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Signed G. Pain

Date 3 - 8 - 89

Interviewer J. Ingarthen

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Signed A.J. Mitchell

Date 17-8-89

Interviewer J. Ingeorthen

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AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

REGIONAL HISTORY RESEARCH PAPER

"The growth and development of the fishing industry in  
Nelson Bay"

INTERVIEWEES:

Alfred John Mitchell  
George Pain

INTERVIEWER:

Julie Tregarthen

DATE:

22nd August, 1989

Question 1.	What is your full name?
Answer	Alfred John Mitchell
Question 2.	When were you born?
Answer	1910
Question 3.	Where were you born?
Answer	In New Zealand
Question 4.	Why did your family come to this area?
Answer	My family came to take up farming
Question 5.	When did your involvement with the fishing industry commence?
Answer	During the Depression
Question 6.	What were the fishing techniques used at this time?
Answer	They were beach seine netting, net fishing, cray fishing and trapping
Question 7.	Could you explain what 'seine fishing' means?
Answer	Well, it's a hauling net, they shoot around a heap of fish and its hauled ashore. That is what they call beach seine fishing.
Question 8.	Where were the fish sent?
Answer	Mostly to Newcastle and Sydney
Question 9.	How were they transported?
Answer	We had our own lorry to transport them in and if we got a real big catch we could hire a lorry for £2/10d. which would take 90 boxes of fish.
Question 10.	How many boats were in the fishing fleet at this stage?
Answer	There were very few trawlers although there were a few steam trawlers still active. There were no local trawlers till later on.
Question 11.	Did you build your own boat?
Answer	We built our own boat by hand.
Question 12.	Was your father involved in the business with you then?
Answer	No, my father had died then. My brother was involved and his wife and my wife.
Question 13.	Did fishing provide a good income?
Answer	It provided a living. It was a lot of hard work. We had to man handle our fish, strand them along the beach and man handle them along to where our lorry was. Then we loaded them onto the lorry and head for Newcastle. It might be dark when we were going to head off to Newcastle, to find boxes of ice and get rid of them.

- Question 14. How did the industry fare during the Depression?  
Answer The industry fared very bad during the Depression. Prices were very poor indeed. Not much for fish. Down as low as 5s. a box for mullet.
- Question 15. How many fish would there be in a box?  
Answer Approximately 60 lb. They weren't weighed in those times, they were just filled level to the top of the box and that was it.
- Question 16. What effect did the Second World War have on the fishing industry?  
Answer Well, when everybody went to the war and there was a bit more of a demand for our fish we got better prices for our mullet and blackfish etc.
- Question 17. What effect did the destruction of the ice works in 1938 have?  
Answer That had no effect at all with us because we ~~were~~ were not fishing in Port Stephens, we were out at Boat Harbour, out at Morna Point fishing at the time.
- Question 18. Who were the main Agents you dealt with in Sydney?  
Answer There was W. Buckland, there was King, Joe Pierce, F. Hanlon and numerous others.
- Question 19. Were good prices obtained from them?  
Answer No, prices were very bad in Sydney. We used to try and sell our fish in Newcastle if we could, before the Co-op was there.
- Question 20. Did you join the fishermens' Co-op when it was established?  
Answer Yes, I was one of the foundation members of the Co-operative.
- Question 21. Was it successful?  
Answer Yes. We were able to obtain our boxes and ice and store our fish in the coolroom and it was all central, everything was at hand.
- Question 22. Has the Government played a supportive role in the growth of the industry in the Bay?  
Answer Yes.
- Question 23. How?  
Answer Oh, well they've helped us with the Co-operative and what have you.
- Question 24. How many boats are in the present fishing fleet?  
Answer I'd say between thirty and forty boats are in the fishing fleet. Little boats and hand liners and what have you, too numerous to mention you know. There's about twenty trawlers there operating out of the Bay along with visitors that come along.

