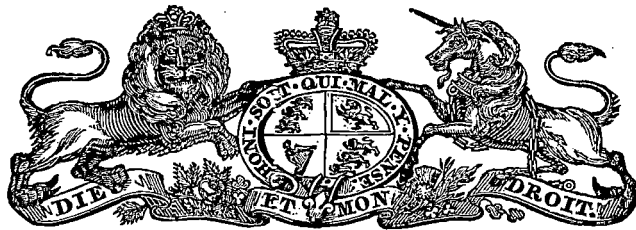


(No. 131.)



1878.

T A S M A N I A.

H O U S E O F A S S E M B L Y.

O Y S T E R F I S H E R I E S :

R E P O R T O F S E L E C T C O M M I T T E E , A N D E V I D E N C E .

Brought up by Mr. Meredith, and ordered by the House to be printed,
May 14, 1879.



REPORT of the Select Committee appointed 1st May, 1879, to enquire into and report upon the Stimulus for the Propagation and Preservation of Oysters, by subdividing the natural Oyster-beds of the Colony into convenient lots, and letting them by Auction for a term of 7, 14, or 21 years.

MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE.

MR. BELBIN.	MR. PILLINGER.
MR. CLARK.	MR. RISHY.
MR. COOTE.	MR. MEREDITH. (<i>Mover.</i>)
MR. DOUGLAS.	

DAYS OF MEETING.

May 6th, 1879; May 9th, 1879; May 14th, 1879.

WITNESSES EXAMINED.

Mr. Owen Meredith. Captain Jas. Bayley. Mr. William Tapner, Junr.

EXPENSES OF WITNESSES.

Mr. Tapner, Junr. £6 16s. 6d.

R E P O R T.

Your Committee have the honor to report that, from the evidence (attached) of experienced persons, they are of opinion that the propagation and preservation of the Oyster in the natural beds of the Colony would receive a stimulus if the Oyster-beds were subdivided into convenient lots, to be determined by the shape and locality of the said beds, and let by Public Auction for a term of *not less than 14 years*, and the present system of granting licences (after the present season ceases) abolished.

Your Committee also recommend that, in all licences granted by the Governor under the provisions of "The Oyster Fisheries Act," the inshore boundary of the pieces of water so leased should commence at low-water mark, and not at one chain from high-water mark, as is the case with some leases at present; and also, that in all leases there shall be a clause preventing any person, save the lessee, from taking the Oysters between high and low-water mark.

Your Committee also recommend that, in the event of discovery of beds of Oysters hitherto unknown, the person or persons so discovering shall have a pre-emptive right of leasing at the average price of Oyster-beds which may have been let by auction.

CHARLES MEREDITH, *Chairman.*

14th May, 1879.

EVIDENCE.

TUESDAY, 6 MAY, 1879.

Present—Messrs. Meredith (Chairman), Risby, Coote, and Belbin.

MR. OWEN MEREDITH *examined*.

You are the holder of a lease or licence of an artificial oyster-bed? I am.

Situate at Prosser's River? Yes.

What steps have you taken towards propagating the oysters on your bed? I have laid down a considerable number, but my attention has been more particularly directed to the propagation of spat.

Do you think the present system of granting licences to dredge is likely to lead to the propagation of oysters? It will, on the contrary, utterly destroy them. The fishermen have no permanent interest in the ground on which they work. They can obtain a licence for Ten Shillings to fish on any beds in the Colony; that being the case they have no permanent interest in any particular bed. They dredge and work simply for marketable oysters, without any regard for the preservation of brood or young oysters. I know an instance where a mass of culch and young oysters was burnt for lime. One house at Alma was said to be built of oysters. Fishermen made jetties, to get to and from their boats, of young oysters and brood. I believe that last season one man threw the whole of his brood overboard, by one of his poles, in a heap three or four feet high, so destroying the whole, except a few that were on the outside. If the ground were leased to different persons, cut up into convenient allotments, it would give the lessees a permanent interest in the beds, and they would put back carefully all young oysters that they dredged.

