

SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND'S OYSTER INDUSTRY

by Glen S. Smith

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The Southern Queensland oyster industry flourished from the 1870s to around 1920; it peaked soon after the turn of the century and declined from approximately 1910. The emphasis of this paper is a broad overview of these peak years. The industry was confined mostly to southern Queensland where there occurred wide inter-tidal flats along with a suitable edible oyster species — *Saccostrea (Crassostrea) commercialis*. This oyster occurs from central Queensland down to the Victorian and New South Wales border and inappropriately is often called the Sydney rock oyster.

For many years the oyster industry was the largest fishery in southern Queensland, exceeded only by the pearling and pearl shell industry of Torres Strait and the beche-de-mer fishery of north Queensland. It was however, the most organised of the fishing industries and generated the most revenue for the Government coffers from rental and licence fees.

At its height, over two hundred men were officially employed in the industry and in one year (1891) more than 21,000 sacks of oysters worth about 29,100 pounds were exported. Approximately two-thirds of the crop was exported to Sydney, Melbourne and as far as Perth, with Melbourne taking the largest portion. In those cities the oysters were marketed under the name of "Queensland" or "Moreton Bay" rock oysters.

The earliest European reference to oysters on the Queensland coast is that recorded by Richard Pickersgill, master's mate on the *Endeavour*, on 23 May 1770, when the ship entered a large bay,

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named Bustard Bay by Cook, and anchored at 8.00 p.m. about four kilometres from shore. The boats were lowered and sent to explore the bay, returning late the following day:

'...likewise, found a great many oysters, both of the common and pearl kind, and some large shell-fish called pan-fish. They tried the seine but got no fish.'¹

The first man who then gave an official report of the Moreton Bay oysters was William L. Edwardson. Sent to explore the coast north of latitude 28°30'S he entered Moreton Bay in June 1822 in command of H.M. Cutter *Snapper* and reported:

'From this Point [Skirmish Point, Bribie Island] to the South part of the Bay, a distance of about 30 miles by 22 miles, the whole is composed of Sand Ridges and Deep Holes interspersed with Mangrove Islands, and these again surrounded for miles by Mud flats and Oyster or Muscle Beds.'²

European exploitation of these Moreton Bay oysters dates from the first white settlement in Queensland at Redcliffe two years later in 1824.

Early Exploitation (1824-63)

The period of early European settlement from 1824 up to the 1863 Oyster Act saw many Moreton Bay oyster beds over-exploited and decimated. There existed a government attitude of laissez-faire towards the oyster fishery with no licensing, regulations or control in any form. The oyster beds were allowed to run their course with individuals helping themselves where, when and how they chose, often with the recruitment of local Aborigines who were paid by the number of sacks they filled. As they were more accessible, oysters growing in the inter-tidal zone were exploited long before those oysters growing below low water mark. Most exploitation was not for food but for the production of lime to make the mortar used in the construction of the houses and buildings of early Brisbane. The oysters were gathered, piled into heaps or in lime kilns and burnt. Live oysters were preferred by some builders as they were claimed to give the lime more "body". Schooner loads were carted away and burnt at such spots as Toorbul Point, Caboolture River and Lamb and Russell Islands in the southern part of Moreton Bay.^{8 11} Another easy source of shell was found in Aboriginal middens. These often predominantly oyster deposits were ideal as they only required shovelling into heaps or lime kilns with firewood to burn.

Early in August 1863 the attention of the Queensland Government was drawn to the wasteful practice of lime burning and to the general unprotected condition of the beds of Moreton Bay. A Bill for the

protection of oysters was introduced in the Legislative Council and given assent on 22 September 1863 in the Legislative Assembly.²⁴ It had been hurried through without much consideration because of the imminent close of the session. The main provisions of the Act were to provide for a fine of up to 10 pounds or imprisonment for up to three months as penalties for the burning of live oysters for lime. This had a particularly beneficial effect at Toorbul Point, Pumicestone Passage, which had been stripped of its once prolific oysters. Five years later oysters had returned to Toorbul Point and were worth harvesting.⁸ Rationalization for oyster gathering was also brought in by the introduction of certificates which permitted those who paid a 5 pound licence fee to lay down oysters on defined oyster beds. These provisions applied only to the port of Moreton Bay but could be extended to other ports and harbours in Queensland.

