

History of Common Leys Farm

This house has history. It is not grand history about famous people; it's a history about working people eking out a living from the land.

We have managed to research the history of the farmhouse back to the 1860s although we know that the house is actually 500 years old.

Thomas Meloney

Below is the Last Will and Testament of Thomas Meloney (pictured right) leaving his 'estate' to his daughters and sons. Thomas Meloney was married to Jane (nee Knight) and lived in Holton. He started his farming by buying a pig from market and collecting the slops from the villagers of Holton and Waterperry to feed. It obviously grew, so he sold it at market and made enough money to buy more than one. And so it went on

After grafting for many years Thomas Meloney wrote the following will listing some of his, all of his daughters belongings:



In the Name of God Amen

I Thomas Meloney of the Parish of Holton in the County of Oxford, Farm Bailiff, in perfect health of Body, and perfect mind and memory of my body, and knowing that it is appointed for all men once to die do make and ordain this is my last Will and Testament, I give Devise and Dispose of this my worldly Estate in the following Manner and Form.

First, I give and bequeath to my Unmarried Daughter Martha Meloney, the following articles of Furniture, that is to say, One French Bedstead Bolster, and Feather Bed, one 30 Hour Clock, Six French Polished Chairs, and Two Elbow Chairs, and Two Deal Tables, and Sofa. 2nd Also, at my Decease, the rest of my Furniture, and the Live Stock, Hay xc to be Sold and the proceeds, after all my Just Debts are paid, to be equally Divided between all my Daughters and Sons.

The following is a list of Articles in my House belonging to my Unmarried Daughter Martha Meloney, purchased by her, and therefore not included in this my last Will and Testament, that is to say, One Wool Bed and Bolster, Two Feather pillows, Two Feather Sheets, Two Washstands and Ware, One Towel Horse, One Dressing Table, One Oak Table, Six Bedroom Chairs, Two Looking Glasses, One Night Stool, Four Pieces of Carpet, Twelve pictures, and One Brush in Case, Eight Jugs and One Teapot, Six Cups and Saucers and One Basson, One Glass jug and Basson, Twelve plates and Two Dishes, Four Bassons, One Tea Tray, One Cruet Stand, One Lamp and Twelve Cups, Thirteen Ornaments, One Stool, One Bed Valance, Six Teaspoons, and Two Table Spoons.

In witness whereof I have hereunto set my hand and seal this 19th day of July 1884.

Thomas Meloney.

Witnessed: *Joseph Renny Frampton Jr Farmer*

Witnessed: *Joseph Lambert Mason*

Mabel & Joseph Fonge

(The following is adapted from information written by the great-grandchildren of Joseph Fonge)

Mabel (nee Meloney, pictured left) was one of Thomas's daughters; born in 1837 (in the reign of William IV, two years before Queen Victoria came to the throne). She married Joseph Fonge, and they rented Common Farm (now known as Common Leys Farm) from one of the Oxford colleges. She was the second of eight children, and before she married was a Ladies' Maid at Holton Park, Oxfordshire.



Joseph Fonge, (pictured right) born in 1836, was the son of John (an agricultural labourer living at Waterperry) and Elizabeth Fonge, and was the youngest but two of 13 children. He was baptised at Waterperry Parish Church on 8th May 1836. The Parish Records also document his siblings James (baptised 1822), Rose (baptised 1824), Henry (baptised 1826), William (baptised 1828), Benjamin (baptised 1830) Robert (baptised 1832), Moses (baptised 1834) and David (baptised 1840).



The only education Joseph had was at the village school two miles away. He had to walk there, but his schooling did not last long; when he was seven he went to work on an adjacent farm where he earned 1s.6d. (8½p) a week. By saving 1s. (5p) a week, he at last, at about 17 years of age, saved enough to buy a pig; here Joe's wealth began.

By the time he was 23 years old he had saved a nice little sum, and his wages being 10s (50p) a week, he made an excellent match, having the good fortune to secure the love of 'a very worthy and industrious Christian woman', Mabel Meloney. He married Mabel on 10 Oct 1859.

The Fonge Children

They had ten children: 5 boys and 5 girls. They are shown here, in birth order:



No known
photos
exist



Their children were healthy and strong; Joseph and Mabel had little trouble bringing them up, and the doctor was almost unknown to pass over their threshold, except at the advent of a new baby. When the boys began one after another to go to work, times were easy and prosperous.

