

Elizabeth Woolcock nee Oliver – Setting the Record Straight

The book "No Monument of Stone" by Allan Peters (historian for the South Australian Police Historical Society)¹ is the story of 25 year old Elizabeth Lillian **Woolcock** nee **Oliver**, who was hanged on 30th December 1873 for the poisoning death of her husband, Thomas **Woolcock**. Elizabeth Lillian **Woolcock** was the only woman hanged in South Australia and the alleged murder occurred in Moonta, South Australia. "No Monument of Stone" is a fascinating account of Elizabeth Lillian's apparent life, and more importantly, her actual trial and death. Allan Peters released an update of the saga, named "Dead Woman Walking"², based on further research. People in Moonta took up a petition to have Elizabeth Lillian pardoned, but this was refused on 24th November, 2012³.

As Allan Peters did not record several pieces of the puzzle which were of interest to me, I decided to look into Elizabeth Lillian **Woolcock's** family tree, especially as the name **Woolcock** is also linked in my husband's family tree. I initially recorded, on a separate data base, all the family tree data that Allan Peters had included in his books, with a view to reviewing, confirming and extending the data. Elizabeth Lillian **Woolcock**, nee Oliver's parents were John **Oliver** and Elizabeth (surname not stated). Allan Peters states in "Dead Woman Walking" that they came out on the ship "Delhi" in December 1839⁴, 9 years before Elizabeth's birth on 20th April 1848, in Burra, South Australia⁵.

When I checked the "Delhi" passenger list⁶, I discovered that the **Oliver** passengers were William **Oliver** and Elizabeth nee **Turnbull**, and their children John and Agnes, not the relevant John and Elizabeth **Oliver**, with a son James as stated in the books. My first task then was to find when John and Elizabeth did arrive in South Australia. I believe it was on the ship "David Malcolm" which arrived in Port Adelaide on 23rd January 1847, with John **Oliver**, wife and two children⁷. This would make good sense as there are no children registered to John and Elizabeth **Oliver** in South Australia, until Elizabeth (Lillian) **Oliver's** birth in 1848. I refer to Elizabeth **Woolcock** (nee **Oliver**) as Elizabeth Lillian, even though on her birth registration she was merely Elizabeth **Oliver**⁸, to differentiate between mother and daughter. I believe the name Lillian must have been added later. Three appendices at the end of this document summarise the family relationships recorded in the books and my additional research, for those who are unfamiliar with the complex story and family relationships.

My second task was to find the surname of Elizabeth Lillian **Oliver's** mother, as, on her birth registration in South Australia, her mother's surname is not recorded, but in 1850 (4th April), at Kapunda, South Australia, when Catherine **Oliver**, Elizabeth's sister (who is mentioned in the books as dying in Ballarat, Victoria in December 1852 (no record)) was registered, the parent's are listed as John **Oliver** and Elizabeth **TREZISE**⁹.

According to the research by Allan Peters, John and Elizabeth **Oliver** and their two surviving daughters, Elizabeth Lillian and Catherine went to Victoria in search of gold. Catherine is recorded



Elizabeth Woolcock nee Oliver

by Allan Peters as dying in Ballarat in 1852. Elizabeth **Oliver** nee **Trezise** left her husband and their only surviving child, Elizabeth Lillian **Oliver**, in the Goldfields and returned to South Australia after Christmas Day, 1852. After John Oliver's death in Creswick, Victoria on 2nd February 1857, Elizabeth Oliver nee **Tresize** remarried in Kensington, South Australia, on 29th September 1860, to John **Johns**¹⁰, a fact omitted from the books. At that marriage, Elizabeth's father is stated as James **Tresize**. When adult Elizabeth Lillian **Oliver** reunites with her mother, Elizabeth is recorded by Allan Peters¹¹ as married to William **Williams**, a marriage I cannot find on the South Australian indexes.