What extent, in your opinion, should such allotments be? They should vary with the nature of the ground; on natural beds they should not be so large as on artificial ones.

You know the oyster-beds at Spring Bay,—what do you suppose would be convenient lots there? About 5 acres on the west, and 10 on the opposite side where there were once good beds. These allotments should be put up by auction for lease of not less than fourteen years.

Do you know how many artificial beds are in the course of formation at Spring Bay? I think five.

Do you know what steps have been taken towards propagating the oysters on these beds? I have seen Mr. William Tapner's bed. He tells me that he has 200,000 oysters on it this season, and from what I have seen I believe this statement is quite correct. His ground begins one chain from high-water mark, excluding him from the ground near the shore, on which are the best oysters. At the present time I have oysters at Prosser's River which are sometimes three hours out of water thriving and growing well.

Do you not think 5-acre allotments too small? I would not prevent anyone from taking more than one; it would pay better to take two or three beds suitable for putting oysters on than one natural one.

For how long is the licence issued? Eight months. I know one man who has destroyed so many oysters at Spring Bay that he would not get a licence there if he applied for it, but as he can get it elsewhere it is no matter to him. Under the present system fishermen are not allowed to do anything for four months of the year. The beds cannot be worked too much.

What do you mean by "worked?" Laying down material for spatting.

You believe that fourteen years lease would be sufficient to create interest in procuring the spat? Yes. It would make the oyster fishery a most valuable industry. At the present time many of the fishermen know of good oyster-beds, and could discover more, but there is no inducement for them to discover the beds. A man may lose time looking for beds, and when he discovers one anyone else can fish on it. I think that a reward of certain rights should be given to anyone discovering a bed.

Do you think that the privilege of first working a bed would be sufficient reward? Yes. I believe there are a thousand acres of undiscovered oyster-beds on the East Coast, in fact, all round the island, but there is no inducement to men to discover them. At the present time men may get from ten to fifteen thousand oysters in one day, nearly all small, perhaps not more than 200 marketable ones amongst them. The existing system will lead to wholesale destruction; but an alteration, giving lessees a permanent interest in the beds, would induce them to preserve the oysters. In Spring Bay there might be work for fifty men all the year round in securing spat and attending to the cultivation of oysters. At Horse Shoe Bank, which consists of from 100 to 150 acres, not one inch at the present time would pay for dredging. A resident fisherman told me that he had seen sixteen or seventeen double-handed boats dredging on this bank, where there is now not a single oyster. In my opinion the time has come when they must be preserved.

Adjourned to Friday, 9th May.

FRIDAY, 9 MAY, 1879.

Present—Messrs. Meredith (Chairman), Belbin, Pillinger, and Risby.

CAPTAIN JAMES BAYLEY *examined*.

You are a master mariner? Yes.

Where were you born? In Essex, England.

Do you know of any oyster farms or fisheries there? Yes, in the River Crouch, where the beds are let in long leases, or for private beds. A short lease would be of no use, as money is laid out in cleaning and cultivating the beds.

What in your opinion should be the shortest duration of a lease? Twenty-one years.

Is that the usual time in Essex? Yes; I believe so.

Who leases out the ground there? The river belongs to Lady Mileman; the fishermen lease from her ladyship for 21 years. A branch of the River Crouch, called the Roach, used to be common property where everyone worked in the summer months, and took the brood, culch, and shells to supply private grounds. An oyster was never allowed to grow its full size there. A company lease it now for a long term, and is a great success.

Do you think it is a success on account of the long lease and the permanent interest the company have in the ground? Yes; boats are working all the year round there cultivating the ground, which must be kept clean. A shelly bottom is also necessary for the spat to adhere to.

From your knowledge and experience you recommend long leases? Yes; a man might spend a lot of money and it would be some time before he would reap any benefit.