In the mid 1860s dredge oysters were discovered in Pumicestone Passage, and shortly afterwards in the Southport Broadwater.³⁶ Dredge oysters were found below low tide level and were collected by means of a dredging basket operated from a boat. The dredges had various designs but usually were square or triangular frames about 1.5 m. wide with a mesh basket of wire rings or tarred cotton. Dredge oysters were claimed to grow faster, taste better and brought top prices.

Bank oystering was more simple, since it involved exploitation of oysters occurring naturally in the inter-tidal zone and attached to stones, dead oyster shells or to the living shells of wandering mud whelks (*Pyrazus ebeninus*). The oysters were hand picked, either off the ground or off oyster reefs with little or no attempt made at artificial cultivation apart from breaking up the clumps and re-distributing them into the lower tidal zone to assist growth. Some oystermen later experimented with rocks, tiles, dead shell and sticks as alternative substrate for oysters to grow on.³¹

The industry flourished, but by 1870 there was a growing feeling that the 1863 Act had failed to provide adequate protection. Letters to the *Brisbane Courier* expressed alarm at the large quantities of Moreton Bay oysters being exported to southern markets, and the likelihood that Queensland's beds would be dredged out in the absence of protection by a closed season.³ The *Courier*, in a lengthy editorial pointed out the deficiencies of the Act and voiced fears for the survival of the Queensland oyster beds.⁴ Shortly afterwards Henry Wyborn, the Brisbane Harbour Master, was issued with a licence to cover all the previously unlicensed oyster grounds in Moreton Bay. Thereafter all persons wishing to obtain oysters from the Bay had to apply to Wyborn for his authority, or risk two years

imprisonment.⁵ This had the effect of suddenly and severely restricting oyster exports. The industry was brought to a temporary standstill, and approximately one hundred men were thrown out of work. The oystermen retaliated by petitioning the Legislative Assembly to legislate for their benefit and permit oyster exports. Shortly afterwards the restrictions were eased and a comprehensive Oyster Bill was drafted by Captain G.P. Heath, the Brisbane Port Master, and introduced to the Assembly by Dr. Kevin O'Doherty. The Bill was strongly opposed by Oscar De Satge, member for Clermont, who believed:

'...It was monstrous to take up the time of the House in that way...it was surprising to him that intelligent men could waste their time upon such petty questions, when there were a hundred important matters ready to be brought before the House...and he had certainly not come down to legislate upon oysters.'¹⁷

He was supported by a further petition of thirty-one oystermen and oyster dealers who this time protested *against* the proposed legislation as being "unfair", "injurious" and "favouring capitalists", and requesting that free dredging on all natural oyster beds be allowed to continue and that oyster exports be permitted.³⁴ As a result, nothing more was done with the Bill before the termination of the session and it lapsed.

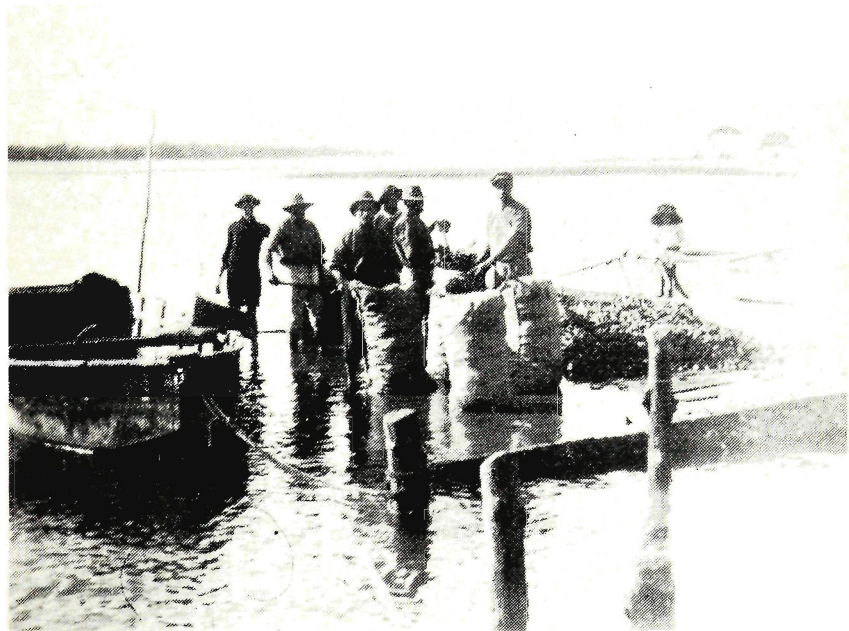
The 1874 Act (1874-86)