On the death of Elizabeth Johns (nee Trezise) at Burnside, South Australia on 20th September 1907, she is recorded as Elizabeth **Johns**, aged 89, widow of John **Johns**¹². Mary **Slape** (nee **Williams**), is recorded in "Dead Woman Walking" as the daughter of William **Williams**¹³ and lived near Burnside. Mary Williams, (father William Williams), married Robert Ralph Slape on 25th December 1862 at St John Church, Adelaide, South Australia¹⁴. Elizabeth Johns is reported in "Dead Woman Walking" as being Granny **Johns** to the **Slape** Children¹⁵.

Further research reveals that Elizabeth **Johns** nee **Trezise** was indeed grandmother, but biological, not step grandmother, to the children of Mary **Slape** nee **Williams**. Elizabeth **Trezise** was first married in St Just in Penwith, Cornwall to William Grenfell **Williams** on 2nd November 1840¹⁶. A son, *William Williams*, was born in Church Town, Cornwall, circa 1841 and was baptised in St Just in Penwith on 14th February 1841¹⁷. A daughter, *Mary Williams*, later known as Mary Martha **Williams**, was born in 1842 in Trewellard, St Just in Penwith, Cornwall, and baptised on 16th October 1842 in St Just in Penwith, Cornwall¹⁸. This baptism occurred after the death of her father, William Grenfell **Williams**, on 5th May 1842 at Church Town, Cornwall, from Obstruction in the Bowels¹⁹, and who was buried on 8th May 1842 in St Just in Penwith, Cornwall²⁰. I believe that, when John **Oliver** and wife arrived in South Australia, the two children with them on the "David Malcolm" in 1846, arriving 23rd January 1847, were actually William and Mary **Williams**, Elizabeth's children from her marriage to William Grenfell **Williams**, *not* children of John **Oliver**.

Let us now look back at the death of John **Oliver** and the marriage of John **Oliver** and Elizabeth **Williams** nee **Trezise**. Allan Peters states in "No Monument of Stone"²¹ that John **Oliver** died in Creswick, Victoria on 2nd February 1857, from Miner's Lung disease. But did he? A viable John **Oliver** is not listed on the Victorian Index and I have spent several months trying to locate the right death certificate, and a marriage certificate for John **Oliver** and Elizabeth **Williams** nee **Trezise**. I then reasoned that, if the shipping records were not factual, perhaps other details in the books were also not factual. So, thinking laterally, I checked the Victorian Pioneers' Index for any credible John **Oliver** death, born in Cornwall, including any with a middle name. To 1888, there was only one John **Oliver** listed with Cornwall birthplace on the index, and he was John Hoskin Oliver, in 1873²². A long shot!

As I also could not find a marriage for a John **Oliver** and Elizabeth **Williams** nee **Trezise** on the England and Wales Marriages Index for the relevant period, via Ancestry.com, using the query "John Oliver" only, I tried "John Hoskin Oliver". *Lo and behold, there it was, John Hosking Oliver, in Penzance, Cornwall, in 1843, with Elizabeth Williams listed on the same page*²³. I did what any fanatical researcher would do – I sent for the marriage certificate! They married on 31st July 1843 at the Register Office in Penzance, Cornwall. Elizabeth, who signed with a cross, was recorded as Elizabeth **Williams**, widow, with father listed as James **Trezise**. John Oliver, who signed in a neat hand, was recorded as a bachelor with father George **Oliver**. John **Oliver's** baptism at St Erth, Cornwall, on 7 July 1811, is transcribed on the Cornwall On Line Parish Clerks website²⁴ with father George and mother Mary. George **Oliver** and Mary **Hosking's** marriage is also transcribed there, occurring on 29th May 1808, at St Hilary, Cornwall²⁵. BINGO! I had found John Hoskin Oliver married to the widowed Elizabeth Williams (nee Trezise), father - **James Trezise**.