What size do you think the allotments should be? That depends upon circumstances, such as locality and the shape of the oyster-beds.

Do the fishermen keep disturbing the ground? Yes; they have harrows to rouse about the bottom, and to take off the dirt and weeds. They haul up the bunches of oysters and separate them as they grow deformed. Just as many boats are working in summer as in winter.

Do the oysters grow between high and low-water mark? They invariably thrive better in shallow than in deep water, and grow faster. They would thrive well between high and low-water mark. I do not think the frosts are severe enough here to harm the oysters. In England when the tide is down they clear them all off the shore above low-water mark, and put them in the deep water to protect them from the frost. The water freezes inside the oysters, and that is what kills them. There are a hundred boats in the river in Essex working and cleaning the beds.

WILLIAM TAPNER *examined.*

What is your age? 32.

Where were you born? Prosser's Plains.

What has been your employment? Chiefly oystering for the last twenty years; fishing in summer, and oystering in winter.

Where? From Spring Bay to the head of Oyster Bay.

Have you a licence to fish for oysters? Yes.

What do you pay for it? Ten shillings per annum.

What power does that give you? Power to catch oysters on any part of the coast of Tasmania.

Would it not be better if the beds were divided and leased out for a number of years? It would be much better.

You have a lease for a private bed? Yes; I have a piece for 14 years to breed oysters on.

What is the extent of it? Two acres.

What have you done to your ground? I have about 100,000 young oysters on it, or perhaps rather more.

What steps have you taken towards cultivating them? I go through them and clean them three or four times a year; the cleaner you keep them the better they grow and fatten.

Is this allotment of two acres as much as you can work? I could work much more, four or five acres.

Would that be a convenient size for a bed? Yes; a man could cut it up into three or four lots and put the oysters in regular beds according to size and age, and take them off as they became marketable.

How long does the spat take to grow to a full-sized oyster? If kept clean and cultivated, about three years. By working through the beds all the weeds can be kept away.

Are there others oystering in Spring Bay now? Only my father, but I expect there will be some other boats down shortly.

When the licensees sort the oysters, are they compelled to return the young ones to the bed? Yes.

Do they scatter them widely? Some do, others do not. This is a matter that ought to be seen to. Some men throw the young oysters overboard in heaps, and then they all die, except a few on the top: this was done last year and in former years.

Do you know of anything which destroys the oyster? The sting-rays do; they lay on the young oyster and crush it. The "gummy" shark is the best friend of the oyster, as it lives on the crabs that destroy the oysters; they go about and turn the shells over and pick up the crabs. When the oyster is feeding the crab puts a stone inside the shell to stop it from closing again.

Is there much destruction in this way? Yes; by the sting-rays. I have seen beds quite white with the broken shells. If the ground were let out in lots each man would protect his own bed. I intend to stake my bed with poles 18 inches apart to keep off the sting-rays.

Who measured your lot? I measured it myself. It begins one chain from high-water mark: it ought to be from low-water mark. The shallower the water is the easier you can keep the oysters clean. You could leave marketable oysters between high and low-water mark till you wanted them. My boundary commences one chain from high-water mark, which carries me into deep water. All licensed beds should be protected up to high-water mark, which should be their frontage.

Could you grow oysters between high and low-water mark? No, sir; my ground begins one chain from high-water mark.

From your life-long experience in oyster-fishing you would recommend the division of the beds into convenient allotments, which should be leased for a period of not less than fourteen years? Yes, I do; for not less than fourteen years.

Is the prospect of the oyster fishery any better lately than it used to be? Yes; for the last two years it has been better than for the ten or twelve years previous, but there is necessity for further protection. In three hauls lately I caught 114, 147, and 97 oysters respectively, mostly young ones, only 7 or 8 in each lot fit for market. With care they will all be fit next year. Some one ought to look after the oyster-men, as there is great destruction of young oysters during the season.