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2012 Are the Clues in the Tattoos?

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Are the Clues in the Tattoos?



Thomas Oakley
1809-1885

Have you ever had that feeling that things are not always as they seem? For years my mother spoke with pride of her eminent family the “Oakleys” of Bendigo, after all, the name had been associated with “undertaking” there for over one hundred years.ⁱ But when I started researching my two times great grandfather Thomas, the founder of the esteemed Oakley Undertakers, things weren’t as I thought.

Contrary to family anecdotes, Thomas Oakley arrived in Sydney, not as a free settler, but as a convicted felon. Thomas had in fact been tried in the Old Bailey not once but twice for stealing carpentry tools and what’s worse, using two different identities, John Masonⁱⁱ and Thomas Oakley.ⁱⁱⁱ Thomas’ – or perhaps, John’s – attempts to conceal his previous conviction with the use of an alias

backfired when he was recognised by the constabulary. He took a risk and now transportation was inevitable. But was there a possibility that Thomas had used multiple names on multiple occasions? Just who was my great-great-grandfather?

A comparative analysis of his two known crimes uncovered minor details of geographical proximity within the district of Chelsea, and stolen items, but provided nothing of his past. A brief search for trials of a similar nature proved fruitless – without his real name it was impossible. It was time to look for clues in his post trial history.

Both UK and Australian records show that Thomas “Ockley”, most probably a simple spelling or transcription error from the court records, was taken from Newgate prison to the prison hulk “Retribution” moored in Woolwich,^{iv} where he remained until he boarded the convict ship “John”.^v

Thomas arrived in Sydney Cove in June 1832 and the Convict indents of the “John” reveal some interesting facts. Aged 23, single, literate – implying some form of education – and a joiner and carpenter,^{vi} Thomas was assigned to Dr Andrew Gibson of Goulburn.^{vii} His occupation is a revelation because to claim a trade he would have had to complete an apprenticeship and it also explains the theft of tools. But, how do I search the apprenticeship records without a name?

Thomas remained in the pastoral lands of New South Wales and was granted a Ticket of Leave (August 1842),^{viii} and three years later his Certificate of Freedom,^{ix} in the district of Yass where he settled.

In April 1846, he married Jane Payne,^x daughter of John and Annie, and began his life as a free man. Having had three of what was to be a total thirteen children he and his family left for the goldfields of Victoria in 1852. On arrival in Bendigo he noticed huge numbers of people succumbing to poor hygiene and disease and saw an opportunity for a good living to be made using his trade – making coffins. His business thrived. Thomas left his past behind and became an upstanding and respected member of the community. He served the people of Bendigo in their times of grief providing excellent funeral services. He became a founding member of the Sandhurst Volunteer Fire Brigade and an honorary member of the Ancient Order of Foresters,^{xi} as well as many other societies, leaving his mark on history.

Thomas died in December 1885 having suffered for years with chronic cystitis.^{xii} The most intriguing aspect of Thomas’ death is his coffin – or should I say coffins – yes he had three! I have come to the conclusion that Thomas consciously ordered the three coffins to reflect his life. The first coffin made from plain deal (pine) represented his simple, perhaps sometimes difficult life in London. The second made of lead – yes you read correctly – represented his life as a convict, and the third made of “*handsomely polished cedar*”^{xiii} represented the success he had made of his life in his adopted city of Bendigo.

I had uncovered Thomas Oakley the convict and freeman of Australia but how could I uncover his real name and his roots? It was time to examine the evidence.

Included in some of the convict documentation was information that just might reveal more about the man and his past than any single document – as well as list his physical features, the post arrival Indentures and his Certificate of Freedom, contained a clear description of his numerous tattoos.

W H K S K on upper, mermaid, crucifix, sun, moon, seven stars and anchor on lower right arm, H W M W on upper, sloop, flag, woman and heart on lower left arm^{xiv}

Did he bear these marks before leaving England or did he, as many convicts did, mark himself during the long journey with secret symbols to remember his past and the family left behind?

Tattoos were often a way of recording personal history and sometimes reveal individual traits.^{xv} Many of the tattoos that adorned Thomas' arms were typical maritime symbols, while others were of romance. The sloop and maritime symbols imply a possible occupational connection. Was he perhaps a ship's carpenter?

The lettering proves the most interesting. From his death certificate the informant claims Thomas' father was John and mother Sarah.^{xvi} This latter fact is most probably true as Thomas named his first daughter Sarah. But the most significant aspect of the lettering is revealed when we examine the names of his sons.

Thomas named his first son **William Henry** - why not John? His second, Augustine, was named after the Church in Yass. His third, John Joseph, was more likely to honour Jane's father. None of his sons were named Thomas. Now I see a link between names and the tattoos. **WHK** was this Thomas' father – a William Henry and the **SK** mother Sarah? Perhaps his real family name begins with the letter "K"?

With all this new information perhaps it's time to return to the scene of the crime, examine the history and populace of early 19th century Chelsea and try to uncover a Knight, King, Kemp, Kerridge, Kerr ...

ⁱ *Bendigo Advertiser* 17 Nov 1855 pg1 National Library of Australia www.trove.nla.gov.au

ⁱⁱ Ref. t18310630-52 <http://www.oldbaileyonline.org>

ⁱⁱⁱ Ref. t18310908-202 <http://www.oldbaileyonline.org>

^{iv} National Archives Kew, England Ref: HO 9/7 *Convict hulks moored at Sheerness: Retribution, Bellerophon: Register of prisoners 1802-1834*. <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C4286831>

^v State Archives & Records Authority of New South Wales *Bound manuscript indents, 1788–1842*. NRS 12188, microfiche 682

^{vi} *Ibid.*

^{vii} The National Archives of the UK *Settlers and Convicts, New South Wales and Tasmania*; Class: HO 10; Piece: 29

^{viii} State Archives & Records Authority of New South Wales; *New South Wales, Australia, Tickets of Leave, 1810-1869*; Series: NRS 12202; Item: [4/4165]

State Archives & Records Authority of New South Wales; Series NRS12210 *Butts of certificates of freedom, 1827-67* [4/4289-418]

^x New South Wales Registry of Birth Deaths & Marriages; *Marriage Certificate Thomas Oakley Jane Mary Payne, 1846 No 600 Vol 94*

^{xi} *Bendigo Advertiser* 17 December 1885 Pg4 National Library of Australia, www.trove.nla.gov.au

^{xii} Victorian Registry of Births Deaths & Marriages, *Death Certificate Thomas Oakley; 1885; No 13911*

^{xiii} *Bendigo Advertiser* 17 December 1856 Pg2 National Library of Australia www.trove.nla.gov.au

^{xiv} State Archives NSW; *Ships Indentures, Convict Certificate of Freedom Series: NRS 12189; Item: [X634]; Microfiche: 700*

^{xv} Robert Shoemaker, Zoe Alker; *How tattoos became fashionable in Victorian England*; 122487

<https://theconversation.com>

^{xvi} Victorian Registry of Births Deaths & Marriages *Death Certificate Thomas Oakley; 1885; No 13911*