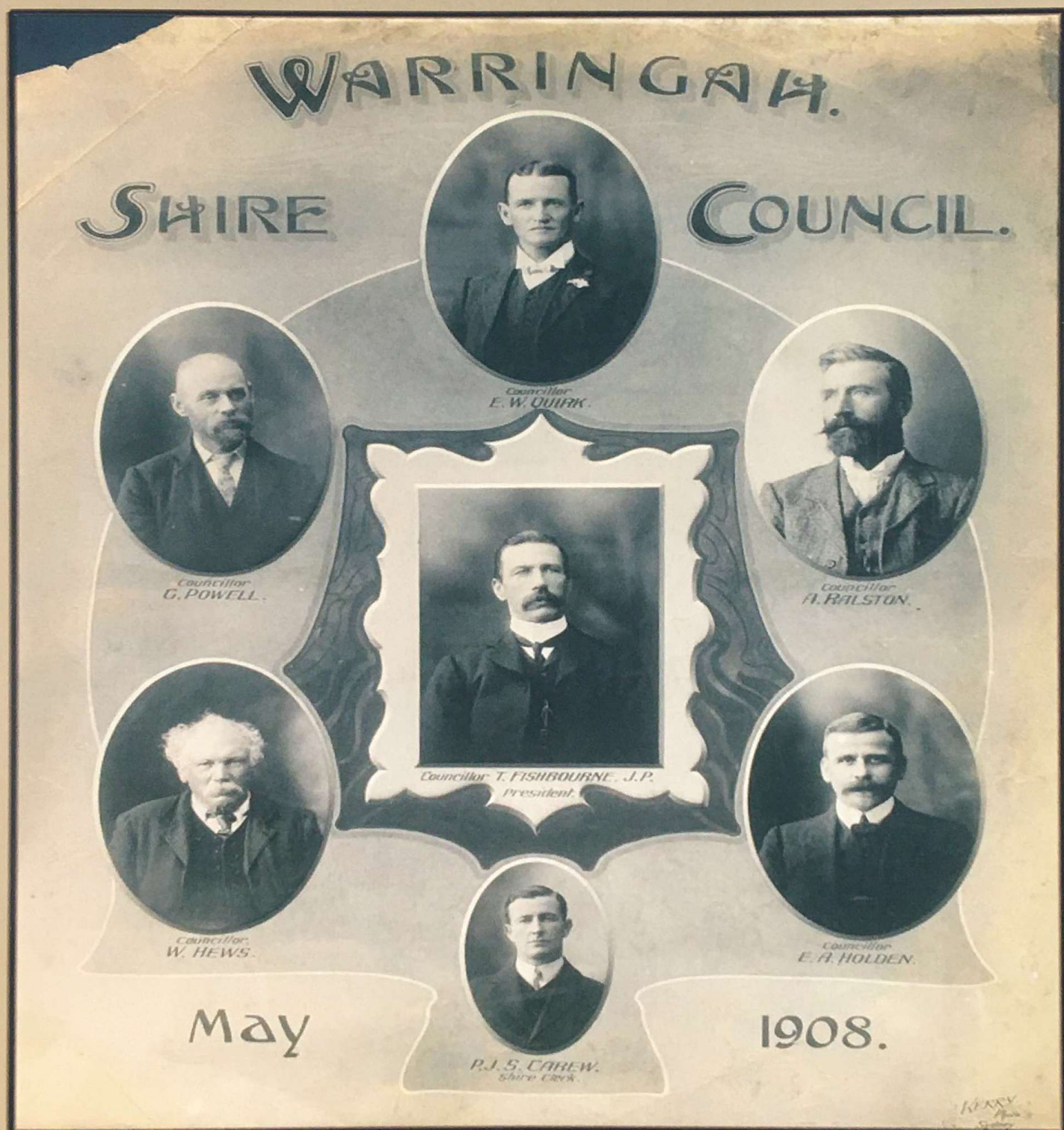


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Journal of the Society of Australian Genealogists



June 2020
Volume 50 Part 2



Thomas Kessey's Origins  Registration of War Deaths
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Thomas Kessey's Origins

by James Michael Fleming, Member

Last year was the bi-centenary of Thomas Kessey's arrival in Sydney as a convict aboard the *General Stewart*. Most family historians have concluded that he was born Thomas Casey in 1795 to James Casey and Alice nee Langford, but I contend that this is incorrect. I propose he was born Thomas Cassey in 1794 to Michael Cassey and his wife Mary.

