

## **The Swing Rioters in Michelmersh and Timsbury**

### **Mary Harris**

*Abstract:*

An account of the agricultural riots of 1830 in the villages of Michelmersh and Timsbury, the men involved and their fates and the long term effects on their families. The character of John Tongs illustrates how the skilled and better educated labourers became involved and blamed by the authorities.

## The Swing Rioters of Timsbury and Michelmersh

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The late 18th and early 19th centuries were times of great hardship and poverty for the rural poor. Enclosures caused some of this but more important than enclosure was the way the Poor Law was used. In 1795 the Berkshire Court of Quarter Sessions decided to solve the problem of rural poverty by creating a system whereby the labourers' wages were made up to what was regarded as the minimum needed for the size of their family depending on the price of bread. This idea spread very widely through southern and eastern counties. It was well meant but had the effect of keeping wages low while creating resentment among the farmers who had to pay more poor rates and the labourers who felt demeaned by having to accept charity. At harvest time there was plenty of work but in winter there was little work available on the land and many men only kept earning by hand threshing. With the development of steam threshing machines at the start of the 19th century there was no work for the labourers through the winter. After a poor harvest in 1829 and the prospect of another poor one in 1830 the labourers reached breaking point. Riots broke out all over southern England called the 'Swing Riots' after a fictitious leader 'Captain Swing'.

The Swing riots started in Kent in Summer 1830. By late November they had spread to Hampshire. After major riots in the North of the county risings took place in the Lower Test Valley area on November 22<sup>nd</sup>. As reported by the Hampshire Chronicle, in the morning a meeting of local farmers took place in the Vestry of Michelmersh church to discuss raising the wages of their farm labourers. Knowing this, about a hundred (reliability of estimate – unknown) labourers gathered outside the church to hear the results. The crowd became excited and James Futcher, farmer at Hall Farm heard cries of "on to Hall Farm" and rushed out of the meeting and pursued the mob as they made their way to his farm. On the way one of the labourers, Arthur Fielder, demanded half a crown from James Futcher. It seems that this was money he was owed but his manner of demanding it was threatening and he was later charged with extorting money by threats although the charge was dismissed. At Hall Farm the mob found George Collins who had been guarding James Futcher's ricks for fear of incendiary attacks for the preceding 3 nights. Arthur Fielder (carpenter) and John Tongs (blacksmith) were armed with hammers, John Collins, George Palmer and Henry Rogers carried sticks. They went to the barn and destroyed the threshing machine. John Tongs, Henry Rogers and Arthur Fielder were seen to be taking an active part in the destruction while George Palmer and John Collins stood by and called out. George Collins appears to have joined the mob after this and gone on with them to smash the second threshing machine at Mr Gale's farm

After this Arthur Fielder and John Tongs took no further part in rioting. They later made a public apology to the local farmers which seems to have been accepted. However, George and John Collins, George Palmer and Henry Rogers went into Romsey and joined the mob there. In the evening they were involved with the mob approaching Captain Heathcote's house at Jermyns. Having been dispersed by special constables from Romsey the mob went from farm to farm destroying machines and levying contributions. After midnight they arrived at Luzborough Farm and there a detachment of special constables captured twelve of the ringleaders. They were

taken to Romsey and placed in gaol and later transferred to Winchester. This group included George and John Collins, George Palmer and Henry Rogers.

The scale of the rioting in Hampshire led to a Special Commission of Assize being called. Two days before it opened Fielder and Tongs were arrested and taken to join the others in Winchester Gaol.

### Charges and Sentences:

Henry Rogers	Riotous and illegal assembly and extortion money from several persons	1 year in prison with hard labour
George Collins & John Collins	Riotous and illegal assembly and extortion of money from several persons	Transportation 7 years
George Palmer	Destruction of threshing machines	Transportation 7 years
Arthur Fielder	Destruction of threshing machines, Felonious assault on James Futcher, putting him in 'bodily fear' and taking from him three shillings – no evidence was brought for this second charge and it was dismissed.	Transportation 7 years
John Tongs	Riotous assembly and destruction of threshing machines	Transportation 7 years