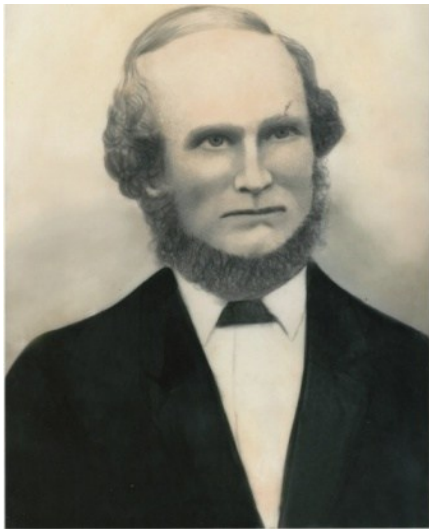
I also eagerly downloaded John Hoskin **Oliver's** death certificate from the Victorian Births, Deaths and Marriages website²⁶. The informant was Catherine Care **Cole**, his sister, of Creswick, (Victoria), who signed with a cross. John Hoskin **Oliver**, miner, died on 14th May 1873 at Spring Gully, Creswick, from Cancer of the Stomach. Catherine **Cole** stated that his parents were George **Oliver**, a miller and Mary, formerly **Hoskin**, and that John Hoskin **Oliver** had been 7 years in Adelaide and 19 years in Victoria, a total of 26 years, This computes back to 1846/47, when our John **Oliver** arrived in Adelaide on the ship "David Malcolm", with a wife and two children! (*How many people refer to South Australia as Adelaide? It still happens regularly even today!*)

John Hoskin **Oliver** had married, at age 24, in Cornwall, to Catherine **Merrifield**, (confirmed by the marriage transcript on the Cornwall On Line Parish Clerks website²⁷) and there was no issue. I believe Catherine **Oliver** (nee Merrifield) died in St Just in Penwith, Cornwall, in May 1839²⁸ and was buried there on 19th May 1839²⁹. John **Oliver** was living alone in Lower Town, Uny Lelant, Cornwall, in the 1841 English Census period³⁰. I am not concerned with the fact that John Hosking **Oliver** is described as a bachelor at his marriage to widow Elizabeth Williams. He had, after all, unlike Elizabeth, no issue from his first marriage. The fact that he was marrying Elizabeth **WILLIAMS** nee **TREZISE**, father – James, says it all! Catherine **Cole** did not mention of a second marriage. Did his sister not know of his second marriage (and children), or think his second marriage relevant, or not want to acknowledge it, given that Elizabeth **Oliver** nee **Trezise** had allegedly deserted him? John Hoskin **Oliver** is recorded as being buried in the New Cemetery, Creswick, Victoria³¹. I wonder if John and Elizabeth **OLIVER'S** second daughter, Catherine, a name not as commonly used as Elizabeth, Mary, Jane and Ann in Cornwall, was named after John's sister and/or even his deceased first wife?

When Elizabeth Oliver (nee Trezise) left John **Oliver** and daughter, Elizabeth Lillian in Victoria, it was reported by Allan Peters³² to be in the company of a man named William **Williams**. I strongly suspect that, if Elizabeth left the Victorian Goldfields in the company of a William **Williams**, he was her 11 or 12 year old son! Also, her 10 year old daughter, Mary **Williams** must have accompanied her as well. Elizabeth had described the goldfields as "*this horrid, sin stained colony of scoundrels and villains*"³³ and, while she could easily take her children from her first marriage with her, she may have been forced to leave Elizabeth Lillian with her biological father. When Elizabeth Lillian came back to South Australia, it was to be greeted by her *half* sister, not *step* sister, Mary **Slape** nee **Williams**, and, in Elizabeth Lillian's "confession"³⁴, she describes Mary as her *sister*. And was the "William **Williams**" mentioned in the books as the stepfather who objected to Elizabeth Lillian's association with Thomas **Woolcock**³⁵, actually John Bolitho **Johns**? After all, he may have known from personal experience what could happen when an unattached woman was housekeeping for a widower with children.