Thomas' Life

On 2 January 1818 Thomas was arrested in his home village of Edmonton (Middlesex) and charged with stealing some cart harness from John Whitbread and two sheep from William White.¹ He was tried at the Old Bailey court in London on 14 January, found guilty and sentenced to death by Mr Justice Park.² A month later he was granted respite from the death sentence by the Prince Regent; instead he was to be transported for life.³

On his arrival in Sydney he was immediately given a job in the Commissariat Department that coordinated the collection and distribution of much of the food produced in NSW.⁴ Thanks to his experience carting rural produce in Edmonton, Thomas was well-suited to this position and was soon promoted to overseer.⁵ His performance and behaviour must have continued to be very good because he was granted a Conditional Pardon within just three years of his arrival in Sydney.⁶ He later set up his own carting business (in partnership with William Boyles at first) transporting goods between Sydney and Bathurst.⁷ He remained in the carting business throughout his long life.

His Bathurst travels brought him into contact with Judith Grady, daughter of convict Patrick Grady and wife Margaret (nee Whalan). They married at Bathurst in 1832.⁸ They produced 12 children and 86 grandchildren.

Thomas Kessey died at Mount Tamar (NSW) on 22 July 1882 and is buried at Bathurst.⁹

Current Theory

Thomas Kessey is included as the patriarch on 21 separate family trees published on Ancestry.com. Eighteen of these trees point to a single baptismal record as the primary source while three list it as an alternate source. His entry in a FamilySearch.com family tree also relies on this baptismal record. The record cited by these trees is the baptism of Thomas Casey, whose parents are James Casey and Alice, dated 24 July 1795, in the Tower Hamlets Christ Church, Spitalfields, Middlesex.¹⁰ Thomas's sister Sarah was also

baptised on the same day and they are recorded as being in the workhouse. Most of these trees give Alice's maiden surname as Langford, but it is unclear where this information comes from.

This 1795 baptism record of Thomas Casey conflicts with many of the known facts about Thomas Kessey from other reliable sources. I have concluded it does not relate to my Thomas Kessey. What follows is my outline of these conflicts.

Birthplace

The many subsequent records of Thomas's life unanimously state that he was from Edmonton, Middlesex—about seven miles from Spitalfields. While Spitalfields was a bustling part of inner-city London, Edmonton was a quiet rural town.

In nineteenth century England, the poor laws required each parish to take care of its poor.¹¹ So it was important to know where you had been born as this connected you to a parish. When people decided to move to a different place, and were likely to need parish help, they would require a Settlement Certificate to formalise the fact that a different parish was now responsible for them.

When Thomas was confined in London's Newgate prison in 1818, the clerk recorded in the Admissions Book that he was 21 years old and had been "born at Edmonton".¹² Thomas would have supplied that information himself. This accords with information recorded on the indents for convict ship *General Stewart* in 1818,¹³ his Conditional Pardon in 1821 and his Death Certificate in 1882.

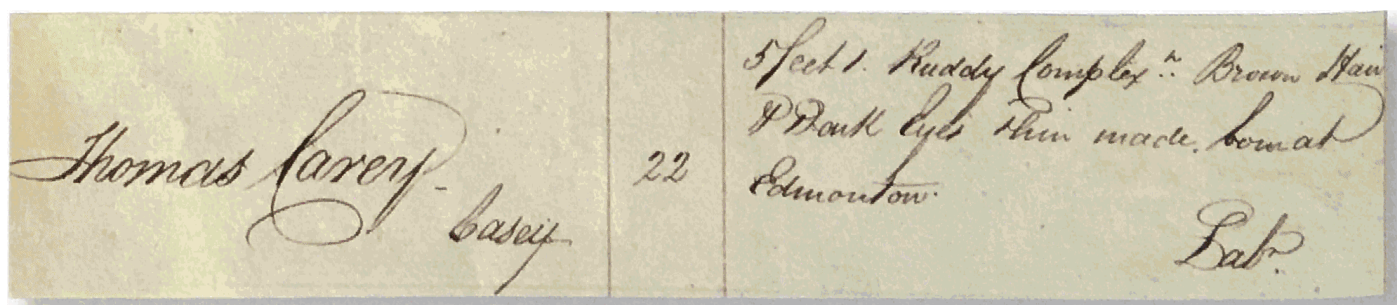
Furthermore, the transcript of his 1818 trial at the Old Bailey records that his offence took place at Edmonton, where Thomas lived with his father.¹⁴

