

# Thomas Kessey's Origins

by James Michael Fleming

**This year is 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 instead that he was born Thomas Cassey in 1794 to Michael Cassey and his wife Mary.**

## Brief biography

In early 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<sup>1</sup>. He was tried at the Old Bailey court in London on 14 January, found guilty and sentenced to death by Mr Justice Park<sup>2</sup>. A month later he was granted respite from the death sentence by the Prince Regent; instead he was to be transported for life<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup>. Thanks to his experience carting rural produce in Edmonton, Thomas was well-suited to this position and was soon promoted to overseer<sup>5</sup>. 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<sup>6</sup>. He later set up his own carting business (in partnership with William Boyles at first) transporting goods between Sydney and Bathurst<sup>7</sup>. 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<sup>8</sup>. They produced 12 children and 86 grandchildren. Their descendants would now number in the hundreds.

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

## Current theory

Thomas Kessey is included as the patriarch on 21 separate family trees published on Ancestry.com. These trees all point to a single baptismal record as either the primary source (18 trees) or an alternate source (3 trees) for his origin. His entry in the FamilySearch.com family tree also relies on this same baptismal record. This record is for a baptism dated 24 July 1795 in the Tower Hamlets Christ Church, Spitalfields, Middlesex<sup>10</sup>. The baptism is of Thomas Casey whose parents (James Casey and Alice<sup>a</sup>) were recorded as being in the workhouse. Thomas's sister Sarah was also baptised on the same day.



Baptism entries for Sarah and Thomas Casey, 24 July 1795, Baptism Register of Tower Hamlets Christ Church, Spitalfields, Middlesex.  
Source: Ancestry.com

This record, however, conflicts with many of the facts that are known about Thomas Kessey from other reliable sources. I have therefore concluded that it does not relate to Thomas Kessey. The following paragraphs outline in detail the many conflicts between the 1795 Spitalfields record and the known facts about Thomas Kessey.

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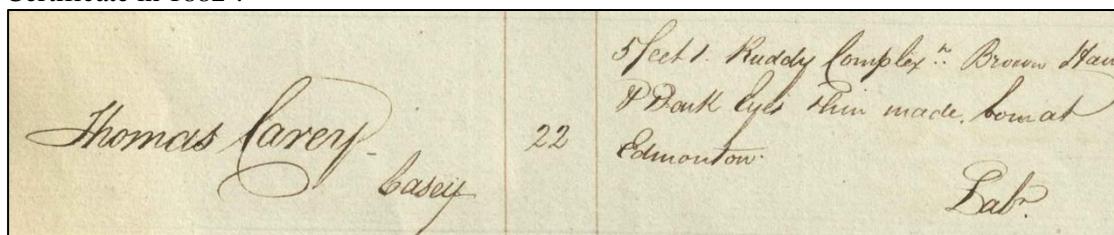
<sup>a</sup> Most of these published trees give Alice's maiden surname as Langford, but it is unclear where this information comes from.

### Wrong place

The many subsequent records of Thomas's life unanimously state that he was from Edmonton, Middlesex – about 7 miles from Spitalfields. While Spitalfields was a bustling part of inner-city London, Edmonton (just 7 miles away) was a quiet rural town.

In nineteenth century England, everybody knew where they had been born because that connected them to the Parish. This was important because the Poor Laws required each parish to take care of its poor<sup>11</sup>. When people decided to settle in a different place, they needed to obtain a Settlement Certificate that formalized their move to a different parish and transferred the Poor Law responsibility to the new parish.

When Thomas was confined in London's Newgate prison in 1818, the clerk recorded in the Admissions Book that he was 22 years old and had been "born at Edmonton"<sup>1</sup>. Thomas would have supplied that information himself. This accords with information recorded on the indents for convict ship *General Stewart* in 1818<sup>12</sup>; his Conditional Pardon in 1821<sup>6</sup> and his Death Certificate in 1882<sup>9</sup>.