A fact not addressed in the books was that there were two children born to John **Johns** and Elizabeth **Trezise**, at Second Creek, Adelaide, South Australia. They were John **Johns Junior**, born 22nd July 1856³⁶, and Thomas **Johns**, born 26th July 1858³⁷ and died 16th March 1859³⁸ at 8 months. These births occurred prior to the formal marriage of John **Johns** and Elizabeth **Oliver** (nee Trezise). As you can imagine, finding the right John **Johns** senior, and junior, was a hard task, especially as I am not researching a close family connection, with oral history as a guide, and without the expense of purchasing numerous certificates. I have, however, found the death of John **Bolitho Johns** (junior) in 1912 in Victoria with parents recorded as John **Bolitho Johns** and Elizabeth **Trezise**!³⁹ They made it easy with a middle name!

John Bolitho **Johns** (senior) had been widowed on 23rd March 1853⁴⁰, and had a surviving son and daughter. His first wife was Jane nee **Jenkin**, and she died on the same day as the birth of her last daughter, Mary, who died 2 months later. Did Elizabeth **Oliver** nee **Trezise** become the



John Bolitho Johns

housekeeper for the widowed John Bolitho **Johns**, resulting in a relationship and the birth of the two aforementioned children? Was her marriage to John Bolitho **Johns** on 29th September 1860 at Kensington, South Australia⁴¹ delayed because Elizabeth was still legally married to John **Oliver**, and she was only free to marry when he died? Or did she commit bigamy, as John **Oliver** did not die until 1873? Or did she reason that, as 7 years had elapsed without contact (she allegedly left Christmas, 1852⁴²), she was free to marry again on the presumption of John **Oliver's** death?

Johns family descendants I have contacted have not come across any evidence for John Bolitho **Johns** using William **Williams** as an alias. In any event, Allan Peters may not have wanted to introduce characters in the story that had no direct bearing on the life and death of Elizabeth Lillian. Also, one can account for some anomalies in the books as perhaps being poetic licence on Allan Peters' part, although I believe the

books were written primarily as historical accounts. However, her abandonment by her mother, her rape⁴³ and the death of her father during her childhood were used as key elements in explaining Elizabeth Lillian's downward spiral into drug addiction and prostitution. Her separation from her father at a young age could be explained by the expectation that children worked and Elizabeth Lillian may have been put into domestic service. But, complicating this issue is Elizabeth Lillian's statement in her confession that her father had died when she was 9 years old⁴⁴. She must have believed it to be so, given the seriousness of her document. Was she abandoned by her father as well?

What is of additional interest in this story is the fact that John Bolitho **Johns** (senior) died in Sebastopol, Victoria on 15th September 1868 from a fractured spine from a fall down a mine shaft⁴⁵, five years before the events in 1873 and Elizabeth Lillian's hanging, and only 18 months after the marriage of Elizabeth Lillian to Thomas **Woolcock**. In the confession published after her death, Elizabeth Lillian refers to her stepfather as "my poor stepfather"⁴⁶. Does this refer to the fact that he was deceased, by an unfortunate circumstance, by the time of her writing? Elizabeth Lillian's mother must have remained in Victoria with her last son John Bolitho **Johns** (junior) and her first son, William **Williams**, during the arrest and trial, as there is no mention of her being present in South Australia at that time. Indeed, Allan Peters states in "Dead Woman Walking", that Elizabeth Lillian's mother and stepfather moved to Victoria⁴⁷. Would news have travelled from Moonta and Adelaide to Victoria about the events occurring here quickly enough, given the small time period between arrest and hanging? Or is it possibly another instance of Elizabeth's apparent abandonment of her daughter, Elizabeth Lillian? Was there any family member around to assist Elizabeth Lillian during the arrest and trial?