By 1874 the Moreton Bay industry was supplying most of the oysters sold in the Sydney and Melbourne markets and oystermen were pressing for a more comprehensive Act to protect and encourage the industry. A Bill was again prepared by Captain Heath with the assistance of several well established local oyster fishermen, which this time had the approval of the majority of oystermen. The argument that the Government at very little expense would derive considerable revenue from leasing the oyster beds was used to advantage in the Legislative Council. It was also hoped optimistically that the industry would employ hundreds of people and ensure a valuable export for the colony. After some opposition, the Bill was given assent on 21 July 1874.¹⁸

This Act²⁵ was much more comprehensive than its 1863 predecessor, and under it the industry went through a rapid growth phase. The Act provided for the sale by auction of dredge sections and the licensing of banks. In October 1874 the first auction of thirty-five dredge sections was held in Brisbane at the auction rooms of Arthur Martin in Queen Street. By 1884, Moreton Bay was divided into thirty-nine sections, which extended along the shores of their

various divisions from two feet (0.61 m) below low water mark on one side to the same depth on the opposite side.⁸

The leases were for a seven-year term; during the fourth year provision was made to divide the section into two equal parts. The lease of one-half was then to be put up to public auction with this lease also running for a seven-year term. This provision was included in the hope that it would encourage the lessee to cultivate and work his section well, so that one-half would not be taken from him after four years. It was unworkable, was strongly opposed and was never exercised. Unfortunately, oyster banks were only licensed under this Act on an annual basis, with six months' notice given if the licensee was to lose the bank. This tended to restrict capital investment in oyster banks. Otherwise he held the bank from year to year so long as he paid the annual licence fee of 5 pounds.



Bagging oysters for James Clark, Poverty Point, Pumicestone Passage, c. 1910.
(Photo courtesy J.W. Clark)

On 11 August 1876 the Moreton Bay Oyster Company entered the industry. Until the 1920s, this company was by far the largest in the Queensland industry, with extensive oyster bed holdings throughout Moreton Bay, Great Sandy Strait and as far north as Rodd's Bay. They were the single largest employer, and between them and the rival organisations of James Clark (the "Pearl King") and R.W.

Leftwich and Sons, they dominated the industry. Consequently the history of the company and that of the industry are strongly interwoven and share a similar rise and decline. Among the major shareholders were Sir Arthur Hunter Palmer and Sir Thomas McIlwraith, both of whom served as Premiers of Queensland.

About the time of the entry of the Moreton Bay Oyster Company into the industry the 1874 Oyster Act with its seven-year leases was found by oystermen to be unsatisfactory. These leases were believed to be too short to induce profitable cultivation and fourteen years was suggested as a more viable term. An Amendment Bill was introduced in the Assembly in September 1881 and several important changes were proposed to the 1874 Act, including the extension of dredge section leases. However the Bill was not passed and was discharged as it was believed to be inadequate and would have done little to remedy the defects of the 1874 Act.¹⁹

A comprehensive Bill was drawn up in 1882 to replace the Act of 1874 and included changes incorporated in the failed Bill of the previous year. This Bill ran straight into heated opposition in the Assembly from J.R. Dickson and R.A. Kingsford, who saw little merit in it. They believed it offered only token protection to the oyster fishery and the Bill was rejected.²⁰ A brighter aspect that year was the appointment of Captain C.S. Fison on 8 November as Inspector of Oyster Fisheries for Moreton Bay. He also held positions as Shipping Inspector, Shipwright Surveyor, and Examiner in Seamanship and Navigation. Despite the number of positions Fison held, a considerable amount of his time was spent on administering the expanding Moreton Bay oyster industry. His original appointments were for the Port of Brisbane but later extended from the New South Wales border to Noosa Heads. He was the author of the first oyster report in 1884 and many subsequent reports on fisheries to the Queensland Parliament.^{8 15}

Recommendations in his earlier reports assisted in the framing of the 1886 Oyster Act, and he had a considerable beneficial influence on the early Queensland fishing and oyster industries.