Question 25.	What are the most common species of fish caught today?
Answer	Well, mullet and trawled fish and prawns and crayfish are the mainstay of the Co-operative.
Question 26.	Do you think the construction of an Export Plant in the Bay is warranted?
Answer	Well, I wouldn't like to say on that because I'm retired from the fishing industry.
Question 27.	What sort of a future do you see for the fishing industry in Nelson Bay?
Answer	I would like to leave that to the fishermen in the industry to give an opinion on that subject.

Question 1.	What is your full name?
Answer	George Pain
Question 2.	When were you born?
Answer	1916
Question 3.	Whereabouts were you born?
Answer	Anna Bay
Question 4.	Why did your family come to this area?
Answer	They first came here market gardening and then after a short while they went into the fishing and remained in fishing then; my father right up to the time he retired and I was fishing from about the time I was seventeen. During this period I only had three years away from fishing during the war years. It's fair to say that I've had a fairly wide experience in the fishing being all that time in it.
Question 5.	What were the main fishing techniques used at that time?
Answer	Lobstering was the main fishing, together with travelling fish such as mullet and blackfish and bream during the travelling period. Also trapping for schnapper, but lobsters could be said to be the main source of income.
Question 6.	Where were the fish generally sent?
Answer	The biggest proportion went to Sydney because even at the present day the biggest part of the fish would go to Sydney. It's always been that way. This area has always produced more fish than local consumption has a need for. Therefore it is necessary to send it to Sydney.
Question 7.	How were they generally transported?
Answer	Usually they were taken by truck to Newcastle and then by train to Sydney. Occasionally, trucks did take them down but in the early part it was train to Sydney.
Question 8.	Was this method of transport efficient?
Answer	I think as well as could be expected because the railway vans were what they call 'louvre' vans and they appeared to keep the fish in reasonable condition as long as they were well iced.
Question 9.	How many boats were in the fishing fleet at this time?
Answer	There were quite a number. Probably in the fishermen themselves there would have been probably one hundred and fifty fishermen in this area that is covered by the Newcastle District.
Question 10.	Did fishing provide a good income prior to the Depression?
Answer	I think equal to any income that one would expect. There was no fortune in it but at the same time the fishermen did make a living.

Question 11.

How did the industry fare during the Depression?

Answer

The Depression years? Shocking, to say the least. Like everything else, the price of fish you got very little for it. It was just a 'hand to mouth' sort of thing. Not much better than what the dole was really.

Question 12.

What effect did the Second World War have on the industry?

Answer

A big effect. Especially with the shortage of fish, prices went up. Like every other thing there was price control on fish which kept them down to a level. Only for price control prices would have been right out of hand, there is no doubt about that. So it did have a big effect. This was brought about mainly because of the shortage of fish and even after the war the price control was still on till about 1951 I think it was, and when they lifted the price control prices did flow out for a while and then there was a 'buyer resistance' to paying these prices and prices started to drop and sort of levelled off a bit.

When the glut of fish was in, prices fell down like they do now. Prices come down when there is a lot of fish.

Question 13.

What effect did the construction of the ice works have on the industry?

Answer

It was one of the main benefits to the industry because ice is the important factor in keeping fish in good condition.

Question 14.

When the ice works was destroyed in 1938, what sort of effect did that have?

Answer

Well, ice had to come from Newcastle. The fishermen at Nelson Bay and at Anna Bay bought their ice at Newcastle and it was only the Tea Gardens fishermen that were effected by that fire, but the fishermen from here all bought their ice from Newcastle.

Question 15.

Who were the main Agents that you dealt with?

Answer

Ah, now that's a good question. Buckland in Sydney was a fish agent. We sent practically all our fish to Buckland. There were a number of fish agents of course in the Sydney market. I'd say 98% of our fish went to Buckland.

Question 16.

Were good prices obtained from them?

Answer

Like everything else, supply and demand regulated the price of fish.

Question 17.

Did you join the Fishermens' Co-operative when it was established?

Answer

Yes, I was a foundation member of the Co-operative. I didn't come onto the Board until two years after the Co-operative was established when I became a Director.



Question 18.

Was the Co-op successful?