John Bolitho **Johns** Junior, Elizabeth Lillian's youngest half brother, who was 17 years old at the time of the trial, married Maria Louisa **Halls** in Victoria in 1881⁴⁸. Sadly, despite having three children, this couple have no registered living descendants. Their first son, Lionel Eastwood **Johns** died in 1883⁴⁹ as an infant. Elsinore Louisa **Johns**, born in 1884, Ballarat East, Victoria⁵⁰, was married in Perth, Western Australia⁵¹ to an older man, John **McCarthy**. From the news reports of her husband's death in a level crossing accident, there were no children⁵². Their third child, John Benjamin **Johns**, was killed in Gallipoli during World War 1 and was unmarried⁵³.

William **Williams**, Elizabeth Lillian's oldest half brother, was married in Victoria on 16th July 1864, as William Grenfell **Williams**, to Eliza Rowe **Davey**⁵⁴ and died in Long Gully, Bendigo,

Victoria on 28th May 1904⁵⁵. He had eight children in Victoria between 1866 and 1884, five of whom survived to adulthood and married, with living descendants. William was occupied in 1873 in Victoria with a new baby and a growing family to support⁵⁶. He appears, therefore, not to have been in Moonta when Elizabeth Lillian was accused of poisoning her husband, or the trial and hanging, nor when she was intent on marrying Thomas **Woolcock**.

Another puzzle not addressed in “Dead Woman Walking”, is the fate of Thomas John **Woolcock**, Thomas **Woolcock**'s only surviving son. Although Allan Peters told me in 2011 that he had been unable to trace him, I discovered that Thomas John must have remained with the **Snell** family in Moonta till at least April, 1884 when his room in the **Snell**'s house in Caroline Street, Moonta, was burnt in a fire⁵⁷. Some time after this event, Thomas John **Woolcock** moved to Charters Towers, Queensland, where he married Annie Christina **Hansen** on 20th December 1890⁵⁸. He had a family of 6 children, 5 of whom survived to adulthood⁵⁹. Thomas John **Woolcock** died, from pthisis, on 5th October 1909 at Charters Towers, Queensland⁶⁰, when his youngest child was just 9 years old.

In regard to Thomas **Woolcock**'s ancestry, a number of people on Ancestry.com have indicated that Francis **Woolcock** (1787 – 1866) and Mary Anne **Nicholls** (1789 – 1876) are the parents of Thomas. However, that would make Mary Anne **Woolcock** nee **Nicholls** 50 years old when Thomas was born. Although possible, I believe a more likely set of parents were Francis **Woolcock** (b c 1807) and Mary ? (b c 1808), with a son Thomas born 26th June 1837 in Tregony, Cornwall, baptised 9th July 1837 in Cuby with Tregony, Cornwall⁶¹, and living in Pollys Row, Tregony, Cornwall in the 1851 Census⁶². There are very few Francis **Woolcocks** listed on the Cornwall On Line Parish Clerks Marriages database, whereas there is only one Francis **Woolcock**, married to a Mary (**Beard**) on 8th March 1828 at Cornelly, Cornwall⁶³ on the Familysearch database. This line needs more research to come to definite conclusions.