Period to 1914

By 1886 there were 178 oyster banks licensed in Moreton Bay; they encompassed slightly more than 5000 acres (2023 hectares) with an average of 30 acres (12 hectares) per bank.¹⁰ For the Great Sandy Strait region there were no dredge section leases but there were thirteen large bank licences, approximating 1800 acres (728 hectares), an average of 138.5 acres (56 hectares) for each bank.

Also by 1886 there was a widely felt need for an updated Oyster Act to incorporate all that had proved beneficial and to remedy the many practical administrative defects of the old Act. After lengthy debates a new Act was assented to on 10 November 1886.²¹ This saw the introduction of fourteen-year leases for dredge sections. It was hoped that this would stabilise the industry and induce an inflow of capital. Without doubt the extended leases were of considerable benefit to existing leaseholders. Another main provision of this Act was that the boundary of all future dredge sections was to extend up to high water mark so as to encompass any oyster banks and reefs within their boundaries. Ownership disputes had been a major problem.

Compensation was also introduced for persons who discovered new dredge oyster beds with a "reward" on discovery of a five-year lease at moderate rental. A minimum legal size of two inches (5 cm) on market oysters was also introduced, to prevent banks being stripped of small oysters.²⁶ This was a result of the old fear that Queensland oyster beds were being decimated with the oysters sent south. New South Wales did not introduce an Act to protect oysters and outlaw lime burning using live oyster until 1868, five years after Queensland. Consequently most of their oyster beds were in a very poor state and Queensland, particularly Moreton Bay, was looked on as a good source of young oysters (culture) to replenish their own stocks.

A considerable trade had been carried out for many years with smacks, cutters and other vessels from Sydney and elsewhere anchoring in Moreton Bay and taking away cargoes of oysters without ever entering the port of Brisbane. Removal of undersized oysters was prohibited by this latest Act unless they were to be used for cultivation purposes within Queensland. Penalties were provided for with a ten shilling fine for every dozen undersized oysters, and forfeiture of every sack containing any undersized. The law was rigorously enforced; all oysters exported by coastal freighters now had to pass through the Brisbane wharves where they were inspected.²⁷ Occasional confiscations took place.

This prohibition of the export of undersized oysters was designed not to interfere with cartage of culture from the Great Sandy Strait region down to Moreton Bay. Moreton Bay beds were used as maturing and fattening grounds for young oyster culture brought from the northern spat catching beds, principally from Sandy Strait and later from Keppel Bay and Rodd's Harbour. In Moreton Bay the oysters grew more rapidly and developed a better shape than if allowed to remain on the northern beds.^{15 31} Before 1900 oyster cutters and schooners were used for this cartage of oyster culture from

Sandy Strait to Moreton Bay. The oysters were three to ten days in transit and losses occasionally were as high as fifty per cent. In 1900 the schooner *Confidence* was wrecked on the Wide Bay bar with the loss of the skipper Harry Prentis and his two sons. Thereafter the use of sail for this purpose virtually ceased and coastal steamers such as the *Lady Lamington* became the carriers. In 1905 these steamers carted 14,000 sacks of culture down to Moreton Bay for re-laying on banks and dredge sections. Most re-laying was into those sections where 12-18 months' growth produced oysters in prime market condition.³³

Many dredge section leases were terminated before completion of the full fourteen-year term. Prices ranged from as little as 5 pounds to the exorbitant figure of 1000 pounds or more per annum. Many lessees of expensive leases had to realize a quick return and often resorted to stripping the section of all oysters immediately following the auction sale. This, in turn, reduced the value of the section which was allowed to lapse by non-payment of the rental fee the following year. The lease was then lawfully forfeited. Consequently many sections changed hands frequently. However the most profitable ones were usually carefully cultivated and until 1889, when the practice temporarily lapsed, many thousands of oyster sacks were "laid down" to fatten on these prime sections.