Answer

Yes it was successful. For the first time, it gave the producers a control of the industry and since then, from that time, the Co-operative has gradually grown as money became available to us and today we have ice plants at practically every centre bar Bungwahl and Swansea. All these depots have coolrooms which is the most essential thing outside of ice.

Question 19.

Has the Government played a very supportive role?

Answer

Initially, yes they did. They did build only a small depot at Newcastle and one at Tea Gardens and that is where the Co-operative started just for that period.

Question 20.

What would you say are the most common species of fish caught in the Bay today?

Answer

Probably, in the travelling fish, that is during the season when fish are spawning, mullet, blackfish and bream. They are the three species. In the trawl industry, there is no particular species which is more outstanding than the others, so they're all, well not the same quantity but probably nannyguy and trevally are the largest quantity of fish caught.

Question 21.

Do you think the construction of an export plant in Nelson Bay is warranted?

Answer

I have some doubt on this myself. I feel that the continuity of supply could be a big factor. To have a plant exporting fish you have to have the expertise as far as handling, filleting, packaging. Now, can you keep those people employed for twelve months a year? That is going to be one of the biggest factors in the export trade. With mullet, there is only a very short season, probably a month to six weeks and then once they finish travelling that is the finish of that. Whether there is an export for such fish as blackfish and bream is something that I could not comment on. I wouldn't know at this stage. Another species of fish that they have been exporting is garfish and trevally in the trawl line. It's the continuity of supply and being able to keep the employees. You just can't pick someone off the street and expect them to be able to fillet fish.

Question 22.

What sort of a future do you see for the fishing industry in Nelson Bay?

Answer

I think it's bright. Particularly now that the Government has taken steps to control the industry. Prior to about some two or three years ago it was open slather. Anyone could build a boat and be able to fish. But now it's very hard to get into fishing. You've got to have a boat that's licensed and fishermen, they just can't get a license. So it's one thing I feel has been overdue, this should have been about twenty years ago and we wouldn't have the shortage of fish that we experience today.

## 500 word summary of transcripts

Alfred Mitchell and George Pain are both long time residents of the Port Stephens area. Their parents settled in this area to pursue a livelihood farming, but as the Australian Agricultural Company discovered the land in this region was not suitable for agriculture and timber and fishing became the main industries.

Their involvement commenced at a most difficult time for the industry, during the Depression, when prices were very low and they were living in a 'hand to mouth' situation. Alfred Mitchell set up in partnership with his brother and together with their respective wives, they built their own boat by hand which they called "Eileen Sylvia". George Pain, from the time he was seventeen, joined his father fishing.

The two families fished on different sides of the peninsula. The Mitchells remained in the Anna Bay/Boat Harbour area while the Pain clan fished directly from Nelson Bay (refer map, attachment III). As Alfred Mitchell commented, everything had to be done manually. Once the fish were hauled on to the beach in nets, they were loaded onto lorries. Since the nearest ice plant was at Pindimar, they had to be taken to Newcastle to be iced and despatched by train to Sydney. The trains were fitted with 'louvred' vans and kept the fish in a reasonable condition provided they were well iced. Alfred Mitchell preferred to make his sales to various fresh fish retailers in Newcastle rather than send them to Sydney. Most of these outlets were either Greek or Italian owned.

The destruction of the ice works at Pindimar in 1938 had very little detrimental effect on the industry in the Bay since most fishermen obtained their ice from Newcastle. It was mainly the fishermen from Tea Gardens who relied on the Pindimar icemaking plant for their supplies.

The outbreak of war proved to be beneficial for these two fishermen. Since there were not so many boats out fishing, those fish that were available, fetched a good price. The Government set up price controls in the industry and this continued till 1951. Prices crept up again though and shoppers boycotted fish sales till prices returned to a more realistic level.

After the war, the Fishermens' Co-operative was established and both George Pain and Alfred Mitchell became foundation members. Two years later, George Pain became a Director, a position which he held for twenty five years.

The Co-operative was very successful since it gave producers the opportunity to control the industry. The Co-operative gradually grew as more money became available and today there are ice plants at practically every centre bar Bungwahl and Swansea and all depots have coolrooms.