All records that relate to Thomas Kessey state that he came from Edmonton. No records state that he was associated with Spitalfields. This suggests that the 1795 Spitalfields baptism probably relates to another person entirely.

Birthdate

The proponents of the 1795 Spitalfields baptism theory have failed to look closely at the source document. It relates to an 8-year-old child, a brother to 3-day-old Sarah Casey who was baptised on the same day and states the birth date of Thomas was 15 December 1787.

The many subsequent records of Thomas's life imply a birth year between 1794 and 1799. Thomas Kessey's 1882 death certificate states that he lived to 83 years of age, but the Spitalfields baptism record would make him 95 years old—a very unlikely lifespan for a hard-working labourer in the nineteenth century.



The entry for Thomas Casey (later Kessey) in the Admissions Book for Newgate Prison records that he was "born at Edmonton". Source: The National Archives, Series PCOM2, Piece Number 192 (Findmypast.com)

Furthermore, a 1787 birth would mean that Thomas was 31 years old on his admission to Newgate prison in 1818. But the prison records give his age as 22. The *General Stewart* convict indents of 1818 give his age as 20. It seems highly unlikely that a 31-year-old man could be mistaken for 20 or 22.

Thomas had also been arrested and tried at the Old Bailey in 1813.¹⁵ Those records give his age as 18 or 19, which is significantly different to the 26 the Spitalfields Thomas Casey would have been.

When Thomas Kessey married Judith Grady at Bathurst in 1832, she was just 16 years old and he was 38. While this is a remarkably wide age difference, if he had been born at Spitalfields in 1787, he would have been 45 years old!

Family Clues

The transcript of Thomas Casey's trial at the Old Bailey in 1818 records that he was living with his (unnamed) father, who was a farmer at Edmonton, Middlesex. The Spitalfields baptismal records refer to a father with a different occupation who lived in a different place.

The parents of the Spitalfields Thomas (born 1787) and Sarah (born 1795) had at least two other children. Mary, born 31 December 1790, was baptised in the same church in January 1791,¹⁶ and Samuel, born 23 December 1792, was baptised there in January 1793.¹⁷ For both the 1791 and 1795 baptisms, their father James was recorded as being in the workhouse. For the 1793 baptism he was recorded as a weaver living at nearby Petticoat Lane.

It seems very unlikely that an unemployed weaver from inner-city London would, 25 years later, be occupied as a farmer.

Wrong person

There is evidence that the Thomas Casey who was born at Spitalfields in 1787 and baptised there in 1795 lived out his life in that area. The Tower Hamlets Church of St George in the East recorded the burial of a 37-year-old Thomas Casey on 16 May 1824.¹⁸ He is just the right age to be the Thomas Casey who was baptised at Tower Hamlets Christ Church, Spitalfields (one mile away) in 1795.

Conclusion

I conclude that the weight of evidence is very strong that the Spitalfields 1795 baptism record does not relate to Thomas Kessey who died at Mt Tamar (NSW) in 1882. This baptism was at the wrong place; at the wrong time; with the wrong father; and more likely to be for a person who died in the same area in 1824.

Finding My Thomas Kessey

So, I set out to find the correct record of Thomas Kessey's birth or baptism. In doing so I acknowledged that it was quite conceivable that this record (if it ever existed) had been lost or destroyed at some time in the last two centuries. It may exist somewhere that is difficult to locate using existing indexes. Nevertheless, genealogists never give up!