The entry for Thomas Casey (later Kessey) in the Admissions Book for Newgate Prison (5 January 1818) records that he was "born at Edmonton".  
Source: Ancestry.com

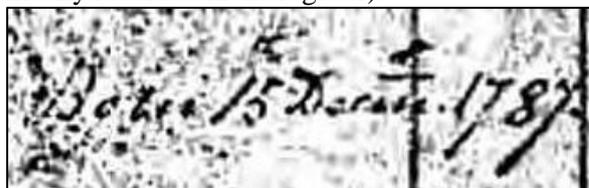
Furthermore, the transcript of his 1818 trial at the Old Bailey<sup>2</sup> records that his offence took place at Edmonton, where Thomas lived with his father.

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.

### Wrong time

The many subsequent records of Thomas's life imply a birth year between 1794 and 1799. The 1795 Spitalfields baptism record puts Thomas at the wrong time because it states that Thomas had been born eight years earlier, on 15 December 1787<sup>10</sup>.

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. Relying on this record gives Thomas Casey a birth date of 15 December 1787 (specifically recorded in the register).



A magnified view of the birth date details for Thomas Casey as recorded in the Baptism Register of Tower Hamlets Christ Church, Spitalfields, Middlesex.  
Source: Ancestry.com

Thomas Kessey's 1882 death certificate<sup>9</sup> 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.

Furthermore, an 1878 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<sup>12</sup>. It seems highly unlikely that a 31-year-old man could be mistaken for 20 or 22.

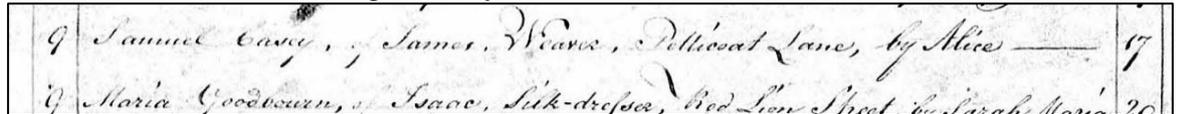
Thomas had also been arrested and tried at the Old Bailey for another crime five years before his 1818 conviction<sup>13</sup>. Those records give his age as 18 or 19, which is significantly different to the 26 that the Spitalfields Thomas Casey would have been.

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!

### **Wrong father**

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<sup>2</sup>. The Spitalfields baptismal records refer to a father with a different occupation who lived in a different place.

The parents of the Spitalfields Thomas (1787) and Sarah (1795) had at least two other children. Mary (born 31 Dec 1790) was baptised in the same church in January 1791<sup>14</sup>; and Samuel (born 23 Dec 1792) was baptised there in January 1793. 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.



Baptism entry for Samuel Casey, 9 January 1793, Baptism Register of Tower Hamlets Christ Church, Spitalfields, Middlesex. Note that his father James is a weaver of nearby Petticoat Lane.  
Source: Ancestry.com

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. This means that he could not be the same person who was transported to Australia in 1818.

The Tower Hamlets Church of St George in the East recorded the burial of a 37-year-old Thomas Casey on 16 May 1824<sup>15</sup>. He is just the right age to be the Thomas Casey who was baptised at Tower Hamlets Christ Church, Spitalfields (just one mile away) in 1795.

**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; for a person who likely died in the same area in 1824.

### **Other possible records**

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. Or that it may exist somewhere that is difficult to locate using existing indexes. Nevertheless, genealogists never give up!

My search identified only two possibilities.

### **1798 Spitalfields baptism**

The first possibility 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<sup>16</sup>. 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.

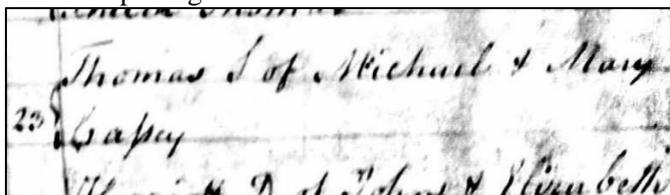
Furthermore, there is some evidence that this child's father stayed in this inner-London area throughout his life (unlike Thomas Kessey's father who lived at Edmonton in 1818).