The most common species of fish caught in the Bay today are mullet, blackfish and bream and large quantities of nannyguy and trevally.

At the present time, a lot of fish are sent to Queensland for preparation for export mainly to Japan. Some members of the Co-operative are of the opinion that an export plant should be built in Nelson Bay in order to keep the profits in the Co-operative. As George Pain explained, the type of fish which are currently exported are very seasonal and may only be available for four to six weeks per year. Unless there is an export market for other species, the continuity of supply would not be guaranteed to sustain the export industry.

The future for the fishing industry as George Pain sees it, is a bright one. Two to three years ago, the Government took steps to control the industry, making it very difficult for anyone to obtain a fishing license. This has resulted in controlled fishing and has ensured the continuation of an industry which provides a livelihood for many Nelson Bay families.

The first real potential of Nelson Bay as an important port was realised by Lieutenant Shortland in 1788 and has been proven many times. In 1826 the Australian Agricultural Company was granted 405,000 hectares at the head of Port Stephens to produce wool and agricultural products and by 1834, there were 500 people settled on one of the company's main properties. 1

Of course the original inhabitants of the Port Stephens area were the Aborigines of the Worimi tribe. There is very little written evidence of their occupation of the Nelson Bay area but the occasional discovery of artefacts support this theory.

Fish abounded in the waters of the Bay at this time and oysters covered the foreshores and provided a consistent and reliable source of food for the Aborigines living in this idyllic region. A record of the fish in the harbour then included porpoise, shark, turtle, schnapper, jewfish, mullet, bream, stingray, torpedo fish, eels, flathead, oysters, shrimp, crayfish and crab.2

William Scott, whose parents were sent to this area with the Australian Agricultural Company, was born in Carrington in 1844. He was encouraged by a friend to write a book about his experiences with the Aboriginal people on this part of the Peninsula. He accompanied the Aborigines on many fishing trips

The Aborigines fished from canoes about 15' long and the women were given the job of making the lines from the inner bark of Kurrajong trees.3

1. N.S.W. Fishing Ports Program, Nelson Bay, Public Works Department, Newcastle. (pamphlet) Sydney, 1985
2. G. Bennett and W. Scott The Port Stephens Blacks Dungog, 1929  
p.p. 4-5
3. Ibid p.p.4-5

From the early 1800's, Chinese fishermen lived on the shores of Port Stephens. The Chinese dried, salted and cured most of their catch and for many years, traces of their drying structures could still be seen at Fly Point. Preserved fish were sent to the goldfields, to China and to merchants in Sydney and Melbourne. Mr. Thomas Curtis, a Sydney fisherman examined in the Fisheries Inquiry in January, 1880 stated that he had fished at Port Stephens and sold his catch to the Chinese. They sent some to the diggings and dried and salted the remainder. They were getting about seventy pounds per ton for dried and salted fish at the time.

4

In 1880, rumblings of a White Australia Policy saw a great number of Chinese return to China.

Up until this time, the fishing grounds at Port Jackson had provided the bulk of fresh fish to the Sydney markets. However, due to the killing of undersize fish caught illegally, this area soon became depleted and fresh fish were in short supply.

In January, 1880, The Fisheries Department commenced a Commission of Inquiry to investigate the development of fishing as a national industry and reports of good fishing in the vicinity of Nelson Bay led it to be considered as a reliable source. During the Fisheries Inquiry, Mr. Richard Seymour, Auctioneer of the Sydney Fish Market, stated that "If we could get fish from Port Stephens, I believe we could get some of the finest fish in the Colony". 5 The Inquiry also concluded that "Port Stephens, about 24 miles to the northward of Newcastle, with its innumerable outer grounds, including the Broughton Islands, and extending as far as the Seal Rocks, is probably the grandest fishing station on the entire seaboard of this Colony." 6

4. Fisheries Enquiry Commission, Minutes of Evidence, 1879-1880  
Vol. 3, p.1181 (Courtesy Mitchell Library)

5. Ibid p. 1155

6, Ibid p. 1135

As a result of this Inquiry, a fishery was established by the New South Wales Fish Company Limited. Twenty five artisans and labourers were sent to Port Stephens to build the fishery and its four hundred and six foot wharf, close to fresh water. A well was sunk which could deliver more than four thousand five hundred litres of water an hour to the icemaking works where four tonnes of ice could be produced every twenty four hours.<sup>7</sup> (See attachment 1)

Captain John Dalton operated the only steam vessel, the "Kingsley", which twice weekly, carried fish, cargo and passengers to Sydney and Newcastle from 1881 to 1898.