The Rise of Joseph Fonge

Joseph's wages increased; he had a better post and looked after cattle and consequently his money gradually rose to 12s (60p), then 14s (70p) and subsequently to 16s (80p) a week. His outgoings were carefully watched. His rent for a comfortable cottage and about 5 poles (1 Pole = 30.5 square yards or 25.289 square metres) of garden ground was 20 shillings (£1) per year. In addition to his garden he also farmed, at a moderate rent, some strips of allotment land at Waterperry Common in a Field close to Common Farm, rented from the Right Hon. J. W. Henley of Waterperry House, Waterperry, who was always ready to let the labourer as much allotment land as he and his family could cultivate in their spare time. Money was not spent on any luxuries.

Having by careful management saved a comfortable sum, Joseph gave up agricultural service and began to farm on his own account, at Common Farm, Waterperry, Oxon. (now known as Common Leys Farm).

He now had the occupation of 40 acres of land, and made a plain simple living. He found that he was about as well off as when he was a weekly labourer, working quite as hard but as his own boss. He could work when he liked, but being his own master, he felt that his work was never done. He was not at all dissatisfied at that, but rather glad to know that he had plenty of work to do, and, by God's blessing, health and strength to do it.

Joseph's father John Fonge died in 1876, but for some years before John's death it fell to Joseph chiefly to support his aged parent, the Poor Law Guardians allowing 1 shilling (5p) and a loaf weekly as an allowance, so John lived with them for the last years of his life; this is documented in the 1871 Census Return, which says that they were living with Mabel's father-in-law, John Fonge, Widow, aged 75, born Water Perry Common. At this time the couple's children, except the two youngest, were all out in the world earning their own living.

In the 1891 Census Return, Joseph, his occupation given as an agricultural labourer, declared that also living with them was his brother Davis, age 40, also an agricultural labourer. The spelling name Fonge was sometimes spelt Funge in the Parish Registers; to Joseph's annoyance he had to have the letter U replaced by an O on his carts etc. to comply with the orders of the Squire.

The 1900's

At the time of Joseph's death on 29th July 1908 aged 73, they still lived at Common Farm, Waterperry where their children were all born, and now owned 140 acres, having considerably increased their original holding. After Joseph died his son Walter managed the farm for Mabel. Their son Charles went to live at Weedon, Northants, and Mabel his mother always used to describe his family as "that Weedon lot".

Mabel lived with a companion called Miss Coombs, who kept a policeman's helmet hanging in the hall in the belief that it would scare off burglars. After Mabel's nephew Leslie (Walter's son), had finished school he used to have to walk across every night to sleep with them for some protection.

Leslie remembered Miss Coombs as a tall thin grey haired, pale faced woman, who somehow seemed rather ghost-like. (Rumour has it that her ghostly shadow still walks the common towards Waterperry. Spooky !!!!!)



Mabel died on 7th November 1930, aged 95, at her daughter Kate's home in Winchester. Both Joseph & Mabel are buried in Waterperry Church Yard.

In collecting this information, we (the great-grandchildren of Joseph Fonge) have gathered that Joseph's life story was considered to be an example of how to succeed by hard work. His life was recorded as a part of Waterperry's history under the title A Successful Labourer. Someone unknown to us has written the following:

'Joseph Fonge continued to walk that path of patient industry which he had from the first mapped out for himself. He was not one of these who grow weary in well doing.

The flight of time was not allowed to render him any less resolute. Painstaking and zealous, he was possessed of a deep and sincere faith in God, though he was not given to talk about it. For him religion assumed the aspect of doing thoroughly the duty which lay nearest to hand. Taken altogether his life was a speaking exemplification of the old fashioned virtues of thrift and strenuousness. This is the type of character on which our empire has been built up and on the continuance of which its existence depends. There are those among us who think that it is unhappily becoming rarer than it once was. At any rate the career of JOSEPH FONGE and of many others like him, shows that it is possible for an agricultural labourer to rise in the social scale to a position of comparative affluence.'

1950s and on

The farm was eventually bought from the Oxford college in the 1950's by Mr and Mrs Neil who farmed it to its full. In his spare time, which was very little, Mr Neil and his friends used to practice in a band at the farm.

In the 1970's it was purchased by some local land auctioneers who brought the farm into the real world.

The Old Dairy is now where Allie cooks. The farmhouse cuisine and the Old Hayloft, as was, is now bedrooms.

If only walls could talk!