An Owen Casey is recorded at nearby Southwark St George on the 1841 census<sup>17</sup>: a labourer aged 61 with a wife Mary and sons James (20) and John (15). Three years later a 67-year-old Owen Casey (a destitute labourer) was twice admitted to the Southwark Workhouse<sup>18</sup>. He died in the same workhouse on 4 March the following year and was taken away by his son for burial<sup>19</sup>.

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.

### **My new theory**

The second possibility is an entry for Thomas Cassey in the Baptism Register of All Saints Church Edmonton on 23 Mar 1794<sup>20</sup>. Previous researchers may have missed this record by failing to check alternative spellings.



Baptism entry for Thomas Cassey, 23 March 1794, Baptism Register of All Saints Church, Edmonton, Middlesex.  
Source: Ancestry.com

Every aspect of this record matches what we know about Thomas Kessey from other sources, as outlined below. I have therefore concluded that this record relates to our Thomas Kessey.

Firstly, the baptism relates to the right place: Edmonton, Middlesex. This accords with the Old Bailey trial transcript (1813)<sup>13</sup>; the Newgate Prison Admissions Book (1818)<sup>1</sup>; the Old Bailey trial transcript (1818)<sup>2</sup>; the indents for convict ship *General Stewart* (1818)<sup>12</sup>; the Conditional Pardon (1821)<sup>6</sup> and the Death Certificate (1882)<sup>9</sup>.

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 1792<sup>21</sup> while William Casey (an infant) was buried on 24 October 1802<sup>22</sup>. This is consistent with what we know of Thomas Kessey – that his father was still living at Edmonton in 1818 when Thomas was arrested.

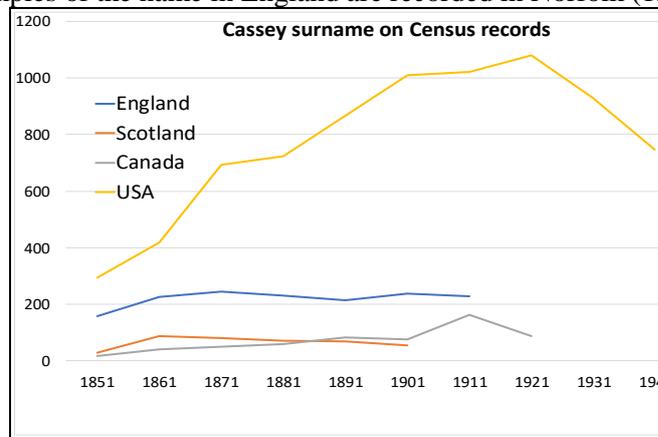
It is also noteworthy that the 1841 census records a Michael Casey, aged 65, living in the Edmonton workhouse<sup>23</sup>. This could be Michael Cassey, father of Thomas. He is not recorded in the 1851 census and I could find no record of his death.

The weight of evidence outlined above is enough to satisfy me that Thomas Kessey was not born in Spitalfields in 1787 to James and Alice Casey but 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 & Mary Cassey*” (where the “j” represents the antiquated form of “s”). In other words, he spelt the surname “Cassey”<sup>20</sup>.

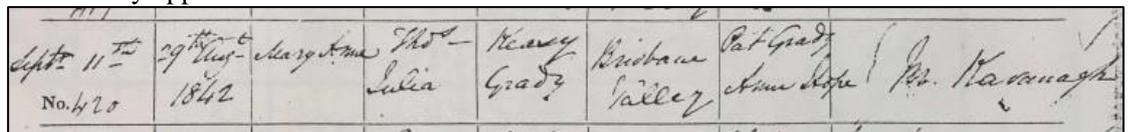
This was probably not a mis-spelt “Casey”; “Cassey” is a separate surname that has existed in England for centuries. The *Oxford Book of Family Names in Britain and Ireland* speculates that it may be a Norman name derived from the town of Quessy, 128 km North-East of Paris<sup>24</sup>. Early examples of the name in England are recorded in Norfolk (1379, 1571).