Fishing at this time was not a very lucrative business and in 1897 fishermen at Port Stephens were becoming disillusioned with the poor returns they were receiving for their catches. Large catches of sea mullet were returning only a penny halfpenny or twopence per pound while in Sydney, the middleman was receiving sixpence per pound. The demand was obviously great for the merchants in Sydney to be able to sell their goods at such a price, but the profits were not passed onto the local fishermen.<sup>8</sup>

Problems arose with the transport of fish from Nelson Bay to Sydney, the greatest one being that of refrigeration. There was a high incidence of fish condemnation at this time, since the steamers transporting fish to the Sydney markets did not have refrigeration facilities on board.

In November, 1917, the State Fisheries built an ice works and refrigeration depot at Pindimar. Costing eleven thousand pounds, it was intended to be the first of several depots built for fishermen using the harbours, rivers and estuaries along the NSW coast to ensure the financial security of the fishing industry.

7. Illustrated Sydney News, Jan.22, 1881 p.14

8. Gloucester Examiner, 30th April, 1897

The opening was a great occasion and decorated boats transported sightseers from Nelson Bay to the opening . Local people saw this as the foundations of a great future for Pindimar.

Up to twelve women travelled by boat from Tea Gardens to work as cleaners and packers and there were other staff to unload the boats.

In 1927, a shark catching station was opened at Pindimar. Facilities such as a dock, brine tanks, winches, oil rendering plants and two hot air dehydrating plants were put in place. Whilst in its infancy stages, the industry had its teething problems. The nets were the biggest ever made in Australia and a method of keeping them afloat had to be found. Two boats were built in Sydney and called the 'Devil' and 'Demon'. However, they proved unsuitable for the waters outside Port Stephens and modifications had to be made. The first catches of thirty sharks were made at Salamander Bay, despite doubts from the locals as to the existence of sharks in the Bay. The sharks skins were sent to the tanners for treatment to be used for the production of handbags and shoes. Liveroil was also a valuable by-product. There was also a demand for shark fins from the Chinese for shark fin soup. Systematic netting in the Bay soon forced the boats outside the heads. Catches over the two hundred mark were not uncommon. The industry enjoyed continuing success. The first six bags of dried shark fins sent to China realised ninety six pounds. The oil was sold to Sydney firms for two shillings and ninepence per gallon.<sup>10</sup>

Shark leather was fetching five shillings and threepence per square. foot for ordinary leathers and ten shillings per square foot for carpet shark hides.<sup>11</sup>

9. Port Stephens Examiner, 18th April, 1978
10. N. Caldwell & N. Ellison "Fangs of the Sea", Sydney 1936, p.p.1-12
11. Ibid p.13

Eventually, boats had to go further out to sea for their catches. Since the boats were unfit for large seas, and the company could not afford to buy more suitable craft, the business gradually dwindled and finally ceased its operations in 1933.

The fishing industry in Nelson Bay also started to decline at this time due to the depression years and resultant poor sales

The Port Stephens Canning Co. purchased the Fisheries Building in 1932. They canned prawns, oysters and mullet. Fishermen would take their catch to Tea Gardens, and the first in would receive the best price of eight shillings per one hundred pound. Fish was cleaned and stored in the freezer rooms until it was canned, sometimes plain, salted or in tomato sauce. Travelling mullet were the best canned, but when they were out of season and the company canned muddy tasting river mullet, sales were spoiled. 12

In 1938, a fire caused by the charcoal burning engine destroyed the ice works and costs to replace it were considered too high. Thus the era of fish processing in Port Stephens ended. The destruction of the ice works was a terrible blow to the Nelson Bay and Tea Gardens fishermen. They now had to depend on the Hunter River Steamship Company boats "Allyn River", "Myall River" and "Karuah", which collected fish as far up as Karuah to bring ice from Darks Ice Works in Newcastle which created problems in having to have fish ready at particular time every day.