My search identified only two possibilities. The first is an entry for a Thomas Casey in the Baptism Register of the Sion Chapel, Union Street (Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion) at Mile End Old Town, London.¹⁹ He was born on 21 December 1798 and baptised on 14 April 1799, son of Owen and Esther Casey of the Parish of Spitalfields.

This record has similar problems to the 1795 Spitalfields baptism discussed above in that it relates to the wrong place. Furthermore, there is some evidence that this child's father stayed in this inner-

London area throughout his life (unlike Thomas Kessey's father who lived at Edmonton in 1818).

An Owen Casey is recorded at nearby Southwark St George on the 1841 census: a labourer aged 61 with a wife Mary and sons James (20) and John (15).²⁰ Three years later a 67-year-old Owen Casey (a destitute labourer) was twice admitted to the Southwark Workhouse.²¹ He died in the same workhouse on 4 March the following year and was taken away by his son for burial.²²

If, as seems likely, this was the Owen Casey whose son Thomas was baptised at Spitalfields in 1798, it is very unlikely that he was living at Edmonton in 1818 and working as a farmer.

The second possibility is an entry for Thomas Cassey in the Baptism Register of All Saints Church Edmonton on 23 March 1794.²³ Previous researchers may have missed this record by failing to check alternative spellings.

This baptism relates to the right place: Edmonton, Middlesex. This accords with the Old Bailey trial transcript (1813); the Newgate Prison Admissions Book (1818); the Old Bailey trial transcript (1818); the indents for convict ship *General Stewart* (1818); the Conditional Pardon (1821) and the Death Certificate (1882).

Secondly, the date of the baptism is consistent with the range of possible birth years that are suggested by his recorded age on later records, i.e. 1794–1799.

Thirdly, there is evidence that both of his parents were living at Edmonton between 1792 and 1802 (at least). The registers for the same Edmonton church where Thomas Cassey was baptised reveal that he had a brother and a sister. Mary Ann Casey was baptised on 10 June 1792²⁴ while William Casey (an infant) was

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buried on 24 October 1802.²⁵ This is consistent with what we know of Thomas Kessey—that his father was still living at Edmonton in 1818 when Thomas was arrested.

It is also noteworthy that the 1841 census records a Michael Casey, aged 65, living in the Edmonton workhouse.²⁶ This could be Michael Cassey, father of Thomas. He is not recorded in the 1851 census and I could find no record of his death.

The weight of evidence outlined above is enough to satisfy me that Thomas Kessey was born in Edmonton to Michael and Mary Cassey in 1794.

The Cassey Surname

There is another intriguing aspect that gives me even greater surety in this conclusion: the surname “Cassey”. The vicar at All Saints Church in Edmonton recorded the 1794 baptism as “Thomas s. of Michael and Mary Cafsey” where the “f” represents the antiquated form of “s”. In other words, he spelt the surname “Cassey”.

This was probably not a mis-spelt “Casey”. “Cassey” is a separate surname that has existed in England for centuries. The *Oxford Book of Family Names in Britain and Ireland* speculates that it may be a Norman name derived from the town of Quessy, 128 km North-East of Paris.²⁷ Early examples of the name in England are recorded in Norfolk in 1379 and 1571.

It may, therefore, be significant that his baptism was recorded as “Cassey”. While our Thomas is recorded as Thomas Casey on most prison and convict records, his family later adopted the spelling “Kessey”. I had previously speculated that this had been done to “hide the convict stain”. But maybe the real reason was that Thomas’s actual pronunciation of his own surname did not accord with how government clerks had been spelling it. Some of the older members of the Kessey clan would, in their cups, pronounce the surname more as Kassey²⁸—right up until the late twentieth century.

If the spelling change had been a deliberate decision to hide a convict past, we would expect that it would have been adopted at a point in time and then used consistently. But there was no clear-cut date for the move to the Kessey spelling; it was adopted in dribs and drabs. Kessey first appeared in 1840 for the baptism of Thomas’s son James.²⁹ Two years later his sister Mary-Ann was baptised as Keasy.³⁰ Subsequent baptisms in 1849³¹ and 1851³² were recorded as Casey, but Thomas placed an advertisement in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in February 1851 that was signed as Kessey.³³ His cattle brand in 1851 was TK.³⁴ A baptism in 1853³⁵ was Casey but marriages in 1856³⁶ and 1858³⁷ were Kessey. Practically all records after that consistently used Kessey. So, it took 16 years for the Kessey spelling to be consistently applied.