To encourage the blossoming industry, twenty-six reserves for oystermen were gazetted at various sites around Moreton Bay and Sandy Strait on 13 April 1889. The majority were of five acres (two hectares) but they ranged up to a 40-acre (16.2 hectares) site on Fraser Island.²⁸ Oystermen were allowed to camp, build houses, fence in small allotments and carry on their oystering operations on these reserves so long as they paid their licence annually.¹⁴ Prior to the gazettal, many unofficial camps had existed at these and other sites. A small school was established in 1890 at Currigee on Stradbroke Island, and some time later another was established at the Coombabah oyster camp eleven kilometres north of Southport. These had become two of the largest camps and were composed predominantly of Aborigines and coloured employees of the Moreton Bay Oyster Company. Accommodation at most camps consisted of simple bark and slab huts with poor living conditions. Small two-room cottages were later built at some camps for the men and their families, with more substantial houses for the managers. The men worked the surrounding oyster beds from the camps using small cutters as transport. Dinghies and punts were preferred for use as work vessels on the oyster beds. Most camps also had one or more oyster docks located nearby. The docks were used for temporary storage of oysters from the banks and sections while awaiting bagging for market.³⁶

Disease Brings Disaster

Moreton Bay oystering saw a steady increase from the 1870s, with the number of banks and sections increasing greatly. Demand was generally good and there was an overall air of optimism about the entire industry. However, disaster struck in the form of mud worm disease which first appeared about 1880 in New South Wales oysters in the Hunter River. One theory suggests the disease was introduced there by imports from southern New Zealand. For many years New Zealand oysters were imported to Melbourne and Sydney in the winter months when they travelled well. During the winter months they provided strong competition for Queensland oysters, but in summer the Queensland oysters dominated the markets. If the Sydney market was glutted on the arrival of the New Zealand oysters, they would be temporarily stored in the Hunter River to remain fresh until prices rose again.

The disease was first noticed in southern Queensland in 1895 on banks at the mouth of the Coomera River.¹⁵ Oysters occurring lower down the inter-tidal zone and into the dredge sections were the worst affected, while those higher on the reefs or on sand usually were untouched. The disease, though harmless to man, made infected oysters unacceptable on the market and was often fatal to the oyster. It was caused by a small red commensal worm (*Polydora sp.*). Spreading rapidly through southern Moreton Bay, it brought about a major slump in the industry. By 1899 the number of sections had dropped from 36 to 18, and banks from 421 down to 292. The worm wreaked havoc in the industry and various measures to contain it, including a prohibition on cartage of oysters from the south to the north of the Bay, were tried with little success. As a result of representations by several oystermen to the Marine Department in December 1897, over one hundred banks and several sections were closed temporarily. Many men were thrown out of work, and in 1899 the Marine Department offered them some relief employment. The slump was temporary. By 1903 the industry was relatively sound again. In 1905 the southern part of Moreton Bay in the Broadwater was almost free of the disease and the re-laying of oysters into the sections for fattening was resumed. Pumicestone Passage, in the northern part of the Bay, was at this time suffering badly from effects of the disease.³³ Overall the disease declined from 1905, and although isolated outbreaks occurred, it had largely disappeared by 1925. Records show that mud worm never went further north than the Maroochy River, and the Sandy Strait region was never infected.¹ ³³ However the effect on Moreton Bay oystering lasted many years. The oystermen became extremely cautious in their operations, and largely abandoned the dredge sections which were more susceptible to mud worm infestation.



Oyster docks (right) with dredging dinghies at Rat Island, Southport Broadwater, c.1892.

(Photo courtesy Dr J.H.B Henderson)

Mud worm was not the only trick of fate to affect dredge sections. Along with various floods such as that in 1893 which destroyed whole oyster beds, a breakthrough occurred in May 1898 at Jumpinpin on Stradbroke Island. The tidal levels and currents were altered, adversely affecting section No.4 opposite the Couran oyster camp on Stradbroke Island, and once the most lucrative section. At the same time, this breakthrough assisted some other sections in the vicinity by scouring the bottom of weed and pests and increasing water flow and food to these oysters.¹⁵

In 1902 G.H. Clarke discovered dredge oysters in the Sandy Strait. Up to that time no dredge sections had existed in that region (with the sole exception of a small lease held by the Leftwich family in the Susan River). Captain E.J. Boulton, Maryborough Harbour Master and Oyster Fisheries Inspector for the Sandy Strait, promptly divided the remainder of the Strait into twenty-six sections. Oystering went ahead by leaps and bounds, with employment increasing from 37 to 87 men. The number of leased dredge sections in the Strait reached a peak of twelve in 1904 but then declined, with the last section forfeited in 1919.¹ The causes of the decline are similar to those that affected the whole Queensland oyster industry.