Some fishermen opted to cart fish to Newcastle by road, to sell to large merchants such as Red Funnel. Prices obtained for fish at this time were not great since the merchants would play the fishermen against each other for the best price.

At the outbreak of the second World War, the Government took over the steam trawlers for use as mine sweepers, which resulted in a shortage of trawled fish.

12, Port Stephens Examiner, 18th April, 1979



During the second World War, the Government took over the control of the Sydney Fish Markets in order to ensure the even distribution of fish. All profits from the sale of fish at this time were channelled into a fund set up for the betterment of the industry. At this time the Government set up markets in Newcastle and Wollongong.

A Committee was elected to travel up and down the coast to look into the setting up of Co-operatives. The Committee consisted of Mr. Mark Josephs from the Registrars Dept. Mr. Richard Frith, an Accountant from the Public Works Dept. and The Secretary of the United Professional Fishermens Association, Mr. Jack Facey. Any fisherman who wished to join the Co-operative registered and took out a minimum of five shares at two pounds per share.

Around 1974, the Newcastle Co-operative was established with share capital from the fishermen and money borrowed from the Fish Marketing Fund. The Co-operative established a market at Newcastle and depots at Nelson Bay, Swansea, Tea Gardens and Bungwahl.

A Board of Directors was elected which consisted of two representatives from Nelson Bay, two from Newcastle, one from Swansea, one from Tea Gardens and one from Bungwahl. These directors were themselves fishermen who had little administrative ability and the Co-operative soon ran into difficulty. In the years that followed, the managerial skills necessary were learnt and the Co-operative was soon running profitably

Local fishermen have shares in the Co-operative which they buy for two dollars each. In order to become a member they must purchase a minimum of two hundred and fifty shares. The Co-operative provides facilities for the fishermen and ensures price protection within the industry. The Nelson Bay Co-operative is a member of the Newcastle Fishermens' Co-operative and one-third of all local fish is sold through Newcastle. Moves have been made by Nelson Bay members in the past to cut ties with the Newcastle group but this suggestion has generally been overruled since being united gives greater strength and stability to the industry.

The Newcastle District Fishermens' Co-operative extends from Lake Macquarie in the South to the Smith Lakes in the North. (See attachment IV)

The sizes of boats in the Bay area varies, and it depends on the size as to the range and distance which the trawlers can cover. The smaller 'in-shore' trawlers which cost from seventy five thousand to one hundred thousand dollars travel approximately six to seven miles for their catch. More sophisticated and larger trawlers approx 70' long and costing up to five hundred thousand dollars, often travel out to the Continental Shelf.