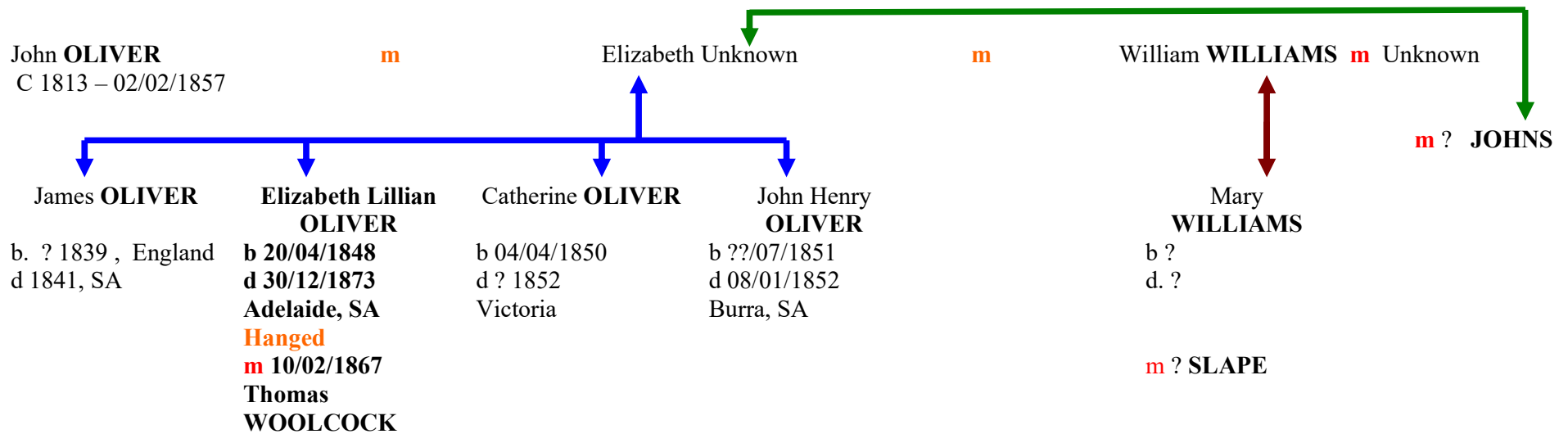
I have also reviewed the shipping records for Thomas **Woolcock** and his family, and they were not listed on the “Lady Milton”, as initially reported. A single Thomas **Woolcock** was listed on that ship⁶⁴. Thomas **Woolcock**, aged 24, Labourer, Nanny **Woolcock**, aged 22, Francis **Woolcock**, aged 4 and John, aged 2, all of Cornwall, were listed on the “Gosforth”, which arrived in Port Adelaide on 25th December 1865⁶⁵.

My interest was sparked to find out where Elizabeth **Williams/Oliver/Johns** nee **TREZISE** fitted in the larger world of the **Trezises**. (My brother -in-law's mother is a **Trezise**.) The only clues are that her father was James **Tresize** and that she was born circa 1818⁶⁶. The daughter of James **Trezise** and Elizabeth **Nankerwes**, baptised 15 November 1818, in Trewellard, St Just in Penwith, Cornwall⁶⁷, is considered to be the best candidate from several Elizabeth **Trezises** born around that time. I did find an Elizabeth **Tresize**, single, and slightly older, in 1851, living with a **Nankervis** family during the 1851 English Census⁶⁸; however, by a process of elimination, accounting for the later whereabouts and fates of the other candidates, it is generally accepted that the daughter of Elizabeth **Nankerwes**⁶⁹ is the right Elizabeth **Trezise**. After her marriage to John Hosking **Oliver**, a son, John (not James⁷⁰) **Oliver** was born on 23rd May 1845 at Trewellard, St Just in Penwith, Cornwall⁷¹, however, he did not accompany the family on the “David Malcolm” to South Australia. Was his death as an infant unrecorded, was it in October Quarter of 1846⁷² before the David Malcolm sailed on 13th October 1846, or did Elizabeth leave him in Cornwall with family?

