

## **The Dutch Connection** (Parts 1 & 2)

By John 'Stinker' Clarke

Dutch oystermen have contributed significantly to the local Port Stephens Industry.

The Second World War had a massive impact particularly in Europe and led to a wave of migration of a war-torn population seeking a better life in another country.

Many eyes focused on Australia as the land of opportunity.

It was the Dutch connection that brought Jozias 'Sos' de Koeyer to Australia and eventually to Swan Bay (Pipeclay Creek).

Back in Holland both the de Koeyer and Salm families were heavily involved in the oyster industry where they were well known and respected, as they are to this day.

Adrian Salm, who was well established working for the Phillips family in Swan Bay, returned to Holland after seven years working on oyster farms in Australia.

He knew the de Koeyers well and arrived at their home in Yerseke for a cup of coffee and to reacquaint with the family. Adrian stayed into the night telling the family that there was plenty of work available in the oyster Industry in Port Stephens.

Their young son, Sos de Koeyer, was 'all ears'.

Sos was working on oysters and mussels in Holland for his father and grandfather and had gathered valuable experience. Back in the 1950s, the Dutch Government was encouraging emigration and was paying 50 percent of the trip if you stayed for a minimum of three years.

"Why don't I go and have a look?" thought Sos.

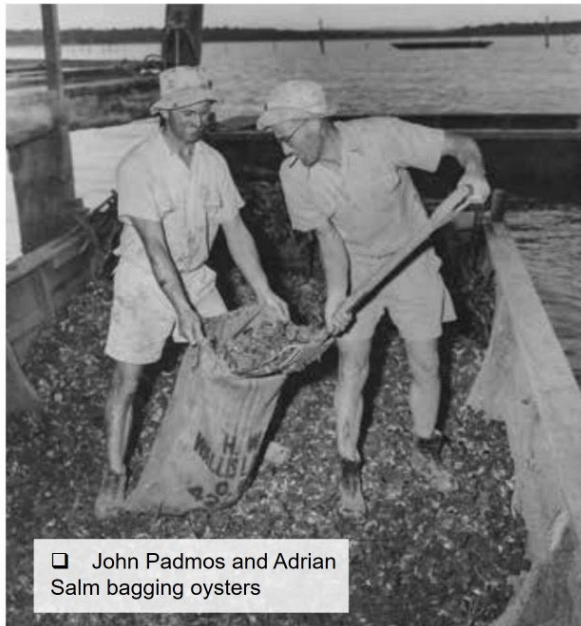
A few blocks away in the same town of Yerseke another young family was having similar thoughts.

John Padmos was the son of a successful oyster and mussel grower. Word had spread through the village that John Padmos was considering migrating.

Adrian convinced John to move to Australia, where they worked together until 1984 in the Port Stephens oyster Industry.

Friends for life.

In September 1957, nineteen-year-old Sos de Koeyer flew from Amsterdam to Sydney, finally arriving at Oyster Cove Port Stephens, where accommodation had been arranged for him by Stan Phillips.



□ John Padmos and Adrian  
Salm bagging oysters

"My wages started off with £12/10/0 at Oyster Cove," Sos said

"I only came with £25 in my pocket which was the minimum amount that you were permitted to land with in Australia – any less and you would be picked up as a vagrant."

Working and saving in 1959, Sos gathered enough money to buy a brand new DKW 250 motorbike from Hazel and Moore in Hunter Street for £300.

Oddly enough, later in 1959 Sos purchased a block of land on the waterfront at Tanilba Bay for £175.

Cheaper than his motorbike!

In 1960 Sos moved out of Oyster Cove and in with Jim Brown who owned the boat shed in Tanilba Bay, where they built and hired out rowing boats.

After a couple of years, Sos moved in with Jacky and Mrs Gale, much to the relief of Jim Brown, who had tired of Sos' continuous attempts to learn to play the piano accordion.

Sos lived with the Gales until he married in 1964.

Among his fondest memories of living with the Gales were of the lunches that were packed daily for him by Mrs Gale - two freshly caught blue swimmer crabs, a home-grown tomato and a slice of bread.

Sos de Koeyer's first boat purchased in 1960 cost \$150 - the *Pumpkin*, built in England of New Zealand kauri and originally designed as a tender for a sea-going ship, driven by a 10-12 Simplex with forward and reverse gear box.

The boat was previously owned by a school teacher at Bobs Farm and had been left sinking in the mud in Tilligerry Creek.

