

Bob Drake at his
Woollooware Bay
oyster lease

Virus killing oysters

Sixteen years after the QX parasite decimated Sydney rock oyster beds in the Georges River, a mystery killer is again stalking the industry.

AN UNKNOWN virus is attacking Pacific oysters only, sparing Sydney rock oysters.

It is yet another setback for an industry which has thrived in Botany Bay and the Georges River for more than 100 years.

Bob Drake is the only Georges River farmer to have survived the devastating QX disease outbreak of 1995.

With perseverance and a breeding program involving the tiny minority of Sydney rock oysters which survived the epidemic, plus the introduced Pacific oysters, which are resistant to the QX parasite, Bob and his brothers were rebuilding their business at Woollooware Bay.

Until three months ago, they had 2.5 million oysters under cultivation. And then the Pacific oyster mortality syndrome (POMS) virus struck, killing his entire stock of one million Pacific oysters, worth about \$70,000.

"The odd thing about the POMS virus is that it is taking Pacific oysters only," Mr Drake said. We have about one million Sydney rock oysters that are only about six metres away that are untouched.

"The same thing is happening in France, England, Ireland, Holland and the United States. The North Island of New Zealand has lost its entire stock of Pacific oysters.

"We think the virus got into the oysters because of environmental stress from the heavy rain."

The Drake family are fourth-generation oyster farmers, and along with the Derwents, among the earliest growers in the area.

Botany Bay and Georges River was the first area in Australia to successfully cultivate oysters and many of the techniques used in the oyster industry were developed in these waters by pioneer lessees. As recently as 1979, the river supported 50 principal growers employing about 300 people.

Botany Bay and Georges River were unique in that oysters could be maintained in fat condition for almost 12 months of the year, even through winter when few

supplies were available from elsewhere. At its peak, local producers supplied 25 per cent of NSW's oyster crop.

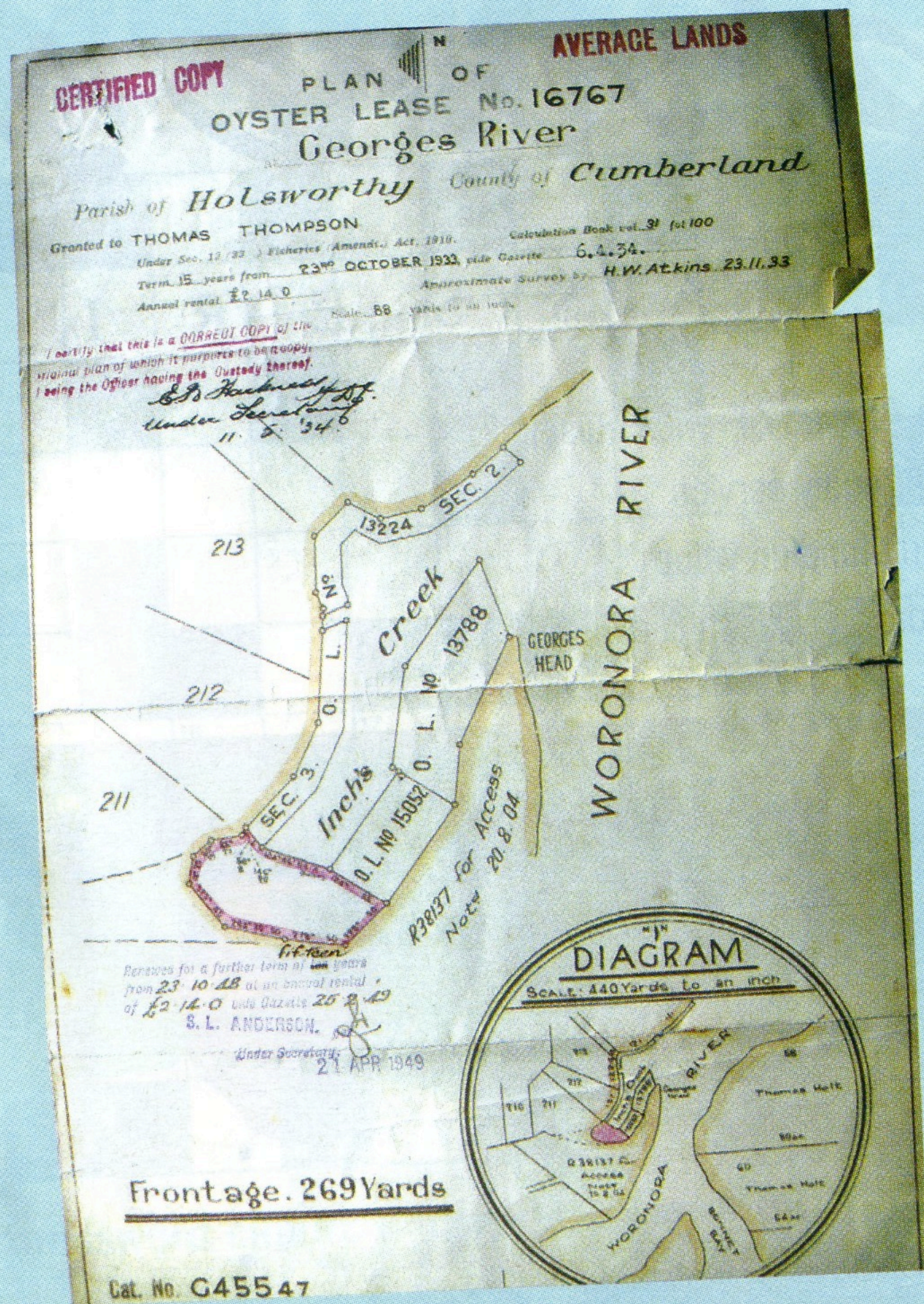
Stick-and-rack cultivation was the predominant technique in which juvenile oysters were allowed to settle on clean, tarred sticks. After 12 months of shell hardening, they were set out on wooden racks at mid-tide level. After another three years, they were harvested.

Production peaked in 1972 at 41,068 bags but episodes of viral contamination in 1978-79 markedly reduced the quantities harvested.

In July 1978, at least 1500 people in Victoria and NSW became ill after consuming oysters grown in the estuary, which was periodically contaminated by sewer overflows and urban runoff. This resulted in the introduction of a system of purification in specialised ponds of filtered and sterilised water.

— by ROGER ROBERTSON

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Settlers led the way

OYSTERS and Oatley have been linked for more than 100 years. Neverfail Bay at the end of Wyong Street was the headquarters of the Derwent family oyster business, while the Geddes, Matthei, and Peters families were prominent farmers in the Lugarno area.

Before oyster cultivation began in the area, oyster shells were gathered for lime burning. Between 1860 and the 1870s, deep dredging for shells threatened to wipe out oysters in rivers.

Early settlers harvested oysters as if they were an inexhaustible resource, until by 1891 stocks were severely depleted. This led to professional oyster farmers experimenting with ways to cultivate them.

Thomas Holt tried the French way of channeling at Woollooware, but the Australian summers were too hot and the oysters died. The Derwent family are regarded as the "fathers" of the rock oyster industry because they were the first to use the tray method of production, making Oatley the first area used for successful, commercial oyster cultivation.

While the QX parasite gave the death blow to the industry, it was already under siege from changing community values.

The 1884 Act which gave farmers the right to restrict access to their farms was deeply unpopular with residents and councils. There are many references in Hurstville Council minutes to complaints about oyster farms and lack of access to the river.

After agitation from residents and the council, it became government policy to reduce foreshore leases from 1966 onwards. Leases next to parks and recreation areas were not renewed.