**Incidence of the surname Cassey on census records in four countries 1851-1941. There were more than 200 people with this surname on each English census during the late nineteenth century. Data source: Ancestry.com; Graphed by the author**

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 Kasse<sup>25</sup> – 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<sup>26</sup>. Two years later his sister Mary-Ann was baptised as Keasy<sup>27</sup>. Subsequent baptisms in 1849<sup>28</sup> and 1851<sup>29</sup> were recorded as Casey, but Thomas placed an advertisement in the Sydney Morning Herald in February 1851 that was signed as Kessey<sup>30</sup>. His cattle brand in 1851 was TK<sup>31</sup>. A baptism in 1853<sup>32</sup> was Casey but marriages in 1856<sup>33</sup> and 1858<sup>34</sup> were Kessey. Practically all records after that consistently used Kessey. So, it had taken 16 years for the Kessey spelling to be consistently applied.



**Baptism of Thomas’s daughter, Mary Anne Keasy on 29 August 1842 in Bathurst<sup>35</sup>.**

I conclude 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 new theory that Thomas Kessey is the son of Michael and Mary Cassey who was baptised at Edmonton on 23 Mar 1794<sup>20</sup>.

## Conclusion

There is very strong evidence that the Spitalfields 1795 baptism (f. James m. Alice) does not relate to Thomas Kessey. There is strong evidence that the Spitalfields 1798 baptism (f. Owen m. Esther) does not relate to Thomas Kessey. There is no evidence that either of those baptisms is more appropriate than the other.

The evidence is overwhelming that Thomas Kessey was baptised as Thomas Cassey at Edmonton on 23 Mar 1794 (f. Michael m. Mary).

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Newgate Prison, London: Register of Prisoners, 5 Jan 1818, The National Archives, PCOM2, 192, England & Wales, Crime, Prisons & Punishment, 1770-1935, findmypast.com.
- <sup>2</sup> Tim Hitchcock, Robert Shoemaker, Clive Emsley, Sharon Howard and Jamie McLaughlin, et al. *The Old Bailey Proceedings Online, 1674-1913* (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 7.0, 24 March 2012), Reference t18180114-62, 14th January 1818, <https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/browse.jsp?div=t18180114-62>
- <sup>3</sup> *Recorder's Report*, Morning Chronicle, London, 20 Feb 1818.
- <sup>4</sup> Storekeeper Returns, Commissariat Department, 25 Jan 1819, NSW State Archives & Records.
- <sup>5</sup> Victualling List, Commissariat Department, 8 Sep 1821, NSW State Archives & Records.
- <sup>6</sup> Conditional Pardons List, 28 Nov 1821, NSW State Archives & Records.
- <sup>7</sup> Advertisement dated 11 Dec 1826 by William Boyles and Thomas Casey, Sydney Gazette, 16 Dec 1826. Commissariat Department notice re tenders for Land Carriage, 30 Dec 1830, Sydney Gazette. Commissariat Department notice re tenders for Land Carriage, Sydney Herald, 2 Jan 1832. Commissariat Department notice re tenders for Land and Water Transport, Sydney Gazette, 1 Dec 1832.
- <sup>8</sup> Marriage Record, Casey-Grady, 1174/1832, *NSW Registry of Births Deaths & Marriages*.
- <sup>9</sup> *NSW BDM*, Death Certificate, Thomas Kessey, 5930/1882.
- <sup>10</sup> Baptism Record, Thomas Casey, 24 Jul 1795, Tower Hamlets Christ Church, Spitalfields, Middlesex. London Metropolitan Archives; London, England; *Church of England Parish Registers, 1538-1812*; Reference Number: P93/CTC1/002; 1729-1812; Ancestry.com. London, England, Church of England Baptisms, Marriages and Burials, 1538-1812 [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010.
- <sup>11</sup> Fowler, Simon. *Poor Law Records for Family Historians* (Family History Press, 2011).
- <sup>12</sup> Indents, *General Stewart*, 31 Dec 1818, NSW State Archives & Records.
- <sup>13</sup> *Old Bailey Proceedings*, Reference t18130602-165, 2 Jun 1813, <https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/browse.jsp?id=t18130602-165-defend1370&div=t18130602-165#highlight>
- <sup>14</sup> *Church of England Parish Registers, 1538-1812*, Baptism Record, Mary Casey, 7 Jan 1791, Tower Hamlets Christ Church, Spitalfields, Middlesex.
- <sup>15</sup> Burial Record, Thomas Casey, 16 May 1824, Tower Hamlets Church of St George in the East, London Metropolitan Archives; London, England; Reference Number: p93/geo/077; 1817-1829; London, England, *Church of England Deaths and Burials, 1813-2003* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010.