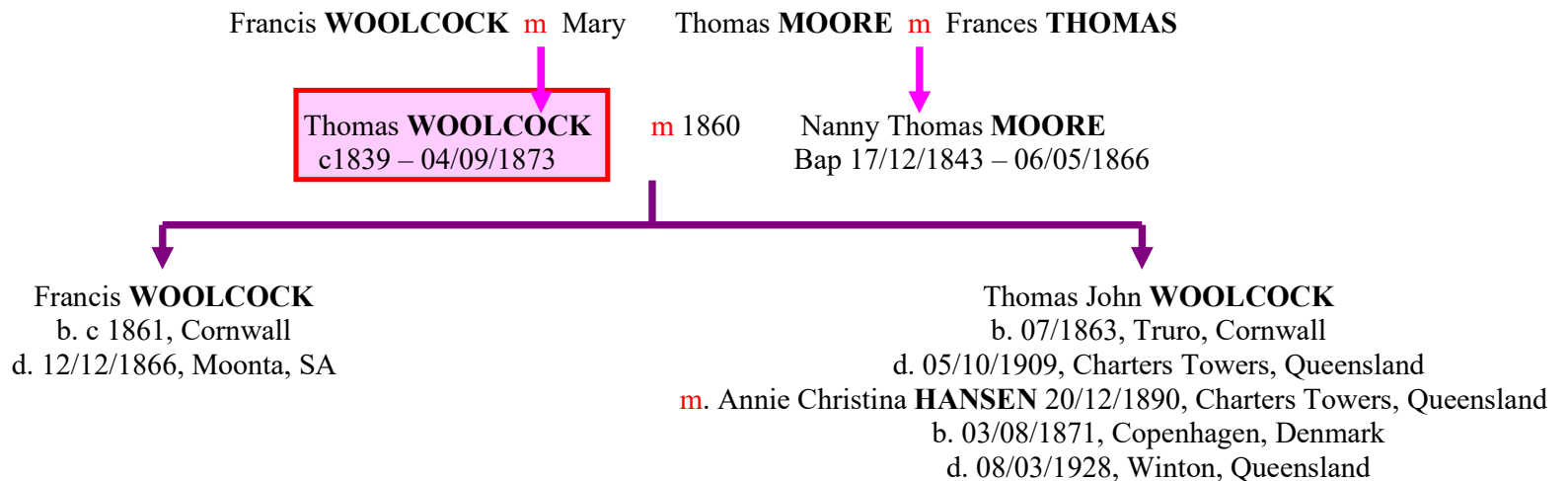
I have therefore now come to an end by fitting *my* final missing pieces to the jigsaw. This story has become as much about Elizabeth **Trezise**, as it is about her unfortunate daughter Elizabeth Lillian **Woolcock**, nee **Oliver**. Elizabeth **Trezise** did, after all, inadvertently set in motion, by abandoning her daughter, the chain of events that led to her daughter's fate on the gallows.