I believe that Thomas and his family members pronounced their surname in a different way than the normal pronunciation of the Casey surname. Over time the spelling came to reflect that pronunciation more accurately, particularly once Thomas’s literate children became adults in the late 1850s. If so, this provides additional evidence to support my theory that Thomas Kessey is the son of Michael and Mary Cassey who was baptised at Edmonton on 23 March 1794.²⁰

This case is a classic example of the perils that can await the family historian who accepts other people’s research without question. While this is an easy thing to do, it really does pay to check original sources yourself. Leave no stone unturned in gathering all possible information sources to ensure that you identify the correct ancestor. Finally, we must accept that sometimes a definitive answer is simply not possible. 🙄

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- ³ British Newspaper Archive, Recorder’s Report, *Morning Chronicle*, London, 20 February 1818, p. 2.
- ⁴ NSW State Archives, Storekeeper Returns, Commissariat Department, 25 January 1819.
- ⁵ NSW State Archives, Victualling List, Commissariat Department, 8 September 1821.
- ⁶ NSW State Archives, Conditional Pardons List, 28 November 1821.
- ⁷ Classified Advertising, *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, 16 December 1826, p. 1.
- ⁸ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Marriage Certificate of Thomas Casey and Judith Grady (1174/1832).
- ⁹ NSW BDM, Death Certificate of Thomas Kessey (5930/1882).
- ¹⁰ Ancestry.com. London, England, Church of England Baptisms, Marriages and Burials, 1538-1812 [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010. Original data: Church of England Parish Registers, 1538-1812. London, England: London Metropolitan Archives, Reference Number: P93/CTC1/002.
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- ¹⁵ Old Bailey Proceedings Online, (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 7.0, 24 March 2012), June 1813, trial of Thomas Casey (t18130602-165).
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- ¹⁷ Ancestry.com, London, England, Church of England Baptisms, Marriages and Burials, Original data: Church of England Parish Registers, 1538-1812. London, England: London Metropolitan Archives, Reference Number: P93/CTC1/002.
- ¹⁸ Ancestry.com, London, England, Church of England Deaths and Burials, 1813-2003 [database on-line]. 2010. Original data: Board of Guardian Records, 1834-1906 and Church of England Parish Registers, 1813-2003. London Metropolitan Archives, London, Reference Number: p93/geo/077.
- ¹⁹ Ancestry.com, England & Wales, Non-Conformist and Non-Parochial Registers, 1567-1970 [database on-line]. 2013. Original data: The National Archives of the UK; Kew, Surrey, England; General Register Office: Registers of Births, Marriages and Deaths surrendered to the Non-parochial Registers Commissions of 1837 and 1857; Class Number: RG 4; Piece Number: 4517.
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- ²⁷ Patrick Hanks, Richard Coates, Peter McClure (ed.), *Oxford Dictionary of Family Names in Britain and Ireland* (Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 451.
- ²⁸ Personal recall of the author.
- ²⁹ NSW BDM, Birth Certificate of James Kessey (2228/1840).
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- ³² NSW BDM, Birth Certificate of Ellen Casey (1823/1851).
- ³³ In the Supreme Court of New South Wales, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 February 1851, p. 4.
- ³⁴ Cattle Stealing, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 August 1851, p. 2.
- ³⁵ NSW BDM, Baptism Certificate of William Casey (1239/1853).
- ³⁶ NSW BDM, Marriage Certificate of Thomas Kessey and Sarah Ann Grose (2144/1856).
- ³⁷ NSW BDM, Marriage Certificate of William J Budge and Ann Kessey (1247/1858).

James Michael Fleming

Jim is a retired Customs Manager and lives on Sydney's lower north shore.

He began researching his family history in 1983 and has been a member of the Society of Australian Genealogists for 36 years.

Aside from genealogy he enjoys travelling and sings baritone in two choirs.



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Image: Lean-Gray wedding 1942, Item. 6/1238



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