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- <sup>16</sup> Baptism Record, Thomas Casey, 14 Apr 1799, Sion Chapel Union Street (Count- of Huntingdon), 1791-1799, Mile End Old Town, 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; RG 4, 4517; Ancestry.com. *England & Wales, Non-Conformist and Non-Parochial Registers, 1567-1970* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2013.
- <sup>17</sup> *1841 England Census* [database on-line], Class: HO107; Piece: 1085; Book: 4; Civil Parish: St George The Martyr; County: Surrey; Enumeration District: 8; Folio: 36; Page: 30; Line: 19; GSU roll: 474668,. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc, 2010.
- <sup>18</sup> Workhouse Admission, Owen Casey, aged 67, Southwark, London, *Workhouse Admission and Discharge Records, 1764-1930* [database on-line], London Metropolitan Archives; London, England; Reference Number: SoBG/101/17, Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2014. Workhouse Discharge, Owen Casey, aged 67, 21 Mar 1844.
- <sup>19</sup> *Church of England Deaths and Burials, 1813-2003*, Death Record, Owen Casey, 4 Mar 1845, London Metropolitan Archives; London, England; Reference Number: SOBG/035/1.
- <sup>20</sup> Baptism Record, Thomas Cassey, 23 Mar 1794, All Saints, Edmonton, Enfield, Middlesex, England, London Metropolitan Archives; London, England; *Church of England Parish Registers, 1538-18*, Reference Number: DRO/040/A/01/005.
- <sup>21</sup> Baptism Record, Mary Ann Casey, 10 Jun 1792, All Saints, Edmonton, Enfield, Middlesex, England, London Metropolitan Archives; London, England; *Church of England Parish Registers, 1538-1812*, Reference Number: DRO/040/A/01/004.
- <sup>22</sup> Burial Record, William Casey, 24 Oct 1802, All Saints, Edmonton, Enfield, Middlesex, England, London Metropolitan Archives; London, England; *Church of England Parish Registers, 1538-1812*, Reference Number: DRO/040/A/01/005.
- <sup>23</sup> *1841 England Census*, Edmonton Union Workhouse, Middlesex, HO107, Book 10, folio 3, page 2, 1841 England, Wales & Scotland Census Transcription, findmypast.com.
- <sup>24</sup> Patrick Hanks, Richard Coates, Peter McClure (Ed). *Oxford Dictionary of Family Names in Britain and Ireland* (Oxford University Press, 17 Nov 2016), p 451.
- <sup>25</sup> Personal recall of the author.
- <sup>26</sup> *NSW BDM*, Baptism Record, James Kessey, 2228/1840.
- <sup>27</sup> Cashman GM. *Avoca – The Faith of the Pioneers* (The Centenary Committee of the Church of St Vincent de Paul, Black Springs, 1988), p93. Original source: Catholic Church Baptism Register, Bathurst.
- <sup>28</sup> *NSW BDM*, Baptism Record, Elizabeth Casey, 3125/1849.
- <sup>29</sup> *NSW BDM*, Baptism Record, Ellen Casey, 1823/1851.
- <sup>30</sup> *In the Supreme Court of New South Wales*, Sydney Morning Herald, 4 Feb 1851, p 4.
- <sup>31</sup> *Cattle Stealing*, Sydney Morning Herald, 27 Aug 1851, p 2.
- <sup>32</sup> *NSW BDM*, Baptism Record, William Casey, 1239/1853. *NSW BDM*, Baptism Record, Martha Casey, 2369/1853.
- <sup>33</sup> *NSW BDM*, Marriage Record, Kessey-Grose, 2144/1856.
- <sup>34</sup> *NSW BDM*, Marriage Record, Budge-Kessey, 1247/1858.