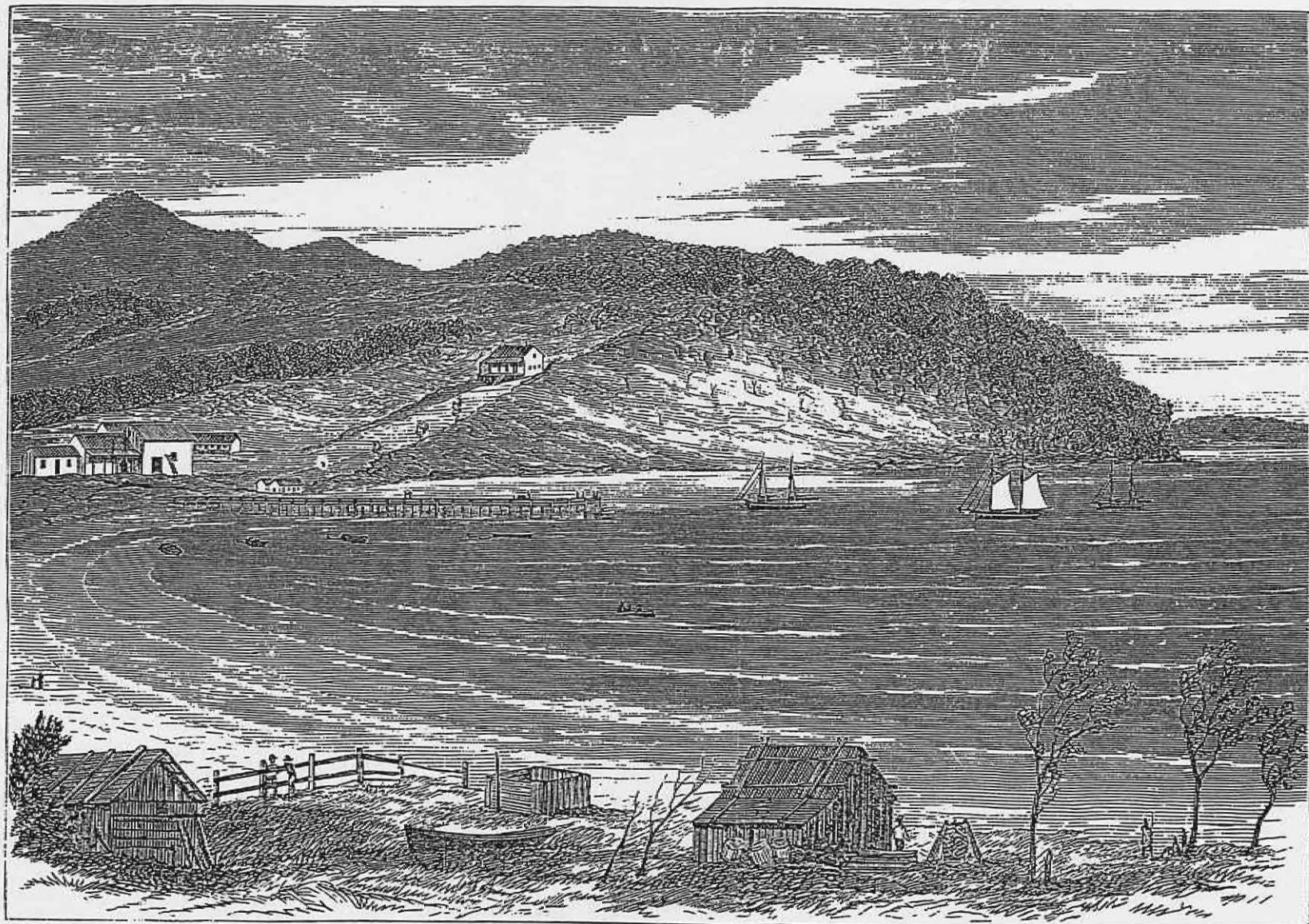
The fishing industry has expanded rapidly since the second World War and there are now plans to establish a new export facility to cater to the demand for the export of fresh fish mainly to Japan. At the present time, mullet for export are sent to Queensland for processing but strict controls are enforced in the construction of such a plant and there are doubts as to the quantity and continuity of supply from the area covered by the Newcastle Co-operative. Processing fish locally for export would mean that the profit would remain within the Co-operative instead of being sent to Queensland.

For many years, fishing has been the main industry in Nelson Bay and has provided a livelihood for many families in the area. The attraction of Nelson Bay's fishing grounds and its picturesque location have lured more and more tourists each year. Road improvements between Sydney and Newcastle have made easy the accessibility of this idyllic region to holidaymakers. As a result, fishing now takes second place to tourism as the main source of income for Nelson Bay.