During the decade 1901-10 the industry reached its peak for the number of men employed, banks and sections leased and boats licensed. Paradoxically, the peak years for oyster production had been in the previous decade of 1890-1900. The greatest part of the

production came from the banks, while dredge oysters comprised only about twenty per cent of the crop. The value of the fishery in export earnings in the 1901-10 decade was around 12,000 pounds a year, which excluded local consumption, and about 2000 was annually produced for the Government in licence and rental fees. The total number of dredge sections in Queensland reached an all-time high in 1904 with sixty-four leased, but from then on there was a gradual decline until the last section in Queensland in the Maroochy River was finally forfeited in 1947. During the peak decade, virtually every location that could support an oyster in Moreton Bay and Sandy Strait was under lease or licence, and demand for vacated beds was strong.

Early in 1913 a five-man Treasury Departmental committee was set up to report on the Queensland fisheries industry, including oystering but excluding pearling. Its findings formed a comprehensive document which became the basis for redrafting legislation, but the measures thus introduced came too late to help the ailing industry.

Decline — and its Causes

From around 1910 the industry had commenced a decline as a result of the many adverse pressures upon it. There appears to be no single cause, but rather a complex combination of factors which include diseases, pests, predators and man's mistakes. An approximate chronological sequence starts with the early days of the industry and competition on the Sydney market from New Zealand oysters. These were a thorn in the side of Queensland producers for many years.¹⁵ A second cause was the auction system for dredge section which successfully produced government revenue but frequently resulted in inflated values and over-exploitation to cover cost. This view is supported by reports of Fishery Inspectors.^{1 15 33}

Predators and pests often caused damage to oyster beds and can be considered one of the causes of the industry's decline. In the Sandy Strait for example, a large one-metre long oyster-eating fish (*Trachinotus anak*) was especially destructive.

A continual hindrance to expansion of the industry was the problem of oyster thefts; these came to be regarded as a major problem in some areas. The public helped themselves, or more often one oysterman stole from another and off adjoining Crown oyster banks. The oystermen constantly complained to the authorities, yet with few inspectors and a vast area to police very little could be done about it.³³ The occasional fines and confiscations had little effect. Oystermen became reluctant to expand and invest money on oyster banks over which they could not keep a close watch.

The greed of some companies and individual oystermen was an additional significant cause in the decline of both dredge and bank oystering. A few large companies attempted to monopolise the industry by acquiring banks and sections, then transferring all oysters and cultch material to their prime beds. The stripped beds which had been made unattractive to another buyer were then forfeited. Any prospective buyer would have to completely restock and wait three or four years before he could expect any return. This was considered by some of the larger growers as a legitimate tactic to force out smaller growers and the practice was encouraged by the high rental and licence fee system.

Mud worm disease was the greatest single contributor to the decline. It destabilized the industry, and its effects were compounded by the other problems the industry was undergoing.

Another problem was the lack of security for oyster bank tenure since licences were renewed annually and only six months' eviction notice was required. Before modern cultivation methods were introduced this was of relatively minor importance but with new techniques it became far more significant. Oystermen were reluctant to invest in costly capital equipment and labour without some form of long-term lease on their banks.

By 1936 Queensland itself was importing New South Wales oysters, a situation that still continues.⁷ Along with the effects of mud worm disease, this rise of the New South Wales industry was the major contributor to the decline of Queensland's industry.

Queensland oyster production today is only about one-tenth of that produced in the peak years of 1880 to 1910. Queensland now relies heavily upon imported New South Wales oysters for both culture supplies and market oysters. The majority of oyster bank licensees are now employed on a part-time basis in sharp contrast to the situation before the Second World War when most were employed full-time in the industry.

Each year sees less traditional oyster growing areas available, and prospects for the future in Queensland are not good. Some of the alternative uses of former oyster areas are fish habitat reserves, net hauling grounds, and water skiing areas which are usually given a higher priority. Oystering operations are also restricted in tourist oriented areas and near sewage outfalls.

Apart from the occasional place named after an oysterman, the remnants of some oyster camps and a few old men's memories, little remains of the once thriving oyster industry. Oystering flourished almost within sight of growing Brisbane yet was largely unknown to its population. The industry was not particularly large and when

compared with other industries of the time such as cattle, mining and sugar, neither was it of great economic importance. Perhaps the industry's main contribution to this State was pioneering the coastal waters and shores of southern Queensland.

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