Justice Vaughan in his addresses to the Special Commission made it clear that the policy of the court was to make examples of the ring leaders. Of the hundred strong mob who smashed the threshing machines in Michelmersh only 6 were arrested and punished. Justice Vaughan also made it clear that he had more sympathy with the genuinely poor labourers. Many groups of farmers had already acknowledged that wages were too low for labourers to manage on. Heavy punishments were therefore given to those involved who did not fall into this category – the craftsmen and better educated labourers who already earned more than the 12 shillings a week the labourers were asking for. It is unfortunate that many of the men in this category were called on by fellow labourers because they had access to heavy tools like blacksmiths' hammers needed to destroy the threshing machines as well as being generally well respected by their neighbours. Many of these men were recommended for mercy by the Grand Jury and many also presented letters recording their previous good conduct. John Tongs presented a letter from Mr Oak Esq. of Southampton to the archdeacon giving him an extremely good character. Justice Vaughan seems to have felt that this made their conduct worse and no mercy was shown. John Tongs in his defence claimed that when he joined the Michelmersh mob he had no intention of harming anyone and only joined them in preference to being called on by the Timsbury mob which, he implied, was less well behaved. Unfortunately there is no record of any activity of the Timsbury mob.

All those sentenced to transportation were taken from Winchester Gaol to the prison hulk, York, at Portsmouth. From there they were transferred to the transportation ships. The Michelmersh men went out on the Eliza on 6<sup>th</sup> February. Even while being transported the Swing rioters were regarded as rather different from the usual criminals. From letters home written by the Masons from Sutton Scotney it appears that they were not continuously shackled and were allowed to wear their own clothes when they went ashore in Australia. On shore they were told not to associate with the 'real' criminals.

It seems likely that they were preferred above others by those using convict labour. The Michelmersh group landed in Van Deiman's Land and were scattered serving different masters.

Back in England their families became immediately dependent on the Poor Relief as soon as their menfolk were arrested. Most remained dependent for a long time.

### **The Background of the men from Timsbury and Michelmersh charged with offences in 1830:**

George Collins	24 years	Ploughman	Married with 1 child
John Collins	33 years	Ploughman	Married with 6 children
Arthur Fielder	43 years	Carpenter	Married with 6 children
George Palmer	37 years	Ploughman	Married with 5 children
Henry Rogers	26 years	No details	family not listed
John Tongs	34 years	Blacksmith	Married with 5 children

A campaign to gain pardons for those transported was started immediately and received a good deal of support but the process took time. All those transported received free pardons in 1836.

The later history of the Michelmersh rioters:

**Henry Rogers** served his prison sentence and is then recorded living in Timsbury in later census returns.

**George Collins** No further information

**George Palmer** A letter from Rev Woodcock of Michelmersh written in 1833 records that George Palmer wrote from Van Diemen's Land in 1832 asking for his family to join him. He gained the necessary record of good conduct from the governor of Van Diemen's land but his family never went. His wife, Mary Harding was dependent on the parish in Warminster at the time of his conviction but by 1841 was back in Michelmersh with her two sons.

**Arthur Fielder** No further information. His wife and children were dependent on Poor Relief until his eldest daughter married the Michelmersh blacksmith, Charles Wingham, who took in his mother-in-law and her younger children. One of the boys became an apprentice blacksmith.

**John Collins** Returned to Michelmersh after his free pardon. In 1838 he applied for assistance to emigrate to South Australia with his family. The Romsey Poor Law Union supported his request saying: "the whole family healthy and industrious" but the Commissioners in London refused because he had previously been transported.

## John Tongs.

John Tongs was the blacksmith in Timsbury and was well respected locally. He was married to Francis Palmer, (nee Collins) a widow with a son. They had 4 more children. John Tongs was 35 years old in 1830. He had apologised to the local farmers for his part in the riots and believed that the matter was ended only to be arrested 2 days before the Special Assize and find himself transported for 7 years. In Tasmania he was assigned to Joseph Archer esq. He received his free pardon in 1836 with all the others but did not manage to return to England before 1841. He then gathered his family, including his step son, John Palmer, who by then was 28 years old and arranged to return to Van Deiman's Land as a free colonist. He did not apply for financial support from the Poor Law Commissioners but it is possible that he received help from the Methodist community.

