot be said of Companies where their main holdings are in the South West Monsoon area.

Visiting Agents generally have followed the advice of the Tea Research Institute in altering pruning methods so that bud break may not take place during very wet weather; this factor seems to have become almost general now in the South West districts, but again is more an agricultural problem which Mr. Morford will be dealing with.

Where Agents are concerned over these evasive precautions is the way work on estates becomes concentrated for short periods, followed by slack periods when employment for all labour becomes difficult. Since there is a statutory obligation to give a specific quota of work weekly it often becomes necessary to "find employment" resulting in higher costs of production. Another repercussion of Blister Blight.

The use of fungicides in the form of sprays have been found useful in the treatment of young plants in nurseries, and on a few estates such prophylactic treatment has been carried out on tea recovering from

pruning. Reports of the work done so far indicate considerable variation in cost, according to the terrain over which the tea so treated is planted. Spraying of old tea in preventing Blight attacks is a subject which I hope will come in for much fuller comment at a later stage today.

One of the most important items for maintaining the Capital Value of a property has been tea supplying, which requirement has in the past been a regular feature of estate routine work. The arrival of Blister Blight has made the supplying of old tea extremely difficult and in some of the worst affected estates it has been given up as impractical. Since casualties amongst old tea are tending to increase rather than to reduction this feature is considered to be extremely serious and it is earnestly hoped some means of protection of young supplies from attacks of the Blight will shortly be devised.

Just about 10 years ago the Tea Research Institute commenced investigating the possibility of propagating tea plants by vegetative methods, at that time the main reason being a search for high yielding types having quality characteristics. Since then selection has been directed towards types having Blight resisting qualities as well as the other desirable characteristics, and the search for Blight resisting types of tea bushes has been attended with considerable success by a few Planters who have devoted a great deal of their time and thought to

this subject. Propagation by the vegetative method using cuttings from Blight resisting clones may soon form part of the future programme of rehabilitation of a number of tea estates. This is a long term proposition attended by more difficulties than is normally appreciated. From the Agency angle the pursuit of this specialised type of planting is one we would like to see developed by Planters as quickly as practicable. However, the various steps for selection cannot be accelerated beyond certain limits since only the very best material for re-planting and supplying will eventually be required and cost of the work is high. No doubt Mr. Morford will refer more specifically to the whole problem of vegetative propagation.

The above observations give only a very brief outline of the way Blister Blight has affected many tea estates in this Country, but I can assure all present here today that we who are custodians of the interests of those who have invested in the tea producing industry are extremely concerned at the way Blister Blight has affected tea in Ceylon and worried by our apparent impotence in controlling the fungus. It was on account of this concern that the problem was stressed some months ago at an Agency Section Meeting of the Planters' Association leading to steps being taken by the Tea Research Institute to attract advice by Specialists from England concluding in this important Meeting today.