

FIBRES

COTTON BUYING IN NYASALAND.

J. ARTHUR LEE.

Cotton grown by natives on Crown land is bought in Nyasaland under agreement between the Nyasaland Government and the British Cotton Growing Association, the grower being assured at the commencement of the planting season of the minimum price he will obtain when the cotton is harvested. The planting season varies according to the altitude but December may be taken as the time for planting in the higher elevations, and January to April in the Lower Shire River districts; the cotton is usually offered for sale towards the end of June, and buying takes place from that month until November.

With an agreement such as the one in force in Nyasaland, the native is assured of a fair return for his labours; he is not in the hands of speculators, who, in the past, have bought his cotton at high prices in boom periods, and have left him with it on his hands when markets were low; this more than anything else was responsible for the falling-off of native cotton growing in Nyasaland. The local native does not understand market fluctuations, and is perfectly satisfied if he obtains a fair and remunerative price for his product. The object of the originators of the scheme was to fix a price to be standard throughout the period of the agreement (five years), any surplus funds after realization on the cotton market being placed in a reserve fund to be used to stabilize prices in the event of a fall in the price on the cotton market.

A season's working of the scheme has resulted in increased activity in native cotton growing in this Protectorate, the natives being more than satisfied with the amount of money obtained, and the writer, in the course of visits to different buying stations, saw their looks of amazement and pleasure at the money they held in their hands; some of them came forward expressing their intention of growing more next season. From 250 native planters in one district in 1923, the number has increased to over 1,500 in 1924.

Markets, or buying centres, are established in the principal villages, but in the large cotton-growing areas, buying stations are fixed at points about 15 miles apart; therefore, the native has not at present to carry his cotton more than $7\frac{1}{2}$ miles. As the industry expands, it is proposed to fix the buying stations at 10-mile points.

In order to suit the different temperaments, the system of markets varies somewhat. Some like to bring small quantities in daily as picked, and the market is open from sunrise until a little before midday; in other districts a date is fixed when the bulk of the cotton is ready, and the crop is bought in and finished within a month. At the latter markets from the first streak of dawn numbers of natives—men, women, and children—may be seen wending their way to the market each laden with various-sized packages on their

heads, the average weight of which is about 45 lb., the most popular form of package being made of dried bamboo, the bamboos being laced together with tough broad grass and the ends covered with what looks like chicken netting of the same material. Others bring it in large open and well-made wicker baskets, the cotton being heaped well up over the top and covered with netting also made of grass or strips of palm-leaf; the circular bamboo package is preferable, as the cotton is more completely protected.

The native having arrived at a market, proceeds to sit as near the weighing-scale as possible, and considerable time is often taken, at some of the markets, in getting the mass of natives who have assembled into something like order. At others, in localities where a number of the natives have had military training, something like order prevails, and the buyer on arrival finds the sellers more or less arranged in an orderly queue. It may be explained at this point that, although Nyasaland is a comparatively small country, we have probably a greater diversity of tribes than other countries, and, as cotton is grown from the northern to the southern end of the Protectorate, the customs, manners, and mode of attire are very striking. The natives of the southern end are practically nude, but as one progresses north they are better clothed and more intelligent, the most picturesque being the stately Mahomedan Yaos on the shores of Lake Nyasa.

A buyer, too, gets his Biblical knowledge refreshed when he encounters the natives in the West Shire district, as owing to mission influence they have adopted Biblical names, and the names of the disciples are in greatest favour. This is not the case in the Lower Shire River district, as one comes across male natives with names of Empress, Princess, and Countess—taken from the names of some of the river steamers.

As to the actual buying of the cotton. The sellers having assembled, the buyer proceeds to weigh in, the cotton having been emptied into open baskets 4 x 2 x 2 feet fitted with two wire slings, the tare of which (10 lb.) is legibly stencilled on the outside. The baskets are brought forward to the spring balance by the owner, who gives his name to the native clerk. The buyer, a white man, shouts out the classification, weight, and price per lb., and this is recorded and entered on a numbered duplicate purchasing form, the owner's name, village, and chief's name having already been recorded. The original is then detached and handed to the owner, who retires to the nearest shade and waits until some fifty baskets have been weighed in. The buyer then pays out, while the baskets are being filled again; the seller hands in his receipt and is paid, the receipt also being handed back to him; this is done so that he can, if he wishes, take his money and voucher to the magistrate and get it checked. It will be asked, but how can an uneducated native tell how much he ought to get? The native has a very good idea of what weight he has in his package, and what he received for it in a previous season; if he has grown more or has had a better yield, he makes it up into packages exactly the same size, has them weighed separately, and receives a ticket for each. A variation naturally occurs, but it is only a pound or two, and the owner understands this from the few extra pence he has received over and above the silver money. At one market the writer visited he was surprised to see several natives with ready reckoners, and as the weight and price was called out they jotted it down, and checked the amount on the voucher,

Taken on the whole, the native does not try any fraudulent practices, but the cotton being emptied into open crates makes their detection a simple matter. Occasionally they slip stones into the bulk or hide inferior grades at the bottom ; the buyer detects this by running his hand through the contents, and when he withdraws a large stone he presents it to the owner, to the accompaniment of the jeers of the surrounding natives, who do not hide their delight at the culprit having been found out.

The cotton offered is classified into three grades, No. 1 being clean white cotton free from leaf, No. 2 stained and white mixed or white with leaf, No. 3 stained cotton. Better prices are paid for the higher grades, and the natives understand that by grading they receive a better price ; the percentage of No. 1 last season was 60 per cent.

The selling of his crop is to the native what a country fair is to the farmers at home, and gives the village something to talk about for some time to come ; it also means, after he has paid his hut tax, a visit to the Indian store, where a new cloth is bought for the wife and a shirt for the husband. The purchasing of these often takes a considerable time, as the female natives are quite keen on shopping, and fashions are also in vogue in Nyasaland, certain colours or the pattern changing each season. Once cotton-growing is firmly established, and the native realizes the value of money, more cotton will be grown : the unclothed, after wearing a shirt or a pair of shorts until they are worn out, feel the heat of the sun (the temperature in the cotton-growing areas often reaching 112° to 115° in the shade,) which they did not before. Clothing, therefore, will have to be bought, and to get the money to purchase this, cotton will be grown, since this crop is easily the most profitable to them.

In conclusion, a word may be said as to the buyer in charge at the different markets. Where possible, the post is given to a planter or ginner in the vicinity of the market, as he is well known to the natives round him, and will in his own interests do his best to please them. Also being resident there he is more or less certain to give them every encouragement and advice to grow more the following season. Payment to these buyers is made in the form of a commission on the tonnage bought ; therefore, being more or less assured of the position, it is also in the buyer's interests to have more produced. His duties in addition to the buying are to see to the bagging and forwarding of the seed cotton to the nearest ginnery. Opportunity is also taken at these markets to encourage better cultivation, and the uprooting and burning of the old bushes after the crop has been harvested ; at the conclusion of buying last season, these buyers were appointed inspectors, and they, knowing their district thoroughly, went round and saw that the regulations of the Cotton Pest Act were carried out. These men, who all speak the local dialect, explained in the vernacular the advantages derived by the uprooting and burning of the bushes, and evidence of their work is to be seen this year in the reduction of pests. In short, the cotton buying scheme in Nyasaland interests everyone : the Government are interested, the native gets a guaranteed price with which he is well satisfied, the local planter a share, and also Lancashire gets the cotton it needs.—The Empire Cotton Growing Review, Vol. II. No. 1