8th December 2012, Revised 5th April 2013

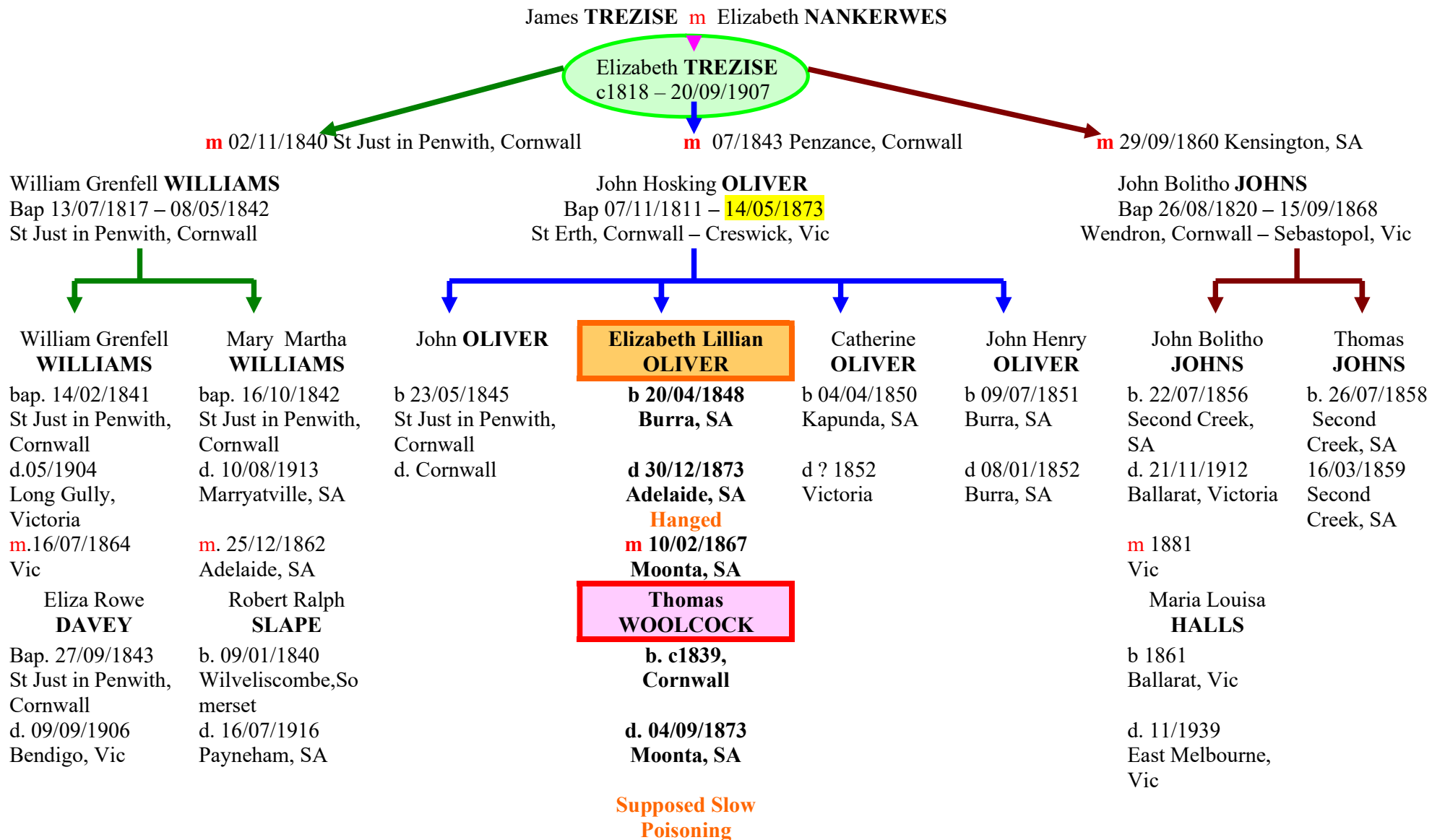
Appendix 1 - Allan Peters Research on Elizabeth Lillian Woolcock's Family



Appendix 2 - Robyn Knight's Research - Thomas WOOLCOCK



Appendix 3 -Robyn Knight's Research on Elizabeth Lillian Woolcock's Family



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- ⁶⁶ South Australian Genealogy & Heraldry Society Inc and Macbeth Genealogical Services Pty Ltd, Publ., South Australian Marriages Registrations 1842 to 1916, Index Reference Book 43, Page 302
- ⁶⁷ <http://www.cornwall-opc-database.org/search-database/more-info/?t=baptisms&id=1689453>
- ⁶⁸ http://search.ancestry.co.uk/iexec?htx=view&r=5538&dbid=8860&iid=CONHO107_1919_1919-0240&fn=Elizabeth&ln=Trezise&st=r&ssrc=&pid=17144985
- ⁶⁹ <http://www.cornwall-opc-database.org/search-database/more-info/?t=marriages&id=561540>
- ⁷⁰ Peters, Allan L., No Monument of Stone, 1992 ISBN 0 646 16962 7, p 8
- ⁷¹ England & Wales, FreeBMD Birth Index, 1837-1915, Jun 1845, Registration District, Penzance, Volume 9, Page 1
- ⁷² England & Wales, FreeBMD Death Index, 1837-1915, Dec 1846, Registration District, Penzance, Volume 9, Page 147