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Newcastle      Nelson Bay (pamphlet) Printed 1985,  
Govt. printing office, Sydney

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HEAD-QUARTERS OF THE NEW FISHERY AT PORT STEPHENS.  
'Illustrated Sydney News', Jan 22, 1881

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 Grevis 3 small 6 doz 8.16-0  
 Georges 2 2 doz 12-0  
 Andrew 3 2 8-0  
 Marshall (3 doz) 2 16-0  
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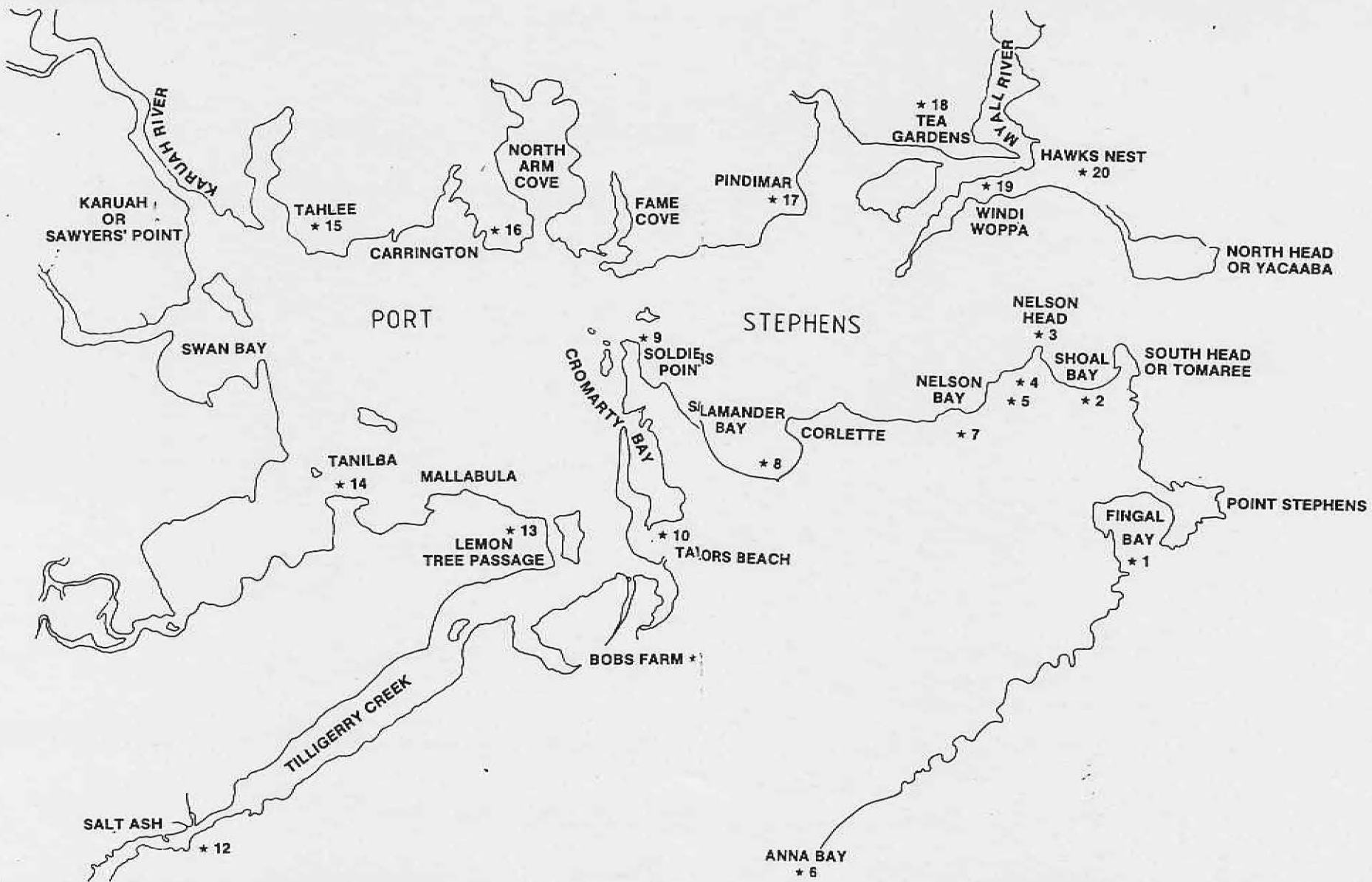
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 1 lb Butter 1-6  
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 Meat 2-0

George Bread 3/ 3-10  
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# OCEAN FISHING ZONES

## OFF N.S.W.