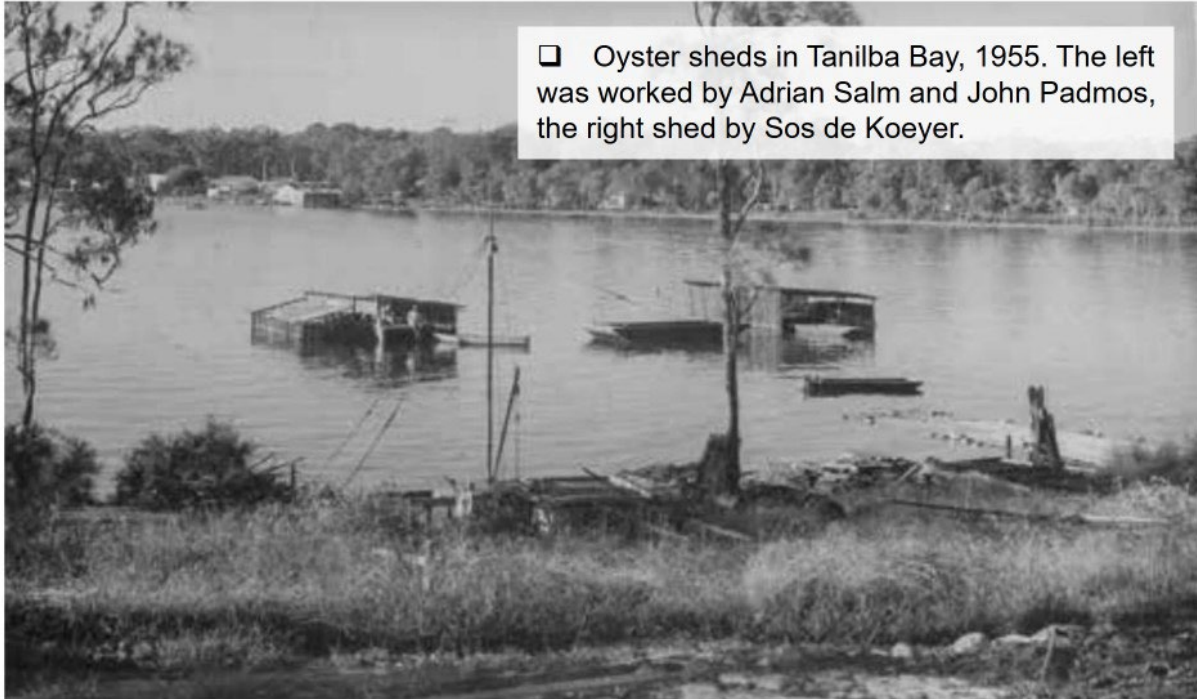
With the help of oyster farmer John Browne, the boat was lifted from the mud and with some work *Pumpkin* was back on the water.

Taking every opportunity to expand his growing interests, Sos knew a good deal when he saw one.

"There was a big vacant oyster lease about 300 yards long adjacent to the houses in North Arm Cove" Sos said.

"I learnt this when I was working for the Phillips in Sydney.

"On my return to Port Stephens I rode my motorbike to the Fisheries offices in Tea Gardens and Karuah in an attempt to purchase the lease which turned out to be a deceased estate."



In 1961 Sos bought the lease, which produced beautiful oysters in ideal growing conditions, for £200.

In 1962 Sos purchased a catching lease at Corlette and a growing lease in North Arm Cove from Claude Johnson who had the boat shed in Karuah.

He put out 2000 sawn sticks to start with in North Arm Cove and over the next two and a half years a beautiful crop of oysters was coming on when disaster hit.

Winter mortality ruined all but a few.

"I must do the best I can with these few oysters that have survived," he said.

The young oysterman set up a bench in an old toilet shed that he had bought for £10 from Newcastle and started opening the oysters that remained.

Sos purchased second hand bottles from the bottle yard in Hunter Street and washed them in a bathtub, using a chip heater to boil the water.

Then he would put the bottles of oysters in the saddle bags of his motorbike and head off on Thursdays - pay day - to the Sea Breeze Hotel in Nelson Bay.

He would sell the bottles alongside the fishermen, including the Asquiths, who were selling their lobsters.

The customers had one request.

"We would buy more if they were bottled in salt water" they promised.

Everyone knows that oysters swell in fresh water and are far bigger and more attractive to the buyer; in salt water they shrink. It also takes fewer oysters to fill a bottle if they are sold in fresh water.

However, the customers in Nelson Bay preferred the taste of their oysters in salt water.

Sos had the solution to the problem – he bottled the oysters in fresh water but on his way to Nelson Bay he stopped his bike at Mambo Creek and replaced the fresh water with salt water.

This process did not give the oysters time to shrink before they were sold.

Sos sold big, fat, salty oysters and the patrons couldn't get enough of them.

During the week, Sos continued to work for the Phillips family, plus each Saturday he worked the Salm-Padmos leases in Tanilba Bay, culling oysters on the beach.