The family travelled on the King William arriving in Hobart in January 1843.

King William from London via Plymouth to Hobart Jan. 28<sup>th</sup> 1843

Number on Embarkation Order.	Names of Immigrants.	Married.		Single.		Children.					
		Men's Age.	Woman's Age.	Men's Age.	Woman's Age.	Boys.			Girls.		
						$\frac{1}{4}$	$\frac{1}{2}$	Under 1	$\frac{1}{4}$	$\frac{1}{2}$	Under 1
	Total brought forward . . . .	30	30	27	17	12	4	1	11	21	1
1207 <sup>x</sup>	Tongs John	47				Paid his own passage in pursuance of H. Act					
	Francis		51			Paid her own passage					
1211	Susanna				23						
1209	Charles			20							
1210	John Joseph			18							
None	Samuel						13				
1208 <sup>x</sup>	Palmer John			28							

## From the records of the 'King William'

In Tasmania the family settled in Longford. John Tongs became a valued member and office bearer of the Methodist Church.

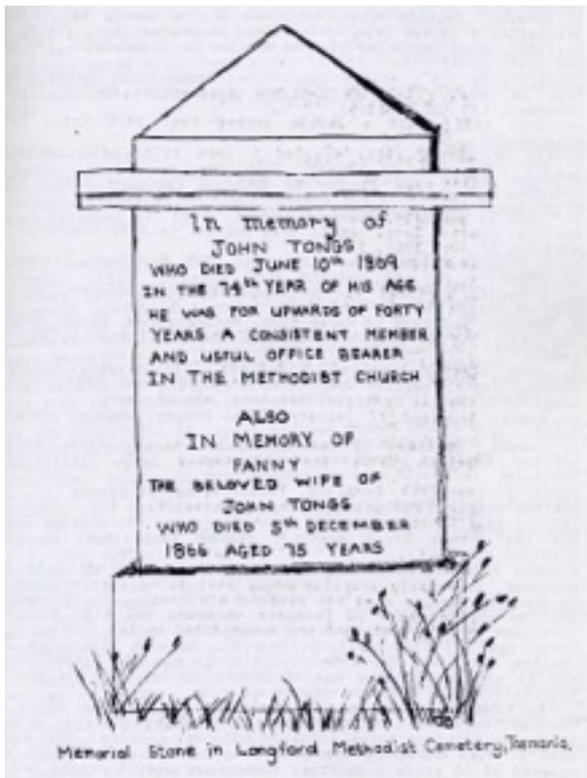
In the book 'A Century Of Methodism in Longford Tasmania 1834-1934, A souvenir History' is a record of John Tongs giving accounts of answers to prayer.

“ Riding from Launceston to Carrick to take a service, he got off the pony near the turn off to Longford, and the pony broke away from him and galloped up the road, and he could not catch her, and he said ‘I told the Lord that I was going on His work to preach his word at Carrick, and I could not get there with out the pony, and the pony stopped and came walking straight back, and let me catch her’.”

John Tongs died 10<sup>th</sup> June 1869 at the age of 74. His will is lodged in the Tasmanian record office and shows that when he died he had property to leave to his family, his own dwelling house and premises, another dwelling house adjoining and land adjoining that.



John Tongs, a respected Methodist preacher in Tasmania.



John Tongs was buried in Longford Methodist grave yard where there is a gravestone. There is also a memorial tablet in the church to local preachers which records that John Tongs was “ keen, gifted, courageous, lived near God” .



Longford Methodist Church,  
Tasmania

#### Sources:

Hobsbawm and Rude            Captain Swing

Jill Chambers                 The Swing Riots in Hampshire

"A Century Of Methodism in Longford Tasmania, 1834 - 1934, A Souvenir History":

<http://www.ooocities.org/tstraughair/pafn07.htm>

Tasmanian archives <https://www.libraries.tas.gov.au/archive-heritage/Pages/default.aspx>

<https://www.black-sheep-search.co.uk>

Linda Moffat and Stuart Rippon            Barton Stacey and the Swing Riots

Census records and parish records of Timsbury

Past copies of The Times and The Hampshire Chronicle