It was there that he noticed a 'wonderful girl' regularly walking along the beach.

Kay McInerny was her name.

After a nervous introduction Sos "made her talk".

"We got acquainted," he said.

He learnt that the young lady's family had a dry-cleaning agency in the general store and post office in King Albert Avenue, Tanilba Bay.

"I finished up having a lot of dry cleaning."

In 1964 at the age of 21, Kay and Sos were married in the Baptist Church in Wallsend.

Back to work on the leases, it was every oyster farmer's worst nightmare to fall into the tar pit.

Unfortunately, for recently married Sos de Koeyer, that is exactly what happened.

It was 1965 and he overbalanced while walking along the edge of the tank, slipped into the tar and sank into the blackness.

Regaining his feet, he crawled from the deep pot and immediately stripped off all his clothes and ran up the hill calling out for wife Kay.

As you could well imagine, Kay was horrified to witness a naked tar man running up the road.

Her surprise turned to concern when she realised that it was her husband in distress.

The tar was scraped off with a stick, followed by a liberal covering of lanolin hand cleaner.

Numerous warm baths gradually washed the tar off, however it was nearly a week before Sos could venture out into the sun, as the tar still clogged the pores in his skin.

"Never again" declared Sos.

It was 1966 when Sos bought his next launch for £750 from Charlie Asquith of Nelson Bay.

Formerly called the *Conray*, the launch was driven by a three-cylinder Perkins engine replaced after twelve months by a 375hp GM 2 stroke diesel.

The boat was renamed the *Katherine* after his daughter.

Port Stephens was a good waterway for catching spat (fertilised eggs).

Sos put out what he called 'contract sticks' – sticks that would capture the spat in Salamander Bay and then be sold and transported to other systems to mature.

Contract catching was successful, with the small oysters being sent to Batemans Bay, the Hawkesbury and other bays and rivers along the coast.

Many were sent on Cliff Godwin's trucks from Stroud to Reg King and the Humbly Bros in the Georges River.

Through long hours of hard work, Sos' business continued to grow to the stage where it was no longer possible to put out their 80,000 catching sticks from Tanilba, as the block was too small, so it was decided to purchase more land at Orange Grove.

It was the early 1970s and a 50-acre block, a market garden at Orange Grove on Tilligerry Creek, was bought for \$10,000, allowing Sos to work the catching leases from on board *Katherine*.

These were boom years for Sos with leases purchased from Denzil Crawford and the Lindemans at Pig Creek and behind Upton Island and another half dozen leases in the Karuah River.

He even considered buying a dredging lease in the Karuah, as there had been dredging there in the past.

At this stage Sos had 20 leases including one in Brisbane Water and was doing so well that his brother Digenis came out from Holland and worked with him for eight years.

Renee Sinke, a Dutchman who married Sos' daughter, also came to Australia to work with Sos, later branching out by himself.



❑ The 'Katherine', named after Sos' daughter and built by Fred Asquith in Nelson Bay.

To keep the grass down on his Orange Grove property, Sos bought twelve steers from Keith Moxey at Williamtown.

Initially, this appeared to be an ideal solution, until the cattle contracted worms and they required vaccination.

The problem now was how to catch them.

This was finally achieved after many miles chasing them through the bush.

Then it was decided to run a few cows and of course a bull to breed from.

It was time to build a yard, loading ramp and a race so that the cattle could be transported away or others brought in. All was in order until the bull arrived.

"Things started getting out of control," explained Sos.

"He was wild, I mean really wild, dangerous and couldn't be approached."

The bull was so crazy that Sos believed that his future was as a bucking bull at a rodeo.

There was no way, it seemed, that this bull could be ridden.

The decision had been made that this mad animal was leaving Orange Grove.

A man by the name of Fitzgibbon from Branxton was contacted and he arrived with his truck and horses to catch the bull, which was destined to join the rodeo.

Riding through the scrub, the excellent horsemen finally rounded up the bull and cornered him in the yard.

The bull refused to go up the race, so they lassoed the beast and attempted to inch him into the truck.

By this time he had all but destroyed the fences around the yard.

"Boy," gasped Fitzgibbon, "this bull will sure be a good one at the rodeo."

That same day they took the bull to the Branxton Oval to try it out.

A champion bull rider was all prepared – he climbed on the beast's back and they opened the shoot and let him out. The raging bull took off straight for the fence with a steel rail and he crashed his way through to freedom, leaving the rider dangling from the highest rail.

The enraged animal charged around until he became lame, ending a very short career as a rodeo bull.

The next stop was his last one - the knackery.

Unfazed by these early setbacks into livestock breeding, Sos bought a 400-acre block in Stroud and another 400 acres in Gloucester, where he then commenced a breeding program with no intention of producing another